

Call It Courage Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Mafatu is afraid of the ocean. As a young member of the tribe on the Polynesian island Hikueru, a people for whom sailing and fishing are a fundamental way of life, Mafatu's fear is a major social stigma. Although he experienced the great trauma at the age of three of nearly drowning and seeing his mother die, those around him have little sympathy or understanding for his fears. Even his father is ashamed of the way Mafatu behaves. As a result of his inability to go out in a canoe and fish, Mafatu is left behind to build spears, nets, and other necessary tools.

Other youth his age tease and reject Mafatu, and one night he overhears their taunts and cannot stand it any longer. He doesn't want to continue to live with his fear and his shame, so he resolves to go out alone and face his inner demons on the sea. Mafatu takes a canoe and with his canine companion Uri and their albatross friend Kivi, he heads out toward the open ocean. Mafatu has not gone prepared however, and a storm nearly destroys his canoe and sweeps away the few things he brought with him, even his clothing. Uri and Mafatu drift in the canoe for days, growing more starved, dehydrated, and sun burnt. Just as it seems all hope is lost, an island appears in the distance. The current carries the canoe towards this island, and although the coral reef surrounding it smashes the canoe, Mafatu and Uri make it to shore alive.

When Mafatu comes to, he drinks some fresh water from a stream and bandages a cut on his leg. Revived by this, he begins to explore his new surroundings. The island has thick jungle and an inactive volcano at its center, and this terrain is strange to Mafatu, who comes from an island of flat plains and few palm trees. Towards the top of the volcano there is a plateau which offers an excellent view of the whole island.

On the other side of the island from the beach upon which he landed, Mafatu discovers a clearing with a pyramid and idol in it. This is a sacred site of sacrifice for the savage eaters-of-men, a cannibalistic tribe of which Mafatu has heard terrible stories. He is extremely frightened, because although there is no one on the island now, they are sure to return at some time. However, he sees a well-made spearhead at the shrine, and knowing it will be very useful to him he snatches it up before running back to the plateau. Mafatu will use this good vantage point to carefully watch out for any sign that the eaters-of-men are returning.

Meanwhile, there is much work for Mafatu to do in order to survive and make himself comfortable on the island. All of his time on Hikueru constructing tools and perfecting those skills is now coming in very handy. He builds a fire to cook his food, and a shelter from bamboo and woven leaves. Mafatu begins to make a new canoe that he can use to return home. He creates all manner of tools, such as nets, fishhooks, bowls, and mats. Mafatu replaces his lost clothing, and creates spears and knives from a whale skeleton he is lucky to find. He makes a raft to use until the canoe is complete, and a fish trap for catching more food farther offshore.



There is one problem with the fish trap, however, and this is the hammerhead shark that regularly raids the trap before Mafatu can get what he has caught. One day Mafatu goes out with a knife to end this trouble once and for all. When he sees the shark he grows afraid, however, and can do nothing even as the shark completely destroys the fish trap. It isn't until Uri is knocked into the water that Mafatu is driven to act. He dives in to save his friend from being eaten, and stabs the shark with the knife, succeeding in killing it. Mafatu helps Uri back onto the raft, grateful to have found the courage to rescue his companion.

This is the first of several such victories for Mafatu. One day while climbing to the plateau to look out for the eaters-of-men, a wild boar charges at Mafatu. He wants to run away but instead acts quickly and uses a spear to kill the wild boar. This is a feat of bravery that even the warriors of his tribe have not succeeded in, and Mafatu returns to his campsite for a triumphant feast. He makes a necklace of the boar's teeth which he cannot wait for his tribe to see.

Once the canoe is finished, Mafatu takes it out to test it and to retrieve that day's catch from the fish trap. Unfortunately his knife falls into the ocean while he does so. Mafatu dives down to get it back, because he would hate to lose it, but is attacked by a large octopus while he is at the ocean floor by the coral reef. Mafatu stabs wildly at it, and he is quickly becoming desperate as his lungs scream for oxygen. It seems as if the octopus is going to win, when one well-aimed stab hits the creature in its eye. Mafatu makes it back to the canoe, gasping for air.

Distracted by all of these events, Mafatu did not check for the eaters-of-men that day, which was a huge mistake because they arrive the next morning. Mafatu observes the beginning of their ritual at the sacred site, trying to remain hidden, but he is discovered by four of the savages. They chase him back to his beach, where he leaps into his canoe and tries to get away. At first the eaters-of-men swim after him, but then they turn back and follow in their own canoes. They follow Mafatu out into the ocean and pursue him for over a day before finally giving up.

It would seem Mafatu is home free. However, the currents are now working against him, and he has difficulty making any progress towards his island of Hikuera. As days pass the food and water he brought runs out, and Mafatu once more grows dehydrated and weak. Finally, he notices signs of land in the distance, and realizes with great joy and relief that it is his home. On the beach, the people of his tribe have gathered to see this stranger that is approaching. Even his own father does not recognize Mafatu at first, but when they understand who he is they are amazed. Mafatu's father proudly announces his son's bravery, and the tale of Mafatu's adventures is told for generations to come.



Chapter 1

Summary

On the Polynesian island of Hikueru, a tale is still told of the boy Mafatu, who is also known as the Boy Who Was Afraid. For the people of the islands, courage is one of the most important traits for a person to have. An individual such as Mafatu, who is afraid of the ocean, has a hard time fitting in among their society, where most are brave warriors and fishermen.

Living on an island, Mafatu is surrounded by the sea at all times, and it is the one thing he fears most. His fear likely comes from a time when he was only three years old, and although he is 15 years old now, that fear is still strong. When he was three, Mafatu's mother took him out in their canoe to look for sea urchin. The other fishermen warn her about the possibility of a hurricane coming, but she stays out in the ocean longer. A storm does come, and it creates a strong current that drags the canoe with Mafatu and his mother in it farther away from the shore. High waves crash over their boat and it is eventually knocked over, dumping mother and child into the sea. They are tossed about in the ocean overnight and into the next day, until finally Mafatu's mother drags them onto a coral ledge called Tekoto. She just manages to give Mafatu a cracked coconut to eat, and then dies.

Since that tragic day, Mafatu has been frightened by the sound of the ocean, and thoughts of it haunt his dreams. Mafatu's father is ashamed of his son, the elders of the tribe believe Mafatu is possessed by a ghost spirit, and the other children tease and exclude him. Mafatu mostly wants to make his father proud, and he tries very hard to overcome his fear. He cannot, however, and it makes him a clumsy and useless fisherman. The others make him stay home and work on making spears and nets. Mafatu's only true companions are a yellow dog named Uri, and Kivi, an albatross with misshapen feet but who can fly beautifully.

The time comes for all of the boys in the village to practice their fishing skills on the many bonitos swimming through their reef during the season of storms. A boy named Kana visits Mafatu and suggests that he should go with them, but Mafatu cannot even bring himself to reply and Kana leaves. Later that night, Mafatu overhears a group of boys talking excitedly about the fishing expedition the next day. Kana is among them, and talks behind Mafatu's back about his fear, laughing and calling him a coward. Disgusted with himself, Mafatu decides once and for all to conquer his fear. He will travel out into the ocean by himself, south towards other islands. Mafatu takes a canoe from the shore, the dog Uri jumping in beside him, and pushes off into the night sea. At the last moment, the albatross Kivi dives down from the sky to join them, easing some of Mafatu's concern.



Analysis

The first chapter sets up the novel's situation for the reader and gives insight into the background of Mafatu's character. It is explained that due to a tragic accident when he was three years old, in which he witnessed the death of his mother, Mafatu is afraid of the ocean. This fear causes him to be ostracized within his tribe, who are fishermen. Even at 15 he is unable to go out in a canoe and fish with the other boys of his age. Instead he must stay behind and perform menial tasks which are often considered 'women's work'.

This initial chapter also provides the event that provokes Mafatu to finally take action and stand up to his fears. He overhears some of the other boys talking excitedly about the fishing they will all be doing the next day. They make fun of Mafatu behind his back, however, because he is the only one who will not be going. One of the boys calls him a coward. Hearing this gives Mafatu the push he needs, and he makes the dramatic decision to leave in a canoe alone, save for his animal companions, and head out into the ocean, the one thing he fears the most.

Vocabulary

Missionaries, courage, urged, midst, indifference, surrounded, hurricane, barrier reef, sea urchins, scattered, intervals, impending, current, millrace, seized, frigate, outrigger, capsized, uninhabited, islet, awash, beckoned, pinnacle, sustaining, pandanus, eternal, quivered, assault, christened, sympathy, scorn, jibes, coir, nondescript, inseparable, albatross, heckling, fledgling, envious, anxiously, bonitos, honed, faltered, resentment, conquer, lagoon, jeered



Chapter 2

Summary

A new day begins as Mafatu's canoe is carried across the ocean by its currents. He can no longer see his home island of Hikueru, and is surrounded by nothing but the sea and sky. Kivi the albatross flies off, leaving Mafatu feeling sad and with only Uri as company. The sea is turbulent and full of dangerous animals. Mafatu opens a drinking nut for its liquid and shares the meat with Uri. The wind becomes stronger, and it seems that a storm is arriving.

Suddenly thunder and lightning surround Mafatu's canoe, and high waves begin to toss the small craft about. The sail is broken off and swept away, followed soon by the mast. Mafatu and Uri huddle in the bottom of the canoe, clinging as best they can. Finally a single huge wave crashes down onto the canoe, tearing the paddle from Mafatu's hands. The two companions barely survive. The wave strips away everything Mafatu had with him: the paddle, drinking nuts, his fish spear, his knife, even his clothes. He is left naked in every sense of the word.

Mafatu and Uri lay together in the wrecked canoe as night passes. The following day the sun beats down on them, hot and dry, making their dehydration worse. Only the next night brings any relief from the sun, although they are still thirsty. As another morning dawns, Mafatu's spirits are lifted slightly by Uri's weak tail wagging as the dog clings to life. The albatross Kivi also returns and flies in front of the canoe, seeming to lead it onward. When Mafatu looks in the direction in which Kivi is flying, he spots land in the distance.

Even though the island could belong to any tribe, even cannibals, Mafatu is extremely happy and relieved to see it. He cries out in a hoarse but glad voice, and watches the island carefully all day as the canoe drifts towards it. Mafatu is surprised to see a mountain on the island, because his home of Hikueru, which is the only land he has seen before, is completely flat. Another night begins to fall, and because Mafatu cannot guide the canoe it is helplessly drawn in with the currents. Waves crash their vessel against the reef, breaking it apart and flinging Mafatu and Uri into the ocean. They weakly swim towards the island, just barely dragging themselves up onto land. Mafatu crawls towards a fresh water stream, but collapses before he can drink.

Analysis

In the second chapter Mafatu discovers just how dangerous the ocean can be during the stormy season, as thunder, lightning, and fast winds ravage the seas around him. His canoe is torn apart and waves wash away the few items he had brought with him. It seems that his fears of the ocean are being proven. For days he struggles to stay alive



through starvation, dehydration, and the burning heat of the sun. He survives despite the odds, however.

Mafatu finally reaches land, after the canoe is shattered completely on the coral reef. He staggers towards fresh water but passes out before he can even take a drink. Uri has survived as well, and stays faithfully by his master's side. The setting of the island represents a fresh start. Mafatu is stripped of everything he owned and knew before, even his literal clothing, and lands naked on this new beach with the ability to remake himself.

Vocabulary

Dismal, idly, glimpse, atoll, slatted, breadth, ascending, desolation, ominous, oppressive, varnished, submerged, shoal, cachalot, parched, gelatinous, ballast, frothing, scudded, instantaneous, sennit, inevitably, rending, churn, buoyancy, tumult, livid, slewed, trough, gradual, prostrate, quailing, hoarse, inescapable, luminous, sultry, clammy, feeble, profoundly, lulled, thwart, reassuring, wafted, tantalizing, riptide, unhampered



Chapter 3

Summary

Mafatu awakens on the beach, lying beside the pool of fresh water. Uri is nearby eating a crab that he has caught, and Kivi is there as well, asleep. Thankful to be alive and on solid land, Mafatu sits up. He discovers that his right leg is wounded from hitting the coral reef. Mafatu drinks from the pool, finally relieving his dehydration. He thinks of all the tasks ahead of him, finding food, building a fire, searching the island, and wonders if the island might be inhabited by the dangerous eaters-of-men. The area seems deserted and peaceful, however.

Mafatu finds a tree with lemons and picks some to use their juice to clean his wound, and makes a bandage out of leaves and vine. He notices a plateau high up the mountain, and follows a rough path probably made by wild pigs or goats towards it. Mafatu will use the ledge as a vantage point to see more of the island. This island is full of many more fruit-bearing trees than Mafatu's home of Hikueru, such as coconut, banana, orange, guava, and mango. This is due to the rich nature of the soil, thanks to the once-active volcano.

On the plateau, Mafatu still does not see any sign that other humans live on the island. The thought that he could be entirely alone there makes him feel lonelier than he did in the canoe. In the distance Mafatu can see another island, with a great plume of smoke coming from the peak of its volcano. He realizes it must be one of the Smoking Islands that belong to the eaters-of-men, as the elders of his tribe have said, and Mafatu worries because it is somewhat close to the island on which he has landed. From his high vantage point, Mafatu can also see that there are only two areas around the island where the coral reef is broken, and could be passed safely by canoes.

A passing wild boar startles Mafatu from his observations, and Uri goes chasing after it. Mafatu thinks how wonderful it would be if he could hunt and kill a wild pig on his own, even though it is a difficult and dangerous task. He wants to do it to make his tribe proud when he returns, especially his father. Mafatu realizes he will also need a new canoe in order to make the trip back, and plans to start building one the next day. Vowing to the God of the Fishermen, Maui, that he will return home and make his father proud, Mafatu eats a mango from a nearby tree and heads off to explore the other side of the island.

Mafatu notices a natural slide leading down the side of the dormant volcano, made from a past lava flow. He thinks of stories he has heard of children from other tribes who ride down these slides on leaves, and wants to try doing it himself. As he pulls leaves off a banana tree, he realizes the fruit has been cut cleanly off with a knife, and knows that other people have indeed been on this island. Deciding to find out who that was, he takes an exhilarating and quick ride down the lava slide to the other side of the island.



At the bottom of the slide Mafatu sees a clear path through the jungle. He follows it towards the sea and discovers a wide clearing with a pyramid and idol statue at the center. Although the idol is ancient and corroded in places, Mafatu sees a pile of fresh bones at the base of the pyramid and takes this as evidence that others have been here recently. He also observes that the bones are human, and realizes with dread that he has found one of the sacred places of sacrifice belonging to the savage eaters-of-men.

As Mafatu studies the sacrificial area fearfully, he sees a glint among the pile of bones. It is a well-made and sharp spearhead, which Mafatu could really use as a tool for getting food and protecting himself. On edge and feeling as if he is being watched, Mafatu carefully moves forward. Although he is terrified, he forces himself on, and finally reaches out and snatches for the spearhead. A bone is knocked loose, startling him, and Mafatu turns and runs back into the jungle. Panicked, he crashes through the trees and climbs back to the plateau. He has succeeded in getting the spearhead, however, which is clutched in his hand.

Mafatu is exhilarated, not only because he disturbed a sacred place and was not struck dead for his offense, but also because he overcame his fear and for a moment was courageous. He praises Maui, God of the Fishermen, and sings a celebratory song about Taaroa, a hero of his people. Feeling very pleased with himself, Mafatu builds a fire. It comforts him against the loneliness of the island. He cooks a variety of fruit at the fire for his dinner, and weaves coconut tree fronds into a roof for his shelter. Mafatu eats the fruit, sharing it with Uri, and thinks of his plans to build a canoe and return home, victorious. Chapter 3 Analysis

Analysis

Mafatu revives himself with water from the stream, and patches up a cut on his leg that he got from the coral when the canoe was smashed apart. He begins to explore his new surroundings. Unlike his home of Hikuera, which was mostly flat, this island has a dormant volcano at its center and thick jungle surrounding it. As a result of the volcanic ash making the soil fertile, there are many different kinds of plant life in abundance. Because island is bountiful it offers Mafatu many useful raw items to work with, such as bamboo, and various leaves and vines. There is fruit and fish to eat, and even the promise of wild boar if he can manage to kill one.

The island is not a pure paradise, however, and has its darker side. Mafatu discovers evidence that it is the site of cannibalistic sacrifices, and the looming threat of these savages' return is ever-present. Fortunately there is a high plateau that serves as a good look-out from which Mafatu can watch to see if the dreaded eaters-of-men are approaching. Although Mafatu is a bit lonely without human companionship on the island, these are not the kinds of guests he wants to see.



Vocabulary

Extracting, gusto, giddy, cascade, plunged, prompted, sparingly, restoring, relishing, assurance, apprehension, splash, legions, volcanic, congealed, belched, brimstone, fertile, cauterize, winced, caustic, plateau, splendid, vantage, shrill, luxuriant, tormented, aerial, eerie, bleating, circumference, habitation, isolation, forbidding, scarcely, testimony, surveying, hues, consumed, unceasing, basalt, amethyst, polyp, undergrowth, pursuit, naught, impaled, adze, rout, clambered, toboggan, extricated, irresolute, grotesque, contours, fungus, lichens, corroded, convolvulus, strewn, forsake, poised, dislodged, haunches, extremity, exertion, charred, famished



Chapter 4

Summary

Mafatu begins to build his canoe. He fells a tamanu tree by burning it around the base and pulling it down with his own weight. Mafatu reflects on how glad he is now that he spent so much time learning how to make tools back at Hikueru. At the time he had been bored by the tasks, but now they are coming in very handy. He is able to build fish traps, netting, fishhooks, and most importantly a raft to use in the meantime before his canoe is complete. While Mafatu works, he thinks how wonderful it would be to kill a wild boar and make a necklace from its teeth, to be a symbol of his courage.

Days pass, and Mafatu continues to expand his inventory of tools and necessities. Using fibers from a mulberry tree he is able to create a sort of cloth, so that he is no longer naked. He builds a makeshift house from bamboo and leaves, filling it with mats, shelving, bowls, rope, and more clothing. Mafatu discovers a whale skeleton on the beach, and is overjoyed. Using the bones, he will be able to create many sharp tools and weapons, such as knives, spears, and better fishhooks. He spends many hours grinding a ten inch long knife, and is very proud of himself at the end result.

Mafatu thinks the knife will be useful in arming himself against the enemy that has emerged in his time at the beach: a hammerhead shark that has been breaking his fish trap and eating the fish from it. When the knife is finished, Mafatu goes out on his raft with Uri to pull up the fish trap and gather what has been caught. They arrive just in time to see the hammerhead approach the trap and crush it in its jaws. Mafatu is furious, but there is nothing he can do but watch his work being destroyed. Uri runs across the raft barking at the shark, and a wave knocks him off and into the ocean. The hammerhead notices and starts to go after Uri. Panicked for his close companion, Mafatu dives off the raft and swims under the shark, stabbing it in the stomach with his whalebone knife. As Mafatu breaks away and drags Uri back onto the raft, other sharks swarm around and tear the injured hammerhead apart. Shaken, Mafatu and Uri return to the beach.

Work on the canoe progresses, although slowly because each day Mafatu takes a break to climb up to the plateau and watch to make sure the eaters-of-men are not coming. One day on this climb Mafatu hears something in the bushes, and realizes that it is a wild boar. The boar is angry and begins to charge. Mafatu wants to run away, but he stands his ground and uses his spear to impale the charging boar. Mafatu is excited and can hardly believe that he has finally succeeded in killing the boar. Using a bamboo sled pulled by Uri they drag the boar back to the beach, and Mafatu builds a large fire to cook it. While it cooks, Mafatu makes his necklace from its teeth. He thinks how soon, given all his accomplishments, he will be able to return home.

After a number of weeks, Mafatu completes his canoe. He offers a prayer to Taaroa for its safety and pushes the canoe out into the water. Uri leaps in beside Mafatu and the two paddle out away from the shore. Mafatu hasn't climbed to the plateau yet that day,



but he is too excited to be out in his new canoe and thinks one day will not matter. He fishes for a while with a piece of crab meat, enjoying the beauty of the reef and his new calm on the water, but the fish are not biting so Mafatu decides to see what is in his fish trap instead. As he pulls the trap up from the water, his knife falls in and sinks to the bottom.

Mafatu is saddened at the thought of losing his knife, since he worked so hard on it and it has done so much for him. Although the ocean floor is deep there, possibly 40 feet or more, Mafatu knows he must try to retrieve the whalebone knife. He dives down and just manages to reach his knife, but before he can rise back to the surface a tentacle whips out from the reef and closes around his waist. A giant octopus has caught him. Mafatu stabs at it desperately, causing the beast to release a cloud of ink. Finally, one of Mafatu's stabs hits the octopus in the eye, and he is freed.

Barely making it up to the canoe, Mafatu lays in it catching his breath as the sun goes down. When he is strong enough, he fishes the octopus' body up from the ocean. Mafatu is in shock that he is alive and succeeded in killing the deadly creature. He knows then that his fear is finally gone; he can return to his people with pride and courage, and in fact plans on leaving on that return voyage the very next day. At his home on the beach, Mafatu falls into a deep sleep, but is awakened before dawn by a steady drumming sound – The eaters-of-men have arrived.

Analysis

As Mafatu builds a new home for himself on the island, he comes to appreciate his life in Hikueru. The tools he was forced to stay behind and make while others fished had seemed like degrading work at the time, but now that he is on his own they are lifesaving abilities. He is also able to take pride in these skills and what he can create now, as accomplishments rather than a punishment. This pride in his work helps to bolster his belief in himself and subsequently his courage.

There are a number of obstacles which Mafatu must overcome. Not only is there the threat of the eaters-of-men possibly returning to this island, but there are also several creatures frightening him and threatening his survival. The first of these is a hammerhead shark, which eats the fish he tries to trap. Mafatu is not able to confront the shark for his own sake, but he jumps in to save his dog Uri. Seeing his friend in danger gives him the push he needs to face that fear, and he comes out victorious.

The wild boar on the island is dangerous as well, because they are brash creatures with sharp tusks that will charge at a moment's notice. No one in Mafatu's tribe has even killed one alone, but when faced with a charging boar Mafatu is able to summon the courage to stand his ground and impale it on his spear. The meat he gets from the boar is delicious, but the true prize is a necklace from its teeth he can show his tribe to earn their respect. Finally, there is an octopus lurking in the ocean depths by the reef, which attacks Mafatu when he dives to retrieve his knife. A large and strong predator, the octopus could easily drown Mafatu. Fortunately once again Mafatu is able to fight off the



creature, and add that success to the growing list of reasons why he can consider himself courageous.

Vocabulary

Resolved, durable, fashioning, utensils, stead, implements, aloft, felling, lashed, archipelago, latitude, errands, alight, mulberry, fiber, persistent, multitude, scurried, thatch, rustlings, galore, veritable, elation, infected, sportive, yapping, imperative, culprit, deference, formidable, unmercifully, consulting, anchored, dorsal, furrow, bolster, leisurely, bristling, impotent, perilous, impact, fathoms, humble, gratitude, caulked, rigging, interfere, whirred, preoccupied, wicked, convulsive, liana, succulent, plantain, anticipation, bleached, rivulets, prow, neglected, rampart, truce, sensation, materialize, gunwale, gleaming, inhaling, oblique, baleful, siphoned, tentacles, piteously, eternity, paeon, prodigious, phosphorescent, aquiver, ebbing, ferment



Chapter 5

Summary

Frightened, listening to the drums of the eaters-of-men, Mafatu creeps up to the plateau for a better view. He is sure he will be seen and caught, but he has to look. He observes the savage men chanting and jumping and dancing around fires at the sacred clearing. They are beating drums and blowing through conch shells, and carry spiked clubs. Suddenly four of the men come out of the jungle towards Mafatu, going after the intruder on their island. Mafatu dashes back down the mountain, terrified, with the eaters-of-men close on his heels. They call out angrily in a language that Mafatu cannot understand as he races towards the beach.

Mafatu pushes his canoe quickly into the water and leaps in with Uri. Fortunately there is enough wind to catch in the sail and move Mafatu along. At first the eaters-of-men swim after Mafatu, and one even starts to climb aboard before Mafatu knocks him off with the paddle. The four savages go back to shore and return to their companions on the other beach. They all get in their own six canoes and row strongly after Mafatu, not relying on sails or wind. At first it seems Mafatu will get away in his lighter and faster craft, but eventually the eaters-of-men begin to catch up.

The wind Mafatu is depending upon begins to weaken, and he prays to Maui, God of the Fishermen, not to abandon him. His prayer is answered and the wind stays strong enough to keep him ahead of the savages. All through that day and into the night they chase Mafatu across the ocean, sometimes falling back and sometimes getting close. At night, Mafatu searches for a familiar constellation to guide him towards his home on Hikueru. By the next morning, the eaters-of-men are gone; they seem to have turned back and given up their hunt.

Unfortunately the current that carried Mafatu away from his home in the first place is now coming up against him, and making it hard for him to get the canoe to move in that direction. He tries many different maneuvers but always seems stuck and does not think he is making much progress forward. Many days pass and still Mafatu does not reach Hikueru. The food and water that Mafatu packed in the canoe the night before the eaters-of-men arrived is running out. He grows weak and tired, and one day Mafatu becomes completely despaired. He believes that Maui has abandoned him, but he refuses to fear the ocean anymore, and yells at the Sea God Moana that no matter what happens he will not be afraid.

After this outburst, Mafatu sees a light in the distance, and recognizes it as the reflection off a lagoon, meaning land is ahead. At the same time, an albatross appears in the sky above his canoe, flying towards this light. He realizes it must be Kivi, leading him home. Mafatu's people are gathered on the beach, watching the unknown canoe approach. The chief Tavana Nui does not even recognize his own son in the brave young man



standing there, until Mafatu calls him father. The chief announces proudly that his son has returned. Mafatu's people tell the story of his adventures even to this day.

Analysis

After defeating the shark, the boar, and the octopus, Mafatu's trials are not yet over. The eaters-of-men have finally arrived back at their island, and they are not happy to discover the intruder who has been living there. They chase Mafatu in his canoe off the beach and away from the island into the open waters of the ocean. Mafatu is just barely able to get away using a combination of his sailing skills and the luck, or blessing from Maui, of a strong enough wind.

The final test of Mafatu's courage and willpower comes when the current works against him and he is unable to guide the canoe back towards Hikuera. Although he had packed the canoe with plenty of food and water before the eaters-of-men drove him off the island, this supply runs out as he drifts for many days without making progress. Once more all hope seems lost, and for a brief while Mafatu even considers jumping into the ocean, essentially committing suicide. He overcomes this thought, however, and shouts to the Sea God Moana that he refuses to be afraid anymore. As if the unseen force is moved by this announcement, Hikuera finally appears in the distance, and Mafatu is able to return home and receive the respect of his people that he has certainly earned.

Vocabulary

Rhythmic, shivered, warily, utmost, peril, reverberated, thrummed, summation, spurts, borne, trance, glistened, conch, interstellar, guttural, whence, slacked, propel, zephyr, aft, taut, gracile, profaned, vengeance, imperceptibly, brandished, impetus, wile, enveloping, constellation, diminishing, waxed, waned, implacable, sinew, fitfully, conflagration, respite, monotony, benign, luring, slat, murmur, sluggish, nautilus, iridescence, defiance, uncomprehending, albeit



Characters

Mafatu

A 15 year old boy from the Polynesian island of Hikueru, Mafatu's name means "Stout Heart." However, due to his strong fear of the ocean, he is known by his tribe as "The Boy Who Was Afraid." In order to overcome this fear and earn respect, Mafatu ventures out onto the sea. He survives alone on a distant island, gaining courage with each additional task that he is able to accomplish.

Tavana Nui

Mafatu's father, Tavana Nui is the Great Chief of Hikueru. He is ashamed for his son, because among their tribe bravery is highly valued and Mafatu is known for his fear. Tavana Nui is able to greet his son with open arms and pride when he returns from his solitary journey, a changed and braver boy.

Mafatu's Mother

Although unnamed in the story, Mafatu's mother plays a crucial role. It is the event of witnessing her death when he is only three years old that creates much of the fear that Mafatu struggles to overcome. The only thing the reader really learns about his mother otherwise is that she stubbornly does not listen to the advice of the other fishermen not to go out with a storm approaching.

Moana

Moana is the Sea God of the Polynesian tribes. Mafatu believes that Moana is out to get him, because he survived the day his mother died, and Moana is biding his time to finally claim Mafatu's life. As an ocean deity, Moana represents an embodiment of Mafatu's fear, a name he can give it and an unseen figure he can address.

Uri

Mafatu's faithful yellow dog Uri is by his side at all times. Uri is Mafatu's one true friend and companion. A loyal and excitable dog, Uri accompanies Mafatu across the ocean to the island. When Uri falls into the ocean and is nearly killed by a hammerhead shark, it gives Mafatu the courage to dive into the sea and face danger to save his friend.



Kivi

Kivi is Mafatu's other companion, although not as constant as Uri. Kivi is an albatross, who has one disfigured leg that makes walking awkward for him. When he flies through the air, however, he has unmatched grace. Mafatu raised Kivi after he saved the albatross from being picked on by other birds for his deformity. Mafatu could relate to Kivi's situation of being bullied for being different.

Kana

Another young boy from Mafatu's tribe on Hikueru, Kana is the only one who seems to act friendly towards Mafatu. He invites Mafatu to go fishing with all the other boys in the tribe. However, he mocks Mafatu's fear behind his back. It is his cruel comments and calling Mafatu a coward that pushes Mafatu to make his decision to leave Hikueru on his own.

Maui

The God of the Fishermen, Maui, is the figure that Mafatu sees as his guide and protective spirit. He often prays to Maui for safety and for things to go well when it seems they are taking a turn for the worse. It is also Maui's constellation that Mafatu follows in an attempt to guide his canoe back towards Hikueru.

Eaters-of-Men

A tribe of savage cannibals that is infamous among the Polynesian islands, the eaters-of-men are a threat to Mafatu's safety when he unknowingly lands on one of their sacred sites of sacrifice. Mafatu describes them as black and vicious men, who carry spiked clubs and chant in a strange language. They chase him off the island and across the sea, but luckily for Mafatu they do not catch him.



Objects/Places

Canoe

Canoes are the primary means of transportation for Mafatu's people, and also the vessels they use to go fishing. Mafatu takes a canoe from the beach on Hikueru in order to venture out on his own. It is destroyed on the coral reef that circles the eaters-of-men's island. Mafatu builds a new canoe from the trunk of a tamanu tree, so that he can return to his home. It is well-made, light and fast, and he is very proud of it.

Knife

Mafatu carves a 10-inch long knife from the rib bone of a whale. It is very sharp, and he uses all of his skill to create it with care. Mafatu uses the knife to kill the hammerhead shark and save Uri when his dog falls into the ocean. The knife falls into the ocean at a later point, and Mafatu dives far down to retrieve it. He is attacked by a large octopus from the reef, and manages to save himself by stabbing it in the eye with his knife.

Fish Trap

Mafatu builds a fish trap so that he can catch more food than by regular fishing alone. He keeps it offshore by the coral reef. However, a hammerhead shark raids his trap and eats what Mafatu has caught before the boy can get to it himself. Mafatu kills the hammerhead after the shark has completely destroyed Mafatu's first fish trap. He later builds another.

Boar Tooth Necklace

Mafatu's grandfather has a necklace made from the teeth of a wild boar, which he got from a neighboring tribe where the men are brave enough to kill these beasts single-handedly. No one in Mafatu's tribe is capable of such a feat. When Mafatu kills a wild boar himself, he makes a similar necklace from its teeth. He wants to show this to his tribe on Hikueru, to prove his bravery to them.

Hikueru

The island of Mafatu's tribe, Hikueru is located in the South Pacific. It is described as flat and not as lush or full of plant life as some of its neighboring islands. The main occupation of its people is fishing.



Tekoto

Barely an islet, Tekoto is the name of the small ledge of coral where Mafatu's mother dies. After their boat is ruined in a storm, she drags herself and her child onto Tekoto. Before dying she manages to give Mafatu a split coconut to eat so that he can survive.

Smoking Islands

The Smoking Islands, named for their active volcanoes and the resulting smoke that surrounds them, are the home of the savage tribes, also known as the eaters-of-men. These cannibals are fierce and feared throughout the Polynesian islands.

Plateau

Mafatu discovers a plateau on the dormant volcano. The plateau gives a clear view of the entire island, and allows Mafatu to watch from above for any approaching danger – namely to see whether the eaters-of-men are returning to their sacred site.

Motu Tabu (Forbidden Island)

Motu Tabu, or Forbidden Island, is a location with a marae (sacred place) where the eaters-of-men make their sacrifices to the Varua Ino. The island on which Mafatu finds himself is unfortunately one such forbidden place. The marae is in a clearing on the island, and has a pyramid with an old idol at its center.



Themes

Survival

One of the themes in the novel is that of survival. In tribal societies such as Mafatu's home on Hikueru, knowing how to utilize nature and the land around you is an important part of daily life. It is equally important to know what is dangerous or safe, and to be quick-witted and able to react appropriately in a given situation. For some things, one can rely on other members of the tribe, but as Mafatu discovered it can be invaluable to have the necessary skills to survive on your own.

Mafatu had despised the menial tasks that he had to perform on Hikueru, such as building tools, repairing nets, and keeping the fires going. However when he lands on the island by himself, knowing how to do all of those things allows him to build a shelter, create essential tools, hunt, cook, and keep himself alive and well. Mafatu also knows enough to carefully watch for any signs that predators are around him, such as a charging wild boar, or the possibility of the cannibalistic eaters-of-men coming to the island.

Acceptance in Society

Mafatu wants to conquer his fear of the ocean and become courageous, and the main reason for this is so that he can be accepted and respected by the other members of his tribe. They have ostracized him for most of his life, because in their society bravery is one of the greatest qualities that an individual can have. Also, theirs is a society of fishermen, and a boy who is afraid of the ocean stands little chance of being a successful fisherman. It is hearing another boy call him a coward that spurs Mafatu on, to prove them wrong.

All throughout his time on the island, Mafatu thinks of his successes in terms of how proud his father will be, and how he can use those achievements as proof to his tribe that he is strong and brave, and can be a contributor to their society. He wants the canoe he builds and the clothes he makes for himself to be well made and look appealing, so that others will appreciate them and see his skill. He also uses the teeth from the boar that he kills to make a necklace, which he cannot wait to show to the tribe as a token of his bravery. It is abundantly clear that earning the respect of his society is a very strong driving factor for Mafatu.

Courage

As is evident in the very title of the novel, courage is a central theme. Courage is an important trait for a tribe member of Hikueru to possess, and it is one Mafatu is found to be lacking. Due to the mocking and disappointment of those around him, Mafatu becomes determined to change and to discover courage within himself. Throughout the



novel, Mafatu becomes more and more courageous as he succeeds in each task set before him. One of the reasons he is able to find this courage is that each accomplishment gives him the ability to believe in himself more. As Mafatu comes to trust that he can be courageous, he is able to act more courageously.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written using a limited third-person point of view. An unseen narrator is telling the story of Mafatu's adventures. Only Mafatu's thoughts and feelings are known to the reader through this point of view, not that of any other character. This approach allows readers to empathize more strongly with Mafatu as he goes through his trials and comes out stronger on the other side.

Setting

The setting for the novel is a group of Polynesian islands in the South Pacific. Hikueru is the home of Mafatu's people, brave fishermen and warriors. It is a mostly flat island with sparse plant life. Mafatu travels across the ocean to another island, which is not named. This island has a dormant volcano at its center, surrounded by lush jungle. A large variety of plants and animals are found there. It is also the location of a sacred site for the eaters-of-men, where they make human sacrifices.

Language and Meaning

The style of the language is formal and descriptive, utilizing somewhat advanced vocabulary. There is little dialogue, and most of what there is consists of Mafatu speaking to himself, or addressing unseen beings such as the Sea God, or animal companions who cannot respond such as Uri the dog. The prose can be very poetic at times, especially when the narrative is describing the ocean or the flora and fauna of Mafatu's surroundings. There are also a number of native Polynesian terms used throughout the story.

Structure

This novel consists of five chapters, running from 16 to 34 pages in length. Each chapter is given a title which offers some indication of the contents in that chapter. For example, chapter three is titled "The Island" and indeed it mainly focuses on Mafatu's exploration of the new island and its geography. The novel opens and closes with virtually the same paragraph, which brings a nice circular completeness to the narrative and also suggests a framework of legend or fireside story.

Quotes

And the voice of the reef seemed pitched for his ears alone; it seemed to say: 'You cheated me once, Mafatu, but someday, someday I will claim you!

All around, as far as the eye could reach, were wastes of leaden water. The canoe was the moving center of a limitless circle of sea.

Thunder in his ears. Water strangling him. Terror in his soul. The canoe slewed round into the trough. The boy flung himself forward, wound his arms about the mid-thwart. It was the end of a world.

The palms, trooping to the edge of the beach, were motionless in the night air. All the world seemed to hold its breath as this boy climbed up out of the sea.

He almost hoped that the island was uninhabited, but if it were— He shivered as he realized his isolation. Even at sea in his small canoe he had not felt so utterly alone as he did here on this strange, high island. Everything about it was alien and forbidding.

But, most important of all, he knew that he had won a great victory over himself. He had forced himself to do something that he dreaded, something that took every ounce of his will. The taste of victory salted his lips.

He had killed the ma'o with his own hand, with naught but a bone knife. He could never have done it for himself. Fear would have robbed his arm of all strength. He had done it for Uri, his dog. And he felt suddenly humble with gratitude.

He had fought the sea for life and won. He had sustained himself by his own wits and skill. He had faced loneliness and danger and death, if not without flinching, at least with courage. He had been, sometimes, deeply afraid, but he had faced fear and faced it down. Surely that could be called courage.

He could hear his pursuers, slipping, stumbling through the brush, shouting threats in a language strange to his ears. But there was no mistaking the meaning of their words.

Then Tavana Nui turned to his people and cried: 'Here is my son come home from the sea. Mafatu, Stout Heart. A brave name for a brave boy!



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What is a possible cause for Mafatu's fear of the ocean? How does this affect his place in the society of his tribe? What steps does Mafatu take in order to try and overcome his fears? What are the critical moments of the novel where Mafatu relies on his courage? It is possible that Mafatu had the quality of courage all along, or did a real inner change occur? If so, when and where was this turning point?

Topic 2

What sort of characterization is the ocean given in this novel? How is it described as personified through Moana, the Sea God? Although they are both related to the ocean and sea life, how are Moana and Maui, God of the Fishermen, portrayed as contrasting forces? In what ways do his beliefs in these deities help and hinder Mafatu?

Topic 3

What role do Mafatu's animal companions play in the story? How do they act as a catalyst for the show of courage that Mafatu exhibits throughout the novel? What do Uri the dog and Kivi the albatross symbolize for Mafatu? What is the role of the other creatures with which Mafatu comes into contact, for example the wild boar, the hammerhead shark, and the octopus? How do their places in the story compare and contrast with Uri and Kivi?

Topic 4

What are some of the items that Mafatu finds or makes that he is particularly proud of? How do these items illustrate his skill or courage? In what ways do these items help Mafatu in his time on the island and in the ocean? What will he do with them when he returns to Hikuera? What sort of response to these items is he hoping to receive from the people of his tribe?