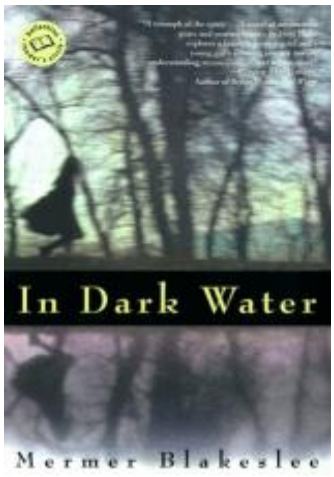
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In Dark Water

by Mermer Blakeslee



About the Book

In 1958, in a small town in upstate New York, the Buell family is falling apart. The sudden death of David, the only son, forever changes the bonds that connect them to one another and to the world. As her mother sinks into depression, eleven-year-old Dorrie Buell, full of an unusual mix of grit and delicacy, sets out on her own. Armed with the imagined identity of a cowboy drifter, Dorrie finds kinship and refuge in the hilltop farm of the eccentric Tappen family. Yet the deep currents of Dorrie's life keep pulling her back toward her mother, toward the past that binds them, toward common ground.

Luminous, alive with the secret knowledge of childhood, **In Dark Water** is a stunning novel of one family's trial and redemption.

Discussion Guide

1. The author has stated that ultimately Eudora's story is one of initiation, not victimhood. In what ways do you think Eudora was "initiated"? As human beings, do you think that extreme, often painful, experiences are necessary for putting us in touch with the deeper, more remote places of our psyche?

2. "He, he doesn't ever yell at me. He just takes care of me. He never talks or asks me things like she used to, but he takes care of me," Eudora says about her father after she returns from hiding in the woods. How do you interpret this comment? Is this a statement of acceptance or discontent regarding her father's parenting?

3. Why do you think the author included the scene where Eudora and Pepper are caught naked by Pepper's father? In what ways does this scene contribute to the novel? Do we learn more about certain characters through this disturbing situation?

4. When Popsy gives Eudora a cap to wear to school, he says to her, "Now when you wear this cap, boy, you keep a mind where this bill's headin', hear?" From that time on, Eudora keeps careful track of every direction she takes. What do you think Popsy was trying to say to Eudora? What effect did her constant mental "logging" of her whereabouts have on her?

5. Why do you think Eudora related so well to Popsy? Do you think Popsy was, in some aspect, a reflection of Eudora?

6. Why do you think Eudora became such a vehement target for Florence's rage after the death of her son? Were you ultimately able to forgive Florence for her abusive treatment of Eudora? Do you believe that Florence was redeemed in the end? Why or why not?

7. Following the gynecological exam at her boarding school, Eudora mentally collapses, going into a near catatonic state. Since Eudora's emotional life is so intricately tied to her physicality, do you think it was this frightening physical intrusion that finally put her over the edge? Or do you think that the breakdown was inevitable and not necessarily provoked by this event? Has an intense physical experience ever led you to an emotional awakening or collapse?

8. When Eudora leaves for boarding school, she takes Beulah's unwashed coffee cup along with her. What symbolic significance does this cup contain?

9. Which character did you most closely identify with? Why? Were there any characters that you had difficulty empathizing with? If so, why?

10. The author has said that it was a great challenge to present Eudora's voice in a way that made room for her child-like immediacy without alienating the reader's desire and ability to see beyond her, "to guess at a larger truth than Dorrie's telling." As an adult, what was it like to hear the bulk of a story through the voice of an eleven-year-old child? How did this shape your reading experience?

11. Author Sandra Scofield says that in this novel "there is a great deal of pain, but there are no villains." Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

12. Eudora is unable to control the smile that emerges during emotionally charged situations. What does the smile convey to you? How do Beulah and Florence interpret the smile? Is either more accurate than the other? What do you think the smile means to Eudora?

13. Do you feel that Mary's decision to let Eudora witness the shooting of her horse was appropriate, or was this too violent a scene for a child's eyes? Why or why not? Have you ever had a child express her curiosity about death to you? If so, how did you handle the situation?

14. Regarding Florence's mental deterioration, do you think that she was, to some degree, a victim of an inadequate mental health system? Do you think that the author implies this in any way? How might her condition have been handled differently today?

15. Why do you think Four Eyes' snakes held such intrigue for Eudora? Why do you think it was so important to her to touch the snake's yellow ring?

16. Eudora had a vivid dream one night in her boarding school about a horse being lifted out of the water by a rope: "They were going to take him out of the water, lift him up. They were going to save him. I knew that if they lifted him into the air going seven thousand miles an hour, all his bones would snap. I knew and they didn't. I needed to tell them right away." What was the significance of this dream? Who--or what--do you think the horse represented to Eudora?

17. Why do you think Eudora thrives so wonderfully at the Tappens? Aside from their love for her, are there other aspects of her life on the farm that beckon her frightened soul out of hiding?

18. In your opinion, what is the driving theme of this novel?

Author Bio

Mermer Blakeslee is also the author of the novel **Same Blood**. She is a New York Foundation of the Arts fiction fellowship recipient. Ms. Blakeslee lives with her husband and son in New York's Catskill Mountains.

Critical Praise

"Written with a fine ear for the voice of a child, Blakeslee builds a lovely portrait and a memorable character in Eudora Buell. "

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