

# A Yellow Raft in Blue Water

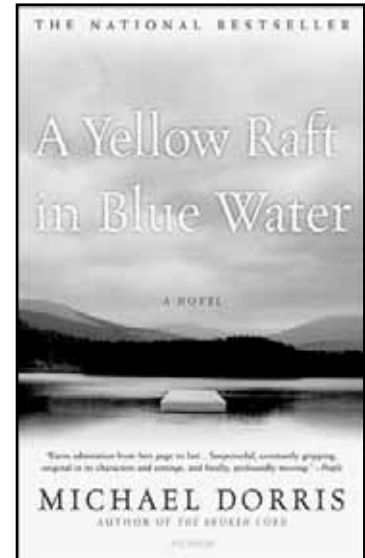
by Michael Dorris

“Powerful . . . A beautifully passionate first novel.”

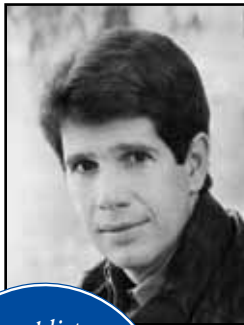
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## TO THE TEACHER

Michael Dorris's widely acclaimed novel, deemed by many a contemporary classic, spans some forty years, and is set throughout the Pacific Northwest and the West, primarily on a Montana Indian reservation. *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* is a moving, deftly constructed, true-to-life saga of three generations of American Indian women, each beset by hardship, frustration, anger, and other inner—and outer—conflicts. However, the magic and brilliance of this book is that these women are also inextricably joined together by the indissoluble bonds of kinship.

Moving backward in time, the novel is “told” to the reader by three distinct and unforgettable heroine-narrators, beginning with the granddaughter Rayona (or Ray, as she is commonly known). On her own at fifteen, Ray is lonely and vulnerable, yet also brave and resilient. She is tough and smart, and is desperately in search of roots and a home—a search made all the more complicated by her mixed ancestry. (Her mother is American Indian and her absent father is Black.)

Next comes Christine, Ray's mother. A bitter child of the reservation, Christine grew up a devout Catholic, believing in—and waiting for—the end of the world. When such a cataclysm failed to materialize, she lost not only her faith but her

PRAISE FOR  
A YELLOW RAFT  
IN BLUE WATER

grasp on existence itself. Later, she lost perhaps the only person she fully loved, her brother Lee. Christine is upset, naturally, at the awful breaks she keeps getting, but moreover she is painfully at odds with how life is supposed to be lived: “You try to make a real world out of what you see on one television channel and what you hear on the radio. You try to put together cute outfits from the secondhand trash at the charity store. You try to have fun when there’s nowhere to go [on the reservation] and you might be related to every other boy in town.” (p. 141)

And finally there is the fierce and mysterious Ida, Christine’s stern mother and Ray’s taciturn grandmother. Ida’s haunting secrets, betrayals, and dreams—which we do not encounter until the concluding chapters—echo through the years, enriching *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* in ways both surprising and stirring. By novel’s end, the shared past of these three women, a cycle of mystery, loss, and neglect, collides with the uncertain yet hopeful future to create a wise, profound, life-affirming story of familial endearment and individual enlightenment.

“Three portraits of remarkable psychological density . . . Each of these women speaks to us directly; and together, their voices form a chorus echoing through four decades of family history.”  
—*The New York Times*

“Eloquent . . . Much of [the book’s] power lies in its strong and disparate voices, each of a female generation, entwined with the others and yet fighting for breath.”  
—*The Boston Globe*

“An unforgettable portrait of Native Americans . . . A rich, multi-layered portrayal of complex events . . . The language is straight from the barrel, the emotions conjured up are straight from the heart.”  
—*Newsday*

“Michael Dorris gives us not just one tough, hard-fighting woman, but three, their stories unified by the theme of tenacious love. The pace is breakneck, the dialogue nothing short of brilliant, and the women bound to win hearts . . . A bull’s-eye of a novel.”  
—Josephine Humphreys

“Poignant and true . . . The overlapping life histories of Rayona, Christine, and Aunt Ida serve as a reminder of the many disguises that love can take . . . Dorris is a wonderful storyteller and a gifted, highly original writer whose style [is] evocative of his part of the country and its distinctive culture.”  
—*The Baltimore Sun*

PREPARING  
TO READ

“Cleverly illuminating . . . The writing is fresh and graceful . . . the characters are human and very real. These three women tell a story that is more just plain American than American Indian, and more just plain human than American.”  
—*Rocky Mountain News*

“An absolutely wonderful book . . . A priceless contribution to American literature.”  
—Gloria Naylor,  
author of *The Women of Brewster Place*

READING AND  
UNDERSTANDING  
THIS NOVEL

This Teacher’s Guide is divided primarily into two sections, which both appear immediately below. The first, “Reading and Understanding this Novel,” will help students with reading comprehension, conceptual appreciation, interpreting the narrative, grasping the book’s symbols and contexts, and related matters. “Questions and Exercises for the Class,” the second section, will enable students to think more broadly, freely, creatively, or comparatively about *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*—both as group and individually. A brief supplementary section, “Suggestions for Further Reading,” is offered in conclusion.

1. Rayona is the first of three different narrators we encounter in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. Who are the other two? How are these three individuals connected? That is, how are both their lives and their narratives connected?
2. Who are Rayona’s parents, and how does she feel about them? Which parent matters more to her, and why? Describe Rayona (or Ray, as she is also known). How old is she? What are her likes and dislikes? Where does she live? Is she smart? What does she look like? What does she think of herself? And what do we learn of Ray’s social, ethnic, religious, and economic background?
3. Near the end of Chapter 2, Ray realizes that, from now until who knows when, she will live on the reservation with Aunt Ida. Then she drops to the ground and begins to “pull weeds out by their roots, scratch them out with my fingernails. I must make the soil smooth, even, without bristles . . . Nothing else matters to me. Nothing but fixing this dirt.” Why is Ray so focused on “fixing” the grassy earth?
4. How do most of the characters in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* regard Father Tom? What point might author Michael Dorris be making here about relations between the Catholic Mission workers and the citizens of the reservation? Also, why does Ray in particular have grounds to despise Father Tom?
5. Who are Sky and Evelyn? Where do they live, and what does each do for a living? How do Sky and Evelyn influence Ray’s life? How do they help her? What does this couple give to Ray—physically, emotionally, and spiritually?

6. Shortly after Ray meets Sky (in Chapter 5), she tells him that her Uncle Lee died while serving in Vietnam. Sky responds to this by saying, “Each one had to make their own decision.” What does he mean by this? How does Sky think and feel about the Vietnam conflict? And how do the other key characters in this novel think and feel about it? Do any of these characters, over the course of the book, change their views in this respect? If so, who? And why?

7. Describe the handwritten letter Ray finds while concluding a work-shift at Bearpaw Lake State Park. Who wrote the letter? To whom is it addressed? What does it say? Why does it matter to Ray? Why does she keep it? And why does she say it is “disturbing in a way I can’t put my finger on” near the end of Chapter 5?

8. In Chapters 9 through 16, Christine is our narrator. Describe her. What kind of grade school and high school student was she? And what kind of sister, friend, mother, wife, employee, and so on? In short, what are Christine’s strengths and shortcomings as a person? Also, why is her health so poor? How and why—as detailed in Chapters 8 and 20—did Christine “lose her faith” in her teens?

9. How would you characterize Christine’s relationship with Lee, her younger brother? How are they alike, and how are they different? Why does she refer to him as “the Indian JFK” on more than one occasion? And why, ultimately, does Christine blame herself for Lee’s death?

10. Who is Dayton? What do we know for certain of his relationship with Lee—and what is suggested? What does Christine think of Dayton? And how and why does her opinion of Dayton change over time?

11. Why does Christine fall in love with Elgin? How, if at all, is he different from the other men Christine has dated? What sets him apart? What does she like about him? What does she dislike?

12. In Chapter 14, we find Christine’s account of a pivotal time she spent in the hospital, and of how she escaped. These same events are described by Rayona much earlier in the novel, in Chapter 1. Explain how and why the two versions of these events are so different. Looking especially at the point in each narrative where Christine’s car breaks down, what does the author seem to be telling us about the relationship between truth and perspective? For what reason does Ray think she has been kicked out of Christine’s car (in Chapter 1)? And what is the actual reason for Christine’s kicking Ray out (in Chapter 14)?

13. Near the end of Chapter 16, Ray treats Christine to breakfast at a roadside restaurant. At the end of the meal, as Christine observes: “She opened her wallet and revealed a wad of cash, then, embarrassed, tried to stuff it back inside the pocket. A torn piece of notepaper dropped on the table and I retrieved it, afraid

she hadn't seen. She took it from my hand, thought a minute, then crumpled it into the ashtray." What is this scrap of paper? Why does Ray immediately take it from Christine and then decide to discard it?

14. What symbolic import, if any, can you recognize in Christine's remark (at the end of Chapter 16): "The program was almost over. Just four songs left."

15. At the beginning of Chapter 17, Ida says: "I never grew up, but I got old." What do you think she means by this remark? Refer to scenes or dialogue from throughout the novel in support of your answer. Also, why does Ida add that she has "worn resentment like a medicine charm" for four decades?

16. In your own view, do the words and deeds of the nuns that Ida and Clara stay with in Denver (see Chapter 18) reflect or refract the novel's overall take on Catholicism? Explain.

17. Why do Ida's memories and impressions of both Pauline and Clara differ from the comparatively sketchy renderings of these two women that we find earlier in the novel? And how, if at all, were your views of Pauline and Clara altered by Ida's recollections?

18. Toward the end of Chapter 19, Ida rejects Willard Pretty Dog, the man she has been living with, taking care of, cooking for, and perhaps falling in love with—the man she has had feelings for ever since childhood. "I didn't hate Willard," she says, "but I no longer wanted him." Why? How did this happen?

19. Why exactly does Ida require that everyone, even her own kids, call her Aunt Ida?

20. How would you characterize Ida's relationship with Father Hurlburt? What do they share? What rituals, secrets, and common experiences connect them as people? And how would you compare and contrast their relationship with that of Ray and Father Tom? Or that of Christine and Sister Alvina?

21. Look again at the last paragraph of this novel. How does Ida's description of "the rhythm of three strands [and] of braiding" echo the novel as a whole?

QUESTIONS AND  
EXERCISES  
FOR THE CLASS

1. How would you explain the title of this novel? Having read the book, what does the phrase "a yellow raft in blue water" suggest to you: literally, figuratively, and even symbolically or metaphorically?

2. As a class, explore both the function and influence of memory in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*—especially memory as a key to the mysterious, lost, or forgotten aspects of the past. A famous philosopher once noted that while life must be lived forward, it can only be understood backward. Explain how that idea is or is not illustrated by this novel.
3. Before driving Ray and herself out to the reservation, Christine insists that they both visit a video-rental store. Why? What goal does Christine have in mind by making this visit? Also, what two movies does Christine eventually decide to rent? Why does she choose these two movies? As an outside project, watch both of these films, then write a short essay on what the films say to you personally, as well as what you think they would say or mean to Ray and Christine.
4. Discuss what this novel revealed to you about the cultures, beliefs, traditions, and experiences of Native Americans. What, if anything, did it show you about modern life on an Indian reservation, for example? Or what did it teach you about the recent history of Indians in the West and Pacific Northwest?
5. A few of the characters in this novel are preoccupied with certain aspects of popular culture, especially song lyrics, TV shows, and radio programs. Which characters are so preoccupied, and which songs and programs and such are most important to them? As a class, discuss why the characters in question are taken by these particular songs, shows, etc. What meanings do they attach to them—and why do they do so?
6. Secrecy is a major theme in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. Indeed, the novel is rich in secrets. The book might even be understood as three separate yet related confessionals, a trio of overheard voices engaged mainly in sharing and revealing their secrets. But are there any secrets that remain unshared or unrevealed at novel's end? If so, what are they?
7. Three generations are profiled in this story: a granddaughter, a mother, and a grandmother. We encounter three women existing in very different if overlapping moments in American—and Native American—history. Discuss how, if at all, the novel informed you on the changing roles, rituals, duties, rights, and possibilities of women in the 20th century.
8. As noted above, this novel has three narrators, three distinct heroines who communicate their stories via the first-person (or “I”) perspective. As an independent exercise, write an additional chapter for this novel in the first-person point of view of one of its secondary yet important characters—be it Lee, Dayton, Elgin, Clara, Pauline, Papa, or another of your choosing. Try to capture the voice, personality, and outlook of the character you have chosen when composing your

fourth perspective for *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. (Your extra chapter need not appear at the end of the story, and it need not read as a conclusion, sequel, or epilogue; rather, it can go wherever you want to put it. Be creative.)

9. Write an original, imaginative story—on any topic you like—in which multiple narrators are employed to tell and re-tell a (more or less) single tale from multiple perspectives. As author Michael Dorris does so movingly and convincingly in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, try to weave together or intertwine the events and ideas of your multiple narrators.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

*A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* is a novel with many vital themes, including the realities and responsibilities of family life, mother-daughter love, coming of age (especially as a woman), the modern Native American (and, to a lesser degree, African American) experience, this country's perception of the Vietnam conflict and the 1960s, Catholic missionary work and its discontents, and so forth.

In recognition of such themes, teachers looking for profitable follow-up reading to Dorris's contemporary classic should consider the following: *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café* (edited by Miguel Algarin and Bob Holman); *American Negro Poetry* (edited by Arna Bontemps); *Annie John* (by Jamaica Kincaid)\*; *Betsey Brown* (by Ntozake Shange)\*; *Black American Short Stories* (edited by John Henrik Clarke); *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (by Dee Brown); *Cloud Chamber* and *The Window* (both by Michael Dorris, and both are novels featuring some of the characters appearing in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*); *I Capture the Castle* (by Dodie Smith)\*; *In the Trail of the Wind: American Indian Poems and Ritual Orations* (edited by John Bierhorst); *The Girl from Purple Mountain* (by May-Lee Chai and Winberg Chai); *My Brother* (by Jamaica Kincaid); *My Sisters' Voices* (edited by Iris Jacob)\*; *On the Rez* (by Ian Frazier); *A Rumor of War* (by Philip Caputo)\*; *Wit* (by Margaret Edson)\*; and *Women of the Silk* (by Gail Tsukiyama).

(\* Macmillan Teacher's Guides are also available for these titles.)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Besides *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, which was the first book he published, other works of adult fiction by Michael Dorris include *The Crown of Columbus* (co-written with Louis Erdrich) and *Working Men* (a collection of short stories). Among Dorris's nonfiction works are *Paper Trail* (a collection of essays) and *The Broken Chord* (which won the National Book Critics Circle Award). Dorris is also the author of *The Window*, a novel for young adults. He died in 1997.

Scott Pitcock wrote this teacher's guide. He works in book publishing and lives in New York City.

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