



## The Water Dancers

By Ms. Terry Gamble  
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### Introduction

Set during the tumultuous, war-torn years between 1942 and 1970, *The Water Dancers* is both a searing love story and a painful exploration of the many ways America is divided along lines of race and class, poverty and wealth, desire and responsibility.

Rachael Winapee is an orphaned Native American convent girl who is hired by the March family to work in their magnificent summer home on the shore of Lake Michigan. There she is given the task of caring for Woody March, who has lost a leg in WWII and is well on his way to morphine addiction and complete disillusionment with the life he is expected to lead. Rachel is dramatically different from Elizabeth, the woman Woody is supposed to marry. Dark, quiet, and acutely sensitive, Rachel is in touch with the rhythms and textures of the earth, while the highly civilized Elizabeth is locked into the conventions of her time and culture. A deep resonance, a sense of shared suffering, draws Woody and

Rachel together, and their relationship, secret as it is, brings Woody back to life. Woody's social standing, his responsibility to take over the family banking business and marry Elizabeth, as well as the adamant opposition of his domineering mother, make it impossible for him to have a life with Rachel. But in ways they cannot foresee, their relationship will forever change the course of their lives.

*The Water Dancers* is more than a love story, as compelling and beautifully written as that love story may be. It is also the story of the Odawa Indians, their culture, their dances, their hopes, their deep but tenuous connection to the land. It is a larger story about wars and what they do to those who fight them. And it is a powerful human story about the desire to come together and all the social and racial barriers that keep us, tragically, apart.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What is the significance of the title *The Water Dancers*? What role does water -- especially Lake Michigan and Horseshoe Lake -- play in the novel? In what ways is dance important to the story?
2. What are the most significant differences between Native American culture and white upper class culture, as they are dramatized in the novel? What does each culture value most? How do Mrs. March and Rachel regard each other?
3. When Woody, Mrs. March, and Elizabeth are assaulted by the smell of rotting fish on the shore, Elizabeth suggests they move inside, but Woody says: "You can't get away from it." To which Elizabeth replies: "Oh, Woody ... we can always try" [p. 157]. What does this exchange reveal about Woody and Elizabeth? In what other instances in the novel do characters try to deny, ignore, or get away from unpleasant realities?
4. Why are stones and dirt so important in *The Water Dancers*? Why do Rachel and Ben like to taste them? What can taking dirt into one's mouth offer one at the moment of death?
5. Why isn't Woody able to defy his mother and marry Rachel instead of Elizabeth? What social and racial taboos would he have had to break in order to do so? Do you think Woody should have chosen Rachel? How would his life have been different if he had?
6. Why does Rachel conceal from Ben his father's true identity? Why does she later reveal it? Does she make the right choices in both cases?
7. Rachel thinks that Woody was "so beaten down by the aftershock of war that nothing could free his spirit" [p. 271]. Is she right? What other forces contribute to his misery? How do all the wars -- WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam war -- affect the characters in the novel? Why isn't Rachel's love enough to save him?
8. Honda asks Ben if he knows what the Indians used to call America before the white man came. When Ben shakes his head, Honda says "Ours!" [p. 135]. At the very end of the novel, Rachel reflects that both she and Lydia March "cleave to our land. We're afraid we can't hold it, but we believe we must. Ours. Ours. What a ridiculous notion. Not even our children are ours" [p. 274]. What does she mean? In what ways does the novel itself call into question the very idea of ownership? In what ways is this recognition that we can't own anything liberating?
9. At the end of the novel, Rachel feels a sudden and "uninvited" compassion for Mrs. March. She is able to sit by her in "companionable silence, forgetting for a moment that they were from different tribes" [p. 266]. Why are Rachel and Mrs. March able to forgive each other at the end? Is Rachel right to give Mrs. March the morphine she asks for?
10. What does the novel as a whole say about the large themes of forgiveness and redemption, love and hate, race and class in America?

### About the author

Terry Gamble has had numerous poems, short stories, and essays published in literary journals. A graduate of the University of Michigan, she lives in San Francisco with her husband and children. *The Water Dancers* is her first novel.