

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

MICHAEL DORRIS

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

GUIDE WRITTEN BY RUTH ROSENBERG

SYNOPSIS

The book is divided into three parts, each narrated by a different person. Rayona tells chapters 1-8; Christine tells chapters 9-16; Ida tells chapters 17-20. The reader thus gets interpretations of the same events from the point of view of the daughter, of her mother, and of her grandmother, who is the only one that knows the whole story. These interbraided tales are symbolized by Christine's braiding Rayona's hair in the opening scene in the hospital. The fifteen-year-old girl inherited her height from her Afro-American father, Elgin, a mailman, who has abandoned them.

Packing their belongings into four garbage bags, Christine drives from Seattle to leave her daughter on the reservation in Montana. Father Hurlburt offers to enroll Rayona in the Mission School for the fall, and to arrange for his assistant, Father Tom Novak, to take her to a church youth group called The God Squad. Rayona finds them hostile. Even her cousin Foxy makes racist remarks. Just as she is considering running away, Father Tom invites her to go to Helena to the Teens for Christ Jamboree. While swimming out to a yellow raft in Bearpaw Lake, Father Tom pretends to drown so that Rayona will have to rescue him, then, embarrassed by indiscretion, he is glad to leave her there.

She is befriended by the owner of the gas station at the entrance to Bearpaw State Park who admits having also been a runaway, since he spent the Vietnam War in Canada. There he had been given the nickname, Sky, indicating his origin in Montana, which is "Big Sky" country. Rayona says she was named for the label inside her mother's nightgown. She becomes part of Sky's family, sleeping on the couch in their trailer, picking up trash left by campers during the day, being fed by Evelyn, and finally feeling she has found a home. The Parks director is pleased that she fills two affirmative action slots.

On the fourth of July, Evelyn drives Ray to a rodeo in Havre. Foxy is scheduled to ride Dayton's horse, but is too drunk, so Rayona takes her cousin's place. She wins a buckle for having been thrown three times. The crowd explodes in war whoops. Dayton drives her to his house where her mother is staying.

Section two, in Christine's voice, describes her admiration for her younger brother, Lee: a handsome, skilled hoop dancer, rodeo rider and good student. When Dayton Nickles replaced her as Lee's companion, Christine became jealous and resentful. To separate them, she manipulated Lee into enlisting. A soldier in a bar, Corporal Elgin Taylor, consoled her after she heard Lee was missing in action in Vietnam. That was how, at 25, she married a black man in Tacoma. Lee's body was not released by the army until fourteen months later.

Driving nonstop to the reservation, Christine perceives that

everyone blames her for Lee's death. At the honoring dance after the funeral, Willard Pretty Dog claims Aunt Ida as his partner. Seven years later, Ida comes to Seattle to visit Clara in the hospital. From Clara's thinning hair, Christine infers she had chemotherapy. When Ida tells her own story, Christine will learn that Willard was Lee's father, and Clara was her own mother.

At forty-one, Christine is told by the doctor that she has only six months left, so she should make provisions for her daughter. For the first time in her life, she has to plan ahead. Leaving Rayona at Aunt Ida's, she goes to Dayton Nickles' house. From newspaper clippings he had tried to hide from her, she learns he had been a science teacher, discharged after a student had accused him of improper conduct. Because he still lived with his mother, people believed the false charges. He had been sentenced to five years in the penitentiary. While in jail, he studied accounting. When he was released he became the tribal bookkeeper. He had bought a wild mare, Babe, to save her from being slaughtered. On July 3, he brought his horse to compete in the rodeo. He returned the next day with Ray. All three of them see Ray on the TV news that night winning a buckle. As Christine's supply of Percocet is decreasing, the priest delivers a new bottle of the pain pills, sent at Aunt Ida's instigation. Ray learns to drive, and at the end of August she takes her mother for a ride to pick up Babe, who is being bred to an Appaloosa.

In the final section, Aunt Ida reveals the reason for resentment. When she was fifteen, her mother was dying, so her Aunt Clara was summoned. By December, Clara is pregnant with her brother-in-law Lecon's child. It is decided that Clara and Ida will be sent to Denver where nuns had a shelter for unwed mothers. On August 11, Christine is born – Ida's cousin and sister. Clara refuses to return to the reservation, preferring to stay in the city, so Ida brings the baby back. Father Hurlburt tells her that her father has become an alcoholic, and her sister, Pauline, no longer lives at home. Four years later, Clara comes to take the child, but Father Hurlburt prevents her by showing the birth certificate that named Ida as her mother.

Years later, Pauline has married Dale Cree. Ida has leased her land and, with the proceeds, installed plumbing and electricity in her house. Willard Pretty Dog returns, disfigured by a mine that exploded in Italy, his handsome face ruined. Willard moves into Ida's house. After his plastic surgery, he leaves Ida to raise their son, Lee, alone.

Christine's bravado dissipates as she worries about a letter given to a Portuguese girl by the Virgin Mary predicting the end of the world. Her teacher, Sister Alvina, is obsessed with the opening of that letter in the coming New Year. Christine believes she must wait on the roof, in a state of

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

grace, for the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Her disillusion is total as midnight passes and nothing happens. The novel concludes with Ida and Father Hurburt sitting on the roof, as she braids her long hair.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Anthony Dorris was born January 30, 1945, in Louisville, Kentucky. His father, a Modoc, had served as an army lieutenant in World War II and was killed overseas. His widowed mother, Mary Besy (Burkhardt) Dorris moved back to her mother's house. His uncanny ability to write in women's voices came from his having been raised by strong-minded women, his three remarkable aunts and his widowed grandmothers. "I heard her version of the world much more clearly and consistently than I heard anybody else's version. So, if I have a point of view to draw on other than myself, it's a woman's point of view."

Always a prodigious reader, Dorris used to win prizes from his local library for having written the most book reports. He went to a Jesuit high school, and then to Georgetown University to continue his education by Catholic priests. In 1967, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa and "magna cum laude." The first person on either side of his family to attain a higher education, he was pleased to find himself surrounded by others who liked to read. He won scholarships to graduate school at Yale University where he first majored in the history of the theater, then, after one year, changed his major to anthropology. His field research was done in a small fishing village in Tyonek, Alaska. While there, he decided to adopt a child. From a Catholic agency, he was given a three-year-old Lakota boy, Abel. It is his story that was told in *The Broken Cord* (1989).

His preparation for writing the two birth scenes in *Yellow Raft* came from his time in the village, when he helped a woman in labor deliver her child. In 1971, he got his masters degree from Yale and taught anthropology at Franconia College in New Hampshire. In 1972, Dartmouth College invited him to found a Native American Studies Department. His future wife became a member of that first class. In 1974, he adopted a second child, Sava, named after his Alaskan fishing partner. A third child, Madeline Hannah, was adopted in 1976. In May 1979, he brought his three children to the annual Dartmouth powwow. There he met his former student, Louise Erdrich, again. Their courtship had to be conducted by correspondence because he had accepted an appointment at the University of Auckland and had arranged to do field research on the New Zealand Maori.

On October 10, 1981, Louise married the four of them. She legally adopted the children under the same judge who had performed the marriage in their back yard in Hanover, New Hampshire. Writing under a pseudonym which was the first syllable of each of their names – Milou North, they published romantic fiction in magazines. Then they won a \$5,000 first prize from *Chicago* for the short story, "The World's Greatest Fisherman" which they extended into a novel, *Love Medicine*. Dorris published two scholarly works which resulted in his academic promotion. His *Guide to Research on North American Indians* (1983) annotated over 1,000 books, articles, and government documents.

In 1985, he became a full professor, won the Indian Achievement Award, served as delegate to the Inter-

American Indian Congress in Santa Fe, and won a Rockefeller Foundation Research grant. During his sabbatical the following year, he did research on reservations about alcoholism impelled by his adopted son's problems due to fetal alcohol syndrome. In 1989, *The Broken Cord* won the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Christopher Award, and the Heartland Prize. It was distributed by the Book of the Month Club and translated into eight languages. The film based on it, starring Jimmy Smits, was watched by 300 million viewers and won the Scott Newman Award, the Gabriel Award, the ARC Media Award, the Writer's Guild of America Award, and the American Psychological Association's Annual Media Award.

In 1991, he and his wife collaboratively published *The Crown of Columbus*, which was immediately optioned for the movies. Michelle Pfeiffer and Kate Guinzberg will codirect the film. *Yellow Raft* is also being made into a movie directed by John Sayles, who also wrote the script.

As a member of the Save the Children Fund, under whose auspices Ellen's family adopted a Navajo foster son in the novel, *Yellow Raft*, Dorris went to Zimbabwe. His report on the starving children there won an Overseas Press Club citation, and the Journalism Award for Excellence. In 1993, these were collected in the book, *Rooms in the House of Stone*.

In 1992, *Morning Girl* won the Scott O'Dell award for best adult historical fiction. A collection of short stories, *Working Men*, was published to good reviews in 1993. One of these, "Earnest Money," is a prequel to *Yellow Raft*, telling how Sky and Evelyn got married. He is presently at work on a novel about his Irish ancestors from Roscommon County of which another of his short stories, "The Dark Snake" is the opening chapter.

His witty essays about his travels, charming insights into his children, book reviews, and historical accounts of treaties made with Indian nations who insist on their sovereign status have just been collected in a volume called *Paper Trail* (1994). He has resigned from teaching and moved west to devote himself to full-time writing.

As the disclaimers on the title page pointed out, the only nonfictional character in *Yellow Raft* was the horse. While attending high school on the Montana reservation where his father, Jim Dorris, had lived before his death, Michael was coerced into entering a rodeo. For a short while he considered becoming a professional bronco-buster, but decided to take the SAT exam instead and became an academic.

CRITIC'S CORNER

The novel was a best-seller from its first publication in hardback. It sold 40,000 copies. When it came out as a trade paperback, 300,000 were sold. It has been adopted nationwide in college and senior high school courses. It will be made into a movie directed by John Sayles, who also wrote the screenplay.

Working Men, his 1993 short story collection, is a prequel to the novel. "Earnest Money" tells the story of Sky's courtship of one of his mother's friends, Evelyn, and his purchase of the Conoco station at Bearpaw State Park. For him, it is like a fort on the border he has just crossed. The uniform he wears is a consolation for him after having been a draft-dodger in Canada. He envisions himself as "guarding

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

the entrance." This retroactive mode of working seems characteristic of Dorris who also organized his novel in reverse chronological order, telling the present and moving backward into the past to end up where he began.

In the *Times Literary Supplement* (March 11, 1988:276) Austin MacCurtain wrote "the device of having three women narrate in turn their versions of the experiences that connect them gives density and richness of texture. It is a device, however, that poses a formidable technical problem. How to see the world through the eyes of the semiliterate, the confused, the willfully blind."

Dorris's response was that the use of first-person narration enabled him to show the interior monologues which were more eloquent than their actual verbalizations. He exercised great caution in the diction, giving them no words to say that would be beyond their range of expressions. The challenge was to articulate the most profound emotions in this limited vocabulary. This was a great test for him as a college professor who had read a book a day since early boyhood. But these constraints had a political agenda as well. Dorris feels that the inherent intelligence of tribal people is vastly underestimated. He told an interviewer: "I tried to be very careful not to let people use any words that they wouldn't know, but the complexity of their thought is valid for people on reservations. The imagery that they use and the way they see the world is not a product of education, it's a result of being inherently intelligent."

Cathi Edgerton wrote "Dorris skillfully weaves the reader into his faultless prose as each thread of story binds the heart." Her point is that only the reader can see the whole story. Each of the narrators has only a partial version limited by what she chooses not to see or cannot have known. Therefore, readers, alone, understand it in its entirety. The impetus to reading further is not suspense, since the plot is known; it is intellectual curiosity. We read on, not to find out what will happen next, but to see how the other characters will deal with what has happened. This makes the cardgames an appropriate symbol for fate – they are forced to play with the cards they have been dealt. As the reviewer in *Mademoiselle* (May 1987:90) indicated: "This is a book about powerful family secrets: the way the past haunts the present. . . . The sense here is that destiny charts your course, and cannot be escaped. Every character has a path she can't help but follow. And all paths, sooner or later, point to home (home, in this case, being the dry, barren reservation, and Aunt Ida's house). It has been tellingly said that all Native American novels are "homing stories." Characters away from the reservation consider themselves in exile. They struggle to return to the old ways. They suffer in the outside world, enduring only through the hope of embracing their own traditions once again.

All of the critics were astounded by the revelations of Aunt Ida. What impressed them was the authorial strategy of making an unlikable character into someone for whom the reader can feel compassion. These comments pleased Dorris most. He told interviewers that people told him that they were changed by having read the book. Suddenly, children began to understand their parents better, parents confessed that they could see things from their children's perspectives. He judges the success of a work by its ability to change readers' perceptions. Robin Hemley (*Chicago*, June

1987:117) found Ida "an irascible battle-ax who spends most of her day telling soap-opera characters what idiots they are." But, a hundred pages from the end, "your resentment of her has completely washed away."

Joyce Maynard wrote of Ida, that she was "a distant, bitter woman speaking only Indian, when she speaks at all." But, when "after half a century of silence, this hard, impassive-seeming woman finally pours out her long and amazing story, filled with intelligence and wisdom and feeling – the reader is left very nearly stunned." Campbell Geeslin remarked that it was Ida who made her successors "remarkably strong and powerful." The *School Library Journal* (November 1987:121) called her "the stony family matriarch who lost her favored son to the Viet Nam War and now warms her heart before the electronic fires of television soap operas."

Saved for last, is a tribal story of self-sacrifice, outdoing the martyrdom of any of the Catholic saints constantly referred to, in which individuals were bound by their ancient codes to value the welfare of the group over their own. In tribal life, it was customary for a man to take his wife's sisters as extra wives. Missionaries who tried to impose monogamous marriage inevitably failed. Therefore, under Native American values, the relationship of Lecon and Clara was absolutely legitimate. Furthermore, marriages were contractually arranged. Young people did not "fall in love" nor were they expected to find their own mates. A nurse was bestowed upon a wounded warrior. Willard makes it clear that he felt bound to Ida through her nursing of him. His marrying the nurse who tended him in the hospital after Ida rejected him reinforces this. Ida's story is the tribal legacy, the inheritance she leaves her descendents which has the power of abrogating all other discourse emanating from videos, hit songs, TV soaps. Its authenticity trivializes all other messages. As Ida considers whether or not to tell Rayona, she thinks "She doesn't realize that I am the story, and that is my savings, to leave her or not."

From remarks made in response to questions about this novel among the 140 interviews Dorris has granted since its publication, it becomes apparent how much of its composition was a discovery process for him. Initially it was a boy's rite of passage. During the long drive west from New Hampshire, Raymond became a girl. When he had finished her section, he thought he had written a long short story, or a novella. Trying to extend it, he found that Rayona had said all that she could, so he switched the point of view to her mother's perspective trying to find out why she was so self-destructive. Again, he thought that the book was completed, but one mystery had not resolved itself. Seeking to learn why Christine's mother was so irritable about being called "aunt" he shifted to her voice and found the answer. So, far from having been plotted at the outset, it grew through his increasing knowledge of, and intimacy with, these characters.

The title came to him one day while he was describing an encounter he had had with concentration camp survivor lying on a yellow raft who spoke to him as if he were an adult when he swam out to him. That conversation between a 40-year-old man and an 11-year-old boy sparked the novel, but nothing of it remained in the final version. Its trace is in the scene of Rayona looking at Ellen on the raft in

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

Bearpaw Lake and feeling connected to her. Dorris says that he works "intuitively" without planning in advance. For him, the designs emerge from the material itself. "I shape the ingredients that are present on the page when I'm trying to perfect it, when I'm rewriting it, redrafting." The writer who works without an outline learns to be opportunistic, "being open to the next path that opens even though you don't know quite where it's headed. The pleasure of the unexpected." He and his collaborator-wife, Louise Erdrich, find pleasure in the surprises afforded them by their characters.

His advice to beginning writers could serve as useful mottos for all composition courses. Four things are crucial.

- Find a reader who will be absolutely candid in assessing your work
- Keep a journal
- Write every day
- Never be satisfied

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To appreciate how impossible it is to understand the present without knowing the past
2. To weigh the cost of evading military service with the price paid for participating in wars
3. To dispel the idea that illiterate or uneducated people are unintelligent, and to appreciate the wisdom of those without formal education
4. To participate in the pleasure of hearing yet another version of an already familiar story as is done in the oral tradition where the emphasis is not on plot but on character
5. To appreciate the feat of a man's creating believable women's voices
6. To generate respect for the values of those so poor that all their worldly possessions fit into four trash bags
7. To appreciate how the humblest work can dignify some one when it is undertaken with commitment
8. To gain insight into the ironies of culture contact; what happens to people deprived of their own language, whose customs are condemned as sinful, and whose mode of sustenance is taken away
9. To discover the parallels subtly suggested in these contemporary hagiographies (lives of saints)
10. To appreciate the miracle of mother love and how transformative an experience it can be

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze a retroactive plot and discuss its impact
2. To learn to reconcile conflicting versions of the same story
3. To deal with polyphonic narration's tendency to evoke the reader's sympathy for each successive point-of-view
4. To grasp the shifting policies of the federal government toward tribal people and their devastating consequences
5. To understand language as a form of resistance to cultural oppression, and the energy invested in transmitting it
6. To appreciate the parallels between apocalyptic movements
7. To discuss the implications of fatherlessness upon

Dayton, Lee, Christine, Father Tom and the reverberations of Rayona's impending orphaned status

8. To contrast interior monologues with externalized speech
9. To understand Native American feelings for the natural world
10. To appreciate the role of humor, especially of irony, as a survival strategy

MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have a particular meaning in the novel. Explain each. Chapter and page numbers are given so that you can note the context from which the item is taken.

1. All characters, events, and details of the setting are imaginary, except for Babe. (copyright page)
(Just like Rayona, Dorris was asked to substitute at the last minute for a cousin. He got thrown off the same horse three times at the Montana State High School Rodeo. Just like Rayona, he told himself that the best thing to do after a bucking bronco has thrown you off is to get right back on. The incident which best symbolized her toughness and resilience, which gains her admirers from formerly hostile acquaintances, was drawn from his own adolescent experience as an outsider on his father's reservation. He felt a kinship with ancestors noted for their horsemanship as Rayona's image coalesces with that of her dead uncle Lee who had been a famed rider. It anticipates the evocative scene in which her mother, drugged with painkillers, thinks she sees her beloved brother's return with the silver belt-buckle he won glinting in his extended hand.)
2. Mom has earlier spent twenty minutes pulling my long frizzy hair into a herringbone braid. (Chapter 1, p.1)
(These are warrior women. Traditionally the defender of his people plaited not only his own long hair, but also the tail of his horse. So this opening symbolizes the battles to come with death, with bereavement, with all the losses that constitute contemporary Native Americans' lives. It prefigures Lee's awakening in the 1960s to Red Power which he flaunts by growing his hair long and braiding it with otter skin. In service of his ambition to be elected tribal leader, to become "the Indian JFK" that everyone expects him to be, he needs veteran's status. Regulations in the U.S. Army require the shearing of hair. He signifies his enlistment by handing his mother his braid. Before the entire reservation, without a word, the announcement is made during Labor Day supper at the mission. "Ida grabbed it to her face and breathed through it slow and hard. It was black and ragged as a horse's mane.")
3. She wears her favorite rings, a narrow abalone, an inlaid turquoise-and-jet roadrunner, and a sandcast silver turtle. (Chapter 1, p. 3)
(Dorris, the trained anthropologist, uses these artifacts to reconstruct the cultures that fashioned them. The pearly shell was used by Ojibwa Mide healers. On the Pacific coast, dentalium shells and on the Atlantic

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

coast, wampum shells had mythic significance, as the migis shells had for the Anishinabe. The turquoise used decoratively by Pueblo artisans also had deep religious meanings. Each tribe had its own trickster figure: coyote, raven, roadrunner, hare. The turtle stands for the tectonic plates that support the North American continent known as Turtle Island. Christine is wed to the stories encircling the bands on her fingers. After she has taught her daughter to drive, she gives her one of the rings to celebrate her license.)

4. For the second tape, after a lot of considering, she picks *Little Big Man*. (Chapter 2, p. 24)
(In one of his book reviews, Dorris praised Thomas Berger's treatment of Native Americans. He told an interviewer who asked him to elaborate that: "The thing that I loved about *Little Big Man* is that the Indian characters had personality and humor, and you have to look long and hard for other books in which they have either one. Berger's Indians, in both the book and the movie version, were interesting, intelligent people who happened to be from a different culture, but who had an edge, a perspective on the world, who didn't conform to stereotypes. I continue to think *Little Big Man* is one of the best fictional books that deals with Indians that I know.")
5. Dominic Savio, the preteen saint . . . dressed in lemon-yellow pants and a lime sports jacket.
(Chapter 3, p. 40)
(The incongruity of this plaster replica of the patron of preadolescents, who died at ten, highlights the stresses of attempting to impose a religion based on a notion which has no analog in Indian philosophy, that of sin. Indian thought is based on nature in which all things are both good and bad, and nothing is pure evil. The second irony is that a lecherous priest is discussing lewdness. The third layer of irony derived from the author's own naivete. Educated by Jesuits, he had gone to spend a summer with relatives on a reservation in eastern Montana after his first year of college. He took a job as youth counselor that proved disastrous. He was expected to plan programs for "a dozen bored, disgruntled kids, most of them my cousins." He found them cynical, and scornful of his efforts to engage them.)
6. Sometimes I think of it as bait, a piece of ripe meat set in a trap for a hungry animal. (Chapter 3, p. 46)
(As long as the package of pills remains on the table beside Ida's door, Rayona has some hope that it will lure her mother back. Once it disappears, she has nothing left to hold her to the reservation, so she runs away. Again, the image she holds of herself is a male identity, the trapper responsible for finding his own food. An orphan was one who had no one to hunt for his sustenance.)
7. It's as if she sends off radiation that tickles the back of my neck and blows against my legs. (Chapter 7, p. 104)
(The empathy emitted wordlessly from Evelyn is expressed in terms of physics: she "sends off radiation," there is a magnetic pull between them. As Rayona confesses the truth about herself, leaving nothing out, the weights fall off. Evelyn had not asked for it. Her love is unconditional. She simply waits, silently, permitting Rayona to listen to herself and to discover that what she heard was not so bad after all. This is a transformative moment. She achieves self-acceptance. Generosity of this magnitude, the Dials sacrificing their busiest day of the entire year, July 4, to take her home, changes her life. This is an instance of medicine power. It is like "Amazing Grace." Before, she had been lost. Now she is found. The cure was effected by Evelyn's ability to feel another's grief, because she herself had suffered.)
8. When I woke the next morning to find the world still there, she had braided her hair so tight that it arched and forked like a sidewinder down her back.
(Chapter 9, p. 145)
(Christine loses her faith, at 15, when the apocalyptic prophecy fails to happen. Previously the most ambitious student, she loses all interest in school because her teacher's prediction has been inaccurate. Similarly, the white messages about beauty are fake. Dorris, who admits to an intense admiration of Toni Morrison's work, has here, in the failed permanent, recreated the moment that Pecola's longing for blue eyes shatters her mind. And the restored braid that snakes down Ida's back is a reassertion of her Indianess, and a repudiation of the Edenic serpent.)
9. I like having an audience when I shamed the boys in my class by being tougher. (Chapter 9, p. 146)
(Christine compensates for her fatherlessness by fathering her younger brother, Lee, who follows her around, adoringly, and was so sensitive to her feelings that he knew something was wrong before she had even admitted it to herself. Her jealousy of Dayton Nickles, who takes her place in Lee's affections, knows no bounds. By stealing her shadow, her doppelgänger, Dayton has robbed her of the best part of herself. The revenge she takes is a terrible one. The only way she could separate Lee from Dayton was to persuade him to go to Vietnam. Since Dayton's father was killed in the navy, he has been exempted as the only support of a widowed mother. When Lee is killed overseas, Christine blames herself. When Dayton takes her into his home to nurse her during her terminal illness, he is enacting his forgiveness of her. Through their reconciliation, they are winning back Lee, a former rodeo star, in Rayona's exploit on the back of Dayton's mare – or, at the very least, they are collaboratively recovering some aspects of him. Dayton had traveled the rodeo circuit with him, carrying his saddle, and boasting in his stead afterwards. Through Dayton's care of Christine, he is re-enacting his role toward his widowed mother. It is after Christine's assumption of motherhood, in which she centers her identity, that she understands how she had taken away Ida's son.)

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the novel.

Questions 1-5 Literal Level

1. What is learned from the replay of the opening scene?
(The hospital visit, from Rayona's point of view, is a comedy. From Christine's, who has just been told she will be dead within six months, it is a tragedy. Without that information about her death sentence, the scene is a replay so familiar that the daughter can predict each move. Her mother has had to check into the Indian Health Service Clinic before, after alcoholic binges. Her father has been too consistent in disappointing her to be trusted. Their temporary reunions never last more than a week. Rayona puts up with her mother's self-dramatizing postures, her cheating at cards, the interminably slow passage of the visiting hours, the supper out of vending machines, the rude curiosity of the other patients. The final farcical conclusion beside the car with the broken headlight taking up two parking spaces, is her spanking of her mother: "I give a karate yell, and, with all my strength, slap her on the butt with my open palm."

In the second version, the fatally ill mother is solely concerned about how, without any resources, to provide for her child. She has to send conflicting messages: to let Elgin know how grave her situation is without alarming Rayona. To buy time, she calls for a pack of cards, hoping to divert attention long enough to formulate a plan. Needing to be alone to think, she regards the visit as an intrusion on the little time she has left. When Elgin refuses to assume responsibility for his daughter, she has but one option left, to fling away her life in hopes that her insurance will render benefits even though the last premium has not been paid. In a trance, she is sped toward Tacoma, "riding an arrow," to complete her circle.)

2. Explain the purchase of the videos.
(This illogical act is disparaged by Rayona who notes that they neither have a television that works, nor a VCR. Furthermore, she knows transporting them over state lines is illegal. Why, then, does her mother insist on signing up for lifetime membership after receiving assurance that the benefits will be extended to survivors? She obviously regards this as a legacy. From Ida, who had been the first on the reservation to own a television set, she had learned how it could be used to fend off reality, and to substitute for society. Justifying the purchase as a present to Ida, she reminds Rayona that they don't want to arrive empty-handed. But her identification with the evil car named Christine that murders people is longstanding, having posted its advertising slogan on her refrigerator with a magnet, as well as having had a bumper sticker made: "I am Christine. I am pure evil." She can never forgive herself for the crime of having sent Lee to his death in Vietnam. Rayona has so internalized this slogan that she blurts it out when she is introduced to Father Hurlburt.

Christine's version of her choice is that she wanted Rayona to remember her as "tough." On one of the last days of her life, Dayton brought home a VCR, Rayona dug out the tapes from the bottom of her suitcase, and, together, they watch "the toughest car that ever was." This inheritance she is leaving is substantiated by her summoning her last remaining strength to teach Rayona to drive so she will always have a means of escape. That their final trip together is to bring home a pregnant Babe, heretofore fierce and untamable, but now whinnying with love, leaves a life-affirming tone.)

3. Analyze the three questions posed by Aunt Ida to Christine.

(Like a condensed version of "King Lear" the crazed matriarch blinded to her daughter's devotion, needily demands "three reasons" which she refuses to articulate. Not until Cordelia was dying did her father recognize the depth of her love. Similarly, Ida's tears are shed too late.

Christine, wanting only a home for her daughter, assesses the cost of saying what Ida demands to hear, and decides that Rayona could survive foster homes better than she could endure the memory of her mother's self-humiliation. She grinds the toe of her boot in the hard soil, dislodging a piece of flint, and hardens herself into stony silence. "I saw Rayona watching and it came to me that nothing, nothing was worth her witnessing me laid low.")

4. What are the characters' attitudes toward Catholicism?
(From Sky's joke about the priest, and his making Rayona a job candidate by suggesting that the Catholics "are after her," his animosity is evident. Pauline had a calling since early childhood, and remains devout. Ida still listens to Sunday Mass broadcast from a cathedral in Denver and boasts of having been there for the feast of Corpus Christi, when she served as a bead in the living rosary at the racetrack. Father Hurlburt, who drives around the reservation in a pickup marked "Holy Martyrs Mission," has been Ida's loyal friend for four decades.

Father Tom is the butt of reservation jokes. Vance Windyboy, one of the tribal council members, gave him private language lessons in ridiculously inappropriate phrases that induce hilarity when he tries them out.

Christine was so zealous in her faith that she won the approval of each nun who taught her. She hung saints' pictures in her room, sprinkled holy water inside her pillow case, wore a scapular on her neck and a religious medallion on her undershirt. Since her Holy Communion, she had made the nine First Fridays. During Holy Week, she made the Stations of the Cross on her knees. On Passion Sunday she stood motionless to liberate a soul from Purgatory. She recited holy words to earn indulgences, and prayed for the beatification of Tekakwitha, the Iroquois candidate for sainthood. But, when the predicted Apocalypse failed to occur on New Year's Eve when she was fifteen, she totally lost her faith, and never again attended church.

However, she has invested much energy in her daughter's Catholic upbringing, sending her to nuns to

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

be taught, teaching her the lives of the saints, even quizzing her on them. Rayona's thought is colored with liturgy. She understands the attitude the park superintendent wants her to assume by means of a religious analogy. She knows how he wants her to act, and imagines herself "assisting at Mass" holding "the paten under the chins of the faithful."

It is through Ida's anguish over Christine's disillusionment that the force of her love burns most fiercely. She submits, respectfully, to her daughter's instructions, trying to shield her from Lee's mockeries, willing to give her life to keep her from being hurt.)

5. Define Rayona's values by specifying incidents in which these are manifested.

(Intelligence matters to her. Hearing her father say that she is "no fool" stiffens her backbone with pride. She has always tried to win his approbation by getting good grades. She knows that being so smart risks her ever becoming popular with her classmates. "Kids keep their distance, and most teachers are surprised, then annoyed, that I know the answers on their tests.")

She is able to converse with adults on their own level. Christine speaks to her as if she were one of her girlfriends. She is also able to communicate with social workers; "with them I know the questions and the answers I'm supposed to give." She is adept at decoding gestural language. She reads Evelyn's looks as "a glint that says 'sure, you bet, uh-huh' " which she interprets as "a fine edge of disbelief, a suspicion." She understands the look Evelyn gives to Father Tom as soundlessly reading him his rights; the look she gives Foxy as her being "on red-alert." She studies her mother's high school photographs and notes the search for transcendence in her eyes: that she's looking for holiness.

She values hard work. She is always on the job by 7:30, works overtime, and puts in a seven-day week. Her boss commends her, saying she has surpassed the trust he put in her. She values conscientiousness in others, praising Ellen for the way she does her job. She manifests fortitude by getting back on the bucking bronco that threw her three times in less than a minute. The next morning, although burning with pain, she gets back on the same wild horse and is flung over the fence. As the announcer who awards her the silver buckle inlaid with coral and jet says, "The kid's no quitter." She clung as fiercely to her mother when she was determined to drive over a cliff. She knows how to hang on and not let go, the survival strength needed by Native Americans, the power to endure on which they pride themselves.

Finally, she values generosity. She attributes her staying power on Babe's back to Sky's having given up his Christmas money to take her to the rodeo at Havre. She gives him a ripped Grateful Dead T-shirt that he prizes. She gives Evelyn a blanket with a stag standing against the sunset in its center. Because the Dials shared their trailer with her, she gives them the true story of her life, leaving nothing out.

Her honesty is so total that she mentally corrects the nightly anchorman who credits her with breaking the

male dominance of bronco busting, reminding herself that she was a loser, her award had been for having been thrown. But she is tactful enough to keep the observation to herself, just as she did when she noticed her mother cheating at solitaire. There were some truths it was not necessary to disclose. However, she is courageous in exposing her own lie about Ellen's letter. She admits having appropriated it because she had wanted to trade places with her.)

Questions 6-8 Interpretive Level

6. What is the time frame of the novel? How does the temporal scheme serve as an organizational construct? *(The present-tense events occur between May and August 1986. When Rayona arrives on the reservation, there are only four weeks left of school. She is taken to the jamboree in Helena on the first of June. Sky crosses out every day of his calendar for the month of May, and then turns the page. She stayed exactly one month at Bearpaw State Park, where he worked on the maintenance crew for four weeks. The rodeo at Havre was on the Fourth of July. That evening she is reunited with her mother. Each of the three sections of the novel end by recreating the events of the first of January 1960 when the Pope opened the letter given to Lucy at Fatima by the Virgin. In Rayona's section, it is motivated by a fundamentalist preacher's predicting the end of the world. Christine, lying down on the grass beside her daughter, who matured during their separation so that now they can confide in each other like equals, tells her fifteen-year-old the events of her fifteenth year.*

This had been her formative experience, as riding Babe had been for Rayona a boundary that she could never recross. Both had felt surged with a power beyond themselves. Both had risked the extinction of their lives. Both had confronted fear. Now Rayona must face her mother's imminent death and the end of the world as she has known it, just as, in the last section, Ida is confronted with her mother's death. As Rayona was taken out of school in Seattle to the reservation in Montana, Ida reverses the circuit. She is taken off the reservation as Clara's companion to the convent in Denver and has to leave school. Similarly, Christine, believing in the promises of relocation, had moved to Seattle.

The holidays within the present-tense time frame assume symbolic resonances. The events begin on Mother's Day and climax on Independence Day. And all three sections conclude on New Year's Day.)

7. What are the Native American aspects of this novel? *(The circular plot of this novel is Native American. Stories typically begin at the ending and circle back to where they began. The polyphonic structure is also traditional since Native American stories are never monologic. There are always many voices. It is assumed that no one knows the entire story, so each listener participates with the version he has heard or observed. Thus, narratives are in many voices, and narration is always collaborative.*

The determination to preserve the language distin-

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

guishes *Ida*, *Christine*, and *Rayona*. All are conversant in their traditional tongue. One cannot "think Indian" using English. Therefore, *Father Hurlburt* speaks the old language fluently because he realizes he cannot otherwise reach the people's hearts. The reasons for *Ida's* refusal to speak English even though she is able to do so are particularly illuminating.

Symbolic gestures made at crisis points are subtle invocations of ancient ceremonies. When *Rayona* has been deserted on the reservation, she compulsively smoothes the ground. This was the way in which the earth was prepared before the sun dance. An earth altar was fashioned ("owanko osnato") which was so holy that no one could touch it. It represented the greatest spiritual force emanating from the earth.

Another resonance is of the Ghost Dance of 1890. The *Paiute* prophet *Wovoka* was inspired by his study of the last book of the Bible, *Revelations*, to prophesy that the world would roll up and a new earth would appear. The Plains tribes sent emissaries to Nevada to learn his songs and teach them to their people. Recently, tribal people have reinterpreted these and have renewed the Ghost Dance as an invocation to undo ecological damage.

The entire tribe participates in *Lee's* wake and the subsequent honoring ceremony. *Ida* sprinkles cedar on his casket, an ancient custom. An update of the warrior tradition is the American Indian Movement. Both *Dayton* and *Lee* assist other tribes with fishing rights struggles and broken treaty rights.

Federal policies of allotment and relocation are briefly alluded to. In the 1950s, the government terminated many reservations, sending tribal members into urban areas where they ended up in ghettos. Before that, the Dawes Act broke up communal land-holdings, ceding 160 acres to every head-of-household and selling off the remainder to white settlers. Less than 1% remained for tribal members to whom this land had been promised for perpetuity.)

8. How do the interior monologues of the three principal characters reveal aspects of their identity? In what way are these unarticulated thoughts ironic?

(*Rayona's* maturity is revealed through a foil, a minor character who mirrors back her attributes by his own lack of them. She sees that *Sky*, with his graying ponytail and his history of draft-avoidance, is an aging hippie incapable of adjusting to the modern world. She notes that he uses Sixties expressions ("far out"), tells old jokes, and falls into the role of a groupie seeking her autograph. Emotionally, he is still an adolescent. Because she did not flee, but faced danger, she is more grownup than he, since he has always been taken care of: by the people in Saskatchewan, by inheriting money through his father's will, and by his wife. *Rayona* can "read" him like a child. She sees him having an argument with himself and can tell from the expression on his face which side he is on. She knows he will hang up the program she signed in his Conoco station.

She also sees through the balding *Father Tom* as if

he were younger than she. His face looks "like a kid whose popsicle just dropped in the dirt." Because he has not had to fend for himself, he has no defenses, he is like "a peeled potato." He signals his lack of social skills by cracking his knuckles: "the sound they make is as loud and hollow as a woodpecker hammering against a dead tree." She notices that he has no trouble at all swimming back to shore from the raft, so he had faked his drowning. Ironies emerge from what can be thought in Indian, but not said in English. *Dorris* said, "Resistance is done in one's own language." The access to the real oral tradition, which is ongoing, and which has not been translated, is available only to native speakers. *Rayona's* memory of the woman she met when she was eight was that she was "a woman who refused to speak English." *Christine* taught *Rayona* this "secret code" in order "to give me my identity." *Ida* validates her grandchild by telling *Father Hurlburt*, "She speaks Indian," so he "switches languages." The old men in front of the Mission immediately change when they realize that *Rayona* can understand what they say. *Christine* listens to *Ida* forbidding *Lee* to become a professional rodeo rider and comments: "Actually what she said was sharper than that since she said it in Indian. English is mild in comparison, full of soft sounds that take the punch out of your thoughts." One can find other instances of linguistic contrasts that would account for *Ida's* meditation that "though I can speak their English better than they think, better than most of them, I prefer my own language."

Another set of ironies emerges from the perceptions of nature within urban settings. It is as if the cement roads and the concrete buildings are temporary encroachments on a natural world which will reassert itself after the shopping malls crumble to dust. Even more striking, is the vision of humans as manifestations of natural forces. *Ida* sees *Christine's* skin as "grayish-white rain clouds." She smells her "earth scent, a mix of leaves and moss." *Annie* "faded like a plant without sun." *Clara's* decision to give her baby up reveals her body, "frozen in its spread position, flat as a centipede when you lift its rock." In the large city of Denver, Colorado, she consulted the winds blowing from the north and west for news of the reservation, which she inhaled: "I found the green scent of budding fields, the sharp catch of fresh dirt." When the priest is made party to the family's scheme, *Ida* envisions the two of them implicated with each other like "two animals who drink from the same stream." And as they lie to him, she looks at the narrow hands protruding from his cassock which "lay like dead pike in his lap." *Clara* "absorbed guilt like the bed of a dry pond sucks water." *Ida's* view of her life is "a ring of mountains, separated by deep chasms." *Christine's* life is that of the turtle, "sandcast in the desert, raising its head, riding on the empty circle of the silver ring." And her death seems to her "a sinking back into the land and the creatures that live on it."

The final set of discrepancies between inner reality and outer appearances raises the most complex questions considering that these female characters are speaking in voices created by a male author. They fre-

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

quently depict themselves in masculine images. Rayona's aching joints make her think of herself as a creaking tin man crying out for an oil can. She "bites the bullet" she imagines holding between her teeth. She is called "a Buffalo soldier" (a black cavalry soldier who fought against Indians). She stalks Ellen like a hunter pursuing the "seal's fur glinting in the sun." She pictures herself as a prizefighter when she decides, the morning after, to mount Babe for the fourth time.

Christine imagines herself behind a rifle aimed at Dayton, "stiff as a porcupine in a hunter's sights." When she tries to tell him she is dying she tries out a joke about the Happy Hunting Grounds where she is headed. In grade school, she had shamed all the boys in her class by being tougher than they. "There isn't one of them I couldn't take on in a fight." She is an enemy soldier facing Aunt Ida across a trench: "The edge that ran between us had sprouted broken glass and barbed wire." She is an angler after Dayton's mind, whose "words stuck like the barb on a fishhook in his brain."

When Rayona is born, she is still a boy in Christine's imagination, and she names her "Raymond" noting that the birth cry has been that of a warrior: "reedy and high as a Cheyenne war dance song." Her eyes are the color of a camouflage suit, "muddy green."

Returning for Lee's funeral, Christine "drove like a truckdriver."

The final irony is that neither the white nor the black characters are whom they seem to be. Elgin Taylor's great grandmother, in Georgia, had been a full-blooded Cherokee. So his daughter turns out to have been Indian on both sides. Even Father Hurlburt had Seneca ancestors. Discovering this got him interested in working with Indian people.)

Questions 9 and 10 Critical Level

9. While Michael was working on *Yellow Raft*, his wife was in Manitoulin Island studying porcupine quillwork with Delia Beboning, whom he calls "the best traditional porcupine quill artist in North America." In a glass-fronted case in their New Hampshire home are the porcupine quill objects Louise Erdrich has made. In the novel, when Rayona dreams of her mother, she envisions her hair held back by a porcupine quill clip. But he also uses the art as an image for the creation of a story. Expand upon his equation between the two art forms by citing possible examples.

Dorris said, "Quill work is a kind of metaphor for writing. You take quills and you lay them down one by one. Using the natural colors, you create a pattern that emerges in the course of laying them down. That is what you do with dialogue or with anything."

10. An extended discussion between Dorris and Erdrich over the first line in Aunt Ida's section is critically illuminating. This disagreement shows how seriously each word was analyzed by the collaborators, and explains why they submit every line to repeated scrutiny so that once the manuscript has been turned in, it needs no further editing. Every phrase has already been justified.

Take sides, defending your decision in terms of the

impact it would have on the work, of taking out the line, as Dorris wanted, or leaving it in, as Erdrich insisted. You may consult the interview by Hertha D. Wong, if you wish to see the reasons they offer.

Questions 11-13 Creative Level

11. Because setting is never background in Native American novels, but the foreground determining the human stories played out in it, the landscape, and its topographical features are extraordinarily significant. In order to tour Montana imaginatively, students can follow Dorris's example. He wrote for brochures and pamphlets about the state. He obtained maps, and colored booklets, and historical information by writing them that he intended to visit. Once, when he was eight, he wrote he planned to relocate his business. The chamber of commerce sent him stacks of materials. Listed below are addresses:

Montana Travel Promotion Division
Department of Commerce
1424 Ninth Avenue
Helena, Montana 59620

Montana Department of State Parks & Recreation Areas
1420 East Sixth Avenue
Helena, Montana 59620

National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
655 Part Street, Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

United States Forest Service, Northern Region
Federal Building, P. O. Box 7669
Missoula, Montana 59087

12. Research the history of Dorris's people, the Modocs of northern California and southern Oregon, and their leader, Kintpuash (Captain Jack). Prepare a report on that tragic history showing its influence on the fates of the Modoc descendants depicted in this novel. A readily available source is Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (219-240).
13. Locate the mentions of Route Two in the novel, which must exceed a dozen, since it is everyone's preferred mode of travel. Dorris's family took it every summer to visit his grandmother on her reservation. An illustrated article in the *New York Times Travel Section* called "Sea to Sea on Route 2" tells of a trip west made by Michael and Louise with their children Pallas (1), Persia (2), Madeline (11), and Sava (14) to Fort Belnap Reservation through the Bearpaw Mountains, and their stay at Havre, "the metropolis of the region" (45). Read the article, or obtain the book version, and report on places mentioned in the novel. Note that Dorris deliberately did not identify the reservation, just indicating it was "somewhere in eastern Montana"; the article did. Look for other locations occluded in the book, but given away in the newspaper article. Why might he have decided to shield their identity?

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Music

1. Many popular songs are listened to by characters in this novel: Christine memorized them in high school and heard them on the radio as she drove, or on the jukebox as she danced; Aunt Ida sings along with her walkman. Look for recordings of some of their favorites. Speculate about what these songs meant to them.
2. Analyze the sound of the Native American singing on the Montana reservation, especially "the men's high falsetto" which is repeatedly mentioned. What is its effect?

Art

1. Attend one of the powwows in your region, noting the regalia worn by the dancers. None of these can be bought. The costumes are all made by the dancers themselves. Sketch or photograph some of these outfits.
2. Illustrate the dance items worn by Lee when he competes in the first summer powwow: dark maroon harness with sky-blue medallions; roach with porcupine guard hairs; flapped taffeta shirt; yellow feather bustle; leather wristlets with bells; eagle feather fan.

History

1. Research the federal policy of relocation. When and why was this measure passed? What was its effect upon tribal people? Were they better off in urban settings?
2. Research the consequences of allotment on reservations. In order to make improvements on her house, Ida leases portions of her allotment. How much of their reservation holdings has been leased out for grazing, mining, farming? How much has been taken by developers?
3. Look up the Catholic missionaries who came to Montana. What institutions did they found that play such important parts in these characters' lives?
4. Research the number of Native Americans who volunteered for military service. How does the proportion who enlisted compare with the number of veterans in the general population? What was the relationship between the service rendered by Native American warriors and their finally being granted citizenship? What were Willard Pretty Dog's motives for enlisting? Which war was that? Why was Dayton exempt?

Health

1. Look up the mortality rates for Native Americans. Why do so many for them die so young?
2. Discuss the meals eaten by Rayona. Is she consuming healthy foods? Evaluate the supplies Aunt Ida has in her kitchen. Are these nutritious?

3. Both Christine and Lecon have drinking problems. When and why were alcoholic beverages introduced to tribal people? What is the incidence of alcoholism among Native Americans? Get a copy of *The Broken Cord*, in which Dorris presents the research on fetal alcohol syndrome and the devastation it wrought on his adopted son. View the video presentation and discuss it.

Fashion

1. Render sketches of Aunt Ida's outfits as she:
 - mows the lawn
 - attends Lee's wake
 - dresses to meet Willard
 - dresses for the end of the world.
2. Cut a Rayona paper-doll out of cardboard. Then design replicas of the outfits worn by her in various episodes.
3. There is much discussion between Christine and Ida about what should be worn on the visit to Clara. Compare these clothes to those worn by Clara herself.
4. Where does Pauline get the outfits that she brings to Lee?
5. What is the significance of the way Dayton and Lee dress as teenagers? What statements are they trying to make with the way they prepare their jeans? What about the display of buttons they wear? What are they trying to say about themselves nonverbally? Discuss clothes as a code.
6. Two dolls figure in this plot. How are they outfitted? Contrast the impact of Barbie dolls on young girls in our culture. Talk about the role of dolls in the Supreme Court case *Brown v. the Board of Education*. Regarded in this way, what can you conclude about the dolls in this novel?
7. Discuss Rayona's reaction to the uniform given her by the parks department. What are the implications of her attitudes?

Geography

1. On an outline map of the West coast, locate all of the places mentioned in the novel. Include not only the cities, highways and parks, but also the topographical features.
2. The climate plays an important role in this novel. Look up the weather conditions in Montana. Just how cold do the winters get there? What is the average annual snowfall? What are Chinook winds? Why did Aunt Ida's well run dry? What is the precipitation rate in the summer?

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

Journalism

1. Dayton committed no crime other than being a member of a minority group. He was indicted by the press before his trial. Rewrite the newspaper accounts objectively, so that their blatant racism is obliterated. Then discuss the impact of biased reporting. Discuss how public figures might escape being victimized by slanted journalism and media attacks. Do you think professional codes of conduct should be mandated for the press?
2. Write Christine's obituary. Keep in mind that the author said that he was most proud of her, because she learned from her experience. She did the best she could with the little she had.
3. Review Michael Dorris's poetry. He said, "Writing poetry is the one thing I have done consistently over the years. I've published in *Sun Tracks*, *Akwesasne*, and *Wassaja*. I've even been anthologized a few times." Look up some these poems and assess them.

Automechanics

1. List all the things that are malfunctioning in the Volare. Discuss what repairs are needed to make it run.
2. Are Christine's assessments of what is wrong with her car accurate ones? Why or why not?

Economics

1. Discuss the prevailing market share of video rental places in the face of interactive, pay-per-view television channels. Is the sale being advertised by Video Village representative of imminent decline of such businesses?
2. What credit card manipulations are practiced at gas stations by Christine? Calculate her income and her expenses from clues given, then discuss her financial situation.
3. Given the educational system in the mission schools, what economic opportunities are available to Native Americans? What types of jobs are they equipped to do? Are their chances of surviving economically better in urban areas than they are on the reservations? What kinds of employment are there for them? What are the national statistics on Native Americans living below the poverty level?

Psychology

1. Are these characters intelligent? How do you know?
2. Brainstorm a list of adjectives to describe Aunt Ida's behavior in the first two sections. Trace their causes from early experiences which are revealed in the final section. Is there any psychological syndrome that would fit her case appropriately?

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Explain the following deceptions. Figure out, by reading the scene closely, why circumstances made it impossi-

ble to be honest. A few, there are more, are listed as starters.

- a) Papa made us lie about Mama's heart condition.
- b) Mama tells her husband to say that her younger sister is homeless and that they will shelter her.
- c) Rayona pretends her father is an airplane pilot.
- d) Clara claims she had been raped by a masked drifter.
- e) Ida pretended to be stupid in front of Willard.

Discuss these, and the other dishonesties you find. Account for them. Why is it so difficult to be truthful?

2. Form a movie company, selecting scriptwriters, set designers, lighting crew, costume people, director, producer, camera crew, and prop committee. Choose a scene to film after having analyzed all its elements including background music.
3. Since each of the three sections occurs when the narrator is fifteen, characterize the developmental tasks of that age. Discuss how well each of the three met those challenges.
4. Anatole Broyard wrote: "The real movement of the book lies in the way the three versions comment on and chime with one another." (*New York Times Book Review*, June 7, 1987:7). Find an episode told three times and discuss what you learn from revisiting it from another perspective.
5. Christine's favorite rings are described on the first page: "a narrow abalone, an inlaid turquoise-and-jet roadrunner, and a sandcast silver turtle." What happens to them later? Do these have any particular significance in Native American culture?
6. In the third sentence, Rayona's hair is braided into a herringbone. In the final sentence, Ida braids her own hair on the night that the world was supposed to end with "the rhythm of three strands, the whispers of coming and going, of twisting and tying and blending, of catching and of letting go." What implications can you find in these repetitive braidings?
7. Card games recur throughout the novel. Discuss their significance. Contrast Christine's view of solitaire with Rayona's. Discuss the Thursday night card games between Ida and Father Hurburt.
8. Men's jewelry becomes a plot element in several instances. What is the importance of belt buckles won in rodeos, of a bracelet of three metals, wristlets of cowhide and tin bells, Father Tom's beaded medallion, and a leather box with a purple heart inside it?
9. Discuss the motif of letters as they function in a novel about a temporary mail-carrier. What role is played by half of a letter in bright green ink from Mother & Pops? What are the consequences of a letter the Blessed Virgin gave to Lucy at Fatima? What events does Dayton's letter to Christine in Tacoma set into action?

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. Interpret the addictive behaviors of these characters. Discuss possible reasons for them. Account for the alcoholism of Foxy, Lecon, and Christine. Explain Ida's addiction to television programs. Why is there such a constant barrage of hit songs from everyone's radio? What is the connection, if any, between these habits and the loss of faith which is a central theme of this novel?
2. Explore the metaphorical implications of the Conoco station. What does it mean that Christine has run out of gas just as she was about to drive off the cliff? That she was able to obtain a refill with an expired credit card whose expiration date she has scraped off with a penknife? What does it mean that when Ellen drives up with her designer license plates and asks for Premium, she is given regular? What does it mean that Sky is willing to hang up a "Closed" sign on the one day of the year he could have made money? What does Christine mean when she protests that it isn't fair for Apocalypse to arrive before she has her driver's license?
3. Look at what Henry James says in his famous "Prefaces" about the power of point of view. Applied to ethnic literature, this means that silenced minorities are finally clamoring to tell their own stories. In tribal terms, no decision was made until each member's opinion had been heard, because no one had the authority to speak for others. Test out the rhetorical force of perspective by retelling one of the incidents in this novel from a minor character's point of view. For example, rewrite the rodeo scene from Annabelle's eyes. Or, describe Rayona from Ellen's eyes, or from Father Tom's. Or, rewrite one of Clara's scenes from Father Hurlburt's perspective. This is a useful strategy to master since it can rescue you from writer's block. According to the author, Michael Dorris, that shift in narrative voice was exactly the technique he employed in order to elaborate a short story and extend it into a full length novel.
4. What are the implications of single parenthood? Note that nearly everyone in this novel is fatherless. Both Dayton and Father Tom were raised by widows. Ida reared two children without ever having been married. Elgin is an absence in his daughter's life. Explore the problems faced by children reared without male support. Is this an issue that must be faced by contemporary society? Given what you know about Dorris's biography, why might he be preoccupied with it?

BOOKS BY MICHAEL DORRIS

- Native Americans: Five Hundred Years After* (with photographs by Joseph Farber). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1977.
- A Guide to Research on North American Indians* (with Arlene Hirschfelder and Mary Lou Byler). Chicago: American Library Association, 1983.
- A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1987.
- The Broken Cord*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

- The Crown of Columbus* (with Louise Erdrich). New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Route Two* (with Louise Erdrich). Northridge, California: Lord John Press, 1991.
- Morning Girl*. New York: Hyperion Books, 1992.
- Rooms in the House of Stone*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 1993.
- Working Men*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1993.
- Paper Trail*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

RELATED READING

- Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*.
- Barry Lopez, *Winter Count*.
- James Welch, *Fool's Crow*.
- Toni Cade Bambara, *Gorilla, My Love*.
- Pauline Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.
- Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*.
- Barbara Kingsolver, *Pigs in Heaven* and *The Bean Tree*.
- Arlene Hirschfelder and Beverly R. Singer, eds. *Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans*.
- Thomas King, *Medicine River*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Modocs:

- Chapter 17 (223-244). In Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*. New York: Holt, 1991.

The Jesuits:

- Jacqueline Peterson. *Sacred Encounters: Father DeSmet and the Indians of the Rocky Mountain West*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

Background:

- Charlotte Heth. *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian Smithsonian Institution, 1992.
- Andrea Lerner, ed. *Dancing on the Rim of the World: An Anthology of Contemporary Northwest Native American Writing*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990.
- Jerrold Ramsey. *Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literature of the Far West*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1983.

History:

- Peter Nabokov. *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492-1992*. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Michael Parfit, "Powwow," *The National Geographic*. 185:6 (June, 1994): 88-113.

Information about the author:

- Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin. *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993.
- Hertha D. Wong. "An Interview with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris," *North Dakota Quarterly* 55:1 (Winter 1987): 196-218. reprinted in Chavkin.

VOCABULARY TEST

Below are listed the Catholic references upon which so much of the motivation in the novel hinges. These allusions are so important that people unfamiliar with Catholic liturgy will have difficulty interpreting the novel. Consult a Catholic encyclopedia or a representative of the Roman Catholic Church and write definitions of the bold faced terms in the space provided.

1. The **mysteries** on Pauline's rosary were marked by silver metal balls.

2. She prayed for candidates for **beatification**.

3. Each set of **Hail Marys** was a different pastel shade.

4. Pauline's prayerbook blossomed with **Holy Cards**.

5. Lee made a **Spring Novena** to ensure his success.

6. She was afraid to die before she had received **Absolution**.

7. We have to wait on the roof for the **Four Horsemen**.

8. We planned to fulfill all of the commands in the **Apocalypse**.

9. A picture of the **Sacred Heart** hung over Clara's bed.

10. Christine did all the **novices'** jobs.

(continued on next page)

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

(Vocabulary Test continued)

11. We must be in a **State of Grace**.

12. Her rings fell into the sink like coins into a **collection basket**.

13. The **Our Fathers** he allotted for her sins were insultingly few.

14. She kept close track of the **Indulgences** she earned.

15. She made nine **First Fridays** through the eighth grade.

16. Every **Advent** she carried a calendar home from church.

17. She abstained from television and desserts during **Lent**.

18. She received **Penance** every Friday after school.

19. She wore a roughbacked **scapular**.

20. They attended **Mass**.

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Identification (20 points)

Below are the names of Catholic saints held up for emulation by the nuns who taught the Native American girls. The girls not only hang saints' pictures on the walls of their bedrooms, but also mention the saints' constantly, compare their own behavior with the saints', and measure their moral choices by means of the saints' martyrdom. Elaborate briefly on each of the following:

1. Maria Goretti
2. Kateri Tekakwitha
3. Saint Helena
4. Saint Catherine
5. Saint Joan
6. Saint Martin
7. Saint Agnes
8. Saint Sebastian
9. Saint Christopher
10. Saint Dominic Savio

Part II: Quotations (20 points)

Which character thought or said each of the following?

- _____ 1. He inspects me like a first-class package.
- _____ 2. I'm past forty years old and my husband wants to ditch me and marry some Arletta.
- _____ 3. I could lose my job for that. They check inventory once a week.
- _____ 4. Give me three good reasons why I should be glad to see you.
- _____ 5. I was in Denver once for the feast of Corpus Christi. I was a bead in the living rosary at the race track, between the first and second joyful mysteries.
- _____ 6. The cow and the pig. Get it? They don't want to sleep with a priest.
- _____ 7. You can never predict when you will encounter rubbish, and it is much more sanitary to spear it.
- _____ 8. Make yourself to home. You'll be on that couch.
- _____ 9. I smell like dogshit! he booms out in Indian.
- _____ 10. I'm going to bust that mare on July 4th.

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

Part III: Completion (30 points).

Fill in the following blanks with words or phrases that will complete the statement.

1. Foxy swerves his truck trying to crush _____ on the road.
2. Dayton taught _____ and coached _____ at the public school.
3. When Charlene says she can't forward any more mail, she means _____ .
4. Babe unloaded a _____ onto Foxy's boots.
5. Christine's legacies to her daughter were _____ and _____ .
6. Rayona's gift to Evelyn is _____ .
7. The student who got Dayton fired was later _____ .
8. Rayona was applauded for having been _____ three times.
9. _____ has a Native American foster brother.
10. Lee's grave could not be dug because _____ .
11. Lecon died of _____ . His wife died of _____ .
12. Ida thinks herself old at the age of _____ .

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Find evidence of racism experienced by the characters. Describe each incident specifically and discuss its impact.
2. Find instances of extraordinary generosity among people who have nothing to give. Cite the hospitality extended or the items shared and account for their occurrence.
3. Compare/contrast the kinds of mothering depicted in this novel. From among the wide spectrum shown here classify the types found from Clara, to Ida, to Pauline, to Evelyn Dial, to Dell DeMarco (Ellen's mom), to Christine. Make judgments, based on their children's characters, of the influence of their childrearing.

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Fill in the blank with the appropriate letter from the list of characters below:

- | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| A. Father Tom | E. Stanley McCutcheon | I. Babe |
| B. Evelyn Dial | F. Aunt Ida | J. Foxy Kennedy Cree |
| C. Christine | G. Elgin Taylor | K. Annabelle Stiffarm |
| D. Norman "Sky" Dial | H. Lee | L. Ellen DeMarco |

- _____ 1. Superintendent of Bearpaw State Park
- _____ 2. drives a red Toyota and wears designer shades
- _____ 3. the only nonfictitious character in this novel
- _____ 4. doesn't acknowledge the Walkman sent to her
- _____ 5. given an eagle feather by tribal chair, Emmet La Vallee
- _____ 6. candystriper trying to pry open a car window
- _____ 7. a hostile teenager who later becomes a friend
- _____ 8. threatens her with a knife to ride in his place
- _____ 9. skinny, spaced-out looking guy with a grey ponytail
- _____ 10. wears a flour-stained dishtowel tucked into her jeans

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Fill in the letter from the list of names below that will identify the speaker of each of the following quotations.

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| A. Mrs. Pretty Dog | E. Father Hurlburt | I. Dayton |
| B. Rayona Taylor | F. "Sky" (Norman) | J. Stanley McCutcheon |
| C. Clara | G. Aunt Ida | K. Pauline Cree |
| D. a classmate in the mission school | H. Lee | |

1. _____ Mom laughs and tells me to M.Y.O.B.
2. _____ Good people up in Saskatchewan. Found me a job. Gave me a place to stay.
3. _____ You sure you ain't looking for the Blackfeet reservation? You must of took a wrong turn.
4. _____ You are a credit to this park. You have surpassed the trust I put in you.
5. _____ I'm not going to fight a white man's war.
6. _____ I never grew up, but I got old.
7. _____ If I don't get Babe home today, I'll have to pay another week's stud fee.
8. _____ I'll never forget when Lecon came to court Annie. He was tall and forceful.
9. _____ I believe they have a motherhouse in Colorado that sometimes shelters unfortunate young girls.
10. _____ You don't have to settle for her now. A fat woman no one else wants.

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

Part III: Completion (20 points)

Fill in the place name to complete each statement.

1. Elgin's people are in _____ .
2. Father Tom Novak had never been west of _____ .
3. The God Squad meets in the _____ .
4. The fourth of July rodeo was held in the town of _____ .
5. The principal from Rayona's school in _____ says she has good grades and is very bright, a person with potential.
6. Willard Pretty Dog lost two fingers and most of his face in _____ .
7. Lee sent a postcard from _____ .
8. In a shopping mall on the north side of the city, Christine took out a lifetime membership in _____ .
9. Ida scalded her _____ with a burning hot soup ladle.
10. All of the money saved up for Christmas gifts was sent to _____ .

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Discuss the function of humor in this novel. As you develop this idea, keep in mind that Native Americans have said that humor is their best survival strategy. Also, consider the grim-visaged Indians portrayed by the media. Direct your response to how and why Dorris sought to smash this stereotype.
2. Discuss the role of religion in the lives of these characters. Does Catholicism correspond with or does it contradict native beliefs? Or is the relationship a more complex one between traditional and missionary cultures?
3. Find patterns of imagery that serve as structural metaphors interconnecting the three sections. Show how these integrate the stories.
4. Analyze Aunt Ida's motives for not telling Christine who she really is. What might be her reasons for sharing the story with Rayona now that it is too late to let Christine know? Should she do so? Why or why not?

A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER

ANSWER KEY

1. important historical moments in the life of Mary
2. those whose miraculous deeds made them candidates for sainthood
3. the small beads on the rosary are prayers addressed to the Blessed Virgin
4. pictures of the Saints given as rewards by nuns
5. nine consecutive days of reciting prayers
6. cleansing of sin
7. representations of plagues and epidemics in the book of the *Bible*, Revelations
8. final book of the New Testament
9. a symbol of Jesus' death when Roman soldiers pierced his side with a spear which entered his heart
10. young girls in training to become nuns who were given hard work to do to test their devotion
11. free of sin through cleansing by confession
12. free will offering given to the church
13. larger beads on rosary indicated prayers to God
14. recitations of prayers earned forgiveness of sin
15. attendance at Mass in successive months
16. four weeks before Christmas which mark the beginning of liturgical year according to Gregorian calendar
17. four weeks before Easter during which sacrifices are made to commemorate Christ's martyrdom
18. sacrament of contrition
19. two square pieces of cloth connected by strings
20. the celebration of the Eucharist (transubstantiation of bread and wine) from the Last Supper

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Identification (20 points)

1. A Native American candidate for sainthood
2. Mohawk (1656-1680) raised by her uncle when her family died of smallpox. Declared venerable 1932, beatified 1980.
3. Mother of Constantine the Great (247-327). Her feast day is August 18. On pilgrimage to Palestine, founded churches. Capitol of Montana named for this empress.
4. Tutelary saint of wheelwrights since after the Emperor Maximus ordered her tortured, the wheel shattered at her touch. A monastery was built for her at Mount Sinai.
5. Joan of Arc (1412-1431). Had visions at 13. Her voices told her to crown the Dauphin. She was burned at the stake.
6. Bishop of Tours (316-400). At 15, divided his cloak with a beggar. Patron saint of reformed drunkards.
7. Patron saint of preteen girls, martyred at 13 on January 21, 304. Keats' "Eve of St. Agnes" commemorates her rites.

8. Handsome soldier who made many converts. Diocletian had him shot by archers. A matron nursed his wounds. His feast day is January 20.
9. Christopher was martyred July 25, 250. Patron of ferrymen because he carried travelers on his back across a river. Once he staggered under weight of a child and was told he had borne the world and its creator.
10. Patron of preteens, died at 12, his motto: "Death rather than sin." Miraculously able to be at two places at once.

Part II: Quotations (20 points)

- | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Rayona | 6. Sky |
| 2. Christine | 7. Stanley McCutcheon |
| 3. Charlene | 8. Evelyn |
| 4. Ida | 9. Father Tom |
| 5. Ida | 10. Foxy |

Part III: Completion (30 points)

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| 1. prairie dogs | 6. a lost blanket |
| 2. science, basketball | 7. found guilty of murder |
| 3. painkiller pills | 8. thrown off a horse |
| 4. stream of excrement | 9. Ellen DeMarco |
| 5. two videotapes, "Christine," & "Little Big Man" | 10. the ground was frozen |
| | 11. an accident, heart trouble |
| | 12. 57 |

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | | | |
|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. E | 4. F | 7. K | 10. B |
| 2. L | 5. H | 8. J | |
| 3. I | 6. C | 9. D | |

Part II: Identification (20 points)

- | | | | |
|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. B | 4. J | 7. I | 10. A |
| 2. F | 5. H | 8. C | |
| 3. D | 6. G | 9. E | |

Part III: Completion (20 points)

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. California | 6. Italy |
| 2. Wisconsin | 7. Hawaii |
| 3. basement of Mission hall | 8. Video Village |
| 4. Havre | 9. face |
| 5. Seattle | 10. South America |

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

PERMA-BOUND[®]

Vandalia Road • Jacksonville, Illinois 62650

Toll free 1-800-637-6581 • Fax 1-800-551-1169

PERMA-BOUND CANADA • Box 517, Station A • Willowdale, Ontario M2N 5T1

Toll free 1-800-461-1999 • Fax 1-705-876-9703