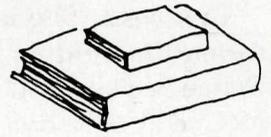


## BOOK REVIEW



**Michael Dorris**

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*A Yellow Raft In Blue Water*  
Warner: Little Brown & Co. Inc.:  
Boston MA , 1987, 343 pages.  
\$16.95

Braiding hair with three different and separate colored strands is the metaphor used by the author of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* to unwind the stories of three strong, sensitive and struggling American Indian women. Dorris, a member of the Modoc tribe, sets the novel as a trilogy capturing each person's voice over a three generation span. Rayona a bi-racial (American Indian and African-American) teenager returns to the reservation to find out about her culture and traditions. She is the third generation. Abandoned by her mother, she tries to reconnect with her grandmother who lives on the reservation. Sexually abused by a trusted assistant priest, she struggles with the idea of returning to the city. Christine, the mother, the second generation, lives in Seattle enduring the stress of an impoverished life. Alcohol provides consolation and companionship. Harboring resentment toward her reservation's extended family, Christine spends her days recalling the joyful times when she was young. Ida, the grandmother (the first generation) and cultural matriarch, holds many secrets and weaves the conclusion of the story into one of both betrayal and loyalty to one's extended family.

While the apparent protagonist is Rayona, the mixed bi-racial daughter, within the inter-generational dynamics of American Indian families, Ida is the true protagonist. Ida's personality, values, culture, and traditions flow through each generation, and reveal themselves in each character. Substance abuse is a strand which colors and filters the reader's impressions of the three characters. The maternal grandmother and the granddaughter both live alcohol and drug free lives despite their troubled experiences. However, Christine uses alcohol excessively and eventually suffers serious health problems. The mix of non-use and excessive use of alcohol among the central characters is an accurate reflection of reality; pointing out many of the problems alcohol creates in Indian communities, without surrendering to the popular but inaccurate stereotype that "all Indians drink."

This novel helps readers to understand much about substance abuse among American Indians, and how culture plays a role to counter the destructive forces. Numerous factors such as oppression, poverty and racism propel Christine to alcohol for friendship and emotional support, while other cultural traditions and American Indian values moderate that pressure. Christine, represents the person in the middle of culture change, moving to the city away from her Indian roots and extended family.

The city represents a spiritual vacuum and isolation from her traditions. She frequents Indian bars for a social life, and falls in love with an African American man: from that union Rayona is born.

**By Charlotte Goodluck**

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Charlotte Goodluck, MSW, CISW, is a doctoral candidate at the University of Denver, Denver, CO. *Walk in Beauty*

Curiously, Rayona's conception takes place at Point Defiance. This underlying theme of Christine's life represents other American Indians' internal and external struggle with understanding "the American Way." Anger, resistance, withdrawal, rage and depression are all points of personal defiance against changing one's identity and culture. Christine uses alcohol to soften the hurt, pain, and rejection of her own experiences as she struggles to find her place in a large city. Despite these problems, she retains a history of her own people. She has a rich extended family on the reservation with whom she visits occasionally, and she tries to teach her daughter her native language. Christine is caught in the "in between" generation, half in and half out, she is half on and off the reservation. Such an isolating position and emotional devastating place for the heart, mind, and spirit. As professional helpers, we could assist her as an individual, focusing only on the issue of alcoholism, or we could use our knowledge to understand her context and see the story in its entirety.

The color yellow symbolizes hidden dimensions. Yellow, a sacred color of the American Indian people, represents the spiritual domain of the life giving sun, corn, and sunrise. One character says, "I'm stopped, halfway down the trail, with my eyes fixed on the empty yellow raft floating in the blue waters of Bearpaw Lake. Somewhere in my mind I've decided that if I stare at it hard enough it will launch me out of my present

troubles." (p. 104) Yellow, from the Indian perspective, is part of the spiritual core and goes to our traditional values and beliefs. Each main character, Ida, Christine, and Rayona have juxtaposed relationships with traditional spiritual ties to their culture. Each family member uses their spiritual memories, traditions, customs, and practices as both symbolic and concrete places to hold on to in the personal struggles of living in "two worlds".

Dorris' novel is a rich resource. The book can serve as an important supplement for educators teaching about Substance Abuse. It can also be used as a tool to look into the world of American Indian women. For all helpers, it is a place to begin a conversation on the issues of substance abuse, race, culture and gender. □

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