A Yellow Raft in Blue Water Study Guide

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water by Michael Dorris

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Published in 1987, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* was Michael Dorris's first novel. Though the author went on to write six other works of fiction (including three young adult novels and a book of short stories) his first novel is generally considered his finest. *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* is especially admired for his layered technique of telling the same story from multiple points of view. According to critic Louis Owens, Dorris borrowed that method from his wife, Louise Erdrich, a fellow writer and Native American who uses it in both *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen.* Dorris's novel, however, says Owens, "generates an impact sharper and stronger than either of [Erdrich's]." Although reviewers like Michiko Kakutani criticized Dorris for withholding key information from the plot in order to create a "false suspense," the critics' consensus is that what keeps readers involved is the vividly drawn characters rather than any formulaic mystery novel devices. A particular strength in the book is Dorris's portrayal of Indians who are neither stereotyped traditionalists nor mouthpieces for Red Power, but rather human beings in many ways like everyone else, trying to find their places in the world. As such they exemplify not just the clash between different cultures, but some of the great themes of fiction, whether it be the search for identity, the struggle within the self between strengths and weaknesses of character, or the clash of different cultures.

Author Biography

Michael Dorris was born on January 30, 1945, in either Louisville, Kentucky, or Dayton, Washington, the son of Jim and Mary Besy (Burkhardt) Dorris. Part Modoc on his father's side, he grew up on reservations in Montana and Kentucky. He graduated from Georgetown University with a B.A. cum laude in 1967. At Georgetown he studied theater, English, and the classics, and also developed a strong interest in cultural anthropology. Dorris received a M.Ph. from Yale University in 1970. Dorris began his academic career as an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Redlands in California. Dorris then spent a year at Franconia College in New Hampshire before settling at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH. He began there as an instructor in 1972 and rose to become chair of the Native American studies department (1979-1985); chair of the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program (1982-1985); and professor of anthropology (1979-1988).

During this period, Dorris also received numerous fellowships, including a Danforth (1967); Woodrow Wilson (1967. 1980); National Institute of Mental Health (NlMH) (1970); Guggenheim (1978); and Rockefeller (1985-86). He also won an Indian Achievement Award and the *Choice* Magazine Award for Outstanding Academic Book of 1984-85 for *A Guide in Research on North American Indians. A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* won a best book citation from the American Library Association in 1988.

Dorris married writer Louis Erdrich in 1981, and they had six children, one of whom, his adopted son (called Adam in the book), was the subject of Dorris's nonfiction book *The Broken Cord: A Family's Ongoing Struggle with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.* The book received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1989 and was also made into an award-winning television film.

In practicality, through all of these efforts Dorris and Erdrich worked as a remarkably close editorial team. Under their system, whoever wrote the first draft received authorial credit, with the other spouse acting as editor. The dedication of A *Yellow Raft in Blue Water* is "For Louise: Companion through every page, through every day, Compeer." Erdrich wrote the foreword to *The Broken Cord* and the two are listed as co-authors on two later books, *The Crown of Columbus,* (for which they received a $1.5 million advance, though the book did not live up to its advance publicity) and *Route Two and Back,* both published in 1991.

Beginning from his days as a single parent, Dorris's concern for children was evident in his life, his writing, and his charitable activities. In addition to being the adoptive father of many children, he wrote two young adult novels, *Morning Girl* (1992), which won the American Library Association Scott O'Dell Award and was named to five best books lists, and *Guests* (1995). Dorris also served as an advisory board member of Save the Children Foundation and on the U.S. Advisory Committee on Infant Mortality.

Despite these admirable achievements, Dorris's life was fraught with hardship. In 1991, his adopted son Reynold Abel died after being hit by a car. In 1995, another adopted

son, Jeffrey, was tried for attempting to extort $15,000 from him. Adding to these strains, in 1997 he separated from his wife and was under investigation for child sexual abuse. Dorris committed suicide on April 11, 1997 in Concord, New Hampshire, by suffocating himself with a plastic bag in a motel room.

Plot Summary

Rayona's Story

Rayona begins her account by describing a typical fight between her Native American mother, Christine, and her African American father, Elgin, who is making one of his infrequent v1sits to see Christine while she is sick in the hospital. This fight, however, causes Christine to explode with anger because Elgin wants to divorce her and remarry a younger African American woman. Raging, Christine escapes from the hospital in a candy striper's uniform and threatens to commit suicide by crashing her car to collect the insurance money. Fortunately, this attempted suicide is frustrated when her car runs out of gas, and Christine is forced to adopt a more rational plan: to leave Seattle, return to a reservation in Montana, and live with her "mother" Ida, who insists that she be called "Aunt Ida" instead of mother because Christine was born out of wedlock. In one of the novel's funniest sections, Rayona describes how the only attachment keeping Christine in Seattle is her lifetime membership at Village Video, which Christine bought because 1t was on sale even though she did not have a VCR. Christine reluctantly leaves the lifetime membership behind in Seattle but not without renting a couple of videos "for life" on the way out of town.

Christine and Rayona arrive at Aunt Ida's only to be greeted with another fight, which also ends in harsh words and Christine running away. Unable to catch her fleeing mom, Rayona ends up stranded with Ida who is a virtual stranger. For awhile, a young priest named Father Tom befriends Rayona and arranges for her to attend school and religious meetings with other youth on the reservation, but the priest ends up making sexual advances at Rayona en route to a religious revival. After they cool off, Rayona tells Father Tom that she does not want to return to the reservation, and he encourages her and gives her money for a return ticket to Seattle. However, Rayona skips the train, pockets the cash, and stays in the area. She eventually meets Sky and Evelyn, who help her find a Job at a state park and rent her a room in their trailer.

After a couple weeks, Evelyn and Sky help Rayona attempt to find her mother at a rodeo in a nearby town. The first person Rayona meets at the rodeo, however, is Foxy Cree, a boy who had ridiculed her back at the reservation school. After admitting that he is too drunk to perform his scheduled ride in the rodeo, Foxy asks Rayona to take his place, and Rayona agrees. Even though she rides poorly, she demonstrates enough determination that the judges award her a special consolation prize. When she goes to accept her award, however, everyone discovers that she is a woman, and she is quickly surrounded by all of her acquaintances: Evelyn, Sky, Foxy, Father Tom, and Dayton, the man who is now living with her mother. Dayton agrees to take Rayona back to his place to see her mother.

Christine's Story

After Rayona and Christine are reunited, Christine begins her story with an account of the night when she loses her faith in God because the mission nuns try to scare her into good behavior by convincing her that the world is going to end on New Year's Eve. Her devout faith 1S shattered, however, when the anticipated doomsday never arrives, and the nuns' only explanation is that a mystery prevented it. This memory leads Christine to other events from her childhood: the dangerous stunts that she performs to impress her brother Lee and his friends, and the rivalry that develops when Lee forms a new friendship W1th Dayton. Gradually, Dayton and Ida convince Lee to embrace his Native American 1dentity wh1le Christine assimi1ates mainstream America's values and fashions. When the Vietnam War breaks out, these differences cause Christine to support the war and Lee to oppose it, but Christine ultimately gets her way by convincing Dayton that Lee must enlist 1f he hopes to be respected as a tribal leader. Reluctantly, Lee enlists only to be killed in Vietnam, and meanwhile Christine uses an Indian relocation program to move to Seattle.

When news of Lee's death reaches Christine, she seeks solace in a bar where she meets an African American man named Elgin. Elgin 1mtially consoles her, but solace quickly turns into sex and passionate romance. Eventually, Christine lets Elgin get her pregnant, and they dec1de to get married only to have the relationship turn sour. As Christine's pregnancy progresses, their passion becomes mixed up with various infidelities, accusations, lies, and hostilities. After Rayona is born, Christine raises her, but her relationship with Elgin and her personal stability continue to slide downhill. Her life in Seattle drifts further and further from her previous life on the reservation, and her periodic contact with the reservation only seems to accentuate her distance from it. She returns to the reservation for Lee's funeral only to feel blamed for causing his death, and Aunt Ida spends an uncomfortable week with her in Seattle while visiting a dying relative named Clara.

Ida's Story

In the final section, Ida reveals several surprises that not only fill in gaps in the story but also force the reader to reevaluate other aspects of the story in light of this new information. To begin with, Ida explains that she is not really Christine's mother after all. Christine's real mother is Clara, an aunt who came to take care of Ida's ill mother but ended up getting impregnated by Ida's father instead. To cover up the illicit pregnancy, Ida's father sent Clara and Ida to Denver where Clara could have the baby out of sight, and he instructed Ida to claim to be the baby's real mother when they returned. They planned for Clara to return with Ida and take primary responsibility for raising the child, but later Clara decided to remain in Denver and left Ida to raise Christine all by herself Several years later, Clara did return to reclaim Christine in hopes of making money by putting her up for adoption, but Father Hulbert helped Ida claim legal rights over Christine because she has raised Christine as her own daughter.

In addition, Ida also reveals the Identity of Lee's father. After spending her youth as the sole parent of someone else's daughter, Ida courted one of the few men who would want her: a wounded veteran named Willard Pretty Dog. Providing each other with mutual solace from their troubled pasts, they became intimate friends, and Ida soon became pregnant With Willard's baby. A few weeks later, however, their relationship was shattered when Willard admitted that he loved her only because she showed compassion on him. They remained friends but never returned to the intimate relationship that they had previously, and Ida eventually gave birth to their son. Following tradition, she named him Lecon after her own father, but she called him Lee to distance him from the negative memories that she had of her father.

Putting a final ironic Spin on the plot, the final page of Ida's story reveals how she seduced Father Hurlburt, the same priest who encouraged her both to raise Christine and to befriend Willard. Not only does this weave together several strands from Ida's own life, but it also ironically connects the three generations of women because Ida seduced the same priest who later supervised the priest who would attempt to seduce Rayona. Moreover, Ida does this on the same night that Christine's faith in God is shattered when the world does not come to an end Nevertheless, many of these ironic connections are only recognized by the reader since the women themselves remain largely unaware of each others' deepest secrets.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

The novel begins with fifteen-year-old Rayona playing cards with her hospitalized mother, Christine, in a hospital in Seattle, Washington. The card games are interrupted by the arrival of Elgin, Christine's African American husband and Rayona's father. Christine and Elgin are estranged and Christine hopes that Elgin's appearance at the hospital today indicates Elgin's intention to return to her and Rayona.

Elgin had borrowed Christine's car and has come to return the keys. Elgin is living with a younger woman and has no plans to return to the marriage with Christine. Rayona leaves soon after Elgin does and takes the stairs to avoid meeting her father. Approaching Christine's car in the parking garage, Rayona can see that a candy striper from the hospital is attempting to break into a locked car with a wire hanger.

Rayona attacks the girl from behind and quickly realizes that the girl in the uniform is not a hospital volunteer but Christine, who has escaped from the hospital. Christine's anguish at Elgin's request for a divorce explodes into rage and Christine informs Rayona of her plans to drive the car to a park near Tacoma and drive off a cliff. This spot is where Rayona had been conceived and where Elgin proposed to Christine. Christine hopes that her suicide at this location will have an emotional impact on Elgin.

Rayona will not let her mother drive to Tacoma alone, so mother and daughter drive through the night until they reach the appointed destination. Christine stops the car to let Rayona out a little distance from the cliff; however, the car will not start when Christine is ready to go ahead with her mission. Apparently Elgin had not re-filled the gas tank, forcing Christine and Rayona to walk back to find a gas station.

When Christine and Rayona return to their apartment, they quietly pack their few belongings and leave the apartment, where they are two months behind in rent payments. The plan is to drive to Montana, to the reservation where Christine was raised and where Christine's mother, Aunt Ida, still lives. Christine calls her mother "Aunt Ida" along with everyone else, because Aunt Ida was not married when Christine was born, and she likes this name. The only thing that Christine and Rayona will miss in Seattle is their lifetime membership to the Video Village, purchased for ninety-nine cents even though they do not own a VCR. On the way out of Seattle, Christine rents two videos so that she will not show up empty handed at Aunt Ida's.

Christine and Rayona drive all morning and the car breaks down about a half mile from Aunt Ida's. The two women retrieve their belongings from the car and walk the short distance to Aunt Ida's house where Aunt Ida is trying to mow the grass with a mower with extremely dull blades. It has been many years since Aunt Ida and Christine have seen each other and Aunt Ida does not welcome the intrusion.

Christine stomps away after arguing with her mother, and Rayona follows Christine as best she can, but Christine has already been offered a ride from someone in a pickup truck. As Rayona picks at the grass at the side of the road, Aunt Ida approaches her and enfolds Rayona in an embrace and leads the girl back to the house.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water is the saga of three generations of Native American Indian women, Rayona, Christine and Aunt Ida, whose story is told in regressive time structure from the perspectives of each of the women.

The author starts the story from Rayona's perspective and we come to understand the desperate life she leads with an absent father and a mother who is repeatedly hospitalized for some illness which has not yet been revealed. Rayona's life has been one of constant moving and always being the new girl at school. In addition to not forming any roots, Rayona is burdened with having an African American father and a Native Indian mother, leaving her with no real identity with either culture. Rayona tries to fit in and is a good student but her parents' angst constantly stirs up Rayona's life. There is much to learn about the broken relationship between Christine and Aunt Ida but something instinctive comes to the surface for Rayona when embraced by Aunt Ida and years of pent-up anxiety burst forth in tears.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8

Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 Summary

Rayona and Aunt Ida are essentially strangers and find communication difficult in Aunt Ida's trailer. Rayona stays in the room that had been Christine's and Aunt Ida watches TV. Word of Rayona's visit spreads throughout the reservation and soon the local priest visits and makes plans for Rayona to attend some church youth activities headed up by another priest, Father Tom.

Rayona also meets a cousin named Foxy, who belittles Rayona for her mixed heritage. Foxy dates a girl named Annabelle who also makes fun of Rayona, so Rayona becomes the project of Father Tom, who tries to alleviate Rayona's sense of alienation. Father Tom is adamantly interested in talking to Rayona about her sexual awakening, a topic which Rayona successfully deflects until one weekend.

Father Tom has driven Rayona to a regional youth jamboree and on the way, the two stop in a state park to sleep and end up swimming where Father Tom makes inappropriate advances toward Rayona, as she suns herself on a yellow raft. The encounter leaves the priest and Rayona's relationship strained, and Father Tom is glad to give Rayona money for a bus ticket when she says she wants to return to Seattle. Rayona does not leave, however, and finds a job at a state park where she is befriended by a cook at the lodge, Evelyn, and her husband, Sky, who owns the local Conoco station.

Rayona tells Evelyn and Sky that she is on a summer adventure while her parents are vacationing in Switzerland. Rayona tells her new friends that her father is a jet pilot for an airline and is able to maintain the fazade until one day Evelyn learns the truth. Evelyn's soft heart toward Rayona prompts her to take Rayona back to the reservation in the hopes of finding Christine and re-building a relationship with her mother.

It is the Fourth of July and Evelyn and Sky drive Rayona back to the reservation where there is a rodeo being held. While there, Foxy convinces Rayona to ride a wild stallion in his place because he is too drunk to compete. Rayona reluctantly agrees and ends up being thrown three times, but receives an award for determination. Her true identity revealed at the award ceremony, Rayona is flooded with well-wishers including Father Tom, Evelyn, Sky, Foxy and a man named Dayton, with whom Christine is now staying.

Dayton takes Rayona home with him and Christine is not happy that Rayona has come back and chastises Rayona for not letting Aunt Ida know where she has been the last several weeks. Rayona is amazed that she has been perceived as being the bad one in the situation, when it is Rayona herself who had been left, but Rayona knows this is her mother's way and just accepts it. The next morning Rayona and Christine share some private time and get reacquainted and Rayona cannot help but notice that Christine does not look well and Rayona wonders if her mother is in fact very ill after all.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 Analysis

The author has given Rayona incredible powers of survival. She immediately adapts to being abandoned at Aunt Ida's and tries to incorporate herself into the youth activities at the reservation. Even the inappropriate encounter with Father Tom does not shake her very much. Rayona is immediately able to find a job and a place to live in spite of the fact that she is only fifteen-years-old and the only person of African American heritage in this area. The author uses the techniques of metaphors and similes to help explain the situation from Rayona's point of view. When describing the awkwardness in Aunt Ida's house when Rayona arrives, Rayona thinks to herself that "Aunt Ida and I don't know what to do with each other. We are unexpected surprises, spoiled plans, bad luck."

When Evelyn encounters Father Tom at the rodeo and he realizes that Evelyn knows about his inappropriate behavior with Rayona, Rayona witnesses the looks the two share and describes the situation as, "He knows she knows, and she knows he does. They're like two computers talking to each other without sound, the information flying back and forth." This description is much more vivid than just a simple description of the situation.

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

The story transitions from Rayona's perspective to that of Christine's as Christine explains her troubled childhood, lived in the shadow of her younger brother, Lee. Lee is tall and beautiful, while Christine is heavy set and struggles, both with her looks, and with Aunt Ida, who clearly prefers Lee. Ironically, Lee does not realize how desirable he is to other people, or the intensity of Christine's jealousy for all that Lee has.

It is the middle of the 1960's and the world is filled with peace demonstrations and talk of the Vietnam War on TV, but that world seems far removed from the reservation where Christine and Lee are finishing their high school years. The tight brother and sister relationship is challenged when a young man named Dayton moves to the reservation and becomes Lee's best friend.

Lee and Dayton become inseparable for years and Christine even tries to seduce Dayton, in an attempt to lure him away from Lee. Dayton is not interested in Christine romantically, which is a blow to Christine who is spending more time and effort on her looks. Christine's self-validation comes from the attention she can get from men of all ages and she is also developing a reputation for being a fast girl, because she dates so many men.

The friendship between Lee and Dayton does not diminish and the two young men decide to show their Indian heritage by growing their hair even longer and wearing some Indian clothes with their usual clothes. Christine, on the other hand, embraces mainstream American pop-culture, dresses in mini-skirts and teases her hair as high as she can get it.

Christine easily tires of life on the reservation and begins to date men who will take her to other towns for entertainment. At one point Christine unwittingly dates a married man whose wife confronts Aunt Ida, which is the breaking point of the relationship between Christine and her mother. Aunt Ida does not understand why Christine will not settle down with a nice boy instead of running around, and Christine is quick to remind Aunt Ida that she herself never married and had two children, herself and Lee, out of wedlock.

Finally Lee graduates high school and is eligible for the draft while Dayton escapes eligibility because of his 4-A status as the sole remaining son in the family. Lee does not immediately sign up to go to the army but Christine sees Lee's enlistment as a way to separate him from Dayton and belittles Lee into believing that he will never be viewed as a tribal leader if he does not serve his country.

Lee and Dayton disappear for a week and return on the night of a big reservation gathering. The room goes silent when everyone sees Lee standing in the doorway, his

long hair shorn off. Lee ceremoniously approaches Aunt Ida and hands her an envelope containing Lee's braided pony tail that had been cut off. Lee announces his enlistment in the army and he becomes the local hero once more.

Christine's social life improves with the news of Lee's enlistment because everyone wants to be close to the heroic Lee and dating Christine is an honor by association. Lee and Christine's relationship strengthens during this period too; it is as if they were young again and best friends.

While Lee waits for his orders to come through, Christine accepts a job in Seattle, provided through the Indian relocation program. Lee waits with Christine at the bus station where she boards the bus to her new life, and brother and sister promise to write and see each other as soon as possible.

In Seattle, Christine has a series of menial jobs and lives in a rundown efficiency apartment but maintains an active social life. One day at work, Christine receives a card from Dayton informing her that Lee has been listed as MIA. Christine's mind reels and that night, she is so distracted she misses her bus stop and gets off in a Negro neighborhood, which scares her at first but she decides to enter a bar for a few drinks. While she decides what to order, Christine is approached by Elgin Taylor, an African American soldier whose courtesy and tenderness move Christine in light of her angst about Lee. Elgin invites Christine to spend the night at his apartment and the two become intimately involved.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

The author uses the technique of first party narrative and this section begins Christine's story as seen through flashbacks. The story is regressing in time, having begun with Rayona's perspective, more information is being provided in Christine's story, which will help make Rayona's story more relevant.

The author also inserts the characters in a historically accurate timeline of the 1960's. Christine talks about wearing mini-skirts and watching the now famous images of protesting students putting daisies in the gun barrels of soldiers standing at attention. The Vietnam War looms large and soon, the family is divided on its validity, which mirrors the perspective of the United States as a whole. There are also references to popular culture in the story with the songs that Christine sings along with, and the importance of Walter Cronkite's news presentations, which seems to provide an anchor for her life on the reservation.

Beautiful imagery is sprinkled liberally throughout the book making it very interesting to read for its almost lyrical tone. For example, in one scene Christine is giving Aunt Ida a hair permanent, at home, and describes the older woman's hair as "hung in a thick, coarse curtain to her waist." Further description of the same situation continues as "her skull looked too small, the way a cat's does when it gets wet." There is no question in

the reader's mind as to what the author wants to impart and the visual imagery is very simple, yet powerful in these instances.

Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

Christine's and Elgin's relationship blossoms and the couple moves into a room at the Excelsior Hotel. Elgin had enough money saved so Christine could quit her job and the two young people spent a few weeks of bliss discovering their love for each other. Soon Christine becomes pregnant and Elgin offers to marry Christine, but they never find the time to make the arrangements until one day when Christine, well along in her pregnancy, pushes the issue.

Christine and Elgin are married at the Justice of the Peace office and they go out to dinner and then to a bar where all the patrons join in the celebration. On the way home, Christine can already tell that she and Elgin have drifted apart, although he carries her for the last two blocks and then, via elevator, up to their room at the hotel.

Elgin begins to work late, an excuse he uses for not coming home much before midnight. Christine knows the post office cannot have that much overtime and Elgin's route as a carrier has limits, but Christine makes excuses for Elgin's lack of interest and tries to hold on to the magic they had shared initially. Christine sends a postcard to Aunt Ida informing her that she has married and has a baby on the way. Aunt Ida never responds and there is still no word about Lee.

It is now mid-December and Christine's baby is a week overdue. The rent on the hotel room is two weeks overdue and Elgin rarely comes home on time anymore. In the depths of misery, Christine can do nothing but hope her labor begins soon. A knock on the door brings a messenger with a letter from Dayton informing Christine that Lee has been killed in Vietnam. Suddenly, Christine's water breaks and her baby decides to come into the world.

Christine pushes back the pain of Lee's death and focuses on the agony of the childbirth bearing down on her as she calls a cab to take her to the hospital. Of course, Elgin does not show up in time for the birth, in spite of many messages left for him. Leaning over Christine and the new baby, Rayona, in the hospital there are a few moments of tenderness but Christine realizes the old feelings are gone.

Before Rayona is a year old, Christine takes her and moves to a place of her own and secures a job with one of the companies for whom she worked when she first arrived in Seattle. Christine's relationship with Elgin is sporadic, neither one of them wanting to let go completely, yet not able to fully invest either.

Because the military delayed in releasing Lee's body, the funeral does not take place until a few months after the notification of his death. Christine packs up Rayona and a few belongings and heads for Montana. Putting off sleep and nutrition, Christine drives

relentlessly through the mountains and over the crystal-glazed roads of the plains in order to arrive at the reservation in time for the funeral.

As Christine approaches the reservation, the car hits a patch of ice and Christine knows the vehicle will spin and crash. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees a vision of Lee, standing on a set of golden stairs beckoning her to come with him. Christine knows if she turns the steering wheel in that direction the car will surely crash and she and Rayona will be killed. Christine gives into the feelings of wanting to be with Lee and cries out, floors the gas, and throws her body over Rayona's. Instead of crashing, the car spins several times and comes to rest on the road. Christine changes Rayona's diaper and returns to the driver's seat. Amazingly, the car starts with no problem and she resumes her drive to the reservation.

Christine is not welcomed with open arms at Aunt Ida's home where Lee's casket rests, under one of Aunt Ida's tablecloths. Visitors and relatives whisper in corners and evade Christine. Over time, she comes to realize that she is being blamed for Lee's death because she had urged him to enlist in the army. Aunt Ida does warm to Rayona even though it is clear the child is of mixed ethnicities. Christine is prepared to make peace with Dayton tonight but Dayton does not visit the house because he knows that Christine is there. During the next few days, the funeral is woven with the Catholic rituals of mass and burial as well as Indian ceremonies. Dayton invites Christine to have dinner and they mend the rift between them, before Christine returns to Seattle.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

Christine is caught between the world of modern day America and the world of her native Indian heritage. Trying to be independent and a woman of the world, Christine strikes out for Seattle to forge a new life and remove herself from the restrictions of life on the reservation. For the most part, Christine enjoys her new liberties, falls in love and marries a Negro man, in spite of the social taboo of interracial marriages at the time.

On the other hand, the pull of the Indian culture never leaves Christine and she is always trying to make her skin look lighter or darker depending on whom she is with. There is not much mention of Indian ritual in the book other than the style of dress and some native dancing at reservation meetings, but it is implied that the culture pervades the residents, in spite of the efforts to transition into the white world.

One episode which may be considered to be of a spiritual nature is when Christine has the vision of Lee beckoning to her on the golden stairs. Christine's despair over her broken marriage and now the death of her beloved brother forces her to a depth where she considers killing herself and her baby daughter as a way of escape. Whether or not Christine actually saw the vision or just hoped that she did is not clear, but Christine does live and composes herself to continue on her life's journey, a fact that she probably interprets as a sign from Lee that this is the ultimate plan.

Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

Christine checks for a note from Elgin when she returns to her apartment in Seattle but there is no note and no indication that he had looked for her while she was gone. None of her friends are available to talk on the phone so Christine dresses, re-applies her makeup and takes Rayona with her to a neighborhood bar to find some company. As Christine scans the people seated at the long bar, she spots Elgin's hand on the back of some woman and soon his eyes meet Christine's in the mirror over the bar.

Elgin comes over to Christine's table and tells her he had planned to call and wonders how the trip to Montana went. Elgin also chastises Christine for bringing Rayona to a bar but he and Christine talk for a while and they leave together. Elgin stays with Christine and Rayona for almost two weeks this time.

Christine and Elgin's marriage is open, in that they cannot divorce because of their feelings for each other, but each is still free to date other people. Christine shudders to think of what Rayona must think about this arrangement but she cannot bring herself to rid her life of Elgin.

One day, out of the blue, Aunt Ida calls Christine and tells her that she is in Seattle to visit a relative who is in the hospital. Christine offers to pick up Aunt Ida at the bus station but the old woman stubbornly refuses the offer, opting to take the bus to Christine's apartment.

The two women are still at odds with each other although it has been several years since Lee's funeral, which was the last time they saw each other. Aunt Ida is slightly kinder to Rayona and has brought a homemade doll for the child, a gesture which both surprises and pleases Christine. Every day for a week, Aunt Ida makes the pilgrimage to the hospital to visit, Clara, who is Christine's great aunt.

On the final day of Aunt Ida's visit, she asks Christine to accompany her to the hospital to visit Clara even though Christine has never met the woman. Christine reluctantly agrees to go and dresses Rayona and herself appropriately for a hospital visit. When Christine sees Clara she remembers her as an old woman at Lee's funeral but that is all the memory she has.

Clara is pleased to see Christine and Rayona and tells Christine that she favors her grandmother. Christine is intrigued by any mention of her lineage and wants to stay to hear more, but Aunt Ida rushes the visit and Christine promises Clara that they will visit again soon; however, Aunt Clara dies soon after. On the last night of her visit, Aunt Ida flies into a rage when Rayona slips and calls her grandma, not Aunt Ida. Rayona locks herself in the bathroom and cries and Christine is powerless to approach either one of them.

Elgin comes over the next night and Christine tells him that Aunt Ida had wondered where he was since he and Christine are still married. It is hard for other people to understand the marriage between Christine and Elgin. It is as if both Christine and Elgin live in separate places but have Rayona as their connector.

Elgin has good intentions about being a good father but more often than not, lets Rayona down and dashes her hopes when outings and meetings never come to pass. On the rare occasions that Elgin takes Rayona to visit his family, Christine is jealous of the time and worried about what Elgin's family says about Christine because Rayona is always in a difficult mood when he returns her.

It is at this point that Christine recalls her version of playing cards in the hospital room at the beginning of the story. Christine has just been informed that she has pancreatic cancer and has only six months to live. The doctor advises Christine to make provisions for Rayona, but Christine has never planned for anything in her life. As the facts of her situation begin to sink in, Rayona arrives for her daily visit and Christine tries to avert any talk of diagnoses by initiating card games.

While mother and daughter play, Elgin shows up in the doorway to return the keys to the car. Christine hopes that the despair in her eyes will show and that Elgin will have some compassion and stay but, true to form, Christine and Elgin argue, and Elgin leaves followed shortly by Rayona. As Christine ponders her fate, she determines that she will not stay in the hospital one minute longer; she wants to go home to the reservation and make arrangements for Aunt Ida to care for Rayona. Christine hopes that she can give Aunt Ida the chance to be a better mother to Rayona than she was to her.

Rifling through closets in the hospital, the only clothes Christine can find is a candy striper's outfit which is too small, but stretches over Christine's body. No one notices when Christine marches out of the hospital. Christine remembers the number of the parking spot where Elgin said he left the car and takes the hanger on which the candy striper's outfit had been hanging and attempts to unlock the car.

As a surprise to both of them, Rayona approaches Christine from the back and attacks her, knocking her mother to the ground. After the shock wears off, Christine explains that her time and her luck have run out and she plans to drive the car off the cliff near a park in Tacoma, where Rayona was actually conceived. Her death would at least provide Rayona with the life insurance money once she is dead.

Rayona refuses to accept this as a solution and for a few moments Christine is struck with tenderness that this loving, tender person could have come from her own body. Rayona will not let Christine drive off alone and buckles herself into the front seat of the car, and mother and daughter wind their way south to Tacoma, in the middle of the night. Christine stops the car at a point she feels is appropriate so that Rayona cannot witness her death, but the car will not start up again. Elgin had not re-filled the gas tank and Christine's plan is formally thwarted, so Christine and Rayona walk back the way they had come to find a gas station.

Later that morning, Christine and Rayona pack what little belongings they have into green garbage bags in preparation for leaving. Christine visits a neighbor down the hall, a nurse at the Indian Hospital who has been providing narcotic pain medication for Christine on the side. Christine leaves Aunt Ida's address so that the woman can forward the drugs and begs her to tell no one where Christine and Rayona are going.

Christine wants to give Rayona something she will remember all her life but she has nothing of any value to pass on, until she remembers the lifetime membership she had just purchased for Rayona at Village Video. Before leaving Seattle, Christine stops in at the video store and thoughtfully chooses two videos to present to Rayona as her legacy. The first move is *Christine,* the Stephen King movie about a car with an evil brain. Christine has always liked that a movie was made with her name as the title, and she likes to think of herself as like that willful car. The other movie Christine selects is *Little Big Man,* not so much for its story about Native Indians, but because Christine had dated one of the minor actors.

Christine and Rayona drive all day and the car breaks down a mile from Aunt Ida's house. Aunt Ida is not pleased to see them and she and Christine argue. As sick as she is and in such terrible pain from the cancer, Christine still has enough dignity that she will not allow Rayona to witness Aunt Ida's belittling and runs away from the house leaving Rayona with Aunt Ida.

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

The author uses the creative technique of repetition to show the difference in how a certain event or situation can be interpreted differently by all who experience it. In this section, Rayona's visit to the hospital and the card games with Christine, which are viewed with impatience by the young girl have a completely different meaning for Christine. Shortly before Rayona's arrival, Christine is informed that she has terminal pancreatic cancer and Christine wants to disguise any signs of distress from Rayona. By playing cards and trying to joke with Rayona, she spares Rayona from devastating news while she herself is collapsing inside.

Throughout the story Elgin has never been a faithful husband or good father, yet Christine cannot bring herself to divorce him. Symbolically, it is Elgin's bringing the car back, with an empty tank, which makes Christine realize the emptiness of the relationship, and she is finished.

The author continues to use brilliant imagery with the description of Christine's reaction to her cancer diagnosis. "A bad diagnosis. I'd seen it a hundred times. I knew how to act. I took myself on the other side of the TV screen, turned down the sound to mute the eerie music, switched channels. I fought the controls until I shut off the set." There is so much emotional and intellectual impact in the description of Christine's state of mind in just a few phrases and the imagery is one that any person could relate to, which makes the writing so engaging.

Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

When Christine runs down the road away from Aunt Ida's house, a truck driven by Foxy Cree, Christine's cousin, slows down to pick her up. Foxy is perplexed that Christine wants to go to Dayton's house but drops her off there. Christine finds a key and lets herself in to wait for Dayton. When Dayton returns home from work Christine is lying on the couch, hazy from the pain medication but she can sense Dayton looking at her intently and she can see him check a desk drawer and rifle through some papers.

Christine shares her predicament with Dayton who graciously offers his home so that Christine will feel comfortable. The next day Christine searches for the papers and finds newspaper clippings of a trial convicting Dayton of improper conduct with a student. According to the articles, Dayton claims his innocence of the charges which occurred as a result of his giving a student poor grades. Apparently Dayton has been in jail during the time that Christine has been in Seattle but Christine puts the papers away and vows not to mention the incident.

Christine and Dayton settle into life almost like a married couple except there is no physical contact. Christine is overwhelmed by Dayton's caring and kindness and the time passes uneventfully until the day that Dayton brings Rayona home with him from the rodeo. Christine had not wanted Rayona to know about the scope of her illness but ultimately Rayona chooses to stay with Christine and Dayton and the three of them become like a little family unit.

Christine is surprised by a visit from a stranger one day, who introduces himself as Father Tom. He has come to offer free pain medication and will provide it as long as Christine needs it. Father Tom inquires as to whether Rayona is at home and when he finds out the girl is not there, the priest leaves, but not before asking Christine to keep the interaction with the drugs a secret between the two of them.

Rayona is learning to drive Dayton's old truck and even goes to the stud farm to retrieve Dayton's horse, Babe, one day. Christine rides along for company although her pain is increasingly worse each day. The mother and daughter stop for breakfast and while washing her hands in the restroom, Christine removes her rings and gives one to Rayona when she returns to the table.

Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

There are many secrets in this small reservation area which begin to emerge in this section. Christine finds the articles about Dayton's imprisonment while she was back in Seattle. The charge of improper sexual conduct makes all the time Dayton and Lee spent together seem a bit unusual but she pushes aside any negative thoughts.

Father Tom's conscience about the inappropriate encounter with Rayona still has a hold on him and he hopes that the delivery of drugs and the promise of more will keep Christine quiet about the incident. Fortunately for the priest, Christine does not yet know about the incident on the yellow raft, but Father Tom reiterates that there is no point in informing his superiors about the drugs.

Chapters 17, 18, 19 and 20

Chapters 17, 18, 19 and 20 Summary

The narrative of the story now changes to Ida's perspective and sheds light on some of the events that impact Christine's and Rayona's stories. Ida explains her life as a ring of mountains, close together but separated by deep chasms. The first summit occurs when Ida is fifteen-years-old; the year her aunt Clara comes to help out at the house because Ida's mother, Annie, is very ill with heart trouble.

Clara is dazzling and magical and befriends Ida who is dowdy and awkward. Ida feels as if her life begins on the day Clara arrives at the house. Before long it is revealed that Clara is pregnant and Ida's father, Lecon, is the father of the child. Annie is devastated at such betrayal and wants Clara removed from the house but there is much work to do and Annie's bedridden condition prohibits her from running the household.

Finally a plan is devised by Clara whereby she and Ida will go away for the time of the pregnancy and return to the reservation with the baby which will be passed off as Ida's child. The family engages Father Hurlburt in this deception and the priest finds a house for unwed mothers run by nuns, in Denver, and Clara and Ida are sent away.

Clara fills the heads of the nuns with stories about a horrific rape which resulted in her pregnancy while Ida is able to hide in a closet to avoid attack. The nuns glory in Clara's story of attack and martyrdom and her bravery in bearing the child. In the meantime, Ida is relegated to harsh cleaning details at the home while Clara rests like a pampered Indian princess. When Clara delivers a baby girl one of the nuns informs Ida that she is now an aunt' however, Clara is considering giving the child up for adoption. Ida is infuriated at the possibility the original plan may be broken and Ida has endured months of labor and humiliation for nothing. Ida storms into Clara's room demanding to know the truth and Clara tells her that she thinks adoption may provide a better life for the baby. Ida demands to see the child and then understands why Clara is not enamored with the girl; she is not a pretty baby.

Clara also has plans to recover at the hospital for a few more weeks and then stay on in Denver for a while because she has never had a chance to see the city. Ida, easily passes for an overwrought unwed mother with her downtrodden appearance, and leaves with the baby, whom she has named Christine. Father Hurlburt picks Ida and the baby up at the train station and delivers them home, where Ida's father is devastated to find that Clara has not returned with them.

Annie is still not well and Pauline, Ida's sister, has married and moved out of the house so, in addition to her responsibilities as a new mother, management of the house falls on her. Lecon begins to stay away from the house longer, working and drinking, finally coming home only on the weekends, leaving the house free for the women during the week.

Ida's only social interaction is the Thursday evening visits from Father Hurlburt, who schools Ida in the subjects she is missing and provides information about the other people inhabiting the reservation. On one visit Father Hurlburt informs Ida that Willard Pretty Dog, a boy she had admired in school, has returned from the war horribly scarred and disfigured and is in a horrible state of depression.

Ida befriends Willard and soon they become lovers and he moves into Ida's house. Willard is able to have some reconstructive surgery, which restores his former looks to an acceptable state. Willard informs his mother that he will be staying with Ida, not because she is beautiful, but because she showed compassion. Ida determines at that moment that she does not need pity from Willard and tells him not to return to her house. Ida bears Willard's son and names him Lee after her own father, Lecon.

One of Ida's worst fears comes true when Clara reappears after four years and wants to take Christine, not out of any love, but because she has met a couple who is unable to have a child and is willing to buy Christine. Ida enlists Father Hurlburt's help in filing the legal papers to make Christine, Ida's daughter, so the threat of Clara's intervention will be forever removed from their lives. Time passes and Annie succumbs to her heart problems and Lecon disappears to another town. Clara never visits Ida's house again and Ida is free to raise her two children without interference.

Ida plants a bountiful garden every year, which feeds her family. She also leases some of her land, which brings in some cash each year so that Anna can make gradual home improvements, beginning with the plumbing and electricity. The children grow strong and healthy and are almost as one person. Lee is in awe of his older sister and her bravery and follows her everywhere and even calls everything that he likes "Tina." Ida notes that Christine is like a boulder against which she must continually push. Lee's gentle personality is in stark contrast to Christine's willful temperament and the boy is shadowed by his dominant sister for many years.

When she begins to attend school, Christine's passionate nature is directed into religious fervor. The teachings of the nuns at the reservation school have filled the children with prophecies of doom and destruction and Christine takes them personally and tries to run the household in preparation for the imminent apocalypse. Ida indulges Christine's passions while Lee makes fun of his sister, but Ida understands Christine's driven-nature and the need to believe in something, even if it frightens you.

Lee also shares with Ida some of the daring deeds that Christine commits in public, a fact that terrifies Ida. One time Christine strips naked and runs the height of a mountain and back down again as others watch and taunt her. Another time Christine crosses a natural bridge made of narrow shale rock even though she is petrified and paralyzed with fear. Lee had to come to her rescue. Christine cannot resist a challenge, especially if there are others standing around who tell her she cannot do it.

Lee is a much more docile child and much less secure in his abilities. For weeks Ida tries to teach him the steps to some Indian dances so that he may participate in the next powwow. Lee practices awkwardly and Ida and Christine sew an authentic costume

complete with feathers and crystal mirrors but Lee will not participate. Ida thinks that Lee lives in fear of Christine's bravado. It is only after a few more years, as Lee watches Christine's successes mixed with failures does he attempt to enter the powwow dance competition. Ida admits that Lee is not very good but he does win the Best Newcomer award and that is at least something for his bravery.

Christine's personality takes a radical change and she is consumed with fear about everything. Ida shares her concerns with Father Hurlburt who suggests that Christine's fear may be a result of a letter that the nuns have read to the children. The letter was written by one of the children who witnessed the visit of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal.

Although no one but the Pope knows the actual contents of the letter it is rumored to say that Russia can be converted only through the intercession of the Rosary and that the world will come to an end. The letter is to be opened on the imminent New Year's Eve and Christine prepares for the end of her life with devout activities. She tries to bring Ida and Lee along in her fervor. When New Year's Eve arrives and the world does not come to an end, Christine does not know whether she should be angry or pleased. Father Hurlburt arrives a little bit after midnight saying that he is concerned for Christine's welfare. Ida leads Father Hurlburt up the stairs to the attic where they climb out onto the roof and watch the stars together.

Chapters 17, 18, 19 and 20 Analysis

At last the secret of Christine's and Lee's parentage is revealed. Christine's father is Ida's father, Lecon, and Lee's father is Willard Pretty Dog. Neither man has the courage or the nobility to own his actions and take responsibility, so the onus is thrust on Ida. Ida has carried huge burdens throughout her life, in spite of tremendous betrayals and emerges as the heroine of the story when it could have been perceived that she is just a crotchety old woman. Ida's silence and perseverance in impossible situations now make all her other actions understandable.

Ida is true to her word, even toward the end of her life when she visits Clara in the hospital in Seattle and brings Christine, even though Christine does not know the woman. It is Clara's dying wish to see Christine, who is Clara's real daughter. Ida's queer behavior in insisting on such a brief hospital visit is now understandable as Ida does not want to risk Clara telling Christine about her true parentage.

Ida has her own code of honor but makes her own rules as well as evidenced by the inappropriate relationship with Father Hurlburt. It is clear that Ida and the priest are intimately involved which is ironic, given Rayona's sexual encounter with Father Tom many years later. Ida's seduction of Father Hurlburt occurs on New Year's Eve when, according to the nuns, the world was supposed to end but didn't. Ida's behavior is in defiance of structure and dogma almost as if she deserves this award for having survived.

The yellow raft in the novel's title is significant in that a raft is a stationary place of transition and rest. Rayona is the only character that actually encounters the raft, first during the encounter with Father Tom, and later, as she watches the pretty, privileged swimming instructor use the raft as a diving platform. The raft can only be reached by swimming to it through very cold water and its respite is immediate but temporary because it is floating.

The women in the story struggle and search for a fixed place of comfort and security but can only find temporary, floating structures on which to rest for a while. The men in their lives disappoint them; their cultural background betrays them in society and economically, they are on the lowest rung with no hope of improving their lots. The author provides the women with this symbolic, brilliant yellow raft as a symbol for hope and peace and perhaps, as the generations of this family take their places, the raft will become less and less necessary.

Characters

Andy

One of Rayona' s work colleagues on the maintenance crew at Bearpaw Lake State Park. Rayona thinks he probably lifts weights or plays football. He has a crush on Ellen.

Charlene

Charlene is Christine's "best friend," according to Rayona. She lives in Christine's apartment building and works in the pharmacy of the hospital where Christine is frequently a patient. Christine depends on Charlene to send her illegal refills of percocet to control the pain of her cancer, although we don't learn the nature of her disease until much later. Charlene reappears in Christine's story to warn her that she's killing herself by leaving the hospital, but she fulfills her promise to give Christine one more refill on her percocet prescription.

Buster Cree

Buster Cree, a "reformed mixed-blood from Wyoming who joined the church when he married Polly," is the father of Dale.

Dale Cree

Dale Cree, Polly and Buster's son, falls in love with Pauline when she comes to board at the Crees. He and Pauline marry, and they have a son, Foxy.

Kennedy Cree

Kennedy Cree (Foxy) is Pauline's son and Rayona's cousin whom Ray substitutes for at the rodeo when Foxy gets too drunk to ride When Ray wins a prize, Foxy is humiliated.

Pauline Cree

Pauline is Clara and Ida's younger sister and Foxy Cree's mother. As Ida gradually becomes closer to Clara, Pauline is left out, though Ida concedes that "Pauline would have made a better mother [to Christine] than either Clara or me." Fed up with Lecon's unemployment and drinking and Annie's helpless condition, Pauline leaves home and gets a job with the Agency, boarding with Polly Cree's family. Pauline falls in love with Polly's son Dale, but when she marries him she asks none of her family to the wedding. Pauline is ashamed of her father's alcoholism and her sister Ida's single-mother status.

Polly Cree

Polly is Buster Cree's wife and the mother of twenty-year-old Dale Cree, who marries Pauline. She is also the midwife who delivers Lee.

Dad

See Elgin Taylor

Dave

Another of Rayona's work colleagues on the maintenance crew at Bearpaw Lake State Park. Of all her co-workers, Rayona likes him the best "because he's the only guy who pays attention to me."

Ellen DeMarco

A swimming teacher at Bear Lake, Ellen has all the things Rayona lacks: beauty, parents, and money. Ray is so entranced by Ellen's way of life that she fantasizes that a letter Ellen's parents wrote to their daughter is actually written to her.

Evelyn Dial

Evelyn, Sky's wife, is the cook at the Bearpaw Lake State Park who gives Rayona a place to live for a few weeks and acts as a surrogate mother.

Norman Dial

Sky, Evelyn Dial's husband, is the operator of the Conoco station. He introduces Ray to Bearpaw State Park and generously gives up his holiday pay to drive Ray to a rodeo where she hopes to see her mother.

Foxy

See Kennedy Cree

Annie George

Annie is Lecon's wife, Ida's mother, and Clara's sister, though the difference in ages meant that Clara and Annie were never close. Lecon calls on Clara to do the housekeeping chores when Annie develops heart trouble. Ida blames her mother for not

anticipating that Lecon would be sexually interested in Clara. In her illness, however, there is not much that Annie can do to influence events. Her death, while sad, frees Ida at last to have more time for herself.

Clara George

Clara is Annie George's baby sister who comes to live with Ida when she is about twenty years old. Supposedly Christine's aunt, though actually her mother, Clara appears no more than five years older than Ida. Clara gets pregnant by her brother-in-law Lecon shortly after she arrives to help Lecon's wife Annie. To save the family's reputation, Clara makes up a cover story about being raped by a masked drifter. Clara's plan works, but four years later, when she shows up at Ida's to claim the child, Ida thwarts her by getting a birth certificate that says Ida is the birth mother. Christine meets Clara only once as an adult when Clara is in the hospital dying of cancer.

Aunt Ida George

Ida calls herself "a woman who's lived fifty-seven years and worn resentment like a medicine charm for forty If I were to live my life differently, I would start with the word No: first to him, my father; to Clara, then to Willard, before they left me; to Lee, to save his life. I was different with Christine, but it turned out no better." In her stubborn isolation, Ida distorts the truth that in the end It was she who rejected Clara and

'Willard Pretty Dog, not vice-versa. Yet Ida alone 'knows all the secrets that bind the main characters in the story.

Ida is Christine's ostensible mother, although everyone (even Christine) calls her Aunt Ida at her request, so that she can protect herself from disappointment if Christine's real mother, Clara, should ever come back to claim her child. When Clara returns four years later and calls herself Christine's mother, Ida is so shocked that she instinctively brings her fingers, which are carrying a hot teakettle, to her ears, thereby burning a plum-sized hole on her cheek that serves as a permanent reminder of her secret burden. Clara wants to give up Christine *for* adoption. To block her, Ida arranges for Father Hurlburt to get a birth certificate that declares Ida as Christine's legal mother. To seal Clara's fate, Ida threatens to reveal the truth about Clara's relationship to Lecon.

Ida dotes on Lee, her illegitimate son by Willard, and so Christine feels rejected. She decides to bring up Lee herself, just as she has brought up Christine, never revealing his true father. Ida has persuaded herself that when she was with a man she always "pretended to be stupid" and that she wanted Christine "to see me smart, to know she could be that way herself in front of any man." Ida's intelligence as she grows older is clear, for she successfully leases part of her land to make improvements in her own life. As the oldest of the three main characters, Ida has suffered the most; but by the same token she has perhaps earned the greatest portion of happiness, however small, having raised three children, to varying degrees, on her own and having achieved some financial stability in her life.

Lecon George

Lecon, Christine's real father, is a proud traditional Indian who, weakened by alcoholism, is not able to adapt to the present. When his wife Annie developed heart trouble, Lecon thought Ida's offer to drop out of school and help at home would be seen on the reservation as a sign of male weakness. Realizing this, Annie makes up the tale that Clara is coming to their house because she is homeless. When Lecon gets her pregnant, he readily accepts Clara's plan to pretend the child is Ida's by a stranger. But his remark when he first sees his new daughter-"It's in their family. Nothing but girls"-shows his essential narrowness. Also disturbing is Lecon's delusion (especially when drunk) that it is Ida's behavior rather than his own that has brought shame on the family. When Lecon dies, Ida feels only relief that he will no longer be a burden to her.

Father Hurlburt

Hurlburt is the priest who recruits Rayona for the teen-age "God Squad" in his parish. Part Indian himself, he is a confidant and intermediary among the various families in the parish. For example, outside of Lecon, Annie, and Clara, only Father Hurlburt knows that Christine is not Ida's child. It is Father Hurlburt who takes Ida and baby Christine home from the residence for unwed mothers and who later helps Ida obtain the birth certificate. As Pauline and others go along with Clara's fictional story that she was raped by an intruder, Father Hurlburt remains to Ida "the only honest one, tied to me by my secrets."

John

The third of Rayona's work colleagues on the maintenance crew at Bearpaw Lake State Park, he reminds her of "the chubby guy on 'Happy Days.'"

Lecon

Lee is Christine's half-brother and the illegitimate son of Ida and Willard. Raised by Ida, Lee never knows his *real* father. As a child, Lee is known for his good looks and his daredevil attitude. When Lee and Dayton become anti-Vietnam activists, Christine challenges Lee's patriotism, pointing out that Lee's political future as a reservation leader would be ruined if he evaded the draft. Lee enlists, but he dies in Vietnam, driving Christine into the faithless arms of Elgin and sowing new seeds of bitterness in Ida's heart.

Lee

See Lecon

Mama

See Annie George

Mom/Mama

See Christine Taylor

Mr. McCutcheon

Mr. McCutcheon is the maintenance supervisor at the Bear Paw Lake State Park who praises Rayona for her work.

Dayton Nickles

Dayton is a close friend of Lee and Christine and shelters her after she returns to the reservation. Later he shows up at the rodeo and takes Rayona back to her mother. Dayton is classified 4-A because his father was killed in World War II. A convicted child molester, Dayton turned his life around after getting out of prison and now has a good job as an accountant for the Tribal Council.

Tom Novak

Father Tom Novak is Father Hurlburt's assistant at the local reservation mission and the butt of Inman jokes because of his naiveté. On a trip to a teen conference, he and Rayona have sex on the yellow raft in blue water after Ray saves him from drowning. Tom soon realizes his error and agrees to finance Ray's trip to Seattle.

Mrs. Pretty Dog

Willard's mother, concerned about her son's interest in Ida, finally visits her and sees that they have more than a nurse-patient relationship. At first disturbed because of Ida's low status on the reservation, Mrs. Pretty Dog is satisfied when Ida decides to reject him.

Willard Pretty Dog

Willard as a boy was handsome, but when he comes back from World War II with some of his face missing, he becomes bitter and reclusive. Only Ida goes to see him, hoping that in his present condition he will not find her so plain. She lays her life out before him in all its sadness, and he is moved to accept her love. When he gets Ida pregnant,

however, Ida rejects him as a future husband, and he ends up marrying one of the nurses who looked after him in the hospital.

Ray

See Rayona Taylor.

Sky

See Norman Dial.

Annabelle Stiffarm

Annabelle is a fellow member of Father Hurlburt's God Squad and a friend of Foxy Cree who accompanies him to the rodeo where Ray substitutes for Foxy.

Christine Taylor

As a young adult, Christine describes herself as "the bastard daughter of a woman [Ida] who wouldn't even admit she was my mother." In fact, however, Christine is the illegitimate daughter of Ida's father Lecon and her sister Clara Christine, however, is brought up as "Aunt" Ida's daughter and never learns the truth about her real parents. As a child, Christine "was never satisfied," but she develops a blind loyalty to her younger brother Lee and a strong faith in Catholicism, especially the martyred saints.

Christine's faith reaches a crisis when she takes too seriously the contents of the "Portugal-letter" in which the end of the world is predicted unless Russia converts to Roman Catholicism. When nothing happens on the appointed night, Christine becomes disillusioned with the Church. Similarly, when Christine finds that Dayton Nickles doesn't want to be her boyfriend, her self-esteem takes such a plunge that "it took me years to forget." Christine's one true friend is her younger brother Lee. "He wasn't just my best friend, he was the only one I trusted, the only one who never let me down." When Lee switches his main allegiance from Christine to Dayton, an anti- Vietnam activist, Christine plots successfully to separate them by telling Lee that being considered unpatriotic would end his political future on the reservation.

Angry at Aunt Ida's disapproval of her promiscuous social life, Christine leaves home and moves in with Ida's sister Pauline's family. She takes a job at the Tribal Council, and continues her playgirl life, eventually leaving for Seattle. Distraught when Dayton writes that Lee is missing in action in Vietnam, Christine meets Elgin in a bar. They marry but it doesn't last, and by the time Ray is a teenager, Christine is dying from cirrhosis of the liver and pancreatic cancer. Angry because Elgin won't take responsibility for Ray, Christine decides to commit suicide. But Ray foils her plan, and Christine is forced to take her to her "Aunt" Ida's, then hitch a ride to Dayton's, where she decides to spend

her final days. With the financial and emotional stability that Dayton offers her in his new life after prison, Christine is able to get Ray back into her life for a brief period. She teaches Ray to drive and gives her daughter her prized silver turtle ring. But having learned from the secretive Ida not to reveal painful truths, she can never tell Ray that she is dying.

Elgin Taylor

Elgin is Rayona's black father, although he visits his daughter only occasionally. Though he is still officially married to Christine, he has not taken a consistent role in bringing up Ray. Christine was attracted to him because he gave her hope that Lee might still be alive. Elgin has a fairly steady job as a mailman, but his commitment to Christine and their child is never complete. For Christine, the final straw comes when Elgin borrows her car while she is in the hospital and returns it with a virtually empty gas tank.

Rayona Taylor

Rayona is the fifteen-year-old daughter of Christine and Elgin Taylor, a black serviceman Christine met soon after she learned that Lee was missing in action in Vietnam. Christine and Elgin marry but stop living together around the time Ray is born, and Christine raises her alone. Life has not been easy for Ray. When we first meet her, she is visiting her mother in the hospital. Elgin arrives, and her parents soon start to argue. Rayona doesn't believe that her mother is really sick, but Ray is soon left with the task of persuading Christine not to take a suicidal journey back to Seattle.

When the car breaks down, Christine flees to Dayton's and Ray ends up with Aunt Ida. With Ida to bring up Ray, Christine now hopes she candle without being a burden to her daughter. Ray Joins Father Hurlburt and Father Tom's teenage "God Squad" but in her loneliness for a real family, she fantasizes about her real father. Father Tom is sexually attracted to Rayona, and after Rayona saves him from drowning, he experiences "an occasion of sin" with her on the yellow raft. In his guilt and naiveté Father Tom gives her train fare back to Seattle to visit her father. Ray, however, decides to stay where she is, and is lucky enough to stumble into a surrogate family and a job at Bear Paw Lake State Park. She proves to be both a good park employee and an appealing boarder to Sky and Evelyn Dial. Ray has concealed the fact that she is a runaway, constructing a fictitious family out of her Imagination and a scrap of a letter she found that turns out to have been a letter to Ellen, a swimming instructor at the park whom Ray admires.

When Ray's fantasy is exposed, however, Evelyn forgives her and offers to take her home. Hoping she will see her mother, Ray persuades the Dials to stop off at an Indian rodeo on the way back to the reservation and ends up winning an award for being the "roughest, toughest" broncobuster at the fair. At the rodeo Rayona finds her mother's childhood friend Dayton, who reluctantly takes her back to the reservation and her mother. But nothing has changed. Rayona still wants to believe that Christine is not

really sick, and Christine is still caught in the mistakes of her past and overwhelmed with her own problems

Tina Taylor

See Christine Taylor

Father Tom

See Tom Novak

Themes

Identity

In 1979, Michael Dorris wrote that "there is no such thing as 'Native American literature,' though it may yet, someday, come into being." Among the requirements for such a literature, Dorris continued, was a "shared consciousness, an inherently identifiable world-view." Expanding on this theme of Identity in a 1992 essay, Owens notes that in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water,* for the most part, "the individual who would 'be' Indian rather than 'play' Indian is faced with an overwhelming challenge." Only Aunt Ida "becomes... the bearer of the identity and order that are so fragile they may perish in a single generation if unarticulated " Although Ida, too, is unavoidably influenced by the bombardment of mainstream culture, Owens notes that "she can take off her earphones and wig, turn off the television soap operas, and become a story-teller, leaving her 'savings'-a recovered sense of self, Identity, authenticity-to Rayona." The other characters in the story, on the other hand, are too enmeshed in sometimes conflicting, sometimes just unknown or unconscious forces of identity. Lee tries to become a Red Power representative but ends up bowing to the mainstream social forces that send him off to die in Vietnam. Lecon never rises above the stereotype of the traditional male, whether Indian or white, who sees women only as the servants of men. And though Christine struggles perhaps the hardest to establish herself as independent, she has only a vague sense of her real mother and not a clue about her real father. She goes from blind acceptance of Catholicism to total disillusionment and outright rejection of her faith This ignorance and irrationality can be seen as coming partly from Ida's secretiveness but also, especially as she grows older, from Christine's own apparent lack of desire to explain why she is taking a given action, like dropping Rayona off at Ida's and then disappearing. As a result of this lack of communication between mother and daughter, Rayona must negotiate her sense of self and community in a cultural vacuum. As a mixed blood, however, Rayona is different from the other characters (except for Father Hurlburt, who serves as an important link between the white and Indian communities). The positive side of feeling left out that is so common to mixed bloods is that Rayona is willing to try new things. For example, she agrees to impersonate her male cousin at the rodeo in which she wins a prize. (In fact, in an earlier version of the story, which appears in Bartlett, the narrator was Raymond, a male Rayona.) When we leave Rayona at the end of her section of the book, she is actively questioning her mother about the details of the mysterious letter from the Virgin Mary. In this curious, questioning attitude, there is hope that Rayona, like the resilient synthetic fabric whose name she bears, will forge a new identity, neither Indian nor white, male nor female, self- nor other-oriented, that will survive and even endure.

Strength and Weakness

Because Dorris's characters are developed by seeing them from several points of view, the reader gets a more rounded portrait in which different sides of the personality are

revealed. This is evident when we examine each major character's strengths and weaknesses and the struggle within each figure to see which attributes will win out. As the youngest major character, Ramona has the least knowledge of what is going on, so ignorance is her main weakness. Thus she interprets Christine's leaving her at Ida's as abandonment, when it is in fact Christine's attempt, however cowardly, to protect her daughter from the truth about her mother's Illness. Among Rayona's strengths, however, include courage, seen in her taking Foxy Cree's place in the rodeo. Rayona also shows great curiosity, which is evident in the many questions she is always asking, and her powerful imagination creates alternate identities that help her soothe the pain of not knowing the full truth about her mother and father. Christine's strengths include: her love for Rayona and Lee and her fierce desire to protect them; her fearlessness in taking up dares, and her perseverance and diligence when she is doing something she believes in, like helping the nuns (before her disillusionment). Never understanding the circumstances of her birth, however, and growing up without a father, Christine must constantly wrestle with feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction with her general lot. She also struggles with insecurity when males like Dayton seem to reject her. Ida is probably the most complex of the three major characters. She can count among her strengths her memory of important events in the past, which she thinks of as "savings." Ida also proves herself very practical in the way she outmaneuvers Clara to claim Christine as her legal daughter or manages her property to achieve some financial stability. Ida also shows perseverance in helping to raise three children, only one of whom is her own. She pays a price for her achievements, however. First, Ida is resentful toward her father and Willard, both of whom (like most men, she feels) make her feel stupid. Second, in her desire to cover up the sins of her father and Willard, as she sees them, Ida has isolated herself and left herself little room for any life of her own, literally branding herself (with the teakettle) as a misfit and recluse in the eyes of others.

Culture Clash

Though Dorris has been criticized for not emphasizing the importance of a distinct native American identity, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* shows that he is well aware of the factors that hamper its development. The book is a virtual catalogue of different forms of culture and the ways they rub against each other, sometimes creating barriers, and occasionally melding. There is Elgin's black culture and its conflict with Christine's upbringing on the reservation. "We're the wrong color for each other," Rayona has heard her mother tell Elgin. "That's what your friends think." There is the white Catholic culture of Father Tom, who knows no Indian language and is the constant butt of Indian humor. There is the more traditional Indian culture in which Ida, who "wears resentment like a medicine charm," has been raised, despite her more recent exposure to Western media. Like the traditional Indian, Ida has an expanded awareness of the past especially the truth about Christine's parentage and Lee's father And finally, there is the mixed-blood heritage that exists in both Rayona (Indian-black) and Father Hurlburt (Indian-white). This heritage is both parodied, as in Father Tom's stilted reference to Rayona's "dual heritage," and respected, as seen in Father Hurlburt's important role in the story as a witness to and confidant of at least some of Ida's secrets.

Style

Point of View

Part of Dorris's genius in the book shows in his telling basically the same story from three different points of view. For example, we first interpret Christine's Illness through Rayona's eyes (in critic Michiko Kakutani's words) as "a phony play for sympathy." Later, we see the same scene through Christine's own eyes and realize not only that her Illness is real but also (again in Kakutani' s words) that "her disappearance constitutes not an act of abandonment but a cowardly attempt to save her daughter from the knowledge of her Imminent death." Similarly, at the beginning of the story Rayona believes that Aunt Ida is actually her grandmother but insists that she be called "Aunt" rather then be reminded that Christine was her own illegitimate offspring. In fact, as we learn only in the last section of the novel, Christine is the Illegitimate offspring of Ida's father, Lecon, and her aunt, Clara, and Ida is therefore not Christine's mother but rather both her cousin and half-sister. As feminist critic Adalaide Morris has noted, one result of a story made up of similar examples involving this intertwined, intergenerational, multicultural family is a "new first-person plural storyteller" or, in the words of Adrienne Rich, "We who are not the same. We who are many and do not want to be the same." In short, the new "we, the plural" is a shifting coalition of different people, "a site where disparate subjectivities collide, converge, and continue to coexist." Thus, restless and unsatisfied Christine leaves Ida for Seattle, just as Rayona, restless to find her real family, later also leaves Ida, but Rayona and Christine are eventually reunited, despite their differences.

Symbolism and Imagery

Dorris's skill in providing concrete descriptions to suggest larger meanings is evident in the central symbols and recurring images of the book. The imagery in the title itself, for example, suggests the clarity and simplicity of a vision or dream that, for Rayona at least, is attainable only too briefly. Thus the yellow raft recalls not only Ray and Father Tom's sexual incident, which to Ray has the quality of a dream, but also Ellen DeMarco, who Ray first sees poised on the raft, representing "everything I'in not but ought to be." Another central image in the story is hair braiding, in which several separate strands are woven into one. Thus the story opens with Christine pulling Ray's hair into a braid and ends with the image of Ida braiding her own hair. In the same way, Dorris has woven the three separate angles of vision provided by Rayona, Christine, and Ida into one complex but unified tale. As Kakutani has noted, Dorris is also a master of the telling descriptive image: the broken taillight, "spilling a red at a funny angle," or the leaves on the trees, "heavy as tin" on a hot, breezeless day.

Allusion

Throughout the story, Dorris's constant allusions to songs, television shows, and movies from the 1960s-1980s pop scene emphasizes the degree to which all three major Inman characters have been molded by mainstream American culture rather than traditional Indian customs and beliefs. Rayona describes her mother's face as "like a stumped contestant on 'Jeopardy' with time running out." Christine, who grew up in the Sixties, remembers watching Vietnam protests on TV, listening to "Teen Beat" on the radio, and fantasizing that Dayton was her grieving lover in "Teen Angel." She considers it fitting to leave her daughter a lifetime membership in Video Village, and the two films she takes out on her first visit are significant for how they show the extent to which Christine has assimilated white American culture. "Christine" (1983) is a Stephen King horror movie featuring a car with demonic powers. In "Little Big Man" (1970), one of whose actors Christine claims to have dated, the main character is not a birthright Indian but a 121-year old white man adopted by Indians. Even Aunt Ida, at fifty-seven the oldest major Inman character and therefore one whose life would ostensibly be most traditional, is singing along to a pop song on her Walkman when we first meet her. Ida turns out to be addicted to daytime soap operas on TV. In these examples, which are only some of many in the book, Dorris is suggesting that if there once was a conflict in the eyes of Indians between tribal heritage and mainstream culture or other cultures, it has long since been resolved in favor of mainstream culture. Only a naive European-American character like Father Tom can seriously speak of Rayona's "dual heritage."

Historical Context

The political situation of Native Americans in the United States is unique. Among many ethnic groups, Indians alone have land called reservations set aside by the government on which they can live without paying the usual land and property taxes. Indians who do not live on reservations pay the same taxes as other citizens. All Indians pay federal and state income taxes and have full voting rights, and receive some special job and health benefits, to which Christine refers. Usually the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs administers reservations. On some reservations, local tribal councils control some political and commercial activities. In 1983, President Reagan issued a policy statement promoting increased economic development on reservations. While many Indian leaders reacted skeptically to the announcement, some reservations have greatly profited from oil, gas, and uranium resources, while others have set up lucrative casinos. On other reservations, the tribal government is a major employer. Both Christine and Dayton hold jobs with the local tribal council, and Lee is being groomed for a political future in the tribal government when he goes off to Vietnam. Courts have generally supported Indian land claims, either by granting repossession (usually of only a portion of the lands claimed) or by payments in exchange for relinquishing of claims. Many reservations, however, remain economically underdeveloped. On one small reservation in Wyoming with an unemployment rate of 80 percent, the suicide rate of 233 per 100,000 is almost twenty times the national average. The rate of alcoholism, an important factor in the characterization of both Lecon and Christine, is a serious problem among Indians. Indians are four times more likely to die from alcoholism than the general population. Dorris explores Indian alcoholism at length in his prize-winning book, *The Broken Cord: A Family's Ongoing Struggle with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.*

The Indian Power Movement, 19691973

During the 1960s, some Indian groups began to press for more economic and political rights. In 1972, the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington; in 1 973 AIM members seized Wounded Knee, South Dakota, demanding the return of all lands taken from Indians in violation of treaty agreements. After nine years as a fugitive from prosecution for assault and rioting charges in connection with the seizure, AIM leader Dennis Banks (who received protection in various forms from the governors of both California and New York), finally surrendered in 1983. He served one year of a three-year term before being released in 1985. Like Lee and Dayton, many Indians were inspired by AIM or similar groups to take a stand against the U.S. government in other areas as well, notably in protesting the war in Vietnam. Other pro-Indian activities mentioned in *A Yellow Raft* in *Bille Water* include protests over limitation or abrogation of fishing rights and participation in inter-tribal activities designed to stress Indian unity. Like Christine, however, most Indians rejected these militant tactics. The majority of American Indians during the Vietnam War were patriotic, as is seen in the favorable way Lee is treated by the tribal elders after he decides to enlist. In 1986 the Grandfather Plaque or Amerind Vietnam Plaque was dedicated at Arlington National Cemetery. Roughly 43,000 Native American combatants served in Vietnam, or one out of every four eligible Indian males.

Critical Overview

A Yellow Raft in Bille Water was both a popular and critical success when it was first published in 1987, although some critics (notably Michiko Kakutani) found fault with the way the author withholds crucial information about the secret of Christine's birth, while others (like Robert Narveson) thought he put uncharacteristic words in characters' mouths to make a thematic point. Yet even these critics admitted that the "meticulously delineated world" (Kakutani) and the "drenched... particularity of motive, of action, of perception" (Narveson) in the story moved the reader happily along and created a series of strikingly unique yet interconnected lives. Reviewer Penelope Moffet also found the major characters in the novel irresistible and Dorris's writing "energetic, understated and seductive." Reiterating the positive reception to the book, Roger Sale called it a "fine novel" with "clearly drawn and clearly felt characters." Writing in 1988, Sale predicted (sadly, in view of Dorris's suicide almost nine years later) that "Michael Dorris works with an impersonality that gives promise that ills list of achievements can grow long." *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* also found a special place in the writings of feminist critics like Adalaide Morris, who categorized tills book, along with two others, as "feminist in their focus on gender but 'post feminist' in their... return to that antagonist of 'room of one's own' feminism: the greedy, sticky-fingered, endlessly complicated family." Moms noted that "despite its conservative force... the family is the one force in our culture that regularly binds together people of different ages, genders, interests, skills, and sexual preferences and sometimes also people of different ethnic traditions, racial or religious backgrounds, and economic classes." At the "source" and center of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water,* as Morris sees it, is Ida, "a figure who embodies the over determined, ambiguous multiplicity behind 'we the plural,' a multiplicity Dorris's narrative extends outward from Christine's 'birth' family to the 'family' she finally constructs, a temporary but tenacious alliance between individuals of different genders, ages, races, economic classes, and sexual preferences." Christine's family thus comes to include not only the pureblooded Indian Ida, who is relatively well off because of her land rentals. It also numbers Christine's childhood friend, the half white (and probable homosexual) Dayton (also relatively well off after a period in prison), who takes in not only Christine, who is genuinely impoverished, but also Christine's Indian-black daughter Rayona. That such a family is unstable in traditional terms goes without saying. In fact, according to Morris, "these coalitions can be effective and lasting only if they are also contested and dialogic, subject to the unending splits, shifts, and struggles that characterize any genuine plurality."_ For Morris, Dorris's book is part of a "project of constructing a subject position from which such a politics could operate, a first-person plural in which the words 'first, "person,' and 'plural' would keep both their separate meanings and their collective force.'" Whether Dorris's critical reputation will survive the disturbing facts surrounding his suicide in 1997 remains to be seen. But for those who believe that a writer's personal life should be considered completely separate from the works of fiction that he or she creates, there is little question that Dorris's body of work as a whole, and certainly *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water,* occupy a distinguished place in Native American literature of the late twentieth century.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bennett is *a doctoral candidate at the University of California at Santa Barbara and has published essays on various postcolonial and Native American authors In academic Journals. In the following essay, he analyzes how Michael Dorris's* A Yellow Raft in Blue Water *demonstrates the complexity of history by interweaving the stories of three Native American women.*

Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* develops an intricate plot structure that weaves together the lives of three Native American women. Instead of using an all-knowing narrator to tell their stories from a single, consistent perspective, however, Dorris has each character narrate one section of the story from her own biased perspective. Consequently, the novel's three main characters all assume dual functions as combined character narrators. While this multiplication of character narrators may initially seem to be a minor part of the plot, a careful reader will recognize that it radically alters the entire experience of reading the novel because the three narrators frequently offer different interpretations of the same event.

When this happens, the reader cannot simply continue reading passively while waiting for the "true" narrator to finally explain what happened because none of the character-narrators has access to all of the facts, and all of the characters are biased by their own experiences and emotions. Instead, the reader must playa more active role in interpreting the novel either by deciding which narrator's story seems most believable or by combining the most reliable pieces from each narrator's story into a coherent whole. This task is made more difficult, however, because Dorris reverses the order of the story. Instead of beginning with the oldest character, Aunt Ida, he begins with the youngest character, Rayona, and works backwards through time. Since important information about the characters' past is not revealed until the end of the novel, the reader must continually reinterpret everything as each narrator reveals new information about the past. In this sense, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* is not simply a story about three Native American women, but at a deeper level it is also a story about the process of interpretation itself: it explores how people's experiences, biases, and preconceptions influence their explanations of events. This makes the experience of reading the novel more exciting because the reader must constantly reevaluate both the events described in the novel and the narrators who are telling the story.

While William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, and many other modernist writers have also created novels with multiple narrators, Dorris's use of multiple narrators in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* is particularly interesting because all of his narrators are Native American women. Consequently, Dorris's novel is not Just generally about how the world is seen differently by different people, but it is specifically about how gender and ethnicity influence our experiences and understanding. While one might assume that it would be easier for Dorris to represent Native Americans than women because he is part Modoc but not a woman, the critical response to Dorris's work seems to suggest the opposite. Some critics actually argue that Dorris's representations of Native Americans are not strong enough, and Dorris himself has frequently stated that his fiction does not seek to

promote any particular Native American agenda. On the other hand, most Critics and readers generally agree that Dorris's representations of women are quite convincing.

As Dorris has explained in various interviews, his ability to understand women comes partly from his own experiences living with many strong women: his mother, grandmothers, aunts, and wife. In addition, his wife, Louise Erdrich, is a famous Native American novelist herself, and their close collaboration has also helped Dorris write about women from a woman's perspective. While reading the novel, therefore, it is important to pay particular attention to how both gender and ethnicity influence the characters' lives. The most significant events in these women's lives, such as bearing and/or raising children or being sexually assaulted, are often specifically connected to their experiences as women. In addition, these women also draw on both their experiences as women and their relationships with other women in order to find strategies for dealing with these challenging events. At the same time, however, one must not lose sight of these women's ethnic identity as Native Americans because they frequently experience even "female" events differently than many white Anglo-American women.

To say that Dorris's writing represents how gender influences experience, however, is not to suggest either that his novel is limited to women's experiences or that it has a narrow interpretation of what it means to be a woman. On the contrary, Dorris's novel also emphasizes traditionally "male" experiences such as going to war. Moreover, both Rayona's rodeo riding and Aunt Ida's seduction of Father Hurlburt demonstrate that Dorris's female characters do not conform to predictable gender stereotypes, and the unconventionality of Dorris's characters is even more evident when he represents their ethnic identity as Native Americans. Aunt Ida's addiction to soap operas and Christine's marriage to a black man are only two examples of the numerous ways in which Dorris's characters seem to mix cultural and ethnic identities instead of remaining rigidly confined by them. In fact, the characters' lives continually and unexpectedly move across cultural boundaries throughout the novel.

After spending their whole lives on the reservation, both Aunt Ida and Christine suddenly find themselves relocated to cities, and for Rayona this process of relocation happens just as abruptly only in reverse. Similarly, at one moment Lee is a Native American activist agitating for tribal sovereignty and pacifism, but the next moment he finds himself enlisted to fight for the United States military itself. Consequently, Dorris's fiction explores both ethnicity and gender but not in any simplistic or deterministic sense. In fact, sometimes there is as much cultural difference between different Native American characters as there is between Native American and non-Native American characters in his novel, and the same can be said for gender identity as well.

By interweaving three generations of Native American women, Dorris's novel also develops a historical dimension that chronicles the evolution of Native American life during most of the twentieth century. The vast differences between Aunt Ida's life and Rayona's demonstrate how Native Americans continue to change and continue to be Influenced by history. Like all people, they evolve and adapt to historical changes, and even reservations cannot isolate them from the political and cultural changes influencing

the rest of the United States. Consequently, Dorris situates his unnamed Native American reservation against the backdrop of broader forces in U. S. history, which are external to Native American life but still influence it: Catholic missionary work, American popular culture, and the Vietnam War.

In many ways, these external historical forces actually influence the lives of Dorris's characters as powerfully if not more powerfully than any historical forces internal to Native American culture, since these external historical forces either directly or indirectly cause many turning points in the characters' lives: Christine's loss of faith, Lee's death, and Father Tom's sexual advances toward Rayona. When the reader connects these turning points, Dorris's novel suggests that the external forces of American culture not only exert a powerful influence on Native American life but their influence generally destroys Native American culture or forces it to assimilate toward mainstream American culture. In the end, Aunt Ida divides her time between the television or listening to her walkman, Christine grows up on American culture, Lee dies for American politics, and Rayona's urban childhood makes reservation almost a foreign country. It is as if Dorris' s characters are almost incapable of resisting the attraction of the dominant culture, even when they attempt to resist it like Lee and Ida.

In closing, however, one must constantly resist the temptation to oversimplify Dorris's novel. Clearly, Dorris does not intend for his novel to be a simplistic denunciation of the evils of Anglo-American history or the impossibility of resisting it, but instead he wants to depict cultural tensions that are more subtle, complex, and multi-dimensional. The world that he represents cannot be reduced into black and white divisions between good and evil. After all, Ida's Native American father is more sexually promiscuous than Father Tom, and he is more directly culpable than Father Hurlburt for deciding Ida's fate. Also, the Catholic missionaries bring as much good to the reservation as they do harm: Father Hurlburt helps raise Christine more than her real Native American mother does, and the missionaries do provide an educational system even if it has some serious problems.

Moreover, there are mutual exchanges between mainstream and Native American cultures, even if those exchanges are not always equal. After all, Father Tom's attempts to assimilate Native American culture resemble Christine's attempts to assimilate American popular culture, and Rayona's return to the reservation suggests that cultural change can run in either direction What Dorris's novel represents, therefore, is the complexity of history and cultural interactions. In this sense, Its historical dimensions parallel its personal ones: both individual lives and cultural histories are constantly retold from many perspectives Just as the three character-narrators have their own interpretations of their personal, family history, each historian has his or her own interpretation of history itself, so there are as many interpretations of history as there are historians. Additionally, Dorris seems to suggest that no one version of history is completely accurate because a historian cannot take into account all of the facts or overcome all personal bias any more than an individual can. Thus, Dorris suggests that there is value in listening to many versions of history because only by synthesizing their competing claims can we come to understand history's true complexity. Coming to

terms with the complexity of Dorris's narrative, therefore, can help us become more aware of the complexity of history itself.

Source: Robert Bennett, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Owens discusses the significance of identity in the lives of three generations of Native American women.

At the end of Michael Dorris's novel A *Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987), one of the book's three narrators and protagonists, Aunt Ida, is braiding her hair as a priest watches: "As a man with cut hair, he did not identify the rhythm of three strands, the whispers of coming and going, of twisting and tying and blending, of catching and of letting go, of braiding." The metaphor of braiding-tying and blending-illuminates the substance of this novel, for it is, like [Louise] Erdrich's works, a tale of intertwined lives caught up in one another the way distinct narrative threads are woven to make a single story. Like Erdrich, Dorris-part Modoc and for many years a professor of Native American studies at Dartmouth College-constructs his novel out of multiple narratives so that the reader must triangulate to find the "truth" of the fiction. And like Erdrich and other Indian writers, Dorris makes the subject of his fiction the quest for identity through a re-membering of the past.

Yellow Raft is told in three parts by three narrators-daughter, mother, grandmother, beginning with the youngest generation-so that as we move through the novel, stories are peeled off one another like layers of the proverbial onion as blanks are gradually filled in and we circle in both time and space from an unnamed Montana reservation to Seattle and back, and from the present to the past and back again. As in so many other fictions by Indian writers, the women in this novel live oddly Isolated and self-sufficient lives, raising their children and keeping their stones intact without the aid of the alienated males whose lives intersect briefly with theirs. These intersecting lives are caught up in pathos rather than tragedy, and though most of the events of the novel take place on a reservation and involve characters who identify primarily as Indian, Dorris succeeds in highlighting the Universality of tangled and fragile relationships.... Though this book may not be about "real people," these characters suffer through many of the same confusions and conflicts, pleasures and pains that we might find in a Los Angeles barrio or a Chicago suburb. Like Erdrich, Dorris has succeeded in *Yellow Raft* in allowing his Indian characters to be human to escape from the deadly limitations of stereotyping.

The first narrator of *Yellow Raft* is Rayona, a young half-Indian, half-African American teenager with all the resiliency of the synthetic fabric for which she is named. Like most mixed bloods in fiction by Indian writers, Rayona is trying to comprehend her life, particularly her abandonment by her Black father and her strangely tenuous connections to her Indian mother, Christine *Yellow Raft* opens with the singular *I* as Rayona describes her position in her mother's hospital room. Though Rayona does not realize it at the time, her mother, Christine, is dying, having destroyed her internal organs through drinking and hard living. with an intensely undependable mother and a mostly absentee father, of whom she ironically says, "Dad was a temp," Rayona is cast back upon the *I* that is the novel's first word and the dangerous antithesis of the communal identity central to Native American cultures. Relying mostly upon her self,

Rayona has achieved a precariously balanced sense of self that straddles what the lecherous Father Tom calls her "dual heritage."

The closest thing to a secure community Christine can offer her daughter is a lifetime membership at Village Video. "It's like something I'd leave you," Christine says in a statement that offers a brilliant contrast to the legacies of tribal identity left to other characters in [other] novels [Video] permeates *Yellow Raft,* to the extent that the old idea of an Indian "village" could be said to have given way to a more modern-and culturally bankrupt" Video Village." Christine emphasizes this disturbing transformation when she looks at a videotape of *Little Big Man* and says, "I dated a guy who played an Inman in that mov1e." We are left to wonder if the guy was an Indian "playing" what Hollywood defines as Indian or if he was a white man playing an Indian. E1ther way, there is an unmistakable suggestion that "Indian" is a role to be played and identity something conferred by script and camera. Dorris will re1nforce this v1deo omnipresence throughout the novel, with characters constantly referring to movies and television to reaffirm their shifting senses of reality....

Even Aunt Ida, a character with a strong sense of self, seems an MTV caricature when we first encounter her wearing overalls, a "black bouffant wig" tacked on by shiny bobby pins, a dark blue bra, sunglasses, and Walkman speakers. Pushing a lawn mower that has no effect upon the grass, Aunt Ida is belting out, like a Stevie Wonder imitation in the wrong tune, the words to what should be considered the novel's theme song: "I've been looking for love in all the wrong places." For the rest of the novel, Ida will seldom be far from a television set, involving herself in the twisted lives of scripted characters of soap operas while living in virtual isolation from the rest of her family and tribe. And when Christine and Aunt Ida confront one another for the first time after many years, Rayona can only say, "I.. watch as though I'in seeing this scene on an old movie and a commercial could come along any time." Christine, in turn, says, "I couldn't guess what Ray had in mind for a grandmother. Probably somebody from TV, Grandma Walton or even Granny from 'The Beverly Hillbillies,' but they were a far cry from Aunt Ida." These mixed blood characters suffer from a loss of authenticity intensified by an inability to selectively assimilate the words and images besieging them from the ubiquitous media....

The characters in Dorris's novel, seemingly trapped in a dialectic that never moves toward *telos,* or resolution, incapable of dialogue and without significant community to aid them in developing a coherent sense of self, become comic reflectors for the monologic discourse of the privileged center beamed to them in their isolation. The result is poignantly funny, pathos pointing-like the narrator's frozen father in *Winter in the Blood* toward cultural tragedy

Despite her resiliency, Rayona is as lost between cultures and identities as any character in Indian fiction, truly a stranger in a very bizarre land. Father Tom, who is trying to convince Rayona to go back to Seattle and far from the reservation where she might tell about his sexual advances, says, "And you won't feel so alone, so out of place.. .. There'll be others in a community of that Size who share your dual heritage." In a icely ironic testimony to her dilemma, the lascivious priest offers Rayona a cheap,

pseudo-Indian medallion he has been wearing, saying, "Wear this. Then people will know you're an Indian." Identity is all surface. The center is lost. With a medallion, Rayona may become Native American rather than African American. Rayona's predicament is underscored even more ironically when she stops beneath a sign that reads, "IF LOST, STAY WHERE YOU ARE. DON'T PANlC. YOU WILL BE FOUND." Rayona takes this advice and stays at Bearpaw Lake State Park, where the ladies' restroom "has a cartoon picture of an Indian squaw on the door." She doesn't panic, though she does attempt halfheartedly to appropriate the identity rich family and all-of a popular, spoiled white girl, and she is found by Sky, a good-hearted draft dodger who doesn't notice trivial details like skin color, and his tough-as-nails wife, Evelyn. Appropriately, Sky and Evelyn-Father Sky, Mother Earth-subsist in the "video village" of contemporary America on TV dinners; and lying on their couch, Rayona muses upon her fragmented self: "It's as though I'in dreaming a lot of lives and I can mix and match the parts into something new each time." Indian Identity is further undercut when the wealthy white parents of Rayona's coworker talk of their "adopted" Indian son who lives on a "mission": "When he Writes to us now he calls us Mother and Pops just like one of our own kids." Such an image suggests the distantly marginalized voice, "' writing back to the metropolitan center" Pops," the white father-in a poignant imitation of the expected discourse.

Rayona returns to the reservation and her mother via an Indian rodeo, where she achieves a totally unconvincing bronc-busting triumph that reminds everyone of Lee, Christine's brother killed in Vietnam. And once she is back, the three strands of family begin to be woven into one thread. Rayona's mother, Christine, begins the second book of the novel by declaring, "I had to find my own way and I started out in the hole, the bastard daughter of a woman who wouldn't even admit she was my mother." In a novel in which identity is obscure at best, Christine is actually the daughter of Ida's father and Ida's mother's sister, Clara; she is the half sister of the woman she thinks of as her mother. It is Ironic that among many tribes, ... it was once common for a man to take his wife's sisters as additional wives, especially if his first wife was in need of assistance and one of her sisters, like Clara, needed a home. According to traditional tribal values, at one time there might have been nothing at all improper about Clara bearing the child of her sister's husband had the situation been handled correctly. But that world is long gone, and Clara's pregnancy is a potentially damning scandal In spite of the fact that Christine has taught Rayona to speak "Indian" and Ida still knows how to dance traditionally, most values have been lost in the confusion of a reservation where young girls mouth the lyrics to "Poor Little Fool" ... while awaiting Armageddon, grandmothers wear black wigs and Walkmans, and a talented boy is labeled "the Indian JFK" and ridiculed by his sister when he speaks of "Mother Earth and Father Sky."

Christine's "brother," Lee, is the son of Ida and Willard Pretty Dog. A warrior, Willard has come home ... with hideous scars and no hero's welcome, taken in like a refugee by Ida. Out of pride, Ida has ultimately rejected Willard and never acknowledged him as her son's father. Thus while Christine mistakenly believes Ida to be her mother and Lee her brother, neither Christine nor Lee can claim a father. Noting her differences from Lee, Christine says, "We were so different I wondered If we had the same father... I studied middle-aged men on the reservation for a clue in their faces." At Lee's funeral, Christine

observes, "A woman who was somehow related to us wailed softly," and of the crowd of men she says, "One of them was probably Lee's father, my father, but that was an old question that would never be answered." When Ida finally takes Christine to visit Clara as Clara lies dying in a hospital, Ida drags Christine away quickly, obviously afraid that Clara will confess that she, not Ida, is Christine's mother. Christine, with little time left to live, will never learn the truth of her biological mother, but she will by the end of the novel be accepted once again as a daughter by Ida.

In the third book of the novel, Ida tells her story, and the threads of relationships in the novel become more clear. It is in this book that relationships are also reforged. Christine, who Jealously hounded Lee into the military and toward his death, is forgiven by Ida and forgives the bitter old lady in return. Dayton, Lee's best friend, both forgives Christine and is in turn forgiven. Rayona is reunited with Christine and taken in as a daughter by Dayton, the mixed blood with whom Christine lives out her final days. Father Hurlburt, silent witness and participant in all-who is vaguely part Indian and has learned to speak Ida's language-is there in the end to watch and approve. And most significantly, Ida becomes the novel's supreme storyteller, as befits the Indian grandmother. "I tell my story the way I remember, the way I want," she says, adding:

I have to tell this story every day, add to it, revise, invent the parts I forget or never knew. No one but me carries it all and no one will-unless I tell Rayona, who 1I11ght understand. She's heard her mother's side, and she's got eyes Bit she doesn't guess what happened before. She doesn't know my true Importance. She doesn't realize that I am the story, and that is my savings, to leave her or not....

Within Ida resides the power to abrogate the authority of that "other" discourse assaulting Indians from the media of Euramerica: she can take off her earphones and wig, turn off the television soap operas, and become a story-teller, leaving her "savings"-a recovered sense of self, identity, authenticity to Rayona.

Though resolution and closure come with a somewhat unpersuasive rapidity and ease in this novel, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* moves energetically into Welch's Montana terrain to illuminate the lives of Indians who live on vestiges of tribal identities and reservation fringes, bombarded by video and the American Dream. In choosing to write of a nameless tribe on a nameless reservation, Dorris deliberately emphasizes the ordinariness of these experiences. Writing in a prose style that inundates the reader with an occasionally annoying plethora of incidental detail, Dorris forces his reader to share his characters' experience of incessant strafing by the foreign and the trivial. The world of permanence and significance, where every detail must count and be counted. .. has given way to an Indian Video Village in which alien discourses assert a prior authority and resist, With their privileged cacophony, easy assimilation. The individual who would "be" Indian rather than "play" Indian is faced with an overwhelming challenge.

Source: Louis Owens, "Erdrich and Dorris's Mixedbloods and Multiple Narratives," in *Other Destinies Understanding the American Indian Novel,* University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, pp. 192-224.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Narveson contends that the narratives given by the three characters are just as perplexing to them as to the reader. Each character is carefully sorting out the overlapping conflicts in their lives.

It used to be said. .. that there were few memorable women characters in American fiction. I haven't heard that said lately, but I am reminded of it because Michael Dorris's novel has three memorable women characters as narrators.

This three-generational story unfolds backward. Its narrators, each telling one large chunk of the story, are what we have been persuaded to call Native American, but what they themselves call Indian. The first to narrate is fifteen-year-old Rayona whose father is black but who is raised by her Indian mother, about whom she knows much and doesn't know more; the second is Rayona's wayward mother Christine, who doesn't know anything at all about *her* mother; the third is the woman whom both call Aunt Ida, who raised Christine and keeps the secret of her motherhood.

Who is she really, this non-grandmother who insists on being called Aunt Ida? The question is introduced early by Rayona and answered late by Ida herself. Much of the suspense of the novel comes from waiting to get this and other things straightened out. In a novel, we can be interested in what has happened already, what is happening now, and what will happen. Here, beyond our pleasure in the sharp particularity of what is happening now, the question is less what will happen than what has already happened long before.

Rayona, the fifteen-year-old who narrates first, suffers from feelings of rejection and neglect. Her father comes home rarely; her mother, sick, wrapped up in her own affairs (lots of them), takes her from Seattle to Aunt Ida's on a reservation in Montana and there deserts her. Aunt Ida takes her in, after a fashion. Rayona finds the friendliest refuge of her life while working at a state park where she lives with a warm-hearted middle-aged hippie couple-it's difficult to describe this briefly-who take her to a rodeo where she rides a wild mare for her Indian cousin, who is too drunk to take his turn. Once back together, she and her mother achieve a fragile reconciliation. But her mother's behavior is still a mystery waiting to be cleared up.

At the end of Rayona's section, Christine tells her about the schoolgirl experience because of which she "lost her faith." One New Year's night, she had waited for the world to end, a termination predicted by her imaginative Catholic nun teachers. Next day she had asked why it hadn't happened and was told "It's a *mystery."* Her disillusionment had been extreme: "A *mystery.* The old three-in-one answer. I never went to church again." Christine refers to the experience in her own narration, and Aunt Ida tells it again in hers. Mystery, as I say, is important to the story. Christine goes on to tell us much more that we are entertained to learn and glad to know, but more knowledge can mean not less but more mystery.

"Tell all the truth but tell it slant." So said Emily Dickinson. I do not suppose that these characters could say directly what they think or feel, or that it would be better if they could. Michael Dorris displays confidence in what his fiction can do and how it should do it. The understated scene of reconciliation with which Christine ends her story gets its emotional power (at least for me) from eloquent details ostensibly about other things: "It was a shock to see the dark glasses on my face. The light was so bright and gold I had forgotten I had them on." This example is representative.

This fiction, however, more than most, makes difficult the question of how the story gets told. Each of the women narrates in the first person, but when, and to whom, and why, and in what relation to the narrations of the other two? The narratives hang suspended in space and time. Why and how do Rayona and Christine tell their stories? Is it for their own sakes? Is it because of things about their mothers, and consequently about themselves, they don't feel that they know or understand and want to puzzle out? Not that that's the whole story, but it's central to the mystery that absorbs them. It's why, after meeting Rayona and hearing her story, I want to hear Christine, and after hearing Christine, I wait for Aunt Ida to clear things up, as to an extent she does.

In Aunt Ida's section, the question of narrative stance rises even more insistently. Aunt Ida says, rather too self-consciously, "I have to tell this story every day, add to it, revise, invent the parts I forget or never knew. No one but me carries it all and no one will-unless I tell Rayona, who might understand." We don't observe Aunt Ida telling her story every day, and she's not revising It while we watch (some storytellers, after all, do that). If she's inventing parts she has forgotten or never knew, I, as reader, will never know it "My recollections are not tied to white paper," she says. "They have the depth of time." So I'in to imagine I'in overhearing her thoughts? The problem with so thinking is that what she says is not tailored to the needs of any audience *she* could imagine. Instead it is tailored to the needs of the audience Imagined by the author who has contrived all three narrators. It isn't Aunt Ida's imagined need to tell that makes her story end with this recollection from when Christine was in school.

"What are you doing?" Father Hurlburt asked.
As a man, he did not Identify the rhythm of three strands, the whispering of coming and going, of twisting and tying and blending, of catching and of letting go, of branding.

The image is lovely, suggesting the intricate intertwining of the lives of the three women. Note also the echo of the "three-in-one" from a passage quoted earlier. The image comments aptly on the three narratives as a whole. Too aptly. The author could hardly be more intrusive if he returned to pre-Jamesian omniscience. The image too evidently serves the narrator's desire to make his thematic point.

I do not suggest that transparent contrivances of this sort obtruded themselves on my consciousness With great frequency as I read Mostly I read along happily, noting and enjoying the solid particularity of narration. The book is drenched in particularity of motive, of action, of perception. Each character is distinct, each sharply drawn, each living a convincingly human life. Dorris does not focus insistently on the Indian identity of his characters, but makes what is Indian in them contribute to their identities as

individuals in a way that seems perfectly natural and taken for granted. It becomes clear before the book's end that what braids together these life stones is place, family, gender, tribe, nation-all those geographical, cultural, and biological determinants that combine with individual passion and will to form unique yet interconnected human lives.

Source: Robert D Narveson, in a review of *Yellow Raft in Blue Water,* in *Prame Schooner,* Vol 63, No.3, Fall, 1989, pp. 126-28.

Adaptations

A *Yellow Raft in Blue Water* was recorded on an audiocassette by Colleen Dewhurst for Harper Audio in 1990.

Topics for Further Study

As critic Paul Radella has noted, Dorris's characters in the novel constantly refer to popular songs, movies, and TV programs "as a way of explaining their situations and defining their roles." Determine the lyrics, story, or subject matter and date of composition of as many song titles, TV shows, or movies referred to in the story as you can. By showing what light it casts on any of the characters in the novel, explain the significance, if any, of each reference.

Describe the beliefs of the American Indian Movement as it expressed itself in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and compare the attitudes of Rayona, Christine, and Ida toward Lee and Dayton's brief attraction to these beliefs.

Research the impact of the Catholic Church, or Christian missionaries in general, on Indian culture and education in the United States. Was there any historical basis for the "Portugal-letter," which played an important role in Christine's losing her faith?

Dorris's novel has been called a feminist work by Adalaide Morris. Compare the attitudes toward the opposite sex of the following characters-Ida, Lecon, Christine, and Rayona-to justify this view.

Compulsive behavior, illness, and disability are important factors in the lives of several characters in the novel. Show how Lecon and Christine's alcoholism, Dayton's child molestation, Lecon's rape of Clara, Willard's disfiguration, and Annie's heart condition affect the course of the plot.

What Do I Read Next?

In *Cloud Chamber* (1997), Dorris returns to Ida, Christine, and Rayona, focusing this time on their ancestors, including a shipwrecked Spaniard who washed up on the shores of Ireland and Jus descendant, Rose Mannion. Rose is the central character in this five-generation epic that covers more than one hundred years.

Paper Trail (1994) is a collection of essays by Dorris written during the 1980s and 1990s on topics ranging from family and Indians to fetal alcohol syndrome and libraries. Of special interest to readers of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* are the articles describing the Important adults in Dorris's own life when he was growing up.

Dorris's *Morning Girl* (1992) is a young adult novel that explores the lives of young Bahamians living in 1492, on the eve of Columbus's discovery of their island. The Book was awarded the 1992 American Library Association (ALA) Scott O'Dell Award for Best Historical Fiction for Young Readers and was named a notable book of the year by *Horn Book, School Library Journal,* ALA *Booklist,* and the *New York Times Book Review.*

Tracks (1988), by Michael Dorris's wife Louise Erdrich, is part of a projected quartet of novels by the part-Chippewa novelist that also includes *Love Medicine* (1984) and *The Beet Queen* (1986). As a prequel to *Love Medicine, Tracks* focuses on the crucial moment in the early twentieth century when the Chippewa saw the last part of their centuries-old traditional life vanish. The novel is divided into nine chapters, one for each of the Chippewa seasonal cycles, and uses the same technique of interwoven tales about a complex family group that Dorris employs in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*

Further Study

Hans Bak, "The Kaleidoscope of History Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich's *The Crown of Columbus* (with a coda on Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus,"* in *Deferring a Dream Literary Sub-versions of the American Columbiad,* edited by Gert Buelens and Ernst Rudin, Birkhauser Verlag, 1994, pp 99-119

An analysis of how Dorris's novels rewrite history by including the previously marginalized perspectives of Native Americans.

Anatole Broyard, "Eccentricity Was All They Could Afford," review in *The New York Times Book Review,* June 7, 1987, p.7.

This review argues that Dorris's excellent writing and complex plot give significance to the otherwise uneventful lives of his characters.

Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin, editors, *Convers ations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris,* University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

These interviews with Michael Dorris and/or Louise Erdrich, his wife, help explain how Dorris sees his own fiction.

David Cowart, "'The Rhythm of Three Strands'. Cultural Braiding in Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water,"* in *Studies in American Indian Literatures: The Journal of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures,* Vol. 8, No.1, Spring, 1996, pp. 1-12

An analysis of how Dorris's three narrators weave diverse experiences and perspectives into a complex plot.

Louise Erdrich, *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris,* University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

A more detailed examination of the nature of the unusually close collaboration between these two Native American writers who were also husband and wife.

Louis Owens, "Acts of Recovery: The American Indian Novel in the '80s," in *Western American Literature,* Vol 22, No.1, Spring, 1987, pp. 53-57.

This review argues that Dorris' s novel contributes to a recent renaissance of excellent, sophisticated Native American fiction.

Ann Rayson, "Shifting Identity in the Work of Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris," in *Studies in American Indian Literatures: The Journal of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures,* Vol. 3, No 4, Winter, 1991, pp. 27-36.

An analysis of how Dorris's collaboration with his wife, Louise Erdrich, enables him to write about situations from diverse racial and gender perspectives.

Barbara K. Robins, "Michael (Anthony) Dorris," *Dictionary of Native American Literature",* Garland, 1994, pp. 417-22.

A brief summary of Michael Dorris's life and a general introduction to the themes developed in both his literary and non- literary writings.

Hertha D Wong, "An Interview with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris," in *North Dakota Quarterly,* Vol 55, No. 1, Winter, 1987, pp. 196-218.

An interview With Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, his wife, which describes their collaboration in writing *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* and explains how some of the material for the novel derives from their personal experiences.

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Paul Hadella, "Michael Anthony Dorris," in *Reference Guide to American Literature,* St. James Press, 1994, pp. 263-65.

Michiko Kakutani, "Multiple Perspectives," *New York Times,* May 9, 1987, p. 17.

Penelope Moffet, review of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water,* in *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* June 21, 1987, p. 2.

Adalaide Morris, "First Persons Plural in Contemporary Feminist Fiction," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* Vol 11, No 1, Spring, 1992, pp. 11-30

Robert D Narveson, review of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water,* Prairie Schooner, Vol 63, No 3, Fall, 1989, pp. 12628.

Louis Owens, "Acts of Recovery The American Indian Novel in the '80s," *Western American Literature,* Vol 23, No.1, Spring, 1987, pp. 55-7.

Louis Owens, "Erdrich and Dorris's Mixedbloods and Multiple Narratives," in *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel,* University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, pp. 218-24.

Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a Politics of Location," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry' Selected Prose* 1979-1985, Norton, 1986, p. 25. Cited in Morris.

Roger Sale, "American Novels, 1987," a review of nine novels, including *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water,* in *The Massachusetts Review,* Vol. 29, No I, Spring, 1988, pp. 71-86.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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