

# **A Rumour of Otters Short Guide**

## **A Rumour of Otters by Deborah Savage**

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## Overview

A Rumour of Otters focuses on a young woman's efforts to define herself in relation to her parents, brother, and community. What makes her struggle moving is that she not only rebels against the traditional domestic role assumed by rural New Zealand women but also proves her skill in two traditionally male roles—herding sheep and pursuing an education. The novel also depicts a young man's effort to prove his skill in the traditional male role of sheep herder, his father's occupation.

Where Savage especially succeeds is in her respectful portrayal of both characters' ambitions and their path to mutual understanding.

In the novel, fourteen-year-old Alexa rejects the life of a farm wife that her mother has fallen into. She wants something that will take her into the larger world that lies beyond her parents' sheep station. By contrast, her sixteen-year-old brother Tod is eager to follow in his father's footsteps. Both, however, face tests of their resolve through a series of adventures. Forbidden by her father to participate in the autumn muster, Alexa steals away on her own mission to find a remote pond where a Maori ranch hand has told her he once saw otters, a species believed to be extinct on New Zealand. For his part, Tod departs with his father and the workers to bring the sheep in from their mountain pastures.

When Alexa's disappearance is discovered, a massive search begins.

Without his father's permission, Tod sets off to find her because he suspects what she has undertaken. The winter weather intensifies as Tod crosses difficult country, and as Alexa, low on supplies, struggles to find shelter and food. The story reaches a climax as the two come in sight of each other across a raging river. Throughout these adventures, both face physical and psychological challenges that almost destroy them, and both survive, chastened but wiser in their self-knowledge.

## About the Author

Deborah Savage was born December 15, 1955, in Northampton, Massachusetts. At an early age, she moved with her family to north-central Pennsylvania, where she spent her childhood and adolescence on a two-hundred acre farm. Encouraged by her father, a college English professor and writer, and her mother, an art teacher, to pursue "individual and rather solitary interests," Savage early learned to write and illustrate stories, first about animals and later about young people and their relationships. Early in her childhood, she writes, she was conscious of "being an artist."

Admitting she "hated school," Savage left home at seventeen to travel in Great Britain and the United States.

She eventually entered the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she earned a degree in writing and illustration. During the late 1970s, she combined teaching creative writing with efforts to publish poetry and short stories, but had little success.

In 1981, she married a New Zealand native and lived briefly on the Great Barrier Island east of Auckland. Later, after moving to Auckland, she sought work as a freelance illustrator. Instead, she found a publisher, Collins, that was more interested in a story she had written after moving to New Zealand called *A Rumour of Otters*. The novel is set on the South Island, a part of New Zealand that she had not visited but whose climate and topography resemble more closely her rural Pennsylvania home. By the time the novel was published in 1984, she had moved back to Massachusetts. *A Rumour of Otters* was picked up subsequently by Houghton Mifflin in 1986 and received a "Notable Children's Book Award" that year from the American Library Association.

After returning to the United States, Savage spent several years in northwestern Connecticut, where she wrote her next novel, *Flight of the Albatross*.

Published in 1989, the work draws upon her experiences on the Great Barrier Island as well as her experiences as a muralist for the Auckland Museum, where she worked in a large hall devoted to navigational feats of the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific.

Among these people are the Maori, whom European explorers encountered when they "discovered" New Zealand.

In *Flight of the Albatross*, the main characters are an American girl, who is very much involved in music and who is visiting her mother for the summer, and a Maori boy, who is trying to understand who he is and what role he will play as an adult.

In recent years, Savage has divided her time between the United States and New Zealand. Her marriage ended in divorce, but her fascination with New Zealand has survived. Her 1992 novel, *A Stranger Calls Me Home*, is set on the East Cape of the North Island. In this story, three young people—two boys and a girl—work through the contradictions posed by their Maori and pakeha (European) backgrounds. A fourth



novel, *Along a Path of Stars*, is nearing completion. In addition to her writing, Savage has taught English in secondary school, has continued her work as a muralist, and has led workshops in writing for schools.

Savage writes, "Why New Zealand has affected me so profoundly is still virtually a mystery. I think I discovered a strong, concrete metaphor there for my own vision. It is a small country, where the problems of environment and cultural differences are extremely pronounced and easily in evidence. In any case, I am somehow able to transpose onto a foreign landscape my own personal experiences in growing up, in discovering a sense of self in my society."

# Setting

The novel takes place on an isolated sheep station on the South Island of New Zealand during the 1970s. The station is located inland from the east coast within sight of the rugged Kaikora Mountain Range. The characters invade vast, uninhabited territory that few people enter except to muster sheep during the fall roundup. Snowfed rivers, thick brush, impenetrable forests, fierce winds, avalanches, and wild boars and goats challenge the humans and domesticated animals that enter their domain. Consequently, the human concerns of the characters often become overwhelmed by the indifferent forces of nature.



## Social Sensitivity

Savage nicely blends a young woman's rebellion against traditional female roles with her growing respect for those roles. She also sympathetically critiques masculine roles. Thus, by the end of the novel, Alexa can respect Clive and accept his invitation for a date, even though she has no interest in marrying him and becoming a farm wife. Less obvious but equally important to New Zealanders, or Aotearoans (as they are called in the Maori language) is Savage's sensitive treatment of Billy, a Maori musterer whose story of having seen otters decades earlier fascinates Alexa. Billy is also shown to be insightful in his dealings with Tod.

Some of the characters do use mild profanity in their speech, and the "survival of the fittest" attitude that Jim, Alexa, and Tod have toward livestock may shock some squeamish readers.



## Literary Qualities

Savage writes a fast-paced but descriptive novel. Because many of the characters are frequently alone, she uses dialogue less and interior monologue, narration, and description more.

The result is a strong sense of the complexity of Alexa's and Tod's personalities, and an artist's vivid vision of New Zealand's weather, landscape, wildlife, and vegetation. Shifting points of view allow for growing suspense as Savage moves back and forth from Alexa to Tod and occasionally to Jim, Marty, Billy, and Clive.

*A Rumour of Otters* offers a good introduction to New Zealand English, which is flavored with Maori names for places, vegetation, and wildlife as well as British terms for schooling and domestic life. Although an American, Savage employs these terms idiomatically and allows context generally to define them. In addition, she captures well the sense of isolation that permeates rural New Zealand life.

Savage is particularly skillful at depicting Alexa's rebelliousness while showing how dangerous it is to herself, her horse, and her dog when she ventures, poorly prepared, into a natural setting that threatens her life. Woven throughout the novel is the Maori sense of quest that leads to a moment of enlightenment and a oneness with nature that strengthens a person for the rest of his or her life.





## Themes and Characters

Alexa and Tod dominate *A Rumour of Otters*. Alexa embodies the need for young people to make decisions for themselves and bear the consequences.

In an effort to prove her resolve to be her own person, Alexa sets off alone to verify a story told to her by Billy, a Maori herdsman, who has said that otters, long thought to be gone from New Zealand, inhabit an isolated mountain lake. Alexa's quest is ultimately successful but at a cost that threatens not only her own life but the lives of a family member, her horse, and her dog. To survive, Alexa grimly commits acts that she had never even imagined.

As for Tod, he must prove his skill as a musterer and his compassion as a brother. Both are tested severely as his hasty decision on the muster almost kills a valued dog, and his well-intentioned but risky rescue efforts almost kill him. Both, however, learn to accept themselves and each other and gain new respect for the lives that their parents lead.

Other characters have minor but memorable roles. Billy, the Maori, represents a people whose Polynesian culture reveres values that are often at odds with those of the European-descended pakeha. His sense of human beings' relation to nature is one that Alexa adopts in her quest to find the otters that scientists tell her do not exist in New Zealand. Alexa and Tod's parents, Jim and Marty, wrestle with Alexa's efforts to break free from the restraints that rural New Zealand society places on children, especially girls.

Both parents must work through their reactions to their daughter's rebellion.

Clive, a young neighbor who works on the muster, intensifies Alexa's sense of maturation through his romantic interest in her, an interest that threatens her with the very life she wants to avoid.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Is Alexa's father's refusal to let her go on the autumn muster justifiable?
2. Are Jim and Marty responsible parents? In what ways is Alexa's rebellion against them selfish or irresponsible?
3. How do shifts in point of view change your opinion of characters? For example, do you think differently of Tod when you see events from his angle rather than Alexa's?
4. In what ways could this story take place in any remote rural area around the world? In what ways is New Zealand an ideal setting?
5. How does Savage's interest in art influence both the content of the story and the way that she writes it?
6. Do you find Tod's rescue efforts believable? Would most brothers respond this way?
7. What symbolism does Savage develop through the images of water, especially the lake in the mountains and the various rivers?
8. How does Savage differentiate among human responses to various species of animals? Should we distinguish domesticated animals from wild animals?
9. What evidence does the novel provide for environmental and ecological problems facing New Zealand, especially those caused by introduced animals such as rabbits and deer?
10. In what ways does the story draw upon the idea of the quest found in Arthurian and other legends?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. New Zealand (Aotearoa) is one of the last habitable places on Earth to have been settled by humans. When did the ancestors of the Maori and Europeans first arrive? Why did they come in large numbers after members of each group "discovered" the two large islands?

2. Weather plays an important role in the novel. What sort of climate does New Zealand have and what geographic and geologic factors affect it?

3. New Zealand has unique vegetation and animal life. Research what species of plants and animals are found there. Which of these does Savage include in the novel?

4. Savage has written two other novels set in New Zealand, *Flight of the Albatross* and *A Stranger Calls Me Home*.

Read them and compare and contrast the characters, plots, themes, and settings.

5. New Zealand has suffered environmentally from the introduction of foreign animal and plant species. Build on those mentioned by Savage (deer, rabbits, sheep, goats) and investigate this problem.

6. Relations between European settlers and the Maori have often been difficult. Nevertheless, the Maori have continued to have a separate identity recognized by New Zealand law. Who are the Maori historically and what are the characteristics of their culture?

7. New Zealand has produced a number of notable female authors, including Katherine Mansfield, Janet Frame, and Kerri Hulme. Find and read a work by one of these authors and discuss how the author deals with the themes developed by Savage.

## For Further Reference

Sinclair, Keith. *A History of New Zealand*. London: Penguin, 1980. First published in 1959 and subsequently updated, this book provides an overview of New Zealand history from the first settlement by the Maori to the present. It contains a valuable annotated bibliography.

## Related Titles

Savage's two other published novels, *Flight of the Albatross* and *A Stranger Calls Me Home*, deal with young adults, some American, some New Zealanders.

However, there is no continuity of characters or settings among the novels.

# Copyright Information

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