Island of the Blue Dolphins

by Scott O’Dell

SUMMARY

Island of the Blue Dolphins is an adventure story set in the nineteenth century. Published in 1961, the book was highly acclaimed, won the Newbery Medal, and still remains very popular. It was made into a film in 1963.

Based loosely on true events, the story follows the plight of a young girl left alone on an island when her people leave for a safer place. Accepting her fate with immense practicality, the girl sets about making a home for herself. The reader learns how she defends herself against the wild dogs, how she protects herself from the elements, and how she develops a harmony with the wild life around her.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Scott O’Dell’s exciting adventure stories, dramatic historical tales and romances have been enjoyed by millions of readers. He had a magnificent writing career, winning nearly every major award available to a children’s writer. Yet he never intended to be a writer of children’s books, and started out as a successful adult novelist.

In the late 1950s, however, O’Dell found himself consumed with anger at the hunters who were relentless in their execution of wild life in the mountains east of San Diego. Because of this, O’Dell wrote his first children's book, Island of the Blue Dolphins, as a protest against hunting.

The issue of hunting and the instinct for survival are two closely linked themes running through Island of the Blue Dolphins. Hunting and survival go hand in hand. On the very first page two children are searching the beach for plants that they can eat. Although there is food in abundance on the island, it is not served up on a plate, and each person, even the small children, must work to survive. The business of existence is of primary importance to everyone. This can be seen when a shoal of big fish get marooned on the rocks, and a teenage girl races to the village to tell the women. There is great excitement and all the women run to help gather the bonus food.

Karana’s tribe hunt to survive. However, the arrival of the Aleuts puts a different perspective on the issue of hunting. These people do not hunt to survive, they hunt to make money. They hunt the otters until they are nearly all gone, take their skins to sell, and leave the bodies decaying on the beach. In their greed they try to avoid paying for the otter skins, which leads to a battle and the death of many young men of Karana’s tribe.

The surviving otters remember the hunters and every year at the time the Aleuts arrived at the island, an old otter leads the others away to safety, and survival.

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After the fight with the Aleuts, Karana’s tribe is very short of men and, choosing the same method of survival as the otters, they leave the island. Once Karana is alone on the island, she has to draw on all her practical skills to

ABOUT SCOTT O’DELL

Scott O’Dell was an American, and was born on May 23rd 1898 in Los Angeles, which was then a frontier town. His father was a railway worker, which meant that the family moved frequently around southern California. San Pedro and Rattlesnake Island were two places that influenced the young O’Dell with their frontier atmosphere and sound and smell of the sea. As a boy, O’Dell loved to be outdoors, especially on the sea paddling logs, hunting for abalones and tracking fish in caves. Throughout his life O’Dell had an affinity with nature: ‘The first sound I remember was a wildcat scratching on the roof of our house.’

O’Dell worked as a cameraman on the original filmset of ‘Ben Hur’, where he used the first technicolour camera. He also worked as a book editor for the Los Angeles Times. It was during this period that he began to write books. He became a full-time writer in 1934, writing fiction and non-fiction for adults. In the late 1950s he began to write books for children, and never looked back. ‘Writing stories you hope children will read is more rewarding than writing for adults. Adults are not good correspondents. But if children like your books, they respond with thousands of letters,’ said O’Dell.

In his later years O’Dell and his wife, Elizabeth, lived in tune with their natural surroundings, deep in the heart of rural Westchester County, New York. O’Dell died in 1989.
survive. She must make a home that is safe from the wild dogs and is protected from the rain and the cold; she must protect her food from the animals; and above all she must make weapons and hunt. She has watched her father and brothers make weapons many times, and follows what they did. Hunting for survival is the natural thing for her to do.

Karana also hunts the wild dogs who killed her brother. She does this to avenge her brother's death. She almost kills the leader of the wild dogs, but then helps him to survive, an action which is the beginning of her change in attitude to hunting.

She hunts the devilfish which fights valiantly to survive causing Karana so much pain that she vows never to hunt another devilfish.

By the end of the book, Karana's attitude to hunting and to animals has changed dramatically. She learns to live in harmony with nature, because the very animals she once hunted become her closest friends.

Written in the first person, Island of the Blue Dolphins illustrates O’Dell’s love of nature. A reverence for all life shines through the story as Karana learns to live in harmony with all the other animals on the island.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Before giving the students the reader, write the title of the book and the chapter titles on the board. In small groups students discuss these questions:

(a) Which chapter title do you like best? Why?
(b) What do you think the story will be about?
(c) What does the book title make you think of?
(d) Which chapter title would be best for a song?
(e) Which title would be best for a poem?
(f) Which title would be best for a book?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Chapters 1-3

Write the word ‘hunting’ on the board. Tell the class to think of as many words as they can to do with hunting. Write all the words on the board. Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss:

(a) Why do Karana’s tribe hunt?
(b) Why do the Aleuts hunt?
(c) Which reasons do you think are better? Why?

Chapters 4-6

Divide students into small groups. Ask groups to think up one title for all three chapters. Then they write down groups of words that these chapters make them think of. Each group makes a presentation of their title and their groups of words. The results can be pinned up on the wall.

Chapters 7-9

Divide students into small groups. Ask each group to write notes about a usual day in their life, and a usual day in Karana’s life. Ask groups what they wrote. Put notes on the blackboard. Then ask students to discuss: ‘You are alone on an island. What do you miss about your usual life?’

Chapters 10-12

Divide students into small groups. Give each group the name of one of the animals in the book. Each group discusses and writes down how and where their animal lives on the island; how their animal survives the great sea wave and great earth wave; and describes Karana through their animal’s eyes.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Bring in a selection of newspapers for the class to look at. Teach the word headline, and talk about the different kinds of headline there are in the different newspapers. Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to write down what they think are the three most important things that happen in the book. Write all these on the board.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Each group chooses one thing and writes a headline for that story to suit a newspaper of their choice.

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>bead (n) a small ball of glass or wood</td>
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<td></td>
<td>cliff (n) high, steep rock, usually by the sea</td>
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<td></td>
<td>dolphin (n) a quite large, friendly, intelligent sea animal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>hunt (v) to chase and kill</td>
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<td></td>
<td>kelp (n) a brown sea plant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>otter (n) a small, brown animal that swims and eats fish; it likes playing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>paddle (v) to make a boat move with a long piece of flat wood that you hold in your hands</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ravine (n) a deep, narrow valley with steep sides</td>
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<td></td>
<td>shell (n) the hard outside part that covers some fish and animals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>spear (n) a long piece of wood with a sharp knife at one end</td>
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<td></td>
<td>string (n) this is long, thin and strong, and is used to tie things</td>
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<td></td>
<td>wave (n) a line of water on the surface of the sea that is higher than the other water; it goes up and down</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>whale (n) a very big animal that lives in the sea</td>
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<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>arrow (n) this is a sharp stick; it can kill things if it hits them</td>
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<td></td>
<td>bow (n) arrows are shot from this</td>
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<td></td>
<td>cave (n) a large hole in the side of a rock or a mountain</td>
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<td></td>
<td>feather (n) birds are covered with these</td>
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<td></td>
<td>fox (n) a wild animal which looks like a dog with a thick tail</td>
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<td></td>
<td>sea elephant (n) a very fat sea animal that likes fighting</td>
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</tbody>
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Read the Introduction in your book and answer these questions
(a) Where did O’Dell grow up?
(b) What three jobs did O’Dell do?
(c) Where did O’Dell study?
(d) What were his most popular books about?

CHAPTERS 1-3

Chapter 1
1 Who are these descriptions about?
(a) twelve years old, long black hair
(b) large flat faces, long black hair
(c) tall, with a yellow beard
(d) small, very clever, with large black eyes
(e) the leader of the village
(f) they swim very fast, lie on the kelp bed and play or sleep in the sun
2 Answer these questions.
(a) Who lives on the island?
(b) Who comes to the island?
(c) Why do they come to the island?
(d) What agreement do the two leaders come to?
(e) Do the two groups of people become friends?
3 Talk with another student.
You are two Aleuts. Talk about the island and what the people here are like.

Chapter 2
1 Put these sentences in the right order:
(a) Kimki leaves the island to look for a new home for everyone.
(b) Orlov and his men leave the island.
(c) The hunters take the otter skins to their boat.
(d) White men come to take the villagers to Kimki.
(e) The hunters and the men from the village fight.
(f) Everyone watches and waits for Kimki to return.
(g) Karana’s father dies.
2 Discuss with another student.
Karana’s father makes two mistakes: he tells the hunters his secret name, and he tries to stop them leaving with the skins.
Do you agree with this? If you do, why? If you do not, why not?
3 Why are the islanders happy to leave the island?

Chapter 3
1 Who says these words, who to and what about?
(a) ‘You are all such ugly women that they will be afraid.’
(b) ‘Do not go back to the house.’
(c) ‘He is on the ship. He came by the first boat.’
(d) ‘We have to stop, we have to!’
(e) ‘I will be sorry if it comes.’
(f) ‘You are not strong enough to move them.’
(g) ‘I will try to think of a better one.’
2 Work with another student.
You are Nanko and Ulape. You see Karana jump into the sea. Talk about Karana and Ramo and what has happened.

CHAPTERS 4-6

Chapter 4
1 Complete these sentences.
(a) Karana ......................... all the houses in the village.
(b) She finds the ....................... that the Aleuts brought to the island.
(c) Karana’s father said, ‘If a woman makes a ....................... it will break when she ....................... it most.’
(d) On a rock, Karana makes a bed out of ....................... .
(e) The best time on the Island of the Blue Dolphins is ....................... .
(f) When winter comes Karana is very ....................... .
(g) Karana leaves the island in a boat but has to turn back because the ....................... comes in through a ....................... .
2 Karana thinks about her people’s laws when she wants to make a spear. But she really needs a spear. Imagine that she talks to her father. Write the conversation down or work with another student and have the conversation.

Chapter 5
1 Put the two halves of these sentences together.
(a) Karana knows she will never try to leave the island again ...
(b) The first thing Karana must do ...
(c) She needs to make a fence ...
(d) Karana’s main food is ...
(e) Karana does not finish her house ...
(f) ... to protect her food from the small red foxes.
(g) ... until the middle of winter.
(h) ... is build a new home.
(iv) ...small fish and shellfish, and soup from plants.
(v) ...because it is her home.

2 Karana is happy to be back on her island. Discuss with another student or write down why she is happy to be back.

Chapter 6
1 Answer these questions.
(a) Why does Karana shoot a sea elephant?
(b) Which one does Karana choose to shoot? Why?
(c) Why do the two sea elephants fight?
(d) Why does Karana stay in her house for five days?
(e) Why does Karana stay in the cave for six days?
(f) How does Karana make the dogs come out of their cave?
(g) Who is Fox Eyes? How do Karana and Fox Eyes become friends?

2 Discuss with another student.
(a) Why doesn't Karana kill the big dog? What do you think her reasons are?
(b) What is the difference between Karana's hunting and the Aleuts' hunting?

CHAPTERS 10-12
Chapter 10
Answer these questions.
1 Karana makes friends with some animals in this chapter. Which animals?
2 Karana does not kill animals any more. Why not?
3 After Rontu dies, how does Karana get her new pet dog?

Chapter 11
1 Answer these questions.
(a) What is the weather like before the great wave comes?
(b) How does Karana get away from the great wave?
(c) What happens after the great wave?
(d) What does Karana think about when she walks towards the visitors?
2 Talk with another student.
What do you think will happen now? How will the story end?

Chapter 12
1 Talk with another student.
(a) Who are the men on the ship?
(b) Why do they want Karana to wear a dress?
(c) What does Karana learn when she is alone on the island?
2 Talk with another student.
Karana says, 'There is no other sound like the voice of a man or woman in all the world.'
(a) What does she mean?
(b) Have you ever felt like this?

Activities after reading the book
Talk with two or three other students.
What do you think the author of the book thinks about hunting? Why do you think this?