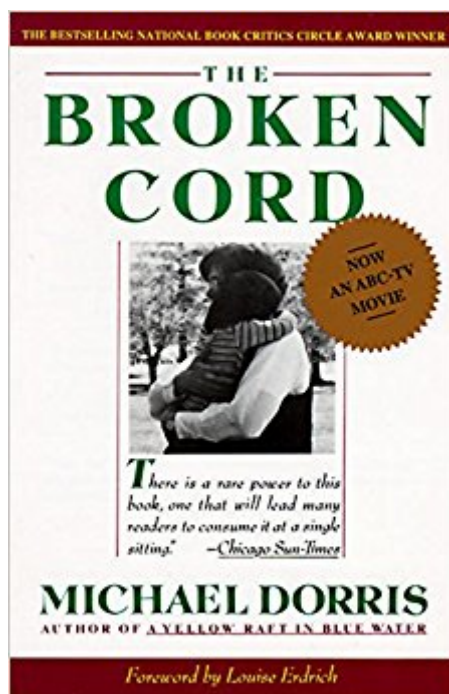


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The Broken Cord



Synopsis

The controversial national bestseller that received unprecedented media attention, sparked the nation's interest in the plight of children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and touched a nerve in all of us. Winner of the 1989 National Book Critics Circle Award.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Harper Perennial; 1st Edition edition (1990)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0060916826

ISBN-13: 978-0060916824

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.8 x 8.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (55 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

It would be a shame if the circumstances surrounding the author's death cast a shadow over this fine book, because it is beautifully written, deeply felt, and a devastating account of the impact of fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) among Native Americans. Michael Dorris, a young unmarried college teacher and writer, adopts a Native American boy "Adam" whose developmental problems, he believes, are the result of poor nutrition, poor health care, and lack of proper parenting. In time, however, he discovers that Adam was born with FAS, a condition Dorris knows very little about. Believing that proper care can reverse the effects of FAS, he takes on the daunting and nearly futile task of helping Adam achieve a "normal" boyhood. The damage done, it turns out, is irreversible; Adam is almost maddeningly unable to learn simple tasks and responsibilities. FAS-related health problems, including seizures, often turn merely difficult days and nights into nightmares for the single father. The book Dorris writes is meant as an eye-opener for readers who are unaware of the potential harm in consuming alcohol during pregnancy. Given naturally to research and study, he shares with the reader much of what he learns about FAS and the Native American culture that has had such a fatal connection with alcohol. To that extent, this is almost a textbook on the subject. But this is also the story of a father and son, and most poignant, for this reader, is the relationship

between them that is a thread throughout the book. Dorris never surrenders to the barriers that exist between him and his son. Having taken responsibility for Adam, he gives his all to making even the smallest difference in the boy's life. It's a heroic effort and often heartbreaking.

This is a vivid and moving account of a father's initiation into (single) parenthood and the rigorous journey of seeing a handicapped child into adulthood. It is both laugh-out-loud funny and profoundly sad. This book works best on the level of personal story-- what it means to live with a child who will never be normal, as you both fear and deny the reality that your kid is handicapped. (As the adoptive mother of a girl who has a constellation of emotional and psychological problems, but with no definitive cause, I could relate to Dorris' experience.) For me, the book bogged down in Dorris' lengthy research findings pertaining to FAS and its impact on native american communities. Dorris adopted his son, Adam, with no forewarning of Adam's FAS diagnosis and wrote the book during the early days of FAS research. Therefore, this info. was groundbreaking at the time of the book's publication, but it is dated today. Because this book is the story of only one individual-- one who was extremely handicapped by his condition-- it paints a pretty depressing picture of FAS, and the book is NOT one I would recommend first to anyone who had just taken on the responsibility of raising a child with FAS or FAE. There are more ways to treat and support individuals with FAS/FAE than were available when Dorris was raising Adam, and foster and adoptive parents of FAS/FAE children need to be pointed to resources that give them a broader view of the possibilities for their youngsters.

I first read this book in early 1990. Prior to reading this book, I did not know about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Effect (FAS/FAE). Mr. Dorris gives a good overview of this tragic condition and his references throughout this book certainly augment the points he makes. I like the lyrical tone Abel's (called "Adam" in the book) story takes when the author includes references to nature and natural phenomena. This book is also culturally enriching by providing glimpses of Native American traditions, e.g. Adam's naming ceremony and the gatherings the Dorris family takes later in the book. Two things saddened me deeply about this book in addition to Adam's congenital condition. The author was involved in a very unfortunate controversy and committed suicide in 1997. In 1991 Adam, then 23 was run over by a car and killed. It made for a very tragic postscript to the lives of the Dorris family and to all those who cared about them personally.

I have an adopted son with possible FAE not FAS. The recent studies are saying that FAE is just as

bad as FAS because you don't know what it is so readily. My son was the product of a 17 year old drug addict/coholic who lived on the streets prostituting. So far he is a happy healthy boy, but is tremendously developmentally delayed. He's 8 years old functioning around age 3-4. He will never be OK. When I'm so sad or overwhelmed with his behaviors I like to sit down and watch the TV version (which I recorded) of The Broken Cord. It truly gives me strength to carry on. I have subsequently fallen in love with Jimmy Smits who played Adam's dad on the show. What an excellent job! He portrays, so well, the true frustration these innocent little people bring into your life. I especially relate to the "choo-choo" dialogue and how it started out so cute and became the biggest source of aggravation. My son does similar things and on occasion I just sit and cry. Michael Dorris did the world a wonderful job of getting the medical profession to begin thinking about this terrible syndrome. Let's keep working! Michael, despite the reasons for your death - you are truly missed and highly respected. You understand these children more than anyone else I know. Doctors - wake up!

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