

Streams to the River, River to the Sea Short Guide

Streams to the River, River to the Sea by Scott O'Dell

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Overview

Streams to the River, River to the Sea: The Story of Sacagawea, like many of O'Dell's young adult novels, is the story of personal identity and strength of character. The story opens with the kidnapping of the Shoshone Indian princess, Sacagawea, and her cousin Running Deer by Minnetaree warriors.

Even though her peaceful existence is shattered, Sacagawea never forgets who she is and the nobility and integrity of her people. Thrust into a series of events that takes her further from her homeland, Sacagawea meets each situation with a determination for survival. She is kidnapped again from the Minnetarees by the vicious LaBorgne, but manages to escape to an island where she survives until rescued and returned to the Minnetarees. There it is expected she will marry Red Hawk, son of Chief Black Moccasin. But before the marriage Red Hawk loses her to the French trader Charbonneau in a shell game. Because she now belongs to Charbonneau, she becomes his second wife, even though she intensely dislikes the coarse Frenchman and is frightened by his bad temper. When Sacagawea bears a son, she shifts her focus from her own unhappiness to her motherly duties and love for her infant Meeko. Only thirteen years old, Sacagawea's strength and integrity become especially apparent when she becomes a part of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

About the Author

Born in Los Angeles May 23, 1903, Scott O'Dell remained in southern California all of his life. Living near the sea and in what he called "frontier country," O'Dell later captured many of his childhood experiences in his novels.

By the time he entered college, he knew he wanted to be a writer and was discouraged to find most college degree programs did not offer what he thought necessary for becoming a successful writer.

As a result he studied psychology, philosophy, history, and English without regard for earning a degree. He worked briefly as a cameraman on Ben-Hur in Rome and spent a year in Texas writing adult novels. He pursued a career in journalism as a book editor for a Los Angeles newspaper. After publishing several successful adult novels, O'Dell turned to writing for children, which he considered more rewarding because, he believed, children are able to live the lives of other people through stories.

Several of O'Dell's young adult novels have been honored with awards, including his first book for young readers, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, which won the 1961 Newbery Medal and the Southern California Notable Book Award. *The Black Pearl* (1967) and *Sing Down the Moon* (1970) both received Newbery Honor Book citations; in 1972 O'Dell won the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award for his lifetime contribution to children's literature. Scott O'Dell died in Mount Kisco, New York, on October 15, 1989.

Setting

Sacagawea's story is told against the backdrop of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804. Instigated by President Thomas Jefferson's interest in the country west of the Mississippi River, the expedition was led by Captain Meriwether Lewis and Lieutenant William Clark, both familiar with the hardships of frontier life and the threat of Indian warfare. The expedition explored American territory newly acquired from France in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.

On May 14, 1804, the expedition, consisting of Lewis and Clark; Clark's servant York; fourteen soldiers; nine Kentuckians; and two French boatmen started up the Missouri River. In July they had their first encounter with Native Americans, a peaceful one, and in October they reached the camps of the Mandan tribe, near present-day Stanton, North Dakota. There they built a fortified camp, Fort Mandan, and spent the winter. At this point Lewis and Clark hired Charbonneau and his Shoshone wife, the invaluable Sacagawea, as Indian interpreters and guides.

Leaving Fort Mandan in the spring of 1805 and traveling by canoe, the explorers traveled up the Missouri, often encountering delays. In July they made the decision to follow the Jefferson River into the Rocky Mountains. In the mountains, Sacagawea was reunited with her Shoshone people, who provided the explorers with horses and guides, enabling them to cross the Bitterroot Range by late September. From this point to the sea, the party traveled by water. In November of 1805, the expedition reached the Pacific Ocean, completing an arduous journey through difficult territory. On the Pacific shore, they built their winter's lodging, Fort Clatsop.

The expedition began the return journey in March of 1806, but upon reaching the Bitterroot Valley in July, the explorers separated to learn more about the territory. Clark followed the Yellowstone River to the Missouri River and Lewis explored the Marias River to the northeast, where he encountered hostile Native Americans for the first time during the entire trip. That summer the two parties met at Fort Mandan where Sacagawea and her family ended their association with the explorers. The expedition reached St. Louis on September 23, 1806, after blazing a future trail for American settlers and providing valuable information about the new territory. The expedition had been gone two years, four months, and nine days, and traveled about six thousand miles.



Social Sensitivity

O'Dell's novels are often concerned with the place of women in society. Sacagawea is another of his female characters who exhibits an ability to exert influence over her world, rather than remain in the shadow of masculine dominance. Although her husband Charbonneau is hired as the guide and interpreter for the expedition, it is the advice and guidance of Sacagawea that the expedition leaders come to trust and value. The feminist theme of the novel is clear as Sacagawea proves to be the equal of the expedition members. Her commitment to the expedition and its success motivates her to endure the hardships of the trail and to ignore those who would reduce her to a secondary role.

The loyalty Sacagawea shows for her tribe is also of social value. Remembering the words of the black man, Ben York, who told her that living in the white man's world would make a slave of her, just as he was a slave, Sacagawea opts for freedom in her own world as opposed to the success of a promising love with Captain Clark. Sacagawea refuses to sacrifice her son and his identity for the love of a white man in the white man's world. Her independence continues the feminist theme of O'Dell's novels.

Finally, the fact that Sacagawea is a member of a peaceful Native American tribe also works to remove the stereotypical view of blood-thirsty savages often held by young readers. By showing the admirable qualities of the Shoshones—their abilities as horsemen, and their willingness to share their horses and supplies with the expedition—O'Dell encourages a view of Native Americans not often emphasized in the past. This positive emphasis encourages a cross-cultural understanding that is lacking in much of the literature that spotlights the relationship between whites and Native Americans.

Literary Qualities

Typical of many of his adult novels, O'Dell uses the main character as the narrator of the story. O'Dell has often used first person narration in novels where the main character is female, including Newbery honorees *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Sing Down the Moon*.

This narrative voice is effective because, looking through the eyes of Sacagawea, the reader can see the nuances of Native American life and can experience the conflicts that reveal her strength of character. O'Dell himself admitted that the historical research for his novels, which usually took from three to four months, was what he enjoyed most while writing the book. This Sacagawea is not the cardboard figure of encyclopedias and history textbooks, but a vividly drawn woman who relies on instinct and common sense for survival in the wilderness and in the complex world of human relations.

By using flashbacks to reveal incidents of Sacagawea's Shoshone background, O'Dell creates a contrast between the peacefulness and civility of the Shoshones and the harshness and insensitivity of others, both Native Americans and whites. As Sacagawea is forced under the threat of death into a loveless marriage with Charbonneau, she thinks back to the Shoshone betrothal of her brother Cameahwait, whose fiancée had the option of refusing even the chief's son. When Sacagawea considers the warning of Captain Clark's slave, Ben York, that she and Meeko will never fit into the white man's world, she returns to her own Shoshone tribe, knowing they will accept her and her half-breed son. Sacagawea recognizes intuitively that she must remain loyal to her Shoshone roots.



Themes and Characters

Sacagawea is one of O'Dell's strong female characters who consistently behaves with nobility and integrity. Best known in history for her importance as a guide and interpreter for the Lewis and Clark expedition, Sacagawea's story, as told by O'Dell, shows the strength she possessed in surviving the hardships of exploring an unknown territory and in overcoming personal disappointments to raise her son in the Shoshone manner. As Sacagawea comes to love Captain Clark, she refuses to be blinded to her greatest responsibility—her son Meeko. It is that responsibility that eventually spurs her to return to her native people and raise her son in the Shoshone traditions.

The other characters in the novel all serve in some degree as a contrast to Sacagawea. Charbonneau is pictured as a greedy and selfish fool. His abuse of Sacagawea is evidence of his cruel and uncaring nature; his betrayal of the expedition an example of his lack of integrity. Sacagawea stands tall in comparison, even though as his wife she is his inferior in Native American society.

Her ability to circumvent his anger and protect her son from his influence show her common sense and her ability to judge character astutely. Even Captain Clark, whom Sacagawea loves and who is basically admirable, does not possess the sensitivity one might expect. While he is quick to protect her when he can from Charbonneau's temper, he does not see the pain he himself causes her when he declares she could come to St.

Louis and become a part of his "civilized world" by going to school to become a proper lady. Neither does he understand Sacagawea's distress when he declares her a beautiful Indian child. Sacagawea is disturbed that after all their time together, through confrontations with hostile Native Americans and the perilous trail, he sees her only as a child, and not as the woman and mother she is.

The other female characters also contrast with Sacagawea. Most of these women exist only in relation to the masculine world in which they reside. Black Moccasin's wives conspire to marry Sacagawea to Red Hawk, and so prepare her to catch his eye. They remind Sacagawea many times of the honor she would receive to be chosen by the elusive Red Hawk. Otter Woman, Charbonneau's first wife, sees Sacagawea as a threat, but expresses a willingness to share the Frenchman so as not to lose her security. Only Running Deer seems to possess an independent spirit when she bravely escapes the Minnetarees.

But later it is Running Deer who discourages Sacagawea from continuing on to the sea with the explorers, even though Running Deer knows of Sacagawea's love for Captain Clark. Running Deer's life has become a submissive one as wife number three to a Shoshone who beats her. Sacagawea has a physical and mental toughness that the other female characters lack as she stands independently in a man's world.

Throughout the story Sacagawea never sacrifices her integrity or Shoshone instincts in order to seek an easier, or a more satisfying life. She does not cry or show fear when



the Minnetarees kidnap her; she survives alone using her wilderness knowledge when trapped on the island; she does not flinch from her duty to marry the repugnant Charbonneau; she shows her physical strength repeatedly on the trail.

But Sacagawea's final act in the novel best exemplifies her strength of character and loyalty to her Shoshone tradition. She knows in her heart that she and Meeko would never belong in the white man's world in St. Louis, regardless of her love for Captain Clark or his regard for her. Without alerting anyone, she silently gathers up her son and belongings and leaves the camp, prepared to journey to the mountains of her Shoshone people. Pained to leave Captain Clark, Sacagawea is willing to sacrifice her love for him in order to devote her life to raising her son "to be a Shoshone always!"



Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Sacagawea refuse to take part in Running Deer's escape attempt?
2. Explain how the wives of Black Moccasin treat Sacagawea. What are their plans for her?
3. What happens to Sacagawea when she is kidnapped by Tall Rock from the lodge of Black Moccasin? How is she able to fend for herself?
4. Many times Sacagawea refers to her talisman while on the island. What is the talisman? What is Sacagawea's belief in it?
5. How does Red Hawk "lose" Sacagawea to Charbonneau?
6. What is Sacagawea's reaction to her forthcoming wedding to Charbonneau?

How is her wedding different from the wedding of her brother when Sacagawea lived with her own Shoshone people?

7. Several times Charbonneau betrays the explorers he has been hired to guide.

What are his motives? What do Lewis and Clark come to think of the Frenchman?

8. At what point does Sacagawea realize that she loves Captain Clark? Discuss the nature of their friendship, giving examples that show their regard for one another.
9. Why does Sacagawea take her son and leave the expedition upon its return to Fort Mandan?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Throughout the story, Sacagawea proves that she is an invaluable part of the expedition. Write a paper that discusses the variety of ways Sacagawea aided the party as it explored the territory.
2. O'Dell has said, "I have a sincere feeling that I am able to say something . . . that someone is listening. I am not just entertaining them; I hope that somewhere in each of my books there is something they will take away from it that is important to them as a person."

Write a personal reaction to O'Dell's statement, referring specifically to the novel.

3. Read O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Write a paper that compares and contrasts the main characters of each novel.
4. Use an encyclopedia and other sources to write a research report on the Lewis and Clark expedition.
5. Use an encyclopedia and other sources to investigate the Shoshone tribe, their characteristics, customs, and traditions. Trace their history to the present day. Write a report using the information you discover.

For Further Reference

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Hoffman, Miriam, and Eva Samuels.

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"Lewis and Clark Expedition." In *Compton's Encyclopedia*. Chicago: Compton's Learning Company, 1986.

Contains a complete discussion of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Wittle, Justin, and Emma Fisher. *The Pied Pipers*. New York: Paddington.

1974. Includes an extended interview with O'Dell, dealing primarily with his opinions on bringing up children today.

Related Titles

This was the last book Scott O'Dell published before his death in 1989.

O'Dell wrote other books about Native Americans, including *Sing Down the Moon*.

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