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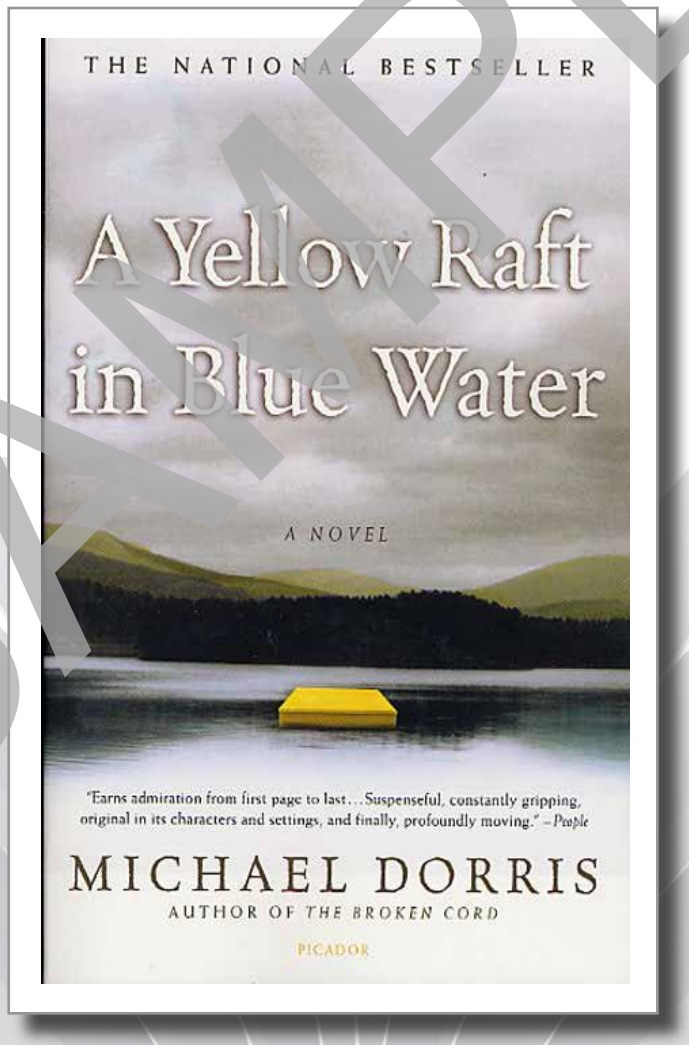
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water

Michael Dorris



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water

Michael Dorris

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Summary

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water is a story told by three generations of women, set primarily on an Indian Reservation in northern Montana. Rayona, the youngest storyteller at 15, is left at the reservation by her ailing, alcoholic mother, Christine, who then disappears from Rayona's life. Rayona, ostracized because she is half African-American—and merely tolerated by her grandmother—forms a friendship with a young mission priest who molests her when the two are on their way to a religious rally. Rayona runs away, works for part of the summer at a state park, learns she has a talent for rodeo riding, and finally returns to the reservation.

Christine tells her story, beginning with her childhood on the reservation. Her mother, who went only by the name of "Aunt Ida" (never "Mother"), clearly favored Christine's younger brother, Lee, a favorite with everyone on the reservation because of his good looks, hoop-dancing abilities, and obvious leadership qualities. Christine's zealous religious faith, spurred by the mission nuns, was shattered when a New Year's Eve prophecy failed to materialize, and Christine then spent her high school years developing a reputation as a "wild girl." After convincing Lee he should enlist in the army, Christine left the reservation for Seattle, where she met Rayona's father, Elgin. When Christine learned that Lee had died in Vietnam, she realized everyone blamed her for pressuring him to join up. With Elgin growing more and more undependable, Christine turned to alcohol for comfort, and Rayona learned to fend for herself at an early age, sometimes living in foster homes while Christine "dried out." Finally, Christine was pronounced terminally ill with liver and pancreas disease. Leaving Rayona with Aunt Ida, Christine went to live out her remaining days with Dayton Nickles—Lee's best friend, and the only one who didn't blame her for his death.

Ida's story reveals some surprising secrets that explain many of the incongruities in the two previous stories. When Ida was 15, her Aunt Clara came to tend to Ida's sick mother. Clara was young and beautiful, and soon announced she was pregnant—by Ida's father, Lecon. To save face, the family—with the cooperation of Father Hurlburt—passed the child off as Ida's. Clara and Ida stayed at a Catholic "motherhouse" in Denver until Christine was born. Ida returned to the reservation with the baby, while Clara remained in Denver. Ida loved Christine and raised her as her own child, but always feared Clara would come back to claim her. When Ida's parents died, Ida inherited their house and land and remained there, taking pity on a disfigured veteran, Willard Pretty Dog, who fathered Lee but soon was sent away by Ida. Ida loved both of her children, but worried most about Christine, unable to keep her from spinning down a path of self-destruction.

This novel is about loneliness and despair, resentment and betrayal—and, in the end, about hope, forgiveness and love.

About the Author

Michael Dorris was born in 1945 in Louisville, Kentucky, of French, Modoc Indian, and Irish ancestry. He spent his early years in Washington and Idaho. He earned a bachelor's degree in English from Georgetown University and a graduate degree in anthropology from Yale. As an anthropology professor at Dartmouth, he founded the college's Native American Studies Program in 1972, and headed it until 1985.

In 1971, Michael Dorris became one of the first single men to adopt a child. He later adopted two more children. In 1981, he married novelist-poet Louise Erdrich, and they had three daughters. In 1985, Dorris was given the Indian Achievement Award by the Illinois Indian Council Fire.

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water, published in 1987, won the National Book Critics Circle award for fiction. In 1989, Dorris received the Washington Governor's Writer's Award for *The Broken Cord*, a non-fiction chronicle of his experience with his son, Abel, which focused national attention on the problem of fetal alcohol syndrome. In the same year, *The Broken Cord* won the Best Non-Fiction of the Year award from the National Book Critics Circle, and was made into a television movie. Other books include *Rooms in the House of Stone* and *Working Men* (both collections of his stories, 1993), *Paper Trail* (essays, 1994), and three books for children: *Morning Girl* (1992), *Sees Behind Trees* (1996) and *Guests* (1994). Additional non-fiction includes *Native Americans: Five Hundred Years After* (1977) and *A Guide to Research on North American Indians* (1983). His work also appears in a number of anthologies, and he co-authored *The Crown of Columbus* with Louise Erdrich. When he died, Michael Dorris had just finished his last novel, *Cloud Chamber*, the story of Elgin's family, using the same multiple-points-of-view approach. Dorris appeared as a commentator and consultant for Ken Burns' "The West" PBS series, and he and Louise Erdrich appeared with Bill Moyers on several PBS programs about Native Americans.

In spite of acclaim for nearly everything he wrote, Dorris' life was filled with tragedy. In 1991, his son, Abel, died when he was struck by a car. Another adopted son, Jeffrey, was charged with trying to extort money from Dorris and Erdrich. In 1995, Dorris and Erdrich separated. In the midst of divorce and custody proceedings, Erdrich told a health professional that one of their daughters had reported being sexually assaulted by Dorris. Most of those who knew Dorris felt the allegation was untrue—but Dorris was devastated. Maintaining that even false accusations would ruin his reputation and put his family through unbearable pain, he ended his own life in April 1997. A note he left read, in part, "I was desperate…I love my family and my friends, and will be peaceful at last."

(**Note:** *The term "Indian" has been used interchangeably with "Native American" in this guide because Michael Dorris himself found such terminology acceptable and used it.*)

Chapters Nineteen and Twenty

Summary

Ida's mother died, her father left home permanently, and her sister married Dale Cree. Ida leased some of the family land and began improving the house where she planned to live out her life. Willard Pretty Dog—horribly disfigured by a land mine in the war—stayed with Ida long enough for her to conceive a child, but when the miracles of plastic surgery returned Willard to his former handsome state, Ida sent him away. Ida named the baby Lecon—Lee, for short. He and Christine were close, and everyone adored Lee. Ida worried about Christine's obsession with the letter from the Blessed Virgin to Lucy. Neither of them knew that when the prophecy proved foundless, Christine's life would begin to change completely.

Vocabulary

scything (338)	decipher (342)	heroics (344)	despaired (345)
discerned (345)	disarray (345)	slough (345)	presumption (346)
scorn (347)	apprehensive (348)	lynx (348)	resurrection (349)
solarium (349)	abating (349)	incredulous (353)	disposition (354)
soothsayers (354)	scrutiny (357)	laxity (357)	vexation (357)
impending (357)	dormant (358)	antagonism (360)	provocation (361)
fervor (361)	distraught (367)	complicity (369)	devout (369)

Discussion Questions

1. When was Ida finally able to start thinking about her own future? (*When her mother died and her father disappeared, she and Christine had the house to themselves.*) How had her old crush, Willard Pretty Dog, changed? (*He was disfigured by a land mine explosion in the war.*) Why did Father Hurlburt think Ida would be an inspiration to Willard? (*She had been through a lot, and had shown courage and toughness.*)

2. How do Ida's preparations for her first meeting with Willard compare with yours when you're going to a special event? What else would you do? Was Willard impressed? (*He was too filled with self-pity to notice.*)

3. In what way did Ida form a bond with Willard? (*She told him the sad story of her own life, offered him constant reassurance and sympathy and listened to his war stories without correcting his grammar.*) How would you describe their relationship—give-and-take, or one-sided?

4. What was Ida's reaction when she learned of her father's death? (*relief*) Why do you think she said "He lived too long"? Did Father Hurlburt understand what she meant? (*He had no idea that Lecon was Christine's father.*)

5. What did Ida "carry like flowers for the sick" *(p. 348)*? (*the news of her pregnancy*) Is this a good analogy? What is another way you could express this idea?

6. Who turned out to be Ida's worst rival for Willard's love? (*his mother*) From her comments to Ida, page 350, what can you say about Mrs. Pretty Dog? (*She is blunt, cruel, selfish, possessive.*) What would you have said to her if you were Willard? Ida? Why did Ida tell Willard

there was no room for him at her house anymore? (*She realized he thought she was stupid and ugly, would only be staying with her because he felt he owed it to her.*)

7. Why did Ida call Father Hurlburt "the only man I didn't want to lose" *(p. 352)*? (*He had always been her true friend, admired and respected her for her good qualities, and even understood about Willard.*)

8. From what things did Ida take joy? (*She loved both of the children, enjoyed planting and tending a large garden, and gradually improved the house. She played card games with the children, told them stories, taught them Indian dances.*)

9. Would you say that Ida "played favorites" with her children, as Christine said? (*p. 360—"In my heart, I had no preference…"*) Seeing Christine and Lee from their mother's viewpoint, what differences do you notice?

Christine	Lee
fidgety, dissatisfied, low self-esteem, not popular, a daredevil, pious to the extreme, saw Ida as obstacle	affectionate as a baby, handsome, popular, craved his mother's adoration, talented dancer

10. At what point does Ida's story end? *(where Christine's takes up)*

Supplementary Activity

Literary Analysis: Implied Analogy

The last paragraph of the novel is an implied analogy—a comparison that is not specifically stated. Carefully reread the paragraph. To what can you compare the three strands of the braid and the ways in which they intertwine?

(The braid is like the lives of the three women whose stories have been told.)

Post-reading Discussion Questions

(These questions may also be used for writing.)

1. What were your feelings about Christine after reading only Rayona's story? Did it change after you read Christine's story? Did it change after you read Ida's story? How did your feelings about Rayona and Ida change as you read the novel?

2. What incidents, scenes, and events were easier to understand after you read Ida's story? For example, what new understanding did Ida's story bring to Christine's description of the visit to the Indian Health Service to see Clara?