

Book Discussion Questions for "Master Butchers Singing Club" by Louise Erdrich

A note of interest: At the All Iowa Reads ICN session on January 27, participants heard a brief radio interview with author Louise Erdrich. She mentioned that the man on the hard cover of *The Master Butchers Singing Club* is her grandfather, who was a butcher in Minnesota.

Discussion questions from All Iowa Reads committee members:

1. One of the library subject headings assigned to *The Master Butchers Singing Club* is "Triangles (Interpersonal relations)." Which characters are involved in a triangle? Discuss the appropriateness of this subject heading.
2. Fidelis' and Delphine's stories join when Delphine "in that fit of longing to see the face of her mother" meets Eva at Waldvogel Meats. Why are the two women drawn to each other? Describe the relationship they develop.
3. Discuss the various aspects of love and friendship explored in *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. With which did you particularly identify?
4. Three characters -- Cyprian, Fidelis, and Step-and-a-Half -- have experienced combat before the book opens. How does this experience shape the character's personality and way of dealing with life?
5. Waldvogel means, literally, "forest bird." What does singing and the singing club mean to Fidelis and to the rest of the men in the club?
6. Underground is associated with death and dying in *Master Butcher*. The Chavers are buried alive in Roy's basement; Clarisse prepares the dead in the basement of the mortuary; Marcus almost dies underground; baby Delphine is narrowly saved from dying in the pit underneath the Shimek's outhouse. With what is life and living associated?
7. During her airplane ride just before her death, Eva has a vision of a "plan, *eine grosse Idee*, bigger than the whole damn rules." (pg. 118) Step-and-a-Half, at the book's end, has a dream of "a world where butcher sing like angels." Discuss both Eva's and Step-and-a-Half's visions. How are they alike and how different?
8. Near the beginning of Delphine's story, she believes she is doomed to watch the suffering of others ("disasters, falling like chairs all around her" pg. 54) while unable to alter their fate. Is this always true for Delphine? For all of us?
9. Is Delphine a typical child of an alcoholic? How does Delphine's part in the balancing act help us to understand her personality?
10. Does Roy become an alcoholic because he lost Minnie's love? Roy claims, "Nothing can fill the nothing . . . except love or booze or a great religious impulse." How does Roy's claim play out in the book? In life?
11. Cyprian is "a balancing expert." (pg. 18) Talk about all the ways that this is a true statement.
12. What role does humor play in *The Master Butchers Singing Club*?
13. Were you surprised to learn that Delphine and Mazarine are sisters? Are there indications that this is so before Step-and-a-Half reveals it?
14. Why do you think the book closes with Step-and-a-Half? Do you assume that Step-and-a-Half told others of her relationship to Roy or the circumstances of Delphine's birth?
15. Argus, North Dakota is peopled by unusual characters. But is it really that different than any Iowa community? Erdrich writes "when small towns find they cannot harm the strangest of their members, when

eccentrics show resilience, they are eventually embraced and even cherished." (pg. 89) Discuss.

16. Erdrich is obviously a close observer of small town life. During her tale of the rivalry between the two butchers, Erdrich comments that a community moves on rapidly to "newer subjects of absurdity or distress. For of course, every so often the town received a great shock. It seemed that just as people grew into a false assurance, believed for instance that their prayers worked and threat evil was kept at bay . . . something happened." (pg. 43) Is Erdrich's depiction accurate?
17. Erdrich creates a wonderful story around Fidelis' immigration to the United States. What immigration stories are told and treasured in your family?
18. Erdrich gives us a peek at German American culture and character in the first half of the twentieth century. Erdrich explains that German Americans, with their tradition of "Zechunst" or "friendly drinking" (pg. 93) felt Prohibition particularly keenly. She also references prejudice against Germans as a result of World War I. Can you support Erdrich with personal experience or family stories?
19. Erich Waldvogel spends time in a German prisoner of war camp in Minnesota. Do you or someone you know have first-hand experience with German POWs incarcerated in the Iowa, Minnesota or elsewhere during World War II?