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REVIEW ESSAY

The Missing Parent: The Fiction of James Welch and *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*

The Child is Father of the Man.

—William Wordsworth

R. W. REISING

Numerous superlatives could be used to describe Michael Dorris's most recent book, *The Broken Cord*, released in July of 1989. Dedicated to both his wife, Louise Erdrich, and "our brave son," who, he acknowledges, is "its true and ongoing creator,"¹ the work painfully but powerfully chronicles almost eighteen years of struggle with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), the affliction that burdens Adam, whom he adopted at age three. Always, Dorris reluctantly concludes in the final paragraph of his heart-rending analysis, Adam will remain "a drowning man" for whom "there is no shore."²

In a provocative article appearing below one of the many favorable reviews that *The Broken Cord* has received, poet and novelist Jay Parini asserts that "serious writers who write a lot of books and who experiment with different kinds of writing will suffer for it. The critics won't keep up with them. Their books will be reviewed in isolation from previous works. . . ."³ Parini's wisdom is striking, for in the accompanying review, there is not a single mention of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, Dorris's novel of

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two years earlier. Despite her familiarity with *The Broken Cord*—or, perhaps, because of it—reviewer Patricia Guthrie elects a focus and parameters that preclude even the briefest mention of Dorris's first novel, or of any of the other penetrating writings he has produced during the last two decades. Apparently, a compelling work can rivet a reviewer or critic to just that work; its power is simultaneously bondage, nullifying the possibility of comparisons, contrasts, and linkages.

Such a limitation is especially unfortunate in evaluating Dorris's prose, all of it from and about the Native American world from which he comes. Although not fiction, *The Broken Cord* continues his concern for family, not merely his own but that of every other American Indian, for whom, in frighteningly disproportionate percentages, social and physiological difficulties, especially those related to alcohol, are a constant blight. Typically, and tragically, family has little chance for tranquility, mainstream style, for the American Indian in the face of inordinate rates of homicide, suicide, imprisonment, divorce, poverty, gastritis, terminal cirrhosis, and, of course, FAS, all of which Dorris itemizes in *The Broken Cord*.⁴ All of these also lurk in the background of *A Yellow Raft*, which, fittingly, opens in a hospital room occupied by Christine, "a regular customer at Indian Health Service," who frequently "wakes wheezing from too much party or from passing out on top of the covers,"⁵ her daughter Rayona notes. In its own way, *A Yellow Raft* is as chilling as *The Broken Cord* in its penetration into and illumination of an alcohol-driven world far from the confines of *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Ozzie and Harriet*.

On that world Dorris is an authority. In addition to an academic background that includes "an undergraduate program in English and classics and a master's degree in history of the theatre,"⁶ he possesses expertise in cultural anthropology and ethnohistory, most clearly articulated, perhaps, in two essays written long before the publication of *A Yellow Raft* and *The Broken Cord*, but years after Dorris's 1971 adoption of Adam. In "Native American Literature in an Ethnohistorical Context," published in 1979, he argues against Native American literature's long-time tendency to "reenforce debilitating stereotypes" and for its need to depict "a new and maturing generation of Native American people, both on reservations and in urban communities, who are by necessity culturally adaptive."⁷ Hence, in his first novel he

reserves no space for "debilitating stereotypes, but instead populates it with "Native American people . . . who are . . . culturally adaptive." Unfortunately, but realistically, he places those people among a population whom he has described in another article as "the poorest economically, the least employed, the unhealthiest, the lowest in education and income level, and the worst-housed. . . ." ⁸ For this population, in this environment, choices such as "the wrong bar on the right night" ⁹ and "prescriptions . . . cheap at the Silver Bullet" ¹⁰ are inviting, popular, and destructive alternatives to depression or boredom.

Those same alternatives lure the protagonists in James Welch's first two novels, which Dorris obviously knew before and as he wrote *A Yellow Raft*. Dorris concedes that "a lot of time you don't know who your influences are," ¹¹ but, clearly, *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), leave an imprint on the tone, treatment, and theme of *A Yellow Raft*. Much of that imprint, certainly, is a result of the commitment that Dorris shares with Welch to avoid stereotypes, to infuse fiction about American Indians with "human beings," ¹² a goal for which Welch admits he has aimed in his novel writing. The two writers also share common ground in the "psychological level" ¹³ at which they work in their fiction. Even more important, however, is the central issue the two strive to illuminate in contemporary American Indian life: parent-child relationships. In effect, although *A Yellow Raft* has already been acknowledged to be "a unique and refreshing composite of the techniques and insights of almost twenty years of the [Native American] Renaissance," ¹⁴ Welch's contribution to the fabric and substance of a novel centered on that issue is so significant that it warrants special study.

That Dorris has respected Welch's fiction for years is undeniable. In his 1979 essay on ethnohistory, he contends that "Welch in particular has evidenced an artistic command spanning and uniting tribal and American literary traditions," adding that *Winter in the Blood* "is a book about poverty but also about survival, against great odds, of tradition and of people." ¹⁵ Dorris incorporates the same "spanning and uniting" and respect for survival into the vision that is distinctively his own in *A Yellow Raft*. In Ida, who keeps a "secret forever," ¹⁶ Dorris has created a character with the strength and integrity of the existential nameless narrator of *Winter in the Blood* and, even more so, of "the old lady" ¹⁷ his grandmother, and of Yellow Calf.

Unfortunately, in the ethnohistory essay, Dorris had no opportunity to comment upon *The Death of Jim Loney*, published in the same year. It can be assumed, however, that he values it no less highly. Loney's tragedy is akin to that revealed in *The Broken Cord*: Although geographically close to each other, father and son cannot communicate; hearing and understanding escape the relationship. Despite Dorris's most loving and persistent efforts, Adam is incapable of responding, of verbalizing beyond "the words he thought we wanted to hear."¹⁸ Similarly, Loney cannot respond to his father, even when he visits him in his trailer, late in the novel. Like Adam he finally "[i]sn't listening."¹⁹ He has withdrawn into his own mind and—again like Adam—is incapable of extricating himself. Alcohol has intruded, from the distant past to the present; it is central in the father/son dialogues. Just as Dorris attempts late in his book to admonish Adam about the dangers of drinking, Loney's father, Ike, warns, "It's poison," as he offers his son a drink.²⁰ And like Adam when he is told that alcohol can kill him, Loney responds with indifference.

Admittedly, Loney is no Adam: His mind is agile, and his tragedy, like his self-engineered suicide, results and gains its poignancy from his uncommon ability to intellectualize. Yet alcohol is a center, perhaps even the center, of his life. He is plagued by "isolation; loneliness; depression,"²¹ the very burdens that Dorris lists when quoting Ann Streissguth's study of adults victimized from birth by alcohol. Loney drinks constantly, from chapter 2, when he goes "downtown for a drink,"²² to chapter 19, when, in one of his final acts, "he drank some more of the Scotch and it didn't taste like anything."²³ Like Ike, whom Welch has called "a miserable old poot,"²⁴ and like his mother, who, Ike tells him, "just sort of went to hell. Started drinking. . . ,"²⁵ Loney depends on alcohol to give life meaning, to make it tolerable. Loney's search for his parents, for "a woman he had never met but who bore him"²⁶ and for a man "on the street who reminds you of the way you think you must look,"²⁷ is simultaneously a journey from, through, and with alcohol.

Such a journey is doubtless not uncommon among Indians in Montana—the setting of all three of Welch's novels and much of *A Yellow Raft*. (Montana also figures in *The Broken Cord*.)²⁸ The nameless narrator of *Winter in the Blood* and Christine in *A Yellow Raft* make that alcoholic journey. In chapter 1 the former concedes that although he "couldn't remember how or why" his

"right eye was swollen," he had been "buying drinks";²⁹ and just before the end of the novel, he admits that he may buy his Cree girlfriend "a couple of cremes de menthe."³⁰ Rayona's mother, Loney-like in her commitment to self-destruction, mouths comparable words between age twenty, when she first "took off to Minot" and its bars,³¹ and age forty-one, when "that doctor came into my room with his long face and the news I had burned myself out and probably wouldn't live another six months," having "spent my time like I spent my money, with no thought to tomorrow . . . without knowing much about my liver or my pancreas."³²

Anger propels both the nameless narrator and Christine, anger fueled by alcohol and by frustration over parentage. His builds until he "had had enough of Havre, enough of town, of walking home, hung over, beaten up, or both . . . , of the people, the bartenders, the bars, the cars, the hotels, but mostly, I had had enough of myself."³³ Shortly thereafter, he embarks on the quest that allows him to learn, thanks to Yellow Calf, that he is totally Indian, not a mixed-blood or a half-blood.³⁴ The knowledge so strengthens him that he can both "save the calf's mother," drowning in the "muck" of "her own stupidity,"³⁵ and, later yet, vow that "next time I'd do it right."³⁶ Knowledge of his biological parentage not only reinforces his desire to live but also provides him with an identity from which he can gain satisfaction. He is a Blackfeet, a truth which provides new purpose and pride for his life.

Dorris's Christine, in contrast, so encased in her certitude, so anxious to proclaim that "mysteries were the least of my problems,"³⁷ never abandons or even questions her zeal for alcohol and her belief that she is "a famous expert on men."³⁸ Thus, ancestry escapes her. The confidences to which she is privy, like the "little secret"³⁹ between her and Father Tom Novak, pale by comparison with the secrets that Aunt Ida absorbs into human understanding. Christine is ticketed for premature death, like Loney; she is certain, beyond even a flicker of her agile mind, that she knows who and what she is, but, in a secret that Aunt Ida shares with the readers of the novel, Christine is barred no less painfully than Loney from the truth of parentage. Her parentage is no more accessible to her than Loney's is to him.

A mystery to which she can never gain access—and from which Aunt Ida and Dorris's readers are likewise barred—involves the

consequences of Rayona's sexual encounter with Father Tom. At the end of the novel, Rayona and the priest, perhaps not only a "father" in the Roman Catholic Church, but also the biological father of her child, share their own "little secret." The end of that story and the consequences, emotional as well as physiological, of the fifteen-year-old's "occasion of sin"⁴⁰ with the man of the cloth lie in the future, beyond the events of *A Yellow Raft*. In the words of the "airplane man" in *Winter in the Blood*, "That's another story. . . ."⁴¹

The fact that *A Yellow Raft* is a three-generational story is exceedingly important. Dorris's use of the first-person narrative is as noteworthy and powerful as is Welch's in *Winter in the Blood*; yet, unlike Welch, Dorris refused to limit that avenue to one individual. Rather, in unfolding a tale consisting of three interwoven parts, Dorris locks each of his storytellers into her own isolated dialogue. Rayona, Christine, and Ida all provide, in turn, a piece of the total narrative; each, as a result, does not know, and probably never can know, the pieces lying outside her own. That ignorance thus imposes on parentage, as well as on identity, the harshest of restrictions: Christine and Ida probably will never know the father of Rayona's child if, indeed, the teenager subsequently finds herself pregnant; and Rayona and Christine will never know that it is Lecon and Clara who are Christine's parents. In the twentieth-century world of the Native American which Dorris delineates, generations are blocked from knowing each other, from knowing their forebears, and hence from the satisfaction and pride that lineage traditionally provided.

Yet it is not in inarguably distinct blood ties that strength is to be found, suggests Dorris. Instead, it is in community that contemporary Indians must and do find satisfaction and support. The parental confusions and the "generation gaps" so fragmenting and disquieting in *A Yellow Raft* are not powerful enough to shatter and spiritually separate families. Despite their differences, both biological and generational, Rayona and Ida comfort and console Christine as diabetes, precipitated or at least worsened by alcohol over the years, saps her life. Daughter and "mother" remain faithful and vigilant during her final months, neither respecting nor resenting how Christine has used her forty-one years. The trio are joined by Dayton Nickles, inseparable mixed-blood friend of Christine's dead "brother" Lee in years past, with whom she lives "even though he had no reason in the

world."⁴² Sustained by medication and with her mind refocused, Christine moves toward death not alone but within a familial community that she enjoys and whose members, in turn, enjoy her. "The prime directive for cultures the world over," said Dorris in a 1989 interview with Bill Moyers, "is to survive." In *A Yellow Raft*, Dorris indicates clearly that, for contemporary Native American societies, survival comes through "characters" (in the words of Moyers) "bonded across time and space by ties of kinship and community."⁴³

Key among such characters in that novel is Ida, superior not in her appearance or prestige, but in her integrity and inner strength. At age fifty-seven the oldest of the novel's principal characters, she is the equivalent of the grandmother and Yellow Calf in *Winter in the Blood*, and of the parents whom Jim Loney seeks but never finds in Welch's second novel. In effect, Ida's presence literally and figuratively provides Christine and Rayona with direction when direction is crucial; she is the force that saves Christine from a foster home, an orphanage, or abandonment when her true mother decides that, "for whatever reason, she would not keep Christine."⁴⁴ For Christine and Rayona, she is both father and mother when biological parents prove incapable and/or unwilling. She is the person to whom the two younger women go when Christine's death becomes imminent. Silently and perseveringly, Ida lives with and through her secrets, assuming the enormous responsibilities those secrets impose. Alone she sustains family, and thus identity, for Native American kin who, more than they realize, need the psychological and emotional advantages that such relationships provide. Ida, in short, remains the true giver of life in an Indian world threatened with extinction by intruding forces.

Dorris's literary debt to Welch is sizable. In a very real sense, Welch's *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney* are compelling novels about the need for parents, the identity that depends on them, and the anguish that is inevitable when parents prove inaccessible. *A Yellow Raft* illuminates the same trio of concerns, showing how, in relationships battered by alcohol and burdened with secrets, that anguish can be relieved by compassion and community. At times, conditions in Montana, as in many other Native American settings throughout the country, are cruelly harsh, making life virtually intolerable for "the vanishing American" who refuses to vanish. Alcohol can provide relief

from such harshness, but ultimately, as Welch and Dorris suggest, survival will depend on the strength that only parents, biological or otherwise, can provide.

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NOTES

1. Michael Dorris, *The Broken Cord* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), viii.
2. *Broken Cord*, 264.
3. Jay Parini, "The More They Write, the More They Write," *The New York Times Book Review*, 30 July 1989, 1, 24.
4. *Broken Cord*, 86-87. The two pages noted are those that most directly address the social and health concerns listed; the whole of *A Broken Cord*, of course, involves such concerns, especially FAS.
5. Dorris, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987), 8.
6. Michael Dorris, quoted in *Contemporary Authors* 19, ed. Linda Metzger (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1987), 173.
7. Dorris, "Native American Literature in an Ethnohistorical Context," *College English* 41:2 (October 1979), 147-62.
8. Dorris, "The Grass Still Grows, the Rivers Still Flow: Contemporary Native Americans," *Daedalus* 110:2 (1981), 43-69.
9. *Yellow Raft*, 166.
10. *Ibid.*, 8.
11. Dorris, telephone conversation with author, 6 July 1987.
12. James Welch, presentation at the 1989 NEH Seminar at UIC, directed by A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff, 31 July 1989.
13. Welch, Seminar.
14. Robert W. Reising, "Native American Renaissance," *Agora*, Teacher's Supplement 2 (March 1988), 5.

15. "Ethnohistorical Context."
16. *Yellow Raft*, 286.
17. Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (New York; Harper and Row, 1974), 5.
18. *Broken Cord*, 256.
19. Welch, *The Death of Jim Loney* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 146.
20. *Ibid.*, 139.
21. *Broken Cord*, 242.
22. *Jim Loney*, 3.
23. *Ibid.*, 175-76.
24. Welch, Seminar, 1 August 1989.
25. *Jim Loney*, 142.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 16.
28. See, for instance, *Broken Cord*, 136 and 178.
29. *Winter in the Blood*, 2.
30. *Ibid.*, 175.
31. *Yellow Raft*, 143.
32. *Ibid.*, 215.
33. *Winter in the Blood*, 125.
34. William J. Scheik, in his valuable book *The Half-Blood* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), employs the term *half-blood*, while other scholars, like Ruoff in "Woodland Word Warrior: An Introduction to the Works of Gerald Vizenor," *Melus* 13:1,2 (Summer 1986), prefer *mixedblood* or *mixed-blood*. Also important in regard to the nameless narrator's ancestry are the antagonisms that have existed historically among Montana Indians; Ruoff addresses this topic fully in the notes to her article, "Alienation and the Female Principle in *Winter in the Blood*," in James Welch, ed. Ron McFarland (Lewiston, Idaho: Confluence Press, Inc., 1986), 59-82.
35. *Winter in the Blood*, 166.
36. *Ibid.*, 175.
37. *Yellow Raft*, 129.
38. *Ibid.*, 203.
39. *Ibid.*, 264.
40. *Ibid.*, 56.
41. *Winter in the Blood*, 45.
42. *Yellow Raft*, 241.
43. Bill Moyers, "Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris," *Bill Moyers: A World of Ideas*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 460-69.
44. *Yellow Raft*, 293.