# Morning Girl Short Guide

## Morning Girl by Michael Dorris

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". 

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# Overview

Morning Girl, published in 1992, is a double first-person narrative told by Morning Girl, so-named because she is up before anyone else in the family, and Star Boy, her younger brother, who prefers the night and the stars to daytime. Alternate chapters give us Morning Girl's perceptions and Star Boy's. These children are growing up on an un-named Caribbean island, part of a loving family and extended tribe. The story is largely a coming-of-age tale for both Morning Girl and her brother as they cope with a family tragedy, a hurricane, with learning their places in the larger community, and finally with the arrival of white strangers.

# About the Author

M Native American author of Modoc ancestry. He was born in Kentucky in 1945. Raised largely by his aunts and his grandmother, he spent most of his early years in Louisville, although some of his childhood was spent on a reservation in eastern Montana. His Native American ancestry has been an important part of both his fiction and his nonfiction. His first novel, A Yellow Raft in Blue Water (1987), concerns three generations of Native American women living on a reservation in Montana. Each woman gives her own first-person account of her life, each interweaving into the next. Dorrisâ□□ own experiences growing up in a largely female household and his reservation experiences form part of the background of this novel, as does the oral tradition of Native American literature. His award-winning non-fiction book, The Broken Cord: A Familyâ□□s Ongoing Struggle With Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, is the story of his own familyâ□□s struggle with an adopted son, a Native American who suffered from the syndrome. Alcoholism rates are much higher among Native Americans than they are among the general population, and problems with fetal alcohol syndrome are equally high. Dorrisâ□□ study draws not only upon history, research, and science, but also upon his own struggles with a son suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome, and the effects of that struggle on an entire family.

Dorris trained as an anthropologist at Yale University, where he received a Master of Philosophy degree in 1970. He taught anthropology at a number of different colleges before finally settling at Dartmouth College, where in 1972 he founded and chaired the Native American Studies Department, a long-overdue development at a college whose historic mission was to provide education for Native Americans. His anthropology training obviously aided him in observing his own family when writing The Broken Cord, but it also has helped in his fiction writing. Dorris' books for children do not take place in the present, but in the historical past, and he uses his training in history and in anthropology to imagine what families and cultures must have been like in the Americas before the incursions of European culture. Thus both Morning Girl (1992) and Guests (1994) give Native American children's point of view of the arrival of Columbus (in the first novel) and the Pilgrims (in the second).

Dorris has a long-standing interest in the welfare of children. As a single father, he adopted three Native American children, one of whom, Abel, had fetal alcohol syndrome. In 1979, while with his children at a pow wow, he met Louise Erdrich, another Native American writer, whom he married in 1981, and with whom he had three more children. Although Dorris and Erdrich both continued to write individually, they also began to collaborate, particularly on The Crown of Columbus (1991). Sadly, Dorris' life began to unravel after the publication of Morning Girl in 1992. He and his wife separated, he was under investigation for alleged child abuse, and despondent, he committed suicide on April 11,1997. However complex his personal and family life might have been, his death marked the loss of a major Native American voice in literature.

# Setting

Morning Girl takes place on a tropical island late in the fifteenth century, where Morning Girl can wake and "watch the ocean or slip into the mango grove," where there is the "rich scent of the large red flowers." It is an island rich with fruit and beautiful with birds and flowers, but it is not a paradise. There are "hungry bugs so small you don't know they're there until they bite you," and storms so violent the rain "was before me and behind me and all around me, a thick crashing wave, and all I knew was water and movement that slammed and hissed and screamed my name," storms that flatten the village.

The setting is realistic, and developed with small but vivid details that help the reader imagine what such an island and its people must have been like before Europeans arrived. We hear of "digging sticks" and "cassava patches," helping us to understand that these are people who are settled and who farm. We hear of the palm leaves that thatch the family house and of the mats the family sleeps on, giving us an idea of domestic architecture, and also a sense that these are people who know how to live with the land and what it has to offer—an important concept in all traditional Native American philosophy. We learn that even violent storms bring some good things. Houses need to be re-roofed, but "the palms were already spread on the ground, perfect for thatch." Coconuts lay on the ground, saving the people the trouble of climbing trees for them. And in large puddles left by the rain, "silver fish carried from the sea could amazingly be found."

Perhaps best of all, the wind has blown the bugs away, so that the people can celebrate the passing of the storm without lighting smudge fires or coating their skin with ashes and soot.

Other details of setting also help ground this novel in reality. Star Boy likes to collect shells, but only perfect ones with no chips or imperfections. His shell collection connects him to contemporary children, many of whom like to collect shells when near the ocean, as well as to his time and place.

There are few toys for children; children must make their own amusement, and Star Boy does so. Star Boy is also protected by a large tree during the hurricane, a tree that his people think holds the spirits of deceased tribal and family members. Again, Dorris uses the physical details of this island to make a connection to the culture and beliefs of the people living there. As in Morning Girlmany traditional Native American cultures, here there is little, if any, distinction between the natural world and the humans who inhabit it. This can be seen even in the names of the characters, Morning Girl and Star Boy, names that both define the nature of the children and connect them to the natural world around them.

# Social Sensitivity

Morning Girl, written as it is by a Native American writer and an anthropologist, is sensitive to Native American culture and to the complex history of the confrontation of Europeans and Native Americans. Dorris does not blame Columbus and the explorers, but lets Columbus speak for himself. In the epilogue to the book, which consists of an excerpt from Columbus' own journal, we hear him speak of "savages" and of his intention to take some of them out of their own world and back to Europe to exhibit.

Letting Columbus' words stand without commentary by the author, and letting them stand after the end of a narrative told from the indigenous point of view, allows readers to draw their own conclusions about the nature of European expansion into the Americas.

Dorris is also sensitive to stereotypical presentations of Native American characters. None of the characters in Morning Girl is the least bit stereotypical, nor are they simply modern characters in historical dress.

The thoughts and words of the characters are sensitive, thoughtful, and lyrical. They dress simply, as befits people living on a tropical island. When the houses are described, they are described from the Native point of view, and thus are not presented as flimsy thatch cottages (which might be the prevailing European point of view), but rather as airy and comfortable dwellings that, when blown down by wind, are easily repaired, easily moved to other locations.

The communal nature of tribal life is also interwoven into the story. Families help each other and their neighbors: neighbors shelter Red Feathers when his parents are having difficulties; the grandmother helps She Wins the Race when she miscarries; the entire village searches for the missing Star Boy. But it is not only crisis that brings the village together: they also come together to feast and to celebrate.

We are given, again and again, details of how simply, yet how elegantly these people live their lives. From a European perspective they have little by way of material goods and wealth, but from a Native perspective they are wealthy indeed: wealthy in food, in love, in community. Their canoes may not seem as technological as the rowing dinghies of the explorers, but as Morning Girl notices, despite many men rowing, the boats move very slowly indeed.

The Europeans are not suited to the environment they have landed in, whereas the native inhabitants are exquisitely matched to the land they inhabit, and know how to fish its waters, survive its storms, collect its bounty, and enjoy its nature.

Dorris' training as an anthropologist and ethnographer helps him, in this novel, to successfully imagine not only the physical world of a people long ago, but also their culture, beliefs, and thoughts. His training as a writer enables him to deliver his imaginings in a beautifully poetic way.

# Literary Qualities

Morning Girl is a brief novel, and seemingly simply told, but in fact it is lyrical and moving and suggests more than it says outright.

Although the novel is named for the female protagonist, Morning Girl shares equal footing with her brother Star Boy.

There are nine brief chapters, five focused on Morning Girl and four on her brother.

Although the final chapter is from Morning Girl's point of view, each of her family members gets nearly equal attention in the chapter, providing an integration of family to suggest the integration of child and adult in the children, and to suggest ironically the coming disintegration of Native culture as the Europeans arrive.

Each chapter is told in the first person, and both Morning Girl and Star Boy have distinct voices. Morning Girl is older, and therefore slightly more articulate about her feelings, and she also thinks more about others than her brother does. In the opening chapter Morning Girl plans to weave necklaces of flowers for her parents before they wake, anticipating their pleasure and surprise. Star Boy, on the other hand, is younger, and lives more in the present than his sister does. While Morning Girl can generally identify and name her feelings, Star Boy gives us impressions and allows us to draw our own conclusions. For example, when he tries to hide by imitating a rock, the reader understands his shame and guilt and fear of punishment, although Star Boy himself never articulates these reelings: he simply concentrates on what it must feel like to be a rock.

The novel creates a vivid sense of place through the use of concrete details that are both familiar and foreign to children. Star Boy collects shells and Morning Girl likes to weave flower necklaces, tasks familiar to many small children. But in the context of the story, the actions seem foreign because they provide almost the only "toys" these children have, although their lives are rich in imagination, in family love, and in play.

The sense of place in the novel also provides not so much a symbol as an atmosphere for the coming of age stories of the children. We begin the story in the family's thatched house, in the comfort of the known; the houses are blown away during a hurricane; and the story ends on the open sea with the arrival of the Europeans. Thus just as the world of the children is opening up and expanding, so does the setting of the story. The hurricane is the single most dramatic event in the story, providing not only the drama of high winds and the lost Star Boy, but also the catalyst for Star Boy's maturity, as well as his sister's. The hurricane literally and metaphorically blows away the old and ushers in the new, but Dorris makes clear that hurricanes are a natural part of this world and that much survives in their wake. The tree that shelters Star Boy during the storm has withstood many hurricanes, and Star Boy and the other tribal members believe that the spirits of ancestors and deceased loved ones inhabit this tree. Here the tree becomes

symbolic of the rootedness of the people, their connection to their own "family trees," and to the cycle of life on the island.

The language of the novel is especially evocative. Dorris is a spare writer, but each word is carefully chosen and precisely right.

Star Boy says that what you see with your 290 Morning Girl eyes closed during the day is "like deep water, a pond that's draped with shade." In the middle of the hurricane Star Boy does not waste time on dramatic description, but tells us, "I watched the way you watch when you know you want to remember: Slowly, even though everything was going fast." Morning Girl likes it when her world fits together like shells sunk into sand after the tide has gone out, "before anyone has walked on the beach and left footprints," and then tells us that her brother Star Boy "was the footprints. He messed up the niceness for me."

Morning Girl's imagery here is typical of that in the novel. Whenever Dorris has one of his characters speak metaphorically, they choose metaphors from the world around them, images based on sand, or water, or flowers, or parrots, or stars. There are no long descriptive passages, no set pieces that give us a vision of the tropical island as a whole, but individual details and the children's use of metaphor based solidly upon their island reality give the reader a very strong sense of both place and character, and of the interaction of the two.

The names of the characters also suggest both the nature of their culture and the closeness of the people to the land. Morning Girl and Star Boy have names connected with the sky and its stars, but we also meet Red Feathers (one of Star Boy's friends); the children's uncle Sharp Tooth; and one or two other named characters (although Mother and Father retain their titles and we do not learn their names until the very end of the novel). Unlike the names of stereotypical Native American characters, these names are linked to the characters' natures and are important to their understanding of themselves. As Morning Girl says, "If your name is true, it is who you are."

It is the point of view of the story that in the end is most evocative. Because we see Morning Girlthe world through the eyes of Native American children, when we see the European explorers, we see them anew, shorn of the mythology textbooks associate with Columbus and his sailors. Names here are important again, because Morning Girl hurries away to announce their arrival before she learns their names, before she learns who they are. And it is the fact that she does not know their nature, that she assumes they are somewhat slow-witted strangers who need help and does not realize that they are the beginning of the end of her people, that gives the novel its poignancy. It also allows the reader to view Columbus and the European discovery of the Americas from an indigenous point of view.

# Themes and Characters

The central characters in this story are Morning Girl, her younger brother Star Boy, and their parents. There are also references to some of the children's friends and relatives, but the action is centered on the family and its daily doings. We are never told the age of the children, but the context of the story suggests that Morning Girl is perhaps eight or ten, Star Boy perhaps five or seven. Morning Girl often complains about having a noisy younger brother and is at the age where she is expected to help her mother and to watch out for her younger brother. Star Boy is a typical rambunctious little boy who runs, yells, acts impetuously, and sometimes gets into trouble with the adults. He is young enough to think that, after he has inadvertently set his father's canoe loose in the ocean, he can hide from the adults by rolling up and pretending to be a rock.

Morning Girl and Star Boy's names suggest their different personalities. Morning Girl tells us that "if the day starts before you do, you never catch up. You spend all your time running after what you should have already done, and no matter how much you hurry, you never finish the race in a tie. The day wins." Morning Girl does not wish to miss anything, and so is up before the day and before the rest of her family, trying to decide which idea to follow first in the day. Star Boy, on the other hand, is attracted to the night, to the stars that look like sand scattered on the sky, to the things that happen in the dark that no one else is aware of because they sleep. But both children share—although they are unaware of this—a deep and even poetic connection to the natural world around them.

No one child can take in both the day and the night, but between them these two children have a complete experience of the world, one in which the reader can share.

The children have two loving parents who watch out for them, but who also give them freedom to learn on their own. Early in the morning, when Morning Girl and Star Boy are grumbling to one another, Father turns on his mat and says, "Ghosts.

My house is filled with ghosts. They talk to each other all night. I'll have to build a new house. I'll live there in peace. It will be wonderful." He is gently joking with his noisy children, and Mother plays along with him, saying she will join him in escaping the ghosts who will not allow them their rest. The parents deliver the lesson that the children are disturbing them in a gentle and loving way.

Their loving and caring nature extends to the way they discipline their children.

Star Boy allows his father's canoe to drift out to sea, a serious error, since the canoe helps provide the family's livelihood. Star Boy, to avoid confrontation with his father and possible punishment, tries to hide and protect himself by turning himself into a rock. His parents, of course, know where he is, and his mother sits close by and talks aloud to herself, assuring herself (and her son) that he would never disappear without saying goodbye. Later his father appears, and talks aloud about how the canoe has been found

and rescued, and even had it not been found, it could be easily replaced. "But nothing can replace a son."

Star Boy ceases being a rock and becomes his father's son again "because I heard the pleasure in his voice."

We know that not all families on the island are loving—this is not paradise, after all. Star Boy has a friend whose parents squabble and argue, so that their son must go live with relatives for a time. The availability and willingness of family and neighbors to take in troubled children underlines the theme of community and interdependence that is so important in this novel. On a small island, tribal members must depend on each other for survival. We can see this during the hurricane, when people come together to search for the missing, and later, to rebuild and to celebrate with a huge feast on the shore. Everyone has suffered, everyone helps, and everyone celebrates.

The feast also brings to the foreground the coming-of-age qualities of the story, for both Morning Girl and Star Boy. Star Boy, excited by his adventures during the storm and the fact that he will get to tell his tale as part of the celebration's entertainment, races around the beach and grabs food from every mat he sees before him. Morning Girl, older, knows that she can no longer indulge in such impolite and childlike behavior, but suddenly realizes that her brother is moving out of childhood as well: he receives the same kind of pointed and disapproving looks from the adults that Morning Girl remembers from her own earlier years. The people begin to call him by his baby-name, Hungry, and to make fun of him. His uncle says he thought he heard Hungry/Star Boy say "he had a grown boy's name, but look, he's the same as ever, the same as he has always been." Star Boy suddenly realizes that he is behaving inappropriately and does not know how to save himself—nor does he have to. His sister calls across to him, "Food! I'm so hungry I can't wait any longer to eat!" and begins to imitate her brother's behavior by taking food from the mats. Then Father says, "Let us eat!" as he greedily bites into a piece of fruit. Star Boy is rescued first by his sister and then by the rest of his family, and at the end gives his sister a private name, The One Who Stands Beside, and knows his behavior in future must change.

This episode shows Star Boy and his sister growing in maturity. Star Boy learns, through the quiet disapproval of his community, how a grown boy behaves. Morning Girl looks at her brother and discovers she loves and cares for him, and helps him through a difficult situation.

Morning Girl has had earlier moments of self-discovery, sometimes in conjunction with her brother and sometimes on her own. One of the things that perplexes her is that she does not know what she looks like.

There are no mirrors in her culture, and water never stays still long enough for her to see her reflection clearly. Her mother tries to help her by having Morning Girl run her fingers first over her own features, and then over her mother's, searching for similarities and differences. Her father provides her with the best solution, however, asking her to look deep into his eyes, where she sees her twin reflection in his pupils.

Not only does this reassure Morning Girl that she is attractive and that she resembles her parents, but it also provides her an example of male approval of her appearance, as well as of the love and caring of her father.

She must also come to grips with the facts of life. Although she does not reach the age of menses in this novel, her mother does become pregnant with a third child.

The family is very happy, and Morning Girl, assuming she will have a little sister to play with in addition to her noisy brother, is especially happy. But then something happens: their mother goes away to stay with the grandmother, and when she returns she does not have a baby with her.

She has miscarried. Morning Girl understands the nature of the catastrophe better than her brother, but both children have been frightened by the disappearance of Morning Girltheir mother, the possibility that she might leave them just as the baby has left them, and that their family might be changed forever. It is overwhelmingly reassuring to the children when the mother returns and folds them into her arms. The children have learned something of birth and death, but they are still children and still need their mother. The episode captures the fluctuating nature of growing-up very well: the children seem older one minute, and much younger the next.

The end of the novel is poignant. Just as the childhood worlds of Morning Girl and Star Boy are beginning to open into the wider world of adulthood, so the tribe is about to be opened up to the wider world of European invasion and technology. Morning Girl goes for an early swim and sees a canoe filled with strangers who "had wrapped every part of their bodies with colorful leaves and cotton. . . .Their canoe was short and square, and, in spite of all their dipping and pulling, it moved so slowly. What a backward, distant island they must have come from." But Morning Girl is mindful of her manners and tries to make the strangers welcome, despite the language barrier. She motions them onto the beach and runs to tell her family of the arrival of the strangers, so that they can be made welcome, even if Star Boy will say she has just dreamed them. "But I didn't think that was true. I knew they were real."

These are the last words of the novel, except for the epilogue. The strangers, of course, are Columbus and his men, but seen from a Native perspective as backwards strangers who must be treated kindly: a terrible irony when one considers the difficult history of Europeans and Native Americans. Dorris does not comment upon these soldiers, except to let us see them through Native eyes, and to let Columbus speak for himself in an epilogue from his journal, in which he says "it seemed to me that they were a people very poor in everything." The reader knows this is not true: the natives are rich in food, in family, in love, in community, in the things that really matter and that will be threatened by the Europeans. But Dorris allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions, based upon what we have learned of the family and community of Morning Girl and Star Boy.

# Topics for Discussion

1. Explain the main complaints Morning Girl has about her brother Star Boy, and give examples from the text.

2. What do you think Star Boy complains about most where Morning Girl is concerned? Can you find details in the story to back up your ideas?

3. In what ways is the tree that Star Boy shelters beneath a symbol for the life of his family? How is it a symbol for the life of the entire tribe?

4. What events lead Morning Girl to change her opinion about her brother?

5. Why are the disapproving looks of the adults at the feast after the hurricane so disturbing to Morning Girl? Why doesn't Star Boy notice these disapproving looks?

6. What things in the story support your preconceptions of what life was like for Native Americans before Columbus came? What do you find surprising about the portrayal of Native culture in this novel?

7. Why do you think the novel is called Morning Girl, when half the story is devoted to Star Boy? Why is the novel not called Morning Girl and Her Brother, or Morning Girl and Star Boy?

8. Look up what a "homonym" is. What is the homonym in the title of Morning Girl? Does the homonym give you a better sense of what the end of the story might mean?

9. Read the epilogue (the excerpt from Columbus' journal) carefully. What does he not understand about the Native Americans? What assumptions does he make about their lives and what they need?

292 Morning Girl 10. Morning Girl is concerned about how she looks. Why is it so important to know one's physical appearance? Is it more or less important today? How do you think your life would be different if there were no mirrors or reflective surfaces in our world?

11. How would this story be different if told from the parents' point of view?

From the point of view of an early explorer? From an omniscient narrator writing from a twentieth-century perspective?

12. How do you think Morning Girl would react to Europe if she were one of the Natives Columbus took back?

13. Columbus writes that the natives need to learn to "speak." But we have heard them speaking throughout the novel.

What does Columbus mean by "speak"?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the outcome of Columbus' journey to the New World. Did he take any Natives back to Europe with him?

If so, what was their fate?

2. Look at your school's history or social studies texts' for their portrayal of Columbus coming to the New World.

From whose point of view is this story told in the textbooks?

3. Research the fate of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean after the arrival of Columbus. How many are left? What was the fate of those who disappeared?

Do the governments of these islands have any policies governing native peoples?

4. Research and describe the flora and fauna of the Caribbean islands. What grows there? What animals and crops can people eat?

Morning Girl5. Research the history and nature of hurricanes in the Caribbean. How often do they occur, and when? How strong are the winds? What methods do people today use to survive hurricanes? How do these methods differ from the methods we see used in Morning Girl?

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# Related Titles/Adaptations

Dorris' other two works about Native Americas and the early Americas, Guests and Sees Behind Trees, are other fine portrayals of American history seen through Native eyes. Joseph Bruchac, another Native American writer, has written a trilogy of Native life as it might have been ten thousand years ago, the first volume of which is entitled Dawn Land. There is an increasing number of novels and stories about contemporary Native American life, among them David Seals' Pow Wow Highway; Paula Gunn Allen's edited collection of stories, Spiderwoman's Grand Daughters; Sherman Alexie's The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven; N. Scott Momaday's The House Made of Dawn; James Welch's Fools Crow, and many others.

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