

1/16/2001
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REL 2380
A Yellow Raft in Blue Water

In the novel, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, the reader finds out about the history of a dysfunctional family—a mother, a father and a confused but smart daughter.

This family is not a typical family. The father is African American, the mother is American Indian, and their daughter, a half-breed, is going through an identity crisis, trying to figure out what life is all about and who she really is.

Her mother is a very spicy character; and although she loves her daughter in her own way, she is not capable of guiding and parenting her: she cheats at cards, she puts her interests first, she is unemployed and treats her daughter more like a friend, and “she makes her plans from one day to the next, always sure that a happy ending is just out of sight” (27).

This is a family where the grandmother is treated as an aunt, because she is trying to cover up the fact that she wasn't married when she had her first child. This is a family where most of the conversations involve subjects not pertaining to their personal lives. When they leave the town, there's no one to miss except the hope of the Dad that the girl used to have. This is a family where the so-called “Aunt Ida” needs three good reasons, in order to be glad to see her daughter.

The little girl ends up on her grandmother's steps, as her mom decides to take off. She is rejected by her peers, and ignored by her own grandmother. The priest is the only one who offers her any attention: "Father Tom is the last one on the reservation I want to know, but he's the only one who wants to know me" (47). These words express her loneliness, and they also show to the reader the level of rejection she experiences from her peers and family.

But the priest's friendship wouldn't last long either. He would eventually abandon her, as everyone else had. The young girl, Rayona, would end up halfway between the reservation and Seattle (where her father lives), working as a maintenance employee.

Her strong character hides very well the fact that she misses a real family. The reader realizes her hidden sorrow when Rayona finds a letter. The letter was addressed to a person, whose family wrote a letter, expressing their affection. She becomes jealous, asking herself, "What kind of a person would throw [the letter] away?" (81).

Rayona is confused about who she really is and feels like she can't move forward in life, being tied to her unhappy past. "It's as though I'm suspended in a time warp and nothing in the world matters but polishing my area and helping out at the trailer and passing the days. I don't know where I'm going any more than when I left the reservation, any more than when I visited Mom in her hospital room in Seattle. It's as if I've taken on a new identity" (97). Although her family members didn't care for her, in the midst of her confusion and despair, she finds a kind family who will help her as much as they can. Evelyn and Sky show her kindness and help her through difficult times.

While Rayona rides a horse in a rodeo, the reader understands how worried she is about her situation, “when I was riding I was mindless and beyond hurt. I was connected to a power I never knew existed, and without it I’m unplugged...Up there, my only worry was gravity” (120). The reader also perceives that Rayona feels disconnected from society’s values, and that she doesn’t feel like belonging to something relevant and comforting. In the midst of her rodeo experience, Rayona also becomes aware of her identity crisis, and it is the first time that she acknowledges this situation. But Rayona’s problems are deeply buried in her family’s past. The author returns in time to search for the causes that influenced Rayona’s present situation and tries to explain her mother’s behavior.

Following Christine’s life (Rayona’s mother), we understand that she didn’t have a happy childhood either—as “the bastard daughter of a woman who wouldn’t even admit she was [her] mother” (141). Her mother’s rejection followed her along her childhood and beyond that. Her brother, Lee, was the favorite child, and she was treated like she never existed. She only represented the reminder of a bad memory. “I understood the battle we had fought for who Lee was going to be, my brother or her child....With the door to my old room closed, there was no sign I had ever lived there” (161).

When she was young, Christine was a beautiful and intelligent woman with hopes and dreams. When she decided to leave home for Seattle, her mother didn’t even try to stop her, happy to see her go. As the years passed by, and her brother died and her marriage fell apart, her life became ordinary, and soon she forgot who she really was. She started to live day by day, becoming more and more like her mother—selfish and living a superficial existence, although aware of it at one

point in time. “By the time you realize that your life isn’t headed the way you expected you’re too busy to look over your shoulder to see what went wrong. That’s what happened to me. I was going downhill with my brakes out always barely avoiding a crash” (220).

The last part of the novel focuses on Aunt Ida’s life and mysterious personality. She is the woman responsible for alienating her family. “I never grew up”, she says, “but got old...” (297). All her life, she was thrown into the middle of new events, without a choice or without knowing how to say, “No.” She was a victim herself, and her sorrow and tragic life will continue in her daughter and granddaughter’s life, without her knowing how to put a stop to the unfortunate events.

Her strong character was a victim of rejection, and unfortunately when she has the chance to make things better, she doesn’t know how. She will alienate her own children, the same way her parents alienated her.

The reader learns how to accept all three women—Ida, Christine and Rayona, beautiful in their own special way—understanding that their only fault is not knowing how to care for their loved ones—only because they never knew love or were loved.

The three different women— but so similar in a way—fascinate the reader. Like a distinct yellow raft in blue water, so the three women are unique, following a lonely existence in a “river” of cold people.

Works Cited

Dorris, Michael. *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. New York: Warner Books Inc., and Henry Holt and Company Inc., 1987.