

Island of the Blue Dolphins Study Guide

Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell

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Plot Summary

At the beginning of the book *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell, Karana is twelve years old. When Aleut hunters come to her island to hunt otters, her people are defeated in a battle. The next year, with their numbers diminished by their loss, they decide to abandon the island. While their ship is about to depart, Karana's younger brother Ramo runs back to his hut for a favorite spear, but the ship starts to pull away. When Karana sees him running along the cliff, she jumps from the ship and returns to him. The ship does not return for the two stranded children, so they start to make a life for themselves the best way they can.

Karana and Ramo are not alone on the island. They have to share (or compete) with a pack of wild dogs. It is not long before Ramo is attacked and killed, leaving Karana alone to fend for herself. Karana proves to be a resourceful young woman. In the expectation that the ships will return for her, she gathers food for herself. Also, in spite of the taboo that normally prevents women from making weapons, she makes spears and a bow and arrows to defend herself and her hut from the wild dogs. She even tries her hand at hunting sea elephants. Alone on the island for years, she befriends a wild dog and tames a few birds. Remarkably, she is recognized by a friendly sea otter. Karana never completely surrenders her hope that someone will come back to her. However, as the years go by, it seems as though she enjoys her solitude and self-sufficiency.

Eventually people do come, as the Aleut hunters return for more otter. With them is a girl who has time to explore the island, and she eventually discovers Karana's hut. Karana and the Aleut girl, who is named Tutok, exchange gifts and communicate as best they can in their two languages. At the end of season, the girl returns with the hunters, leaving Karana alone again.

Karana remains on the island for several years before white people come from California to take her away. She finds that her people have disappeared entirely. While she lives at the mission with Father Gonzales, she lives a very different life than she lived when she had an entire island to herself.



Chapters 1-5 (p. 1-29)

Summary

Chapter 1

Aleut hunters come to the island of the blue dolphins to harvest otter pelts. Karana sees their ship from a distance, but she continues to gather roots. Her six-year-old brother Ramo sees the ship and runs to the shore. When the ship arrives, Karana's people hide in the bushes. Some come out to greet Captain Orlov when he is rowed ashore by the Aleuts. He says that he comes in peace, and he wants to bargain for the right to hunt otter. Karana's father, Chief Chowig, says that they can hunt if they split the proceeds. Captain Orlov agrees, and the hunters set up camp.

Chapter 2

Captain Orlov's men move their things ashore. Karana says that the island is two miles long, with springs and abundant natural resources. Karana says that her father warns his people against visiting the hunters, but the two parties keep a close eye on each other. Karana's sister says that there is a girl among the hunters, but none of her people believe her. When a school of large white bass are chased ashore by killer whales, Karana's people do not share with the hunters, on the premise that they only have enough for their people. The narrator says that the trouble that came from the hunters later might have started with this issue.

Chapter 3

Karana's tribesmen keep a close watch of how many otter pelts Captain Orlov's men take. They watch carefully for any sign that the hunters might be about to leave, and they are not certain whether Captain Orlov will honor his side of the deal they made.

Chapter 4

Karana says that the Aleuts leave at the end of summer. She says that when her father asks Captain Orlov for payment, Captain Orlov presents him with a chest filled with trinkets. Karana's father says that his people deserve three more such chests. He refuses to let the hunters take the pelts until more goods are delivered. At this point the hunters pull out knives, and Karana's people start to fight with them. The warriors are forced back toward the cliffs. When the wind begins to blow, Captain Orlov recalls his hunters, and they sail away. Karana's father is one of the many warriors killed in the fighting.

Chapter 5

Karana says that of forty-two members, only fifteen of her tribesmen survived after the battle. This catastrophe puts an elder named Kimki in charge. Kimki says that the



women in the tribe must now do the work that warriors had done. Karana is given the task of collecting abalone, and her brother is responsible for protecting the drying abalones from wild dogs and seagulls. Karana says that the work keeps their minds off of their loss. However, after food is collected for winter, the sadness really begins to sink in. Kimki says that he will take a canoe to the east and look for lands so the tribe can be resettled.

Analysis

Chapter 1

Island of the Blue Dolphins concerns the collision between two cultures, an indigenous culture of Ghalas-at and a visiting culture of Aleut hunters. As the residents of the island, Karana's people are vulnerable to disruption by the visitors. It is not immediately clear whether Chief Chowig has entered into a good bargain with the hunters when they agree to split the proceeds of their hunt. Seen through the eyes a child, this apprehension brings the reader into quick sympathy with the indigenous people who are at risk of disruption.

Chapter 2

Even good fortune can be the source of bad blood in The Island of the Blue Dolphins. When Karana's father refuses to share the white bass that are chased ashore, his failure of diplomacy tempts the hunters to retaliate over what they feel is an injustice. Karana's father has already revealed too much by giving Captain Orlov his private name. Unfortunately, he has now set bad blood between the indigenous people and the hunters.

Chapter 3

There is a good amount of tension in this chapter, as Karana's people wait to see what hunters will do. Her people have given the hunters something, and they are nervous about being cheated of what they were promised in return.

Chapter 4

The events that Karana describes are still just background information, for the beginning of her own tale. She herself does not make the judgment, but it seems clear that she feels that her father revealed a weakness by telling the Russian captain his secret name. On the other hand, it seems as though the Russians and the Aleut hunters are simply taking advantage of the local people by fleeing before they honor their agreement. Nevertheless, this battle will have a profound effect on Karana.

Chapter 5

The loss of twenty-seven warriors has profound effects on Karana and her people. Work is redistributed. When it is clear that the tribe cannot stay in this location, their leader



goes looking for another site. This chapter proceeds fairly quickly without much description because it is still setting up the departure in which Karana will be left. Nevertheless, the sadness that haunts the tribe is a difficult place for her story to begin.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the Aleuts and the people of Ghalas-at. How are they similar? How are they different? How does O'Dell describe them differently?

Discussion Question 2

How does O'Dell characterize Karana? What kinds of words does he use, and what kinds of situations does she describe, that express her character? What kinds of things to expect from her?

Discussion Question 3

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the story about primitive people encountering hunters from more advanced civilizations? How does this story seem relevant today?

Vocabulary

Aleut, lizard, cormorant, gaze, parley, crouched, enclose, seldom, echo, ceasing, surround, mesa, clattered, leagues, notice, language, befriend, sparingly, harvested, autumn, fortune, terror, pursued, lapping, refuse.



Chapters 6-9 (p. 30-58)

Summary

Chapter 6

It is spring, and Kimki has still not returned. The people have stored provisions and canoes at the south end of the island in case the hunters return. One night, a ship arrives and people begin to flee, but Chief Matasaip says it is not the same ship that brought the hunters. A runner from the tribe says that the ship brings white men who have come to take them away from Ghalas-at. The people conclude that Kimki has sent them to help.

Chapter 7

Karana says that her people took their possessions with them, and she says that she packed her needles, and awl, a good knife, and a box filled with earrings, while her sister took mostly jewelry. As they are leaving, Karana's brother Ramo says that he has forgotten his fishing spear. He goes back for it. Karana and the others are put aboard the ship. When Karana cannot find her brother onboard, she sees him running along the cliff top with his spear. She says that the tribe will have to wait, but the wind is increasing. The captain wants to go. Frantic to save her brother, she jumps into the water with her basket, which sinks immediately. She swims to shore and embraces her brother, and the ship sails away without the two of them.

Chapter 8

Karana and her brother take shelter for the night, and they hear dozens of wild dogs rummaging through the huts of the village. The next day, they gather food and cook. They hear the wild dogs again at night and start to see that they will have to protect themselves. They will be competing for food. One day, Ramo says that he is the chief now; but, Karana says that in order to be chief, he will have to undergo a painful initiation rite. Nevertheless, he tells her the name he wants to be called by when he is chief, and he goes to the place where the canoes were stored to bring back provisions and supplies. When Karana hears the barking of dogs, she goes looking for Ramo. She finds him dead in the center of a circle of dogs. She chases the dogs back to the cave where they live and vows to kill all the dogs someday.

Chapter 9

Karana says that many suns rise and set, and she decides not to live in the village anymore. She burns down each of the houses, taking away only a basket of food. She makes her home a league west of Coral Cove, on a rocky point where the dogs won't be able to get her. She looks for weapons in the huts, but she does not find the bow and arrows she will need to kill the dogs. At the beach where the battle took place, she finds the chest filled with trinkets, but there are no arrowheads or spear points. Karana says



that her tribe has a taboo against women making weapons, and she says that the ideal spear point is made from sea elephant tusk. However, to hunt a sea elephant typically requires at least three strong warriors. Nevertheless, she gathers materials for a bow and arrow. Through trial and error she learns to make and use them. Karana says that she looks for a ship every morning, but no ship appears during the winter or spring.

Analysis

Chapter 6

The arrival of another ship fills the people with panic, but this ship is going to take them away to safety. Already, the reader can see the story of a woman left alone on an island coming into focus. It is still not clear about how or why she will be left.

Chapter 7

After saving her brother from being left behind, Karana finds that the ship has left without either one of them being taken to safety. The preliminary action of the novel has now been established, and Karana is alone on the island with her brother. For the reader who knows that this story is about a woman alone on an island, there is little apprehension about what will happen to Ramo.

Chapter 8

The question of how Ramo will be eliminated from the novel is answered fairly quickly. Karana's feelings about her situation are not developed in great detail. The reader gets the impression that the life of her tribe and the details of her environment have kept her in a background role. However, now that she is alone, she is being thrust into the forefront of a story, and the reader can expect to find out more about her as a person.

Chapter 9

Now that Karana is completely alone, the island is much more dangerous than it seemed when her people were still there. Still, she seems to be able to do everything she needs to provide for herself, and with the exception of making weapons, she's well prepared to be self-sufficient. She expects, after all, that someone will come back to get her. So, she is not filled with despair, as some people might be, in her situation.

Discussion Question 1

How does Karana's personality begin to express itself now that she is alone?



Discussion Question 2

What are the major challenges Karana faces in living alone on the island? How does she plan to overcome these challenges?

Discussion Question 3

Debate the proposition that in the absence of her tribe, the taboo against a woman making a weapon is no longer meaningful.

Vocabulary

Shrouded, alarm, entrance, canoes, awakened, harbor, chorus, enemies, Stern, fearful, urging, unmarried, fierce, ugliness, anchored, beckoned, confusion, chieftain, drowned, repeated, farther, forlorn, sifted, dozens, gorged.



Chapters 10-14 (p. 59-90)

Summary

Chapter 10

Summer passes, and when the first winter storm comes, Karana loses hope. She kills three of the wild dogs and retrieves provisions from the canoes. She says that she plans to take a canoe and travel to the east by herself. She says that she is not afraid because she had seen others go, including Kimki. She says that the idea of staying on the island and fighting the wild dogs is less appealing than taking her chances in a canoe.

Karana gets the canoe into the open water, and the island of the blue dolphins disappears. She begins to feel fear. She recognizes a star in the night sky, though, and navigates by its light. The canoe begins to take on water, and she exhausts herself with bailing out. When she wakes in the morning, she has drifted off course, and the leaks are getting worse. She decides to turn around, and a pod of dolphins surrounds her canoe. She sees this as a good omen and succeeds in returning to the island.

Chapter 11

Karana says that she is happy at home after her attempt to leave. Instead of being afraid, she claims the island is her home and is never going to leave again. Staying will require her to reckon with the wild dogs, and she resolves to kill the leader, who has long gray hair and yellow eyes. She chooses the site for her house and begins to make plans for building a cut in a fence around it to keep the dogs and foxes out.

Chapter 12

Karana goes to a beach where whales had washed up, and she scavenges their bones for use as a fence. She digs holes in the ground for them to stand in, and weaves them together. She then begins to collect poles for the walls and roof of a hut. She says that half of the winter passes before she completes the house, but she feels secure there, inside the enclosure she has built. Now that she has shelter, she begins to make plans to kill the wild dogs. Using light from burning fish, she works through the night to make weapons. She would still like to get tusks from the sea elephant, but she is certain that she does not have the strength to kill one herself.

Chapter 13

As much as Karana wants to make a weapon, she is nervous about the taboo against women using them. She goes to the beach where the sea elephants live and chooses a young bull as her prey. But, as she prepares to stalk it, an older bull chooses the young one as a rival and begins to fight with it. Karana shoots at the young bull, but she



misses him as he fights with the older bull. The fighting gets close to where she is watching. As she retreats, she stumbles and injures her leg.

Chapter 14

Karana's injury is serious, and it keeps her laid up for almost two weeks. She runs out of water, and when she crawls to the spring, the wild dogs are waiting for her. She crawls into a nearby cave, where her ancestors had carved figures and drawings. While she is recovering, she decides to stock the cave with shellfish and seeds, in case she ever needs to stay there in the future. When she is well enough, she returns to the beach where the sea elephants had fought to find the bones of the older bull. She is able to claim his teeth in the end.

Analysis

Chapter 10

Any desire Karana has to escape from the island is dashed in this chapter. The distance she has to cover in the ocean is too great for the leaky canoe. Though her hopes are dashed, Karana shows real resiliency in undertaking her journey, and she shows discretion and wisdom in deciding to return. Now, it seems, the book will fall into a rhythm as she adjusts to living on the island alone, for the long term.

Chapter 11

Karana's defeat with the canoe in the open ocean changes her perspective about the island where she lives. She is resigned to staying, and as she begins to make plans for a house, the reader can feel some toughness and also optimism in her story.

Chapter 12

Karana establishes herself on the island as a full-time resident, not a refugee. Her commentary does not venture into a deep discussion of her feelings. However, in the patient description of her day-to-day tasks and her plans, her feelings are conveyed, nonetheless. She seems to be a steady, patient, resourceful woman, and therefore an interesting heroine for the novel. By this time, the reader's sympathies are all on her side, and it only remains to be seen how she will overcome the obstacles facing her.

Chapter 13

The fight between the sea elephants does not directly involve Karana, but the outcome will affect her. Through her description, the reader gets to watch the two sea elephants fight. It is only when they get close to Karana that she is in any danger. Since she lives alone, the injury that she does suffer makes her wonder how she will take care of herself.

Chapter 14



The injury Karana suffers has the effect of making her expand her territory. She claims a cave where she hides from the dogs. In a stroke of good luck, she finds that the old sea elephant has been killed by the younger one, and she can use the tusks as spear tips after all. Now that she has two houses on the island, she is also safer than before. Since she has healed, she can begin her battle against the wild dogs.

Discussion Question 1

What makes the island seem comforting to Karana after she fails to paddle away in the canoe?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think are Karana's feelings, and what clues does she give you about what they are?

Discussion Question 3

Debate the proposition that Karana's survival owes more to luck than to skill.

Vocabulary

Milder, headland, spouting, loneliness, protection, stale, advice, ancestors, disappeared, difference, serpent, manner, fiber, seeping, forgotten, omen, dusk, Voyage, favorable, brackish, steadier, clamor, thieves, ravine, dunes.



Chapters 15-19 (p. 91-124)

Summary

Chapter 15: Karana says that the leader of the dog pack is probably not a native dog—she had not seen it before the Aleuts came to hunt for otter. It is much larger than the native dogs, and it has longer hair. She has killed four of the dogs, but more puppies have been born since she was abandoned. One night, she sets fire to some brush, and pushes it into their cave. When the dogs run out, she shoots them. In the middle of the pack, the leader comes out and she shoots him in the chest, but he gets away. When she finds him three days later, he looks dead, but just as she is about to spear him, he moves his head, and she relents. Instead, she picks him up and carries him back to her hut, where she brings him fish, and he recovers. While she is nursing him, she calls him 'Dog,' but after he recovers, she names him Rontu, which means Fox Eyes in her language.

Chapter 16: Karana continues to watch for the ships of either the white men or the Aleuts, but no ships come. Nevertheless, she prepares to leave in case the Aleuts do show up. By breaking up a large canoe, and remaking it, she provides herself with transportation. Rontu is constantly by her side while she works, and the two of them explore together in her canoe. When she enters a cave, she finds a place to hide her canoe, and she also finds what she calls a devilfish, which the reader will recognize as an octopus. She tries to spear it, but it gets away in a cloud of ink.

Chapter 17: Through the winter, Karana makes a special spear for hunting the devilfish, and one night in spring, Rontu leaves her enclosure and does not come back. She hears the sound of dogs fighting, and finds him in a fight with two of the wild dogs. She watches, with bow and arrow in hand, but does not intervene. Rontu defeats both of his challengers, though, and returns to the enclosure with Karana. She says that he never leaves her again.

Chapter 18: Karana describes the beauty of the island in spring, and she says that he took two newly hatched birds out of their nest to raise them as her pets. She makes a cage for them, and when they outgrow the cage, she makes a larger one. She calls one Tainor, and the other Lurai. She says that she also makes another skirt of yucca, and a belt of sealskin. After the deaths of warriors in the battle with the Aleuts, she had cut her hair short in mourning, but she says that her hair has grown back long and full, and it is now as long as her waist.

Chapter 19: Now that it is summer again, Karana gathers red abalone, and plans to hunt the devilfish. When she finds it, she succeeds in spearing it, but it is hard to move it toward shore. When she does pull it out of the water, Rontu gets close to it and barks at it, but the octopus wraps its legs around Rontu's legs, and attaches its suckers to Karana's arms when she tries to pull Rontu away. She succeeds in rescuing Rontu, but



she does not manage to kill the octopus, and considers herself lucky to retreat with just bumps and bruises.

Analysis

Chapter 15: Karana's encounter with the wild dog pack's leader takes a surprising turn when she relents from killing him. Instead of an enemy, the dog is now a pet and companion, and Karana has earned his loyalty by a certain toughness, and also a certain compassion.

Chapter 16: Now that Karana has made herself safe, and even endured a good amount of time alone on the island, she spends this chapter exploring, and expanding her range of experience. She discovers a cave that will be useful as a hiding place, and also finds an octopus, which she plans to hunt. If she is still hopeful, or fearful, that people will return, she is making plans for her escape, but she is also planning ways to enrich her days on the island.

Chapter 17: It is now Rontu's turn to have an adventure, and his fight against the two wild dogs establishes him as the supreme dog on the island. It also establishes him as Karana's loyal companion.

Chapter 18: Karana is really making herself at home, now, with not only Rontu, but her two birds as well, for pets. It is not clear whether she still hopes that someone will return for her, or whether she simply takes pride in making herself beautiful, even though she is alone. But she spends her time making clothing for herself, and even a wreath for Rontu.

Chapter 19: Short of hunters or other visitors returning, the octopus is the largest challenge on the island, for Karana. Her battle with it tests her, and ultimately defines the limit of her strength and ability: she can spear it, but cannot land it, and now she knows how much she can expect from herself and from one of the other dominant creatures around her.

Discussion Question 1

What character traits allow Karana to survive, and even to thrive, on the island alone?

Discussion Question 2

What does Karana learn from her adventures around the island?



Discussion Question 3

How does Karana divide her time between providing for her immediate needs and preparing for possibilities like the Aleuts' return, or white men's return?

Vocabulary

Bolder, quivering, carcass, gnawed, surprise, matted, limp, bindings, kneeling, poisonous, coral, narrow, yawning, abandoned, Loosening, length, pelican, numerous, handsome, drifted, movement, liquid, puzzled, fashioning, errors.



Chapters 20-23 (p. 125-151)

Summary

Chapter 20

Karana gathers more abalone and rigs up a way to keep the seagulls away from the drying meat. She also catches small fish whose oil will provide light when she burns them in winter. She goes to Tall Rock, where cormorants roost, and kills ten birds, whose skins she will use in a skirt. She also discovers Black Cave on the south side of the island, where she finds figures made of reeds, clothed in gull feathers. In their midst, there is a skeleton, which she decides must be one of her ancestors. The tide has come in while Karana is exploring, and she has to stay there overnight until the tide goes back out. It has been two years now since the Aleut hunters came. During this summer, they return. Karana notices that there is, in fact, a girl with them. She moves to her cave, in hopes that they will not find her.

Chapter 21

When the hunters set up camp a league from Karana's cave, she wonders whether she should move further away. She says that she is not afraid of the hunters, so much as she is afraid that the girl will go exploring while the hunters are at work. When she returns to her house, she finds that three whale ribs have been cut from the fence. She gathers food for herself and stays in the cave, where she sees no sign of the girl. She begins to work on a skirt made out of cormorant skins. After two months, she finishes it. She is modeling the skirt when the girl comes through the leaves. Rontu barks at her, but she approaches, nonetheless. She admires Karana's skirt, and Karana gives it to her to inspect. She says a word that sounds like the word for beautiful in Karana's language, and she gestures to herself to indicate that her name is Tutok. Karana goes back to her hut that night to take provisions. When she returns to the cave, the girl has left a necklace of black stones for her.

Chapter 22

Seeing the necklace on the rock in front of her cave keeps Karana from going inside. Instead, she sleeps at the headland on a ledge. When she returns to the cave the next day, the girl returns. She and Karana try to communicate. They exchange words for objects in each of their languages. When Tutok leaves, Karana begins to make a gift for her as well. Karana begins to wonder when the hunters will leave, and she begins to dread the day when her friend will leave with them. Tutok does not make any attempt to say goodbye. Karana simply finds that the harbor is quiet one day, and the ship has left. She says that without her friend the island is very quiet now.

Chapter 23



After the hunters leave, Karana finds many wounded otters. Some she kills; however, she moves one, which is gashed along the back, to a pool. She brings it fish until it recovers. She names the otter Mon-a-nee, which means Little Boy with Large Eyes in her language. She repairs the damage to her fence. She does not have small fish to use as lamps that winter because the Aleuts had prevented her from harvesting them.

Analysis

Chapter 20

Two years after the battle, the Aleuts have returned. Karana is prepared for this. She has a hiding place to keep herself out of sight, and she can pass the time on the island until they leave. They are her enemies, after all, as they have killed her father and kinsmen. She is powerless on her own; so, she must stay hidden.

Chapter 21

Karana and Tutok, the young girl from the hunting camp, are separated by language and culture. It is very difficult for the two girls to have any meaningful communication. However, Tutok admires Karana's skirt and leaves an offering of stones. It is not clear how their relationship will develop, and Karana has to be nervous about the possibility that the hunters will find out about her because of Tutok.

Chapter 22

Tutok is the only person Karana has seen for years, and the friendship she begins with Karana is mystifying as well as rewarding. They exchange gifts and talk as much as they can; but, they are too divided by their languages and circumstances. The Aleut girl, nonetheless, protects Karana from the hunters. If she had told them about Karana's presence, they would probably have made trouble for her, and the story would have taken a drastic turn away from the quiet setting of Karana's self-sufficient lifestyle that has characterized it so far. At the same time, though, Karana is not entirely satisfied when the hunters leave, as they are taking her only friend with them. She can't help but feel sad when Tutok leaves.

Chapter 23

Karana makes another friend in this chapter. It's the otter she nurses back to health. Now that the hunters have gone, she is safe again. The island is all hers. It does not seem that she is terribly upset about Tutok's departure. However, once she is all alone again, there is a new sadness in the air.

Discussion Question 1

How does Tutok's arrival change the experience of being on the island for Karana?



Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Karana and Tutok. How are they similar? How are they different?

Discussion Question 3

Debate the proposition that Karana is betraying her family by befriending Tutok.

Vocabulary

Abalone, roosted, shimmering, kelp, curious, oblong, slung, decided, earrings, reef, footsteps, condition, yucca, giddy, motion, chewing, sinew, graceful, gestures, thrown, listened, necklace, admire, circlet, deserted.



Chapters 24-author's afterword (p. 152-183)

Summary

Chapter 24

Using reeds and Rontu's hair, Karana's pet birds build a nest in the tree inside her enclosure. Karana also takes in a seagull with a broken leg. When she goes to the reef, she sees Mon-a-nee in the kelp, and he follows her. There are two baby otters with him, and Karana decides that he must be a she, now that she is a mother. She changes her name to Won-a-nee, which means the Girl with the Large Eyes. With so many friends among the animals, Karana resolves never to kill cormorants, otters, seals, or wild dogs.

Chapter 25

Karana says that the hunters never returned to the island, but she continued to make weapons. She was prepared to move to another part of the island if it came to that. She says that she used to keep track of the months, and then the seasons—but then she stopped keeping track of time altogether. She says that one summer, Rontu barked to be allowed out of her enclosure. When he did not come back, she found him a few days later in a cave. He was not hurt, but he was obviously not well, either. She puts her head to his chest as he takes his final breaths, and then she buries him on the headland.

Chapter 26

Over the winter, Karana makes snares in which to catch the wild dogs. She has seen another large dog that resembles Rontu, and she wants him for a pet. When the snares do not work, she tries to add a numbing medicine to the spring where the dogs drink. After a couple of attempts, she catches the dog she is looking for. She takes him back to her enclosure and ties him up until he becomes her pet. She names him Rontu-Aru, which means son of Rontu.

Chapter 27

In the spring, Karana takes the canoe out and patches it with fresh pitch. At midday, she falls asleep on the beach under the overturned canoe, and she hears a rumbling that wakes her. The tide is far out, further than she's ever seen. In the distance she sees the great white crest of a tidal wave approaching. She scrambles up the cliff and wedges her hand into her crack, so that when the wave reaches the cliff, it laps at her feet, but does not pull her off. Then Karana feels the earth move. She must hold on tight until the waves recede.

Chapter 28



Karana says that the earthquake did not do much damage, although she was upset to find that the canoes were gone. After finding them buried in sand, she digs them out and repairs them, using pitch that was also washed up on the beach. While she is making her repairs, she sees a sail approaching the island. As it draws closer, she sees that it is not the hunters. The ship pulls into the cove and lowers a boat. Soon, Karana hears the cries of men who have discovered her fire and her canoe. She dresses herself in her cormorant skirt and her otter cape. Then, she goes down the trail to meet them, but they have gone back to the ship before she arrives, and the ship sails away.

Chapter 29

Two years later, another ship comes to Coral Cove, and men come ashore to camp. Again, Karana dresses herself in her finest clothes and prepares to meet the visitors. She tells Rontu-Aru that she is leaving and goes down to meet two men. They do not speak the same language, but Karana says that the sound of the human voices is, nevertheless, sweet. One man tells the other to make a dress for her, which he does by tearing apart two pairs of trousers and sewing them back together. Karana says that she was not really pleased with this dress, since her cormorant skirt was so much more becoming. She says that it was not until later, when she came to Mission Santa Barbara and met Father Gonzalez in California, that she learned that the ship that took her people away sank shortly thereafter. As she is leaving the island, dolphins accompany her.

Author's Note: The author says that Karana's tale is based on a true story of a woman who lived alone on the island of San Nicholas, a Channel Island southwest of Los Angeles, between 1835 and 1853. He says that there is not much evidence in the historical record, beyond the bare facts that a young girl jumped off the ship to return to the island, and a woman wearing a cormorant skirt was taken from there eighteen years later. The author says that the island of San Nicholas is a United States Naval base, which is in danger of being swallowed by the sea.

Analysis

Chapter 24

Karana has transferred her allegiance from the human society she was once part of to the animal kingdom in which she now makes her friends.

Chapter 25

Rontu's death marks the first death of one of Karana's new relatives, and it expands the range of her experiences. She has taken care of animals that needed to be healed, but she has never had to relinquish one to death. She does this with the same matter-of-fact dignity that she has shown in all of her other activities on the island.

Chapter 26



Instead of just reacting to events, Karana is now capable of making her own plans and executing them. When her dog dies, she resolves to capture herself another companion, and she is resourceful and persistent until she succeeds.

Chapter 27

The earthquake and tidal wave are dangerous for Karana, but it shows that Karana has been on the island long enough to see the island's own experience of time, as it changes with the tectonic shifts in the earth. Karana experiences this in her same matter-of-fact way, although she might have seen it as a spiritual omen or an indicator of some kind of social superstition if she had been among her people.

Chapter 28

When the ship arrives in this chapter, Karana is ready to meet people. The ship is not bringing hunters. It carries whites who might take her away to join her people. After the initial apprehension subsides, she prepares herself by putting on her nicest things, but she will have to wait until they return.

Chapter 29

Finally, Karana leaves the island. She does not comment on many of the aspects of her life. At the end of the story, she reflects very briefly about her time alone on the island. From her description of the dress the men made for her, civilization was going to be an itchy, uncomfortable affair. Yet, she does not go into detail. The reader is left with a certain satisfaction that she could survive all those years with dignity and pride in her accomplishments.

Author's Note

There is a certain satisfaction in finding that Karana's tale is not entirely fiction. The reader is given the satisfaction of knowing that a woman really did survive all alone on this remote island for eighteen years.

Discussion Question 1

In what way, if at all, does the conclusion of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* make you think differently about Karana? Explain your feelings about her ability to survive on the island all by herself. Is the story realistic? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Debate the proposition that Karana was better off on the island than she was when she came to civilization.



Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the most important lesson found in Karana's story?

Vocabulary

Seaweed, tame, teetering, hobble, snatched, interested, scarcely, notched, snares, baited, Frisked, frightened, steaming, gleam, current, lobster, trickled, damage, ashore, pitch, forgetting, beaked, prow, ornament, excavation.



Characters

Karana

Karana is a young girl who is stranded on an island alone. She learns to provide for herself and to defend herself against wild dogs and hunters.

Ramo

Ramo is the narrator's brother who runs back to his hut when his people are being evacuated, His sister goes back for him. They both miss the ship that would have taken them from the island to safety.

Kimki

This one of the elders, the leader of the people who leaves in a canoe, looking for lands to the east where his people can settle.

Captain Orlov

This is the Russian who is leading the Aleut hunting expedition which clashes with the narrator's people.

Matasaip

This is the person who takes over leadership of the people after the narrator's father is killed by hunters.

Chief Chowig

This person is the head of the narrator's people, and he is killed when the hunters try to leave without paying tribute for the otter skins they take.

Rontu

This is the leader of the pack of wild dogs on the island. This dog befriends the narrator and lives with her as her companion.

Tutok

This is the girl who comes with the Aleut hunters and exchanges gifts with the narrator.

The Aleut hunters

These people come to the island of the blue dolphins to harvest otters for their pelts.



Symbols and Symbolism

Otter skins

This is a kind of currency collected by hunters who visit different islands.

Cormorant skins

These things are used by the narrator to make a skirt.

Canoes

These are made of planks held together by pitch. They are used to navigate around the island of the blue dolphins.

Devilfish

This is Karana's term for the octopus that lives in the reef around her island.

Bow and Arrow

This is the weapon with which Karana kills the wild dogs that threaten her and her food.

The Spring

This is the source of fresh water for the narrator and all of the life on the island of the blue dolphins.

Mummies

These are the dried and preserved remains of the narrator's ancestors, which are perhaps hundreds of years old.

Sea Elephant Teeth

The narrator uses these to make points for her spears.



Settings

Ghalas-at

This is a village on the island where Karana lives with her family until the Aleut hunters kill half of the villagers.

The Island of the Blue Dolphins

This is one of the Channel Islands West of Los Angeles and the primary setting for the novel.

Russia

This is the homeland of the hunters who come to the island to get otter pelts.

California

This is where Karana is taken after she is rescued from the island.

Black Cave

This is an opening in the rocks, at waterline, inside of which are the mummified remains of the narrator's progenitors.



Themes and Motifs

Self-reliance

Karana comes from people who are self-reliant, in that they support themselves with what grows and lives on their island. They do not import or export any goods. After the people leave, Karana has no one but herself to rely on, and she herself is responsible for any dignity or respect her life has. Fortunately, she lives on an island where food and shelter are fairly easy to come by, and she has some time, free from necessity, to spend making things like weapons, spear points, and her cormorant skirt and sealskin sandals. She also has time to explore new caves and stock them with supplies in case she ever needs to use them. In this sense, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is a very American tale about a young girl who has all of the resources and knowledge she needs to support herself without anyone's help.

Making friends

Karana originally returns to the island in order to save her brother, with the expectation that the ship will return for them. Her first impulse to take care of her brother is responsible for her isolation. After the ship departs and her brother is killed by dogs, she is lonely without anyone to take care of. For a long time, she devotes herself to the daily tasks of feeding and sheltering herself. Her desire for company softens her heart when she is about to kill Rontu. Instead of killing him, she takes him in. Then, the Aleut hunters return to the island. Even though they are her enemies, she finds herself talking with Tutok, a young girl who is with the hunters. Karana is lonely for a friend. She feels some apprehension about whether Tutok will betray her presence to the hunters, but she wants company so much that she is willing to take the risk.

Planning ahead

On the island of the blue dolphins, it is not difficult for Karana to find all of the food, shelter, and necessities she needs. Many writers have idealized this kind of tropical existence as living in paradise. However, Karana knows that winter will come and the hunters might also return. She cannot just attend to her immediate needs. She has to think about what she would do in different scenarios. By giving herself different options, Karana also gives herself peace of mind. She is confident that she will be okay no matter what eventually happens.

Taking care of nature

After growing up in a society that treated animals as raw materials or food, Karana is prepared to follow in her culture's footsteps. However, when she is living on her own on the island, she finds herself taking care of a number of injured animals. This starts with



Rontu, the leader of the wild dogs. She stops short of killing him because his suffering bends her heart. She takes him in, and they become companions. She then saves a wounded otter and a gull with a broken leg. She resolves in the end not to hunt animals that she has befriended. She has also developed the ability to survive perfectly well on shellfish and abalone and roots and seeds, so she does not need to prey on the larger animals who might become her friends.

Overcoming challenges

Karana is challenged simply by the task of having to support herself, but she succeeds so well that she can take on other challenges as well. For example, after she has built a shelter for herself, she systematically devotes herself to killing the wild dogs. She makes the spear and the bow and arrows that she will need. Then, she devises plans, which she executes effectively. She does something similar when she figures out how to use the canoes that are hidden by the cliff and, again, when she tries to capture the octopus. She's not always successful, but she is determined, attentive, and smart. She learns from each of her experiences.



Styles

Point of View

Island of the Blue Dolphins is narrated by a girl named Karana, who is twelve years old at the story's beginning. She is thirty years old at the end of the book. Details about her personal development are not included in the story, but the reader is exposed to her thinking as she goes through the process of providing for herself and protecting herself from potential dangers on the island. Karana is someone who is capable of extreme patience, as she waits for years in the hope that a ship will return for her. Every spring, she prepares to be rescued. When no one finds her, she is not destroyed by despair or loneliness.

Language and Meaning

Island of the Blue Dolphins is narrated in the plain-spoken English that might have been used by a Native American woman who learned English later in life. Some euphemisms in the book are consistent with non-native speakers' words, such as 'devilfish' for octopus. Karana's younger brother speaks to a great extent in metaphors. However, after he dies early in the story, there are no metaphors or symbols that require multiple interpretations. The book is a literal narration of events as they transpire in Karana's life. As such, the author's intended young adult audience can easily understand the story.

Structure

Island of the Blue Dolphins is told chronologically. Highlights from the story's timeline include the following: the arrival of the hunters; the departure of the island's natives; Karana's solitary life on the island; and, finally, Karana's rescue. There is a very brief glimpse at what happens after she leaves the island. Karana mentions the Mission and Father Gonzalez. The author then supplies a historical note at the end, to say that this story is based on events that really did take place on an island off the coast of Los Angeles.



Quotes

The sea is smooth. It is a flat stone without any scratches.

-- Ramo (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 2)

Importance: Ramo says this when he notices that something is disturbing the tranquility of the ocean. He sees the approaching ship of the Aleut hunters. Karana tries to turn his attention back to the task of gathering roots.

The parts shall be equal.

-- Captain Orlov (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 7)

Importance: When Captain Orlov tells Karana's father that shares will be equal, he is not telling the truth. His dishonesty will be the cause of the battle that kills many of the people who live on the island.

We shall not profit if we try to befriend them.

-- Chapter 2 (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 10)

Importance: Karana's father tells her people to stay away from the Aleut hunters. He does not give specific reasons, except to say that the Aleuts do not understand friendship. This becomes clear when the hunters leave without paying the price they had agreed. However, it is also true that the chief refuses to let the hunters share in the people's good fortune when the sea bass are driven up on the beach.

Everyone laughed at the idea that hunters would bother to bring their wives with them.

-- Karana (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 11)

Importance: When the hunters first arrived on the island, the girl whom Karana will later know as Tutok is among them. The reader never learns whether she is a wife, or merely a cook and maid for the hunters, but Karana will befriend her some years later, proving her sister right.

After food had been stored in autumn and the baskets were full in every house, there was more time to think about them, so the sort of sickness came over the village and people sat and did not speak, nor ever laughed.

-- Karana (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 28)

Importance: The devastating catastrophe of the battle that kills the majority of the people on the island is not felt all at once. The reality of loss has to sink in over time, and it is only when the people have finished their work that grief really hits them.

I am the son of Chowig. I am his son and since he is dead I have taken his place. I am now chief of Ghalas-at. All my wishes must be obeyed.

-- Ramo (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 44)



Importance: When the people depart, Ramo, who is six, thinks that he is ready to take charge. However, his sister reminds him that she has to endure the painful initiation ceremonies before he is a man. In this way, she remains in charge.

With the four winds blow in from the four directions of the world and smother me as I made the weapons? Or would the earth tremble, as many said, and bury me beneath its falling rocks?

-- Karana (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 54)

Importance: There is a taboo against women making weapons, which is man's work. Since she's been left to her own devices, though, Karana needs to have some way to protect herself and to hunt. She makes the weapons. Of course, the wind does not blow, nor does the earth bury her as predicted if she made weapons. When there is an earthquake, it does not happen as a result of anything she has done.

I had watched, but not with the eye of one who would ever do it.

-- Karana (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 55)

Importance: Karana is a fairly young woman when her people depart, and she does not have expertise in all of the fields of knowledge she needs to know. She will have to learn not by tradition, but by trial and error.

Why I did not send the arrow I cannot say.

-- Karana (Chapter 15 paragraph Page 95)

Importance: The wild dogs have been Karana's enemies from early on. Then, to solidify her hatred, they kill her brother Ramo. Strangely enough, later on when she has injured the leader of the wild dogs, she takes pity on him and refrains from killing him. She does not say why she takes pity on him. Perhaps, some sympathy develops between them, and she sees the injured dog's vulnerability as similar to her own vulnerability, alone on the island.

After that summer, I never killed another otter... nor did I ever kill another Cormorant for its beautiful feathers... nor did I kill seals for their sinews... nor did I kill another wild dog, nor did I try to spear another sea elephant.

-- Karana (Chapter 24 paragraph Page 156)

Importance: Isolated from other human company, Karana befriends the animals. They are now friends. She resolves to never kill them.

But suddenly, as I thought of Tutok, the island seemed very quiet.

-- Karana (Chapter 23 paragraph Page 146)

Importance: Karana is not very demonstrative about her emotions, but when she befriends Tutok, she comes to rely on her companionship. Even though they do not see each other very often, Karana is affected when her friend is no longer on the island.



Perhaps, by keeping her statement of loneliness very simple, Karana hopes to minimize the feeling.

Until that summer, I had kept count of all the moons since the time my brother and I were alone upon the island.

-- Karana (Chapter 26 paragraph Page 158)

Importance: As long as Karana still hoped to be rescued, time kept its meaning. But, after years go by and the Aleuts return with Tutok, Karana gives up keeping track of time. Perhaps, she is getting older, and she no longer needs evidence that time is passing her. She knows well enough that she is alone, and she may be giving up hope that time will bring a ship for her.