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CLOUD CHAMBER

By Michael Dorris

Scribner. 320 pp.

In his end, sometimes a writer finds his beginning. Faulkner took a silver hair on a pillow, Oates a vagabond standing at a door, then each wrote a magnificent story to see how the image got there.

In his compelling new novel, Michael Dorris takes the vibrant 15-year-old part-Black, part-Indian, part-Irish Rayona of his earlier novel *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* and wends back five generations to find how she got there.

In the process, he discovers America.

Start with black-haired Rose Mannion, born in 1852 in County Roscommon, Ireland. Fiercely patriotic, Rose finds the only man she'll ever love has sold out to the English, so she sleeps with him, turns him in for execution, and flees with Martin McGarry, a man her lover betrayed, to Kentucky.

There, Rose bears Andrew and Robert. Strong-willed Bridie, 25, falls in love with Andrew. But Andrew is a priest, so she marries Robert and becomes the second generation to pine lifelong for one man while married to another, of whom she says, "I despised his pliant love, spread it upon my breakfast toast and devoured it as he watched."

To Edna and Marcella, their two daughters, the impoverished Robert can bequeath only tuberculosis and a capacity for tenderness new to the women in this family.

While the outcast sisters are in a t.b. sanitarium in Louisville, Marcella meets Earl Taylor, son of the local black grocer, and becomes the family's only woman to actually marry the man she loves. But the Second World War takes Earl, leaving Marcella and Edna to raise Marcella's son Elgin.

Feeling neither white nor black, Elgin heads out to discover who he is, moves to the Northwest, marries a full-blooded Indian and has a daughter, Rayona. When we first see teenaged Rayona she is deciding what name to choose for her naming ceremony. Drawing the novel's five generations into that volatile but irreducible unit called "family," Rayona tugs the green thread stretching from Ireland and chooses "Rose," her great-great-grandmother.

The tale's magic, though, lies in the details, and the book's only serious shortcoming is that there are not more of them, as 320 pages provide too little room to spend with Dorris's compelling characters.

Eight are rendered in their own words, 16 first-person chapters showcasing Dorris's delight in voice, from 19th century Rose to broken Robert to the endearing Edna to rootless Elgin to sprightly Rayona whose intelligence and sensitivity slip through the crackles in her Nick-at-Nite generation voice.

Dorris provides poetic character descriptions, like Martin describing young Rose as "a girl whose halo surrounded the sum of her. She moved through a room like a jet of flame, a girl of such sweet purity, such oblivion to her own effect, that the longing looks that rained down upon her left her dry and untouched," which says more about Martin than about Rose.

There's the sense of authenticity that comes with attentive place and period detail, such as Earl's meeting Marcella because no white grocer would serve a sanitarium.

Yet, what resonates most is the book's thematic depth.

There's the full spectrum of love and anguish arising from our sense of family. "The dead never really are quite gone from our family," says Edna, warmest member of a family with little vocabulary for love. But from what family are the dead really gone?

Dorris shows the value of time and remembrance of people past, balanced by treasuring the simplest things in the present moment, even as tubercular Marcella learns to cherish a single breath: "Draw. Treasure. Release."

Deeper still, there's the national portrait that emerges as we see Elgin, raised by white women, curious about his black father and Creek grandmother, who leaves home to find his identity. A microcosm of America--the New World where Europeans bought a future by mortgaging their past, where Africans and Indians had their past stripped from them--Elgin's is the timeless Oedipal/American quest: "Who am I and where do I come from?"

His answer lies not in the past but in his daughter's Irish spirit and "Afro-Souixish" hair, in her choosing who she is, even if the name is from the past. Rayona's identity lies in her freedom to be who she wants, the thing people abandoned their roots for when they left Ireland and its neighbors behind.

It's Dorris's resonant world of issues that makes so short and exquisitely written a book seem so large.
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