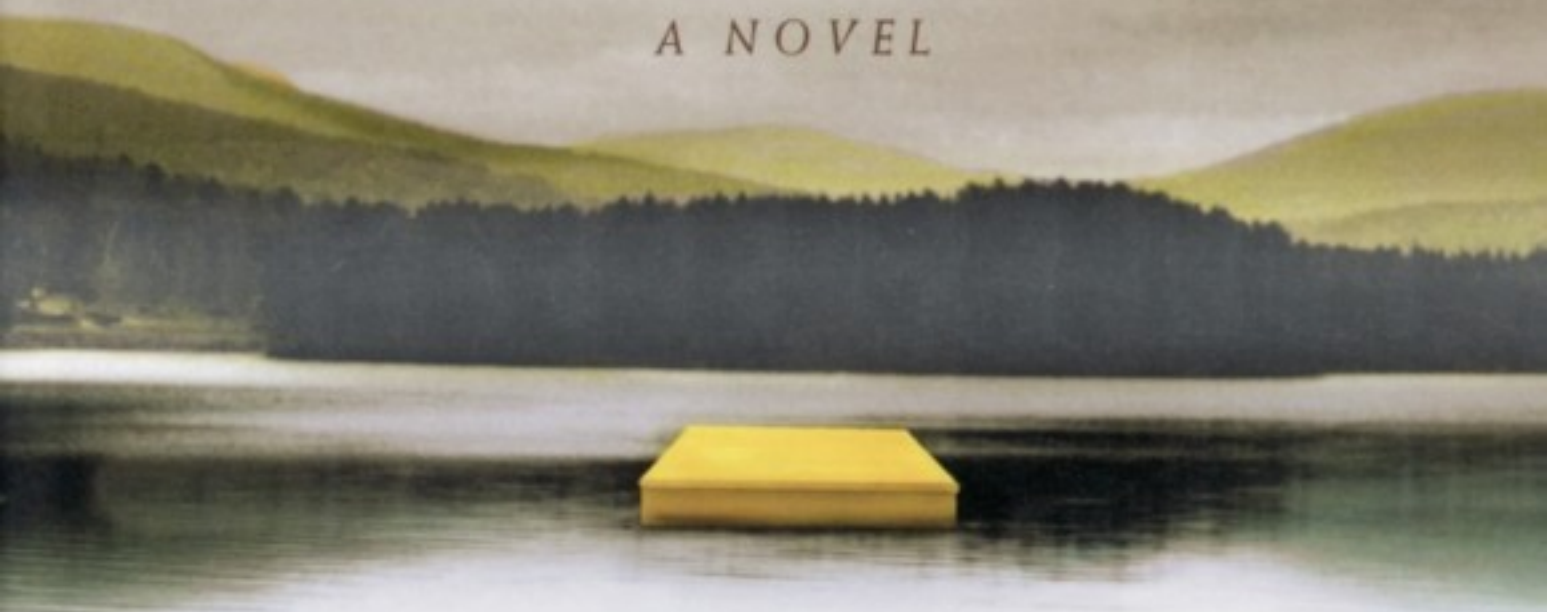


THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# A Yellow Raft in Blue Water

A NOVEL



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MICHAEL DORRIS

AUTHOR OF *THE BROKEN CORD*

PICADOR

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# I

I sit on the bed at a crooked angle, one foot on the floor, my hip against the tent of Mom's legs, my elbows on the hospital table. My skirt is too short and keeps riding up my thighs. Mom has earlier spent twenty minutes pulling my long frizzy hair into a herringbone braid and has tried to give me beauty magazine tips to improve my appearance—cosmetics to highlight my cheekbones or soften my chin, a blusher that might even my skin tone. I check the clock on the wall. Five minutes till the end of visiting hours. I want to leave but Mom would hit the ceiling and tell me I'm not polite.

We play solitaire on the sliding desk pulled across the foot of the electric bed. With the back moved all the way up and a pillow wedged under her knees, everything Mom wants is within her reach. Her round face is screwed into a mask of concentration, like a stumped contestant on "Jeopardy" with time running out, and her eyes see nothing but the numbers on the cards. She wears her favorite rings, a narrow abalone, an inlaid turquoise-and-jet roadrunner, and a sandcast silver turtle. Dwarfed among them, the thin gold of her wedding band cuts into her third finger. She's on her throne, but her mind is with the game.

In the last two hours we have each drunk three plastic glasses full of warm ginger ale and Mom has sampled a second lunch, abandoned as the two other women in the room sleep through the afternoon visiting hours. We talk softly to keep our privacy.

Mom turns each trio of cards and slaps them down clean so

that only the top one shows. "This time I can feel it," she tells me.

I don't disagree but I could. The last pass through I have seen a two of clubs and a jack of spades hidden below an early ten of hearts. The cards will win this hand.

After squaring the deck Mom starts through again. This time she snaps the sets into her palm before she lays them out, and the first face to appear is the black two. She pegs it onto its ace without changing her expression, but does seem pleased to see the jack.

"Come to Mama," she whispers and matches it to her queen of diamonds. The ten follows suit. "What did I tell you? Nothing to it." Her eyes are large and brown, dull from her morning medication and from not enough sleep, but they flash with her victory.

I can't help it, her cheat bothers me, but I go along. It's not worth arguing about.

"You're on a roll," I tell her when all fifty-two are distributed, ace to king, in four matching rows. "Now try the other kind, the jump-over."

"I quit when I'm ahead." She pushes the pile in a jumble toward me, finds the button that adjusts her angle, and sinks to a reclining position.

I take the cards, shift my weight, and shuffle, riffle, and pat them even. Out of habit, I offer Mom an illegal cut, which she ignores, then I pick up the deck and peel off a four of clubs.

"Do you remember how?" Mom asks.

The object of the game is to reduce everything to a single pile. You set the whole deck down, one by one, then find a match with the card that comes before, either by suit or number: a six on a six, a spade on a spade. You can find its mate next door or by jumping back two, no more no less. I usually end with about twenty short stacks. This time it's eighteen.

"I never win this," I say, rising to leave.

"You fold too easy. Let me see those cards once..." But Mom doesn't move. Something's wrong. She seems suddenly

smaller, as if she has shrunk in her bed. Her eyebrows relax and she stares to the ceiling. Her hands go limp at her side. It occurs to me for the first time that this hospital visit might be different, that she might really have a disease. I start to reach for the white cord with a button on the end, but Mom snatches it first and puts it under the sheet. She looks over my shoulder and makes like she's trying to smile but can't quite bring it off.

I turn and see my father in the doorway. For a big man he's quiet, and I'm always surprised when he appears. He's tall and heavy, with skin a shade browner than mine. He has let his Afro grow out and there's rainwater caught in his hair. His mailman uniform is damp too, the gray wool pants baggy around his knees. At his wrist, the bracelet of three metals, copper, iron, and brass, has a dull shine. I've never seen him without it. He looks uncomfortable and edgy in the brightly lit room, and wets his lips.

"Rayona, what's happening?" he asks me.

These are the first words I've heard from him since my fifteenth birthday five months ago, when he telephoned to say he'd be late to the party, so I'm not friendly.

I stand. I push five-ten, taller than any other girl in my school, but I still feel short in front of him.

"Don't you say hello to your father?" Dad asks me.

"Elgin," Mom says behind me. "I thought you only visited when I was asleep."

*Visited?* Mom must have called to tell him she was out of commission. There's no other way he could have known because her friends are not permitted to speak to him these days.

"You go on now, Ray," Mom says. "Elgin and I have to talk." She has been busy rearranging herself and the bed. The cards have disappeared and the table is pushed off to the side. She's now lying almost flat, with the sheet tucked under her chin. The pillow still supports her knees, though, so she has to lift her head to see us.

"Now don't rush off," Dad says to me. "Let me get a look at you."

He inspects me like a first-class package, looking for loose

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MICHAEL DORRIS's adult fiction includes *The Cloud Chamber* and *Working Men*. Among his nonfiction works are *Paper Trail*, and *The Broken Cord*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award.

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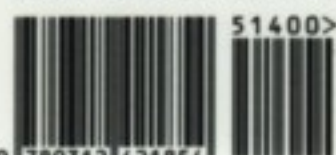
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