

## A GUIDE TO Island of the Blue Dolphins

Scott O'Dell

*Animals and birds are like people, too, though they do not talk the same or do the same things. Without them the earth would be an unhappy place.*

### THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

*Island of the Blue Dolphins* is a survival tale about an Indian girl who lives alone on an island for eighteen years.

**Setting:** Early 1800s in the village of the Ghalas-at Indians on Island of the Blue Dolphins, a rocky island off the coast of southern California.

**Point of View:** First-person narration by Karana, the protagonist.

**Protagonist:** Karana, a young girl who leaps from a ship that is taking her and the other Indians away from their island.

**Conflicts:** The major conflict of the book is Karana's need to survive on her own. Karana also faces internal conflict between fear and courage and between her fear of the Aleuts and her need to communicate with another human (an Aleut girl). Other external conflicts pit Karana against some of the island's wild animals and the forces of nature.

**Resolution:** Karana accepts her fate and survives. Overcoming her fear, she and the Aleut girl become friends. Karana tames and nurtures wild animals. She respects and endures the forces of nature. Finally she leaves the island on a ship bound for Mission Santa Barbara on the mainland.

**Themes:** All living things are interconnected and interdependent. Love and compassion overcome hatred and the desire for vengeance.

**Of Special Note:** The novel is based on the true story of an Indian girl, the Lost (or Lone) Woman of San Nicholas, who lived alone for eighteen years on San Nicholas Island, the outermost of the Channel Islands, about seventy miles west of Los Angeles.

courageous Robinson Crusoe-like figure. The deaths in the novel may evoke some sadness, but the author passes over them quickly, treating them as part of nature. The tone is generally optimistic and even uplifting. The Indians are portrayed realistically, not stereotypically. Karana is multidimensional; her growth from a terrified young person into a quietly self-reliant adult exemplifies a coming of age that most readers will admire.

### BACKGROUND

In his Author's Note, O'Dell relates the history of San Nicholas, the Channel Island off the coast of Los Angeles that is the basis for the setting of his fictional island. He also gives an account of the few known facts about the Lost Woman of San Nicholas.

#### **The Lost (or Lone) Woman of San Nicholas Island.**

According to original accounts (which contain some conflicting information), in 1835 a young Indian woman jumped from a ship that was carrying the villagers of Ghalas-at to the Roman Catholic mission at Santa Barbara. In 1853, hunters led by a Captain Nidever found the Indian woman on San Nicholas Island. She had survived alone for eighteen years and was dressed in a skirt made of cormorant feathers. Her Indian dialect was unknown to anyone at the Santa Barbara Mission, where she was brought, but she communicated in signs. She told her rescuers that wild dogs had killed her younger brother (or son). She seemed greatly disappointed that none of her relatives could be found, and she died just a few weeks after reaching the mainland. It is estimated that more than thirty thousand Indians who were brought from their native villages to the California missions died within months of their arrival because of the new diseases they encountered.

**The Indians.** More than 200,000 Indians were living in California when the Spanish arrived in 1542. They spoke hundreds of dialects, which can be grouped into at least seven languages. The unique dialect of the isolated Channel Islands is believed to have been a variation of Shoshonean.

In the 1800s, Aleuts, natives of the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, traveled south to hunt sea otters on islands

### SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

This novel will be most interesting to middle-school children. The strong heroine will appeal to girls, but boys will have no trouble identifying with Karana as a

along the California coast. It is not surprising that the Aleut hunters in the novel were led by a Russian sea captain. Russia colonized Alaska beginning in 1784 and sold it to the United States in 1867. (Note also that during the time the Indian woman lived alone on San Nicholas, Mexico, in 1848, ceded California to the United States.)

## MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**Karana**, the narrator, twelve years old at the beginning of the novel; she is also known as **Won-a-pa-lei**, Girl with Long Black Hair.

**Ramo**, Karana's brother, who is six years younger than she.

**Captain Orlov**, a Russian who comes to the island with forty Aleuts to hunt sea otters.

**Chowig**, Karana's father, Chief of Ghalas-at, an Indian village on the island.

**Ulape**, Karana's sister, two years older than Karana.

**Kimki**, an old man who becomes chief after Chowig's death.

**Matasaip**, the chief of the Ghalas-at after Kimki leaves.

**Nanko**, a young Indian with whom Ulape is in love.

**Rontu**, leader of wild dogs and Karana's pet. His son is **Rontu-Aru**. Other animals are **Mon-a-nee/Won-a-nee**, an otter, and **Tainor** and **Lurai**, birds.

**Tutok**, Aleut girl who comes to the island with another group of hunters.

## PLOT

**Chapter 1.** We meet the **main character**, Karana, and her younger brother, Ramo, in an idyllic island **setting**. Karana soon sights an Aleut ship, and the reader's interest is hooked, for few ships visit the Island of the Blue Dolphins. In a **foreshadowing** of trouble, Karana is surprised when she hears her father, Chief Chowig, telling Captain Orlov his real name, a secret usually not divulged to strangers. Orlov wants his men to camp on the island while they hunt sea otter. It's clear that Orlov is unhappy about the payment the chief demands: half of the catch, to be paid in kind.

**Chapter 2.** In a **foreshadowing of conflict** between the Aleut hunters and the villagers of Ghalas-at, Chowig warns his people against visiting the Aleut camp; he says that Aleuts do not understand friendship and caused trouble in the past.

**Chapter 3.** Karana worries that the hunters will kill all the otters; she enjoys seeing the otters and considers them her friends. Her father laughs at her foolishness; he is concerned that the hunters will leave the island without paying the village.

**Chapter 4.** The Aleuts get ready to leave quickly because a storm is about to break. **External conflict** (hunters versus villagers) breaks out as the Aleuts load

otter pelts onto the ship. Orlov gives the chief a chest filled, he says, with a string of beads and an iron spearhead for each pelt. The chief demands three more chests and says that the rest of the pelts cannot be taken until he receives them. When an Aleut knocks down Chowig, the chief's men rush to his aid, but a shot from the deck of the ship fells several of them. The Aleuts run for their boat, leaving many warriors, including Chief Chowig, dead.

**Chapter 5.** Twenty-seven men have been killed, leaving only fifteen, seven of them old. Kimki, an old man, is chosen to be chief. He divides the necessary hunting and gathering work among the men and women who survived. In the spring, Kimki sets off, alone in his canoe, to find a country in the east that he remembers from his boyhood. He hopes to find a place where his people can live happily again.

**Chapter 6.** The villagers live in fear of the Aleuts' return. When a ship does arrive, Matasaip, the new chief, realizes that it belongs not to Aleuts but to white men. Kimki has sent them to bring the Indians to the place he found.

**Chapter 7.** The wind is rising, and the villagers must hurry to the boats. Karana won't let her little brother, Ramo, go back for the fishing spear he has forgotten, but when the Indians reach the shore, Ramo is missing. Nanko mistakenly tells Karana he is on the ship, but as the ship is leaving the cove, Karana sees Ramo running, spear in hand, on a nearby cliff. Matasaip tells Karana that the ship will return for Ramo on another day. **Suspense** rises as Karana pleads for the ship to go back for Ramo. Karana shows bravery, strength, and selflessness when she leaps overboard and swims ashore.

**Chapter 8.** Karana and Ramo, alone on the island, find that a pack of wild dogs has stolen most of the food left behind. During the night, Ramo leaves the hut. The next day, Karana finds him dead, the victim of the wild-dog pack he had apparently been hunting. Karana follows the dogs to their cave and vows to avenge her brother's death.

**Chapter 9.** Haunted by memories of the dead, Karana decides to leave the village. According to her tribe's law, women may not make weapons, but her brother's death has changed Karana. She has become angry, fearful, and vengeful. She makes her camp on the island's rocky headland and practices using the weapons she has made.

**Chapter 10.** A year passes while Karana, increasingly lonely, watches for the ship's return. She kills three of the wild dogs but not their leader. Desperate to leave the island, she sets off in a canoe to find the country that Kimki had said lay to the east. The canoe leaks badly, and Karana realizes the journey is too dangerous. Dolphins, a good omen, swim ahead of her canoe. They signal a **turning point** in the plot. Karana is happy to return to the island.

**Chapter 11.** Karana accepts her fate; she will stay on the island until the white men return. No longer bitter but determined to survive, she resolves again to kill the pack of wild dogs. But first she must build a house for herself on the headland. In contrast with the **mood** of previous chapters, here the mood is upbeat, and the **descriptive details** are almost lyrical as Karana sees good omens all around her.

**Chapter 12.** Karana makes a fence from whalebone ribs. She builds a house of poles from tree trunks covered with kelp (seaweed). She is determined to find a male sea elephant (a type of seal) so that she can make stronger spearheads from its tusks.

**Chapter 13.** Karana watches an old bull sea elephant fight a young one. As she tries to get away from the sea elephants, she hurts her leg.

**Chapter 14.** Karana rests while her leg heals. Driven by thirst, but even more by her will to survive, she crawls to a spring. She finds a cave that her ancestors once lived in and decides to make it into a second home for herself. Later, returning to the place where she saw the sea elephants, she finds the bones of the old bull and makes spearheads from its tusks. **Suspense** builds as she gets ready to kill the wild dogs.

**Chapter 15.** Karana believes that the leader of the pack is a dog that was left behind by the Aleuts. She piles brush inside the dogs' cave and sets fire to it. Karana shoots the leader in the chest. Now we see a change in Karana and new **character traits**: her growing compassion and love for animals. She does not kill the mother dog or her pups that she finds in the cave. When she finds the wounded leader, she carries it to her house, removes the arrow from its chest, and feeds it. After four days, the dog no longer threatens her, and she names it Rontu, which means Fox Eyes.

**Chapter 16.** Karana works to repair a canoe so that she can escape if the Aleuts return. With Rontu for company, she is no longer lonely. She paddles the canoe around the island and finds a cave with a devilfish (a kind of octopus) near it. She decides to make the special kind of spear she needs to catch the devilfish.

**Chapter 17.** In the spring, Rontu disappears, and Karana finds him fighting two wild dogs. Rontu wins out over both dogs and returns to Karana's house. The wild dogs never return.

**Chapter 18.** Karana captures and tames two birds. She names them Tainor and Lurai. Karana is happy and at peace with herself and her environment.

**Chapter 19.** Karana again sees the giant devilfish. **Suspense** rises as Karana and Rontu swim toward it and she tries to land it on a sandbar. The devilfish seems to be dead but suddenly grabs Rontu in its tentacles and drags him into the water. Karana stabs the devilfish even as it attacks her; she saves Rontu, and they return home.

**Chapter 20.** Now we see a character who is self-reliant. Karana invents individual ways of doing things that the villagers used to do cooperatively. To keep gulls away from her food, she hangs abalone shells from poles. She kills cormorants to make a skirt from their feathers. Exploring another sea cave, she finds images of ancestors and a skeleton. She calls this cave Black Cave and decides never to return to it. The plot takes a **dramatic turn** when Karana sights a ship coming from the north; she takes her pets to her cave, hiding evidence that someone has recently lived in the house. The ship anchors, and Aleuts land to hunt for otter. Karana sees a girl cooking on the shore.

**Chapter 21.** Karana worries that the Aleut girl may find her footprints, so she stays with Rontu in the cave during the day. One day, she stands at the mouth of the cave and sees the Aleut girl watching her. Rontu recognizes the girl, who identifies herself as Tutok. After Tutok leaves, Karana decides to flee to another part of the island. Just before she goes, she finds a necklace of black stones that had been left on a rock in front of her cave.

**Chapter 22.** In a **key scene**, Karana, hiding near the cave, calls to Tutok as she approaches. Karana puts on the necklace; the girls teach each other their names and words that mean "pretty" in their languages. Karana tells Tutok her secret name and makes a circlet of shells for Tutok's hair. When the Aleuts leave, Karana misses Tutok.

**Chapter 23.** Karana finds wounded otters that the Aleuts left behind; she kills those that are suffering and will not survive. She finds a young one that is not badly hurt and feeds it until its wound heals. Karana is now fully capable of caring for herself, yet she misses human companionship. She thinks often of Tutok and wishes to see her again.

**Chapter 24.** As she nurtures and tames the creatures around her, Karana continues to transform the wilderness into a home. Her thoughts and actions communicate an important **theme**: the interrelatedness of all living things. Karana will never again kill another mammal or bird because she feels that these creatures have become her friends.

**Chapter 25.** After many summers, Karana no longer expects another ship to arrive. In a beautiful and moving scene, Rontu dies of old age, and Karana buries him.

**Chapter 26.** After several unsuccessful attempts to catch a dog that she thinks is Rontu's son, Karana drugs the spring whose water the dogs drink from. When the dog falls asleep, she takes it back to her house, tames it, and calls it Rontu-Aru, Son of Rontu.

**Chapter 27.** As the **climax** of the novel draws near, the author once again shows the destructive power of nature. One hot day while Karana is out in the canoe, a great tidal wave strikes the island. Karana saves herself by clinging to a cliff. That night an earthquake shakes the island.

**Chapter 28.** As Karana repairs her canoe, she sees a ship in the distance. Three men land, and Karana knows they are not Aleuts. In the **climax** of the novel, the men find Karana's fire and her canoe. She runs to her house and puts on her best clothes. She recalls the happy times she has had on the island, but she wants to be where other people live. She follows footprints down to the cove—and sees the ship moving away.

**Chapter 29.** Two years pass, and the ship returns. Karana has watched for it every day. Once again she dresses in her best clothes. Three men reach Karana's house. They have come to hunt otters, but Karana, loyal to the creatures she loves, pretends not to know where they can be found. On the tenth day, Karana leaves the island with Rontu-Aru and the hunters; dolphins swim ahead of the ship as it sails to Mission Santa Barbara.

### APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students working individually on research projects might focus on the following activities.

#### 1. Comparing Historical Truth and Fictional Truth

Let readers discuss the difference between historical and fictional accounts of the same event. Questions such as the following might be discussed:

- What is the difference between a factual account and a fictional story based on the factual account? Let students give examples of other fictional stories based on fact.
- Why are fictional accounts often more interesting and more emotionally moving than factual accounts? Many students may prefer factual accounts to fiction; encourage students to debate the issue.

#### 2. Comparing Crusoe and Karana

Daniel Defoe is believed to have based Robinson Crusoe on a real person, a sailor who was marooned on an island for almost five years. Advanced readers might enjoy reading Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and comparing the two survival tales.

#### 3. Creating an Island

Students who are interested in geography might enjoy the following activities:

- Using the details that Karana gives, draw a detailed map of her island.
- Alone or with others, create the kind of island you would prefer to be marooned on. Specify the latitude and longitude, vegetation, topography, weather, and animals. Draw pictures that illustrate your island.

### MEET THE WRITER

**Scott O'Dell** (1898–1989) was born on Terminal Island, Los Angeles, California. After working for twenty-five years as a cameraman, newspaper columnist, editor, and writer of novels for adults, O'Dell wrote *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, his first book for children. It won the Newbery Medal in 1961. The Children's Literature Association judged it one of the ten best children's books published in the United States in the past two hundred years. O'Dell was the first American to receive the Hans Christian Andersen Medal (1972), the highest international award for children's literature. In all, O'Dell wrote twenty-six books for children. He was working on another novel when he died at the age of ninety-one.

### READ ON

**Scott O'Dell, *Zia*.** Sequel to *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Tells the story of fourteen-year-old Zia, an Indian girl who is Karana's niece. Zia wants to rescue her aunt, left behind on Island of the Blue Dolphins eighteen years before. When Karana is brought to Mission Santa Barbara, she changes Zia's life.

**Michael Dorris, *Morning Girl*.** A short, beautifully written story narrated from the point of view of two Taino children on a Bahamian island in 1492.

**Mary Whitebird, "Ta-Na-E-Ka."** A short story about a young girl who must survive on her own in the woods as part of the coming-of-age ritual of her Kaw ancestors.

**George Toudouze, "Three Skeleton Key."** In a weird and frightening short story set on an isolated island off the coast of French Guiana, three men in a lighthouse struggle against a vicious invading army.

**Patricia Lauber, "When the Earth Shakes."** This non-fiction account describes one of nature's most awesome forces—the earthquake.

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