Sing Down the Moon Short Guide

Sing Down the Moon by Scott O'Dell

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

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Overview

O'Dell called Sing Down the Moon an adventure about loyalty. Bright Moming, a young Navaho woman, remains loyal to her family, her homeland, and her people. The book opens with Bright Morning remembering the first time she took her family's sheep onto the mesa at Canyon de Chelly to begin the spring grazing. When a late spring blizzard strikes, she secures the sheep in a grove of trees but becomes frightened and abandons the flock. Although the sheep survive, Bright Morning feels that by leaving, she has betrayed both them and her family. Looking back on the incident a year later and recalling her family's disapproval, Bright Morning understands the importance of loyalty. Her experiences throughout the novel— being captured as a slave, being forced to participate in the Navaho "long walk" into exile from Canyon de Chelly, marrying the recently crippled Tall Boy, and returning with her new husband to the canyon—test and strengthen her loyalty to the people and places that are part of her identity and her integrity.

About the Author

Scott O'Dell was born on May 23, 1903, in Los Angeles, California. Although he traveled widely, he made his home in southern California, the region in which many of his books are set.

O'Dell attended Occidental College, the University of Wisconsin, Stanford University, and the University of Rome but never completed a degree. Believing that he did not need an academic degree to become a successful writer, he attended these institutions to study the subjects that interested him most: history, philosophy, psychology, and literature.

In addition to being a prolific novelist, O'Dell worked briefly as a movie cameraman, served in the Air Force, and pursued journalism. He married Jane Rattenbury in 1948.

After publishing several adult novels, O'Dell began a career as an author of novels for young readers with Island of the Blue Dolphins. He went on to write more than twenty novels for young adults, most of which received awards and achieved popularity. One of the best of these is Sing Down the Moon, a Newbery Honor Book. O'Dell's other awards include the 1961 Newbery Medal for Island of the Blue Dolphins, a 1968 Newbery Honor Book citation for The Black Pearl and the 1972 Hans Christian Andersen Award for lifetime contribution to children's literature. Two of his novels—Island of the Blue Dolphins and The Black Pearl—were adapted to feature-length films. O'Dell died on October 15, 1989, in Mount Kisco, New York.

Characters

Bright Morning is one of the strong, resourceful and independent young Indian women that O'Dell creates in his novels. She has a fierce desire for freedom which makes her refuse to give up and adapt to the ways of her Spanish captors. Instead, she stubbornly bides her time and takes the first chance to escape. This independent streak also characterizes her relationship with Tall Boy who later becomes her husband.

Critics of O'Dell have mentioned the stoicism and absence of emotion in Bright Morning, but this is not quite true. Although the girl does not express her emotions easily, something considered inappropriate among her people, she has a deep bond with the young man and understands his feelings. When he is crippled by a bullet during his attempt to help her escape from the Spaniards, she carefully rebuilds his self-esteem, knowing that his pride is deeply hurt by his inability to hunt and do the work of other men.

"Tall Boy rode through the field on his way home, but did not stop. 'You think that I went to the white man's village just to rescue you,' he said as he passed. 'You are wrong. I went there for another reason.' I watched him ride away, sitting stooped in the saddle, one shoulder lower than the other, and my heart went out to him."

A similar, unspoken but deep relationship exists between Bright Morning and her mother. Although her mother taunts her about Tall Boy's inability to provide, there is concern only that her daughter would be making a mistake, and when she sees that Bright Morning is determined, she accepts her decision unquestioningly. "Every week my mother and I went to visit Tall Boy and his family. She never again said anything about his arm and when he had trouble, when it was awkward for him to do something, she always looked away in pity."

Bright Morning is the central character of the novel, and all others are seen in relationship to her. Tall Boy, the young Navajo brave who eventually becomes her husband, is proud but lacks the strength of the young woman.

Wounded during the rescue of Bright Morning from the Spanish slavers, he eventually loses the use of his right arm. Although he learns to compensate for his physical injury, his emotional recovery is much more difficult. He overcompensates by denying that he is crippled, but underneath he is well aware that the others in the tribe consider him with pity. When the tribe is relocated on the reservation, however, most of the other men are also quickly giving up. As Bright Morning says scornfully, they become the worst gossips, doing nothing all day except sit around and talk. It is the women such as Bright Morning and her mother who still carry on and dream. When Tall Boy is thrown into prison for beating an Apache, he escapes, but lacks the will to go any further than his reservation home. Only the combined efforts of his mother-in-law, who taunts him, and Bright Morning, who plans for him, get him to flee the reservation and take his wife back to their old home in the Canyon de Chelly. There, Bright Morning and her family have again hopes for the future.

The remaining characters of the novel have marginal roles in the life of the protagonist. Running Bird, her friend, shares her captivity, Bright Morning's mother is a forceful example of the Navajo women, and the Spanish townspeople, the members of the tribe, and the white soldiers only serve to promote the action. Scott O'Dell uses an omniscient point of view, yet we do not see into the minds of these characters. Even Bright Morning is shown mainly through her actions and statements. Indeed, what she does not say is sometimes more eloquent than what she does.

Setting

Sing Down the Moon takes place mainly in Arizona and New Mexico between 1863 and 1865. The story begins and ends in Canyon de Chelly, now a national monument. O'Dell is a careful historical novelist. In addition to giving his readers the pleasure of adventures set in another time and place, he offers a glimpse into the life and culture of Navahos in the nineteenth-century Southwest. He creates a vivid sketch of traditional Navaho life, basing his story of "the long march" on an actual historical event. In 1863 the U.S. government removed all the Navahos from the Four Comers region of the Southwest (where the borders of Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico all meet) to Fort Sumner, southeast of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Colonel Kit Carson led U.S. Cavalry troops in destroying Navaho villages and crops and killing those who resisted the three-hundred-mile walk. About ten thousand Navahos were removed; about eighty-five hundred reached Fort Sumner alive. Another fifteen hundred died during two years of exile. Sing Down the Moon captures the horror of this long march from a young Navaho woman's point of view.

Social Concerns

Much of O'Dell's fiction revolves around two major areas of interest: the history of the Southwest and the conflict between Native Americans and white people. Sing Down the Moon deals with the canyons and deserts of Arizona and the attempts to resettle the Navajo people from these, their homelands. Bright Morning, a fourteen-yearold Navajo girl, leads a simple but happy life, caring for her mother's sheep and sharing in the work and celebrations of her community. Her first encounter with whites almost brings an end to this way of life, as Bright Morning and her friend Running Bird are captured by Spanish slavers and taken south to a large city. There the girls are sold as household help and meet young Indian girls from several tribes, even from as far north as the Nez Perce, an indication of the widespread trade in Indian slaves by the Spanish. While some of the young women have adjusted and even enjoy the softer city life, Bright Morning's fierce desire for freedom helps her and Running Bird to escape and return home. This episode, which serves both as an introduction to the abuse of the Indians by the whites and as a demonstration of the determination and love of freedom of the Navajo, deals with a widespread practice of the Spanish in the Southwest to use and abuse the native population for labor. The seemingly idyllic life of the old Spanish families is based on such exploitation of the natives, often under the guise of making them converts to Christianity.

But while Rosarita, another captured Navajo girl, goes willingly to the white man's church, Bright Morning refuses stubbornly during her captivity to have anything to do with the god of her captors.

The second part of the confrontation between whites and Indians occurs when the army, "the Long Knives," forcibly relocates the Navajo and marches them to a reservation, a long, painful journey reminiscent of the Cherokee's Trail of Tears to Oklahoma.

This treatment of the Native Americans is even harsher, and some of Bright Morning's people suspect that the army tries to eliminate them and does not wish them to survive. Illness, starvation, and lack of shelter take a terrible toll of the Indians at Bosque Redondo, the inhospitable desert where their new reservation is located.

Social Sensitivity

O'Dell said that he was concerned with the way in which children grow up in American society and with the failures of different cultures to understand and appreciate one another. These concerns are apparent in Sing Down the Moon.

O'Dell shows Bright Morning growing from the girl who abandoned her sheep into the mature woman who can break the lance her husband makes for their son. Her rejection of a tradition of warfare promises a new cultural direction for her people. A feminist theme is implicit both in O'Dell's choice to make a young woman his narrator and main character, and in the direction the story takes. In traditional Navaho society, masculine interests dominate, and these interests help to provoke "the long march." Despite warnings from the U.S. government that Navaho raids against the Utes will bring reprisals, the Navaho are unable to give up warfare as a means of gaining extra food, territorial advantage, and personal honor. Though Bright Morning and other women understand how foolish such behavior is and emphasize the importance of protecting their precious, fertile canyon, the men will not listen. Rather, they insist upon the traditional way, in which women submit and avoid contradicting husbands and fathers. While women have a voice in tribal affairs, they lack the power to change the men's foolish behavior. Tall Boy's loss of the use of his arm and the couple's sufferings in exile lead to Bright Morning's assertion of a new ideal that promises a beneficial change for her people.

In Sing Down the Moon, much suffering results from the failures of cultures to understand and appreciate one another. The Navaho are unable to give up their long rivalry with the Utes even though they have all they need. The Spanish-American civilization of New Mexico tears young women away from "savage" tribes to gain slaves and servants. The U.S. soldiers who move the Navaho think of them as primitives that need and desire autocratic control. In each case, cruelty arises from ignorance and a lack of effort to overcome the ignorance. To use people or force them to conform always seems the easier choice, unless it is seen from the point of view of the victims. By telling the story from Bright Morning's point of view, O'Dell insures that his readers will see how unnecessary and wrong are such brutalities as the Navaho long march and the exile at Fort Sumner.

Techniques

Scott O'Dell's style and narrative technique are very original, and both have drawn high praise as well as criticism from his reviewers. He is a master of understatement. Rarely do his characters express their emotions, although the perceptive reader will find that they may run deep. The love between Bright Morning and Tall Boy is never expressed except for brief comments such as "I stood there and felt like crying," or "My heart hurt for him." Yet although she feels sorry and understands Tall Boy's despair, when her mother taunts her husband and says: "He will soon have to change his name again . . . What do you think it should be? Boy-Who-Sits-at the Fire?

Boy- Who-Sleeps-Stan ding-up? "she comments drily, "I will need to think hard." This seeming stoicism and lack of emotion is derived from older stereotypical pictures of the Indian, but in Scott O'Dell's writing it becomes a powerful and effective tool. The strength of his protagonists comes from an inner core and does not need outward confirmation.

As spare and unemotional as his style are his descriptions, but they are extraordinarily evocative due to effective uses of comparisons and metaphors. The first day of spring is described as the day the waters came.

High on the mesa, Bright Morning first hears them as a whisper like the wind among the dry corn stalks, then as a sound of the feet of warriors dancing, and finally as a roar that shakes the earth. Metaphors and comparisons are drawn from the world of the characters, and underscore the Indian way of life.

Themes

Living in harmony with the environment is a theme that appears in several of Scott O'Dell's stories about Native Americans. Just as Karana, the heroine of Island of the Blue Dolphins (1960), manages to live and even find satisfaction in a hostile environment, Bright Morning, her family and people lead a frugal but satisfying life in Canyon de Chelly, raising sheep, fruit, vegetables, and corn. There is pleasure in watching the sheep prosper, as well as responsibility for their welfare. Bright Morning recalls an episode where she was frightened by a storm and went home, leaving the flock to fend for itself. She is not punished, but her mother refuses to trust her for a year and treats her as an irresponsible child.

The Navajo life is meaningful because everyone knows his place in it, but when this way of life is disturbed, so is the social balance. After the soldiers have forcibly settled the Indians on the reservation, they try to turn them into wheat farmers, not a natural activity for the Indians. Their natural seasonal rhythm is destroyed, and they merely exist on the food they are handed, lacking any will to work because they have lost their role and purpose in life. Totally demoralized, they lose their self-respect and will to survive.

"My mother and sister and I, like all the other women, had little to do.

There was no corn to grind. Wagons came filled with flour. White soldiers stood in it up to their knees and passed it out to us on big wooden shovels.

There were no sheep to tend or wool to shear and weave into blankets. There were no hunters to bring in hides to scrape and stretch and make into leggings. We were idle most of the time."

The domination by a foreign culture leading to the destruction of an ancient way of life is another, related theme of Sing Down the Moon. The colorful rites of becoming a woman that Bright Morning undergoes in the early part of the novel are in stark contrast to the apathy and lethargy of reservation existence. It is only when Bright Morning refuses to give up her old ways, represented by her sheep, that she is able to escape and recapture her former existence. In this, she is the leader, and her husband Tall Boy, the follower, just as in the Navajo culture the women are the keepers of tradition, and guardians of the home and the flocks.

Key Questions

When Scott O'Dell first submitted his manuscript for Island of the Blue Dolphins, it was rejected because the protagonist was a young woman. O'Dell's agent suggested that he change the sex of the main character, but the writer refused to do so. In what way does his preference for young female protagonists affect his novels? Would the theme and story evolve the same way if Karana was a boy or Bright Morning a young man? It is interesting that in Sing Down the Moon, only the women play an important role. The men may brag or give up, but the Navajo women are the ones that carry on the traditions and tasks of everyday life. Why would a male author show such preferences?

Are his girls feminine or masculine?

Does the fact that the Navajo culture is largely maternal — the women own the sheep, the backbone of the economy of the tribes — explain the strength of character of the protagonist, or are there other explanations?

1. Sing Down the Moon actually consists of two plots — the kidnapping of Bright Morning by Spanish slavers and the relocation of the Navajo by the U.S.

Army. Why did O'Dell bring in these two plots? Are they related? What is the function of the kidnapping and rescue story?

2. What is the purpose of the detailed description of the Womanhood Ceremony? Why is it placed between the two tragic stories? How is this ceremony related to O'Dell's overall theme? What is its importance in the life of Bright Morning? Does it explain her character? Her standing in the tribe? The role of women in Navajo society?

3. What significant role do sheep play in Bright Morning's life? O'Dell uses them almost in a symbolic manner. What is their purpose beyond factual detail?

4. What is the relationship between Tall Boy and Bright Morning in their marriage? When they escape from the reservation, he rides their horse and she has to walk. She says that "someday I hoped to have a horse of my own and then I would ride beside my husband. Perhaps he would not own a horse by this time, then it would be he who would have to walk." How does the Navajo concept of marriage differ from the one of the white society?

5. How does O'Dell handle emotion in this story? Are the Indians simply stoic? What about the teasing that Bright Morning refers to with her friends? Are we to take everything she says literally? Is this true also for her relationship with Tall Boy?

6. Why does Bright Morning destroy the toy spear Tall Boy has made for his son? Does this illustrate her vision of the future, and what does this vision promise? Why does she call the rain at the end of the book "Navajo rain"?

Topics for Discussion

1. What does Bright Morning leam from her mistake of leaving the sheep in the snow storm?

2. Why can't Bright Morning live happily in the pleasant house where she is a servant after she is first captured?

3. What do you think of the way Tall Boy handles the men who pursue Bright Morning and her friends to regain their horses?

4. Why does the U.S. Cavalry remove the Navahos from the Canyon de Chelly area?

5. What meanings do you see in Bright Morning's taking care of the baby that dies on the way to Fort Sumner?

6. How does the forced move to Fort Sumner affect the Navaho? Think about both the physical and the spiritual changes they undergo.

7. Why does Bright Morning want to return to Canyon de Chelly from Fort Sumner?

8. What similarities do you see between Bright Morning's first and second exiles? What important differences do you see?

9. What meanings do you see in Bright Morning's breaking her son's toy spear at the end of the story?

10. In the postscript, we learn that this novel is based on actual historical events. Does this make a difference in the way you think about the novel?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Tall Boy's loss of the use of his right arm may be seen as a symbol. Review what we learn about that arm, how it is hurt, what the loss means, and what he says about the wound. Write a paper explaining how the wound functions as a symbol in the novel. What does Tall Boy learn from Bright Morning's response to his injury?

2. O'Dell has said, "I'm not interested in the Navajos particularly—they're not my favorite tribe even. They were marauders—they rode in and took the crops of other Indians, after harvest sometimes." Does his attitude towards the Navaho show in the story? Write a paper discussing the weaknesses of Navaho culture that most seem to influence how the story is told.

3. Think about the married life of Bright Morning and Tall Boy. Write a sketch of what this life would have been like had the two married as they originally planned—she wealthy in sheep and he a successful hunter and warrior.

Describe and explain the most interesting similarities and contrasts between this picture and the actual situation.

4. Use an encyclopedia and other sources to learn about the culture or history of the Navaho. Write a report about how O'Dell incorporates this information into his novel. Note any new facts that surprise you.

5. Use an encyclopedia and other sources to leam about the Navaho's long march to Fort Sumner in 1864. Explain the differences between the historical account and the one presented in Sing Down the Moon.

6. O'Dell refers briefly to one of the most horrendous acts of violence by white settlers against Native Americans: the nighttime massacre, led by J. M. Chivington, of an entire village of three hundred Arapaho and Cheyenne. Research the historical events that led to this massacre.

Literary Precedents

The Indian as the "noble savage" is an age-old concept used by many writers, ranging from Cooper's Leather Stocking Tales to modern Westerns such as Dorothy Johnson's "The Lost Sister." The eighteenth century saw the American native as a person living in a state of innocence, in a natural paradise unspoiled by civilization. Unfortunately, the European world often destroyed this paradise. Scott O'Dell uses this theme when he describes the happy, productive life of Bright Morning and her people in the Canyon de Chelly, a life that is abruptly ended when they are moved to the reservation by the white government. Yet O'Dell still sees hope for the future when the courageous Navajo woman and her husband return to their home and start life over. Later such a hope is no longer possible, as in Thunder Rolling in the Mountains (1992), where the Nez Perce under Chief Joseph have no chance to return to their beautiful Wallowa mou ntains.

For Further Reference

Estes, Glenn E. Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 52. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. Contains a discussion of O'Dell's career with detailed descriptions and reviews of his young adult books.

Townsend, John Rowe. A Sense of Story: Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children. New York: Lippincott, 1971.

Includes a brief overview of O'Dell's early novels and an excerpt from an essay in which he discusses his aims as a writer for young people.

Wintle, Justin, and Emma Fisher. The Pied Pipers: Interviews with the Influential. Creators of Children's Literature.

New York: Paddington, 1974. Contains an interview with O'Dell about Sing Down the Moon and his other novels, his reasons for writing books for young people, and his views about the function of young adult literature in modern American society.

Related Titles

O'Dell did not write any other books about the characters in Sing Down the Moon, but The King's Fifth takes place in the same region. This novel, which is about the sixteenth-century Spanish search for gold, includes Native American characters. Several other O'Dell novels are set in the Southwest, Mexico, and Central America, and concern interactions between Native Americans and Europeans.

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