

Approved for use in English III

Summary of the Work:

Told from three points of view in cyclical, episodic, the novel tells the story of three generations of American Indian women on a reservation in northeast Montana. Rayona, the granddaughter, part Indian and part black, faces the circumstances of her life bravely and pragmatically; alcoholism has taken her mother sick for real, this time, so she and her mother must return to the reservation and her grandmother, whom they both call "Aunt Ida." Christine, the mother, has confronted her own unexpected pregnancy by marrying Rayona's black father, with whom she has a stormy and unstable relationship. "Aunt Ida" has her own secrets, love borne silently through suffering. The three stories interweave, as "Aunt Ida" says "...the rhythm of three strands, the whispers of coming and going, the twisting and tying and blending, of catching and of letting go, of braiding."

Rationale:

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water is a powerful novel presenting themes that will resonate with young readers. Contemporary life on a reservation, a complex mix of family ties, dysfunction, alcohol, tradition, and ways of the past as well as the present, is a primary focus of the book. In addition the problems of bi-racial families and mothers as single parents are presented.

When she runs away, Rayona is fortunate in making the friendship of an aging hippie couple; through them she affirms her own importance as an individual. Understanding her mother and her grandmother as imperfect but loving individuals helps her to find her place as a person of mixed race on a reservation. Thus, the novel is a coming of age story as well as a story which illuminates some of the problems for contemporary American Indians.

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

Neuman, Pat. "Michael Dorris: 'A Yellow Raft in Blue Water.'" *Mostly Fiction Book Reviews*. 1/1/09.

<<http://www.mostlyfiction.com/west/dorris.htm>>

School Library Journal. Keddy Outlaw, Harris County Public Library, Houston

Library Journal. Thomas L. Kilpatrick, Southern Illinois Univ. Lib., Carbondale

Library Journal. R. Kent Rasmussen, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2004

* Print resources are available from the library media center and libraries in the district. Contact any library media specialist to view the scholarly sources.

* Scholarly reviews are also available online through Books in Print and Gale. Contact the library media specialist to obtain username and password information to access the subscription database of full-text reviews.

Noted Distinction:

- Noted in *Roots and Branches* by Dorothea M. Susag, NCTE, 1998, winner of the Award of Excellence for American Indian Education.

Readability:

- Lexile Score: 980
- Readability Level: 8.1

Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

Standard Alignment: [\(link\)](#)

Approval: 2006

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption: 2006 Adoption

Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water helps students recognize difficulties American Indians face on and off the reservation today. In addition, the characters, deeply personal and courageous, illustrate the complex nature of multi-generational relationships.

While short segments present explicit sexual material, the coming of age story is appropriate for mature readers.

Though Michael Dorris is not a Native American, he writes with compassion and insight as an outsider about Native Americans.

Connection to the Curriculum:

Students in English III read American literature, including fiction about and by the American Indian. Pat Neuman, writing for *Mostly Fiction Book Reviews* has said, "While this is a unique and compelling story sympathetically told, it is Dorris's exquisite prose that makes it deserving of its place in American literature."

Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)

Reading the novel helps meet the Essential Understandings of Indian Education as presented by the Montana Office of Public Instruction.

