

Background about the Book – *Island of the Blue Dolphins*

Island of the Blue Dolphins is an American children's novel. It was published in 1960 and won the Newbery Medal that year. It is based on the true story of Juana Maria, the "Lone Woman of San Nicolas," a Nicoleno Indian marooned for 18 years, between 1835 and 1853, on San Nicolas Island off the California coast. San Nicholas is one of the Channel Islands that lie off the coast of California, southwest of Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. San Nicolas was once home to American Indians and was a hunting place for the Aleuts and the Russians who came in search of sea otters. The island is now used by the U.S. Navy, and the public is not allowed to visit.

In *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, O'Dell tells the story of Karana, a Native American girl who survives alone on a wild, isolated island for many years in the mid 1800s. Karana is tested by her environment, even though it is a familiar one. The story is also about what it means to be human: Karana shows emotional and moral courage as she copes with a terrible loss. In the words of one reader, the novel is "A sad story, yes; but the sadness...is of a singularly inspiring kind."

Many readers admire *Island of the Blue Dolphins* for its plain but vivid style and for the authentic details that convey the natural richness of the setting. One critic has commented on the "beautiful feeling for the passing of the seasons, and for the companionship offered by the presence...of many animals." Another has noted that O'Dell never allows the narrative pace to slacken as he "intermingles accounts of Karana's day-to-day activities with the highlights of her adventures." O'Dell's style reflects the dignity and perception of the heroine in a moving tale of adventure and self-discovery.

About the Author



Scott O'Dell was born on May 23, 1898, in Los Angeles, California, when there were no airplanes, no freeways, and only a handful of automobiles. Travel was by foot, by horseback, by horse-drawn trolleys or wagons. Before long the family moved a short distance south to San Pedro. For a time they lived on Rattlesnake Island, across the bay from San Pedro, in a house built on stilts. At high tide, the waves washed beneath it. He lived with his mother, father and younger sister, Lucille. Because O'Dell's father worked for the railroad, the family moved often.

Scott O'Dell was not the name the author was given at birth. In fact, it was quite the opposite: He was named Odell Scott. When he was a young adult, a typesetter accidentally switched the two words.

O'Dell decided that he liked the new name better and legally changed his name.

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During high school tall, thin O'Dell was a track star. He graduated from Polytechnic High School in Long Beach, California. School came so easily to him that he never studied very hard. When he went to college, he found that he did not know how to focus on his studies. That's why, he once said, he attended four different colleges: Claremont College in California, the University of Wisconsin, Stanford and the University of Rome. He studied only what interested him – history, literature, philosophy and psychology- and never earned a college degree.

During both World War I and World War II, O'Dell was a soldier, though he never fought in either war. He was still in training when World War I ended, and he was stationed in the United States during World War II.

O'Dell lived for many years in California, where he loved to sail and fish. For a while, he owned a sailboat that he sailed up and down the western coast of North America between Alaska and Mexico. O'Dell was married twice, the second time to Elizabeth Hall. He became a stepfather to Hall's two children from her previous marriage.

In 1960, when *Island of the Blue Dolphins* was published O'Dell's life underwent a sea-change. He was already in his early sixties, a point in life when many people's careers are winding down. It was a career that would quickly bring him praise from around the world. In 1961 *Island of the Blue Dolphins* was awarded the Newbery Medal. The Newbery Medal is awarded each year by the American Library Association to the author of the most distinguished American children's book published the previous year.

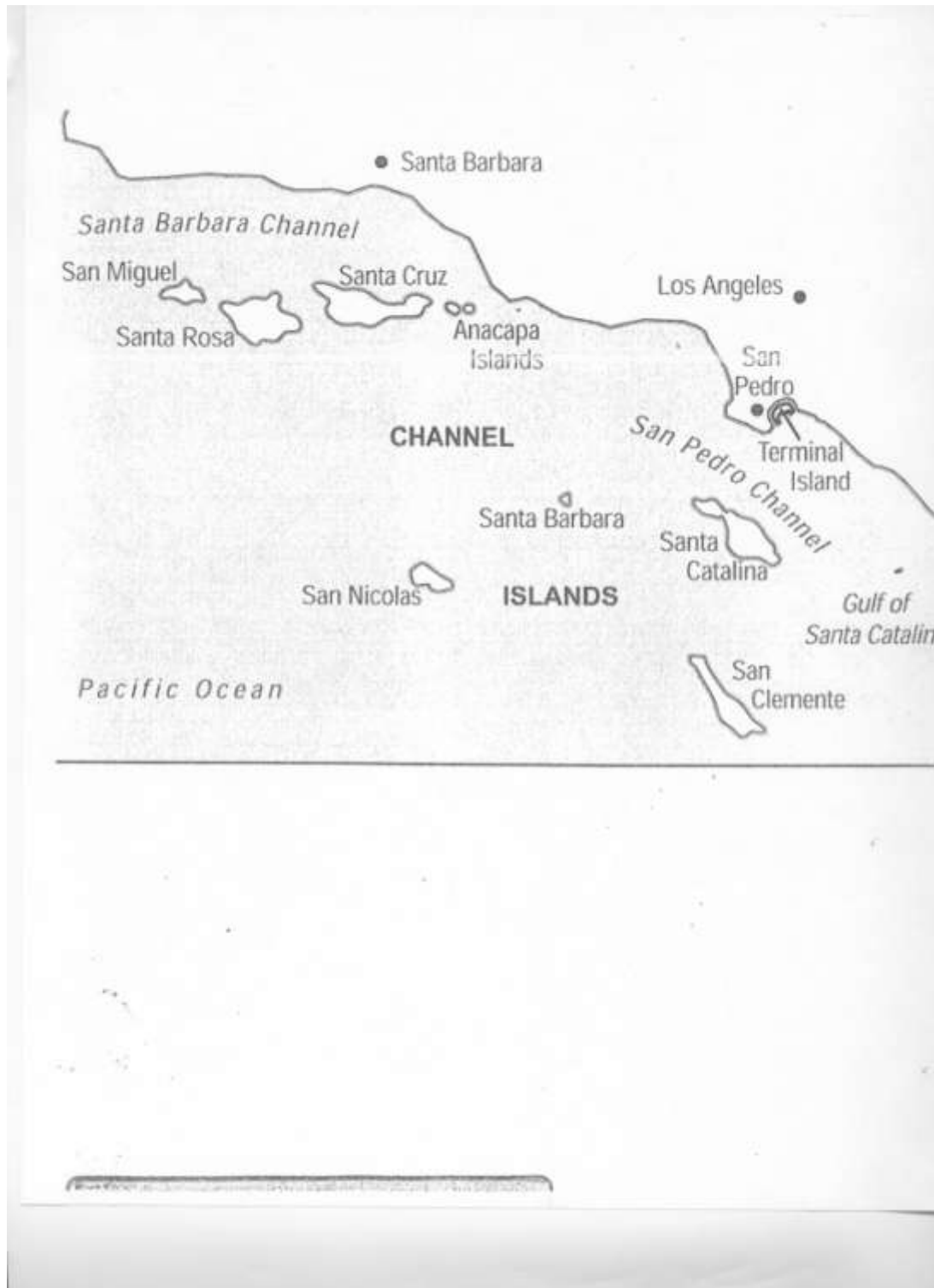
O'Dell moved to the East Coast in 1975. His wife had accepted a job in New York and they moved to Westchester County, north of New York City. There, they bought a home on a lake. When he was not writing, O'Dell liked to plant trees and grow vegetables. He also pursued his lifelong passions for traveling, sailing and fishing.

In 1982, O'Dell began a project to encourage others to write about history. He established the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Each year since 1984 this annual award of \$5,000 has been given to the author of the best book of historical fiction for children.

O'Dell died of cancer on October 15, 1989. He was ninety-one years old. Although he died on the East Coast, his ashes were scattered in the sea off the coast of La Jolla, California. After the ceremony, as the mourners' boat turned back toward shore, a group of dolphins leaped from the water. The dolphins never left the boat's side until it turned from the ocean into the San Diego Bay.

From www.scottodell.com

Map – Island of the Blue Dolphins



Reviews – Island of the Blue Dolphins

REVIEW: ISLAND OF THE BLUE DOLPHINS

Another Look At Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*

By Hazel Rochman

Here are plot summaries of two Newbery-winning historical novels, both published more than 45 years ago. One, set in the Old West, a historical period with proven staying power, dramatizes the heroism of a young boy defending his mother and sister from an Indian attack. The book's author was known for conducting research using original sources and immersing himself in the periods about which he wrote. The second book tells the story of a Native American girl who was forced to live alone on an island for 18 years. It was written by a white male who had no previous experience in writing for young readers and who was more than 60 years old when the book was published. It was based on an actual incident, but one about which very little was known.

Readers familiar with children's literature will know that book number two, Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, Newbery winner in 1961, also wins the endurance race, but it's doubtful whether the experts of the day would have predicted it to outlast Walter Edmonds' *The Matchlock Gun*, Newbery winner in 1942. Edmonds' novel had the feel of a classic western, *High Noon* for kids. What we didn't know then was that our interpretation of what appeared at midcentury to be an archetypal story, settler versus Indian, would change dramatically in the 1960s and beyond, leaving readers with zero tolerance for passages describing Native Americans as savages who looked like dogs.

Back in 1960, though, it was O'Dell's novel that encountered resistance. The book was turned down at first submission, the publisher echoing the author's agent, who had advocated changing the protagonist from a girl to a boy. Girls didn't sell in 1960, the thinking went, at least as lead characters in adventure stories, assumed to be the province of boys. But another publisher, Houghton Mifflin, loved the book, and it was soon on its way to the Newbery.

O'Dell's wife, writer Elizabeth Hall, says that "when Scott finished the manuscript, he didn't know what he had." O'Dell had written several adult historical novels, but this was his first children's book. "He didn't know how children's books were supposed to be written," Hall explains. "Perhaps because he didn't know the tradition, he didn't conform to the accepted recipe."

Island of the Blue Dolphins is based on the true story of a young Native American woman called Karana, who survived alone with her wild dog for 18 years in the mid-nineteenth century after her people were driven from an island off the California coast. Now, nearly 48 years after its Newbery triumph, it continues to be hugely popular worldwide, with millions of copies sold in the U.S. and translations into at least 30 languages. The book is the 2007 "Santa Barbara Reads" selection, and this March the Santa Barbara Symphony premiered an orchestral work entitled *The Island of the Blue Dolphins*, by Peter Madlem, as part of a country-wide celebration of the book.

A remarkable success story, to be sure, but the question remains-What enabled *Island* to do what *The Matchlock Gun* and numerous other historical novels couldn't do: keep an audience even as one generation morphed into another, and tastes, mores, and assumptions about the past kept changing?

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Perhaps not surprisingly, it may well have been the same characteristics that made it an unlikely best-seller in the first place. Take the idea of a female lead in an adventure story: a radical notion in the early 1960s, but one whose time had come-and would keep right on coming for decades. Once the book was published, the strong, heroic girl was never a problem. “Scott always credited the American Library Association for the book’s success,” Hall says. “At the time, not many books for children had strong female protagonists, and librarians were delighted to find not only a strong female character but also one that was the total focus of the book. Of course, boys like it too. And I think part of the enduring appeal is Karana’s unisex nature. She’s not stereotypically female.”

Just as unisex characters weren’t jumping from the pages of children’s books in 1961, neither was conservation the hot topic it is today. In fact, most early critics and readers, even those who loved *Island*, mostly ignored the conservation theme in the novel, which O’Dell explores with great passion but without preaching. Hall says it was the indiscriminate slaughter of animals that drove her late husband to write the story. “Scott said the book was born in anger,” she elaborates, “anger aimed at the hunters who each year invaded the mountains around his home in Julian, California, slaughtering everything that crept or walked or flew. But he also was angry with himself, his boyhood self, who was just as unfeeling and who had as little regard for other species.”

Ironically, O’Dell’s hope that young readers would react with passion to the massive killing of otter he describes in the story didn’t exactly happen-not at first. “Back then,” Hall explains, “there was very little interest in conservation. Now kids care about the extinction of species, the destruction of rain forests, global warming.” So here was a case of a book ahead of its time, but when the environment eventually took hold of young people’s consciousness, O’Dell’s environmental message was there waiting for them.

So, unfortunately, was another issue that might have derailed the novel’s long-term success: the gender and race of its author. And yet, despite contemporary objections to a white man telling a story from the viewpoint of an Indian girl, *Island* has continued to grow in popularity, as new generations of readers reject the view that the attempt to portray persons from another culture is doomed to be racist.

“Children in Kotzebue, a town in the far north of Alaska,” Hall notes, “were so taken with Scott’s portrayal of Native Americans that they invited him to accompany their class on a trip to Siberia, to see the land of their ancestors. I do agree that it’s difficult to write authentically about characters from another culture, and I agree that a lot of it has been done badly. It takes an immense amount of research and a huge dose of empathy. Human emotions have not changed since our ancestors were hunter-gatherers in Africa. All that has changed is the situations that evoke those emotions.”

And that, finally, may be the key ingredient in determining which historical novels will endure for generations: research, empathy, and the ability to evoke universal emotions as they were expressed at a particular historical moment.

From Booklist, April 15, 2007

Read Alikes – Island of the Blue Dolphins

Call it Courage by Armstrong Sperry

Julie of the Wolves by Jean Craighead George

Hatchet by Gary Paulsen

Boston Jane by Jennifer L. Holm

The Cay by Theodore Taylor

Nory Ryan's Song by Patricia Reilly Giff

Discussion Questions - Island of the Blue Dolphins

1. If Chief Chowig had not argued with the hunters about payment, what do you think would have happened that day? What might have happened the next time the hunters came to the island?
2. Why do Karana's feelings about killing animals change?
3. Why do you think Ramo adapts so easily to being Karana's dog, after being a wild dog?
4. Is Karana like other twelve-year-olds you know? Do you like or admire her? When she is older how does she change?
5. Why do you think *Island of the Blue Dolphins* has won so many awards? What makes it special? Did you like it as much as other people seem to like it?
6. Overall, did the novel seem too sad to you? Or were only some parts of the novel too sad? If so, which ones?
7. Why do Karana's feelings about enemies change? Do you consider any people or animals your enemies? Did your feelings about enemies change after you read the novel?
8. Scott O'Dell said that the two most important themes in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* were forgiveness and respect for all life. Can you give examples of these themes in the actions of any of the characters?
9. Could you survive on your own in a new situation, without familiar people and conveniences? What would you do to find food and shelter? What past memories and experiences would give you the knowledge and strength to survive?
10. What kind of life do you think Karana will have at the Santa Barbara Mission?

From Scholastic BookFiles

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be applied to any book. You can tweak the questions for your specific book. They can be cut into strips and passed around in a basket to help facilitate discussion.

My favorite part of the book was...

A better title for this book would be...because...

(Name of character) reminds me of myself because...

My least favorite character was...because...

If I were (name of character, -----) I would (wouldn't) have...

(Name of character) reminds me of someone I know because...

I changed my mind about...because...

I would (wouldn't) like to read another book by this author because...

This book made me think...When I finished this book, I still wondered...

This book reminded me of...

I'd like to tell the author...

What happened in this book was very realistic (unrealistic) because...

This book was better (worse) than the movie version because...

When I started reading his book, I thought...

I didn't like...because...

This book made me realize...

If I could talk to (name of character), I would say...

One thing I have noticed about the author's style is...

If I could be any character in the book I would be...because...

I was surprised when...

I think the main thing the writer was trying to say was...

The most important thing about this book is...

I predicted that...

I think the writer must be ...because...

I would change the ending...