

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Island of the Blue Dolphins

by
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Book Information

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Left alone on a beautiful but isolated island off the coast of California, a young Indian girl spends eighteen years, not only merely surviving through her enormous courage and self-reliance, but also finding a measure of happiness in her solitary life.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Misc./Other; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Medal; SLJ Best Book

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Main Characters

Captain Orlov the dishonest Russian sea captain who brings Aleut hunters to the island to hunt sea otter

Chief Chowig Karana's father and the chief of the Ghalas-at people

Karana (also, Won-a-pa-lei) the principal character in the story, a native girl who lives alone on an island for many years until rescued by white sailors

Kimki the man who takes Chowig's place after Chowig dies

Matasaip replaces Kimki as chief after Kimki fails to return to the island

Ramo Karana's brother, a six-year-old boy, for whom Karana leaves a ship to return to the island when he is left behind

Rontu a big gray dog with yellow eyes that Karana tames and befriends

Rontu-Aru Rontu's son whom Karana tames after Rontu's death

Tutok an Aleut girl whom Karana befriends while the Aleuts hunt

Ulape Karana's older sister; she leaves the island with the white men

Vocabulary

Aleut a member of a people inhabiting the Aleutian Islands and the Western Alaska Peninsula

devilfish an octopus

faggot a bundle of sticks, twigs or branches bound together and used as a torch

league a unit of distance; in English-speaking countries, usually estimated roughly at three miles

parley to hold a discussion or conference

sinew a tendon; the band of dense tissue serving to connect a muscle to a bone

Synopsis

When an Aleut ship, led by a Russian sea captain, comes to the island, the Aleuts wish to hunt sea otter. There is tension while Chief Chowig, the leader of the tribe, and Captain Orlov, the Russian, negotiate terms of the hunt and compensation. The parties agree to equal parts, with the Ghalas-at being paid in goods. When the hunt is over, Chief Chowig tells the captain that the one chest of goods he has given the tribe is not enough. A fight ensues between the men of Ghalas-at and the Aleuts. Chief Chowig and many of the men of Ghalas-at are killed. The remaining tribal members are left to bury their dead after the Aleuts leave the island.

Kimki, the new chief, decides to leave the island alone in a canoe to reach the mainland, make a place for the tribe, and return for them. Although he does not come back, he has sent white men in a ship to bring the tribe to the place where he was. As the tribe is making its way to the ship, Ramo, a

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young boy of six, returns to the village for the spear he has forgotten. The ship sets sail, and when his sister, Karana, discovers he is not aboard, she dives off the ship to return to the island to be with him. He is killed the next day by a pack of wild dogs that had grown bolder since the bloodshed occurred between the Aleuts and the tribe. Karana is now alone on the island and needs to survive until the white men's ship returns for her.

Karana realizes she must break the rules of her tribe against women fashioning weapons in order to survive. She is determined to eliminate the wild dogs that were responsible for her brother's death. Out of loneliness, she attempts to leave the island in a canoe, but when that fails and she returns, she embraces the island as her home. She now builds a house on the headland, protecting herself and her food from the dogs and other wild animals. When she goes after the dogs and wounds the leader, she finds she cannot destroy him and instead brings him home, tames him and names him Rontu. They become inseparable. After a number of years, the Aleuts return to hunt for otter, but Karana stays hidden from them except for an Aleut girl named Tutok, whom she befriends. After they leave, it is a number of years before a ship with white men come to the island for Karana. Before leaving the island they fashion her a dress out of trousers. She goes with them peacefully and takes along her old clothes, Rontu-Aru, who was Rontu's son, and some birds.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why did Karana dress up at times?

Karana appreciated beauty. Before the tribe left the island, she had watched her sister dress and groom herself as she approached womanhood. The scene at Coral Cove when the chest was open showed that the necklaces were admired. If we look at ourselves, we know that there are times we like to look special, and to be admired. Karana was probably responding to these same desires. She was also proud of her handiwork.

Literary Analysis

What statement about human nature did Scott O'Dell wish to make with this book?

A number of ideas are communicated. Humans are problem solvers and their instinct to survive is very strong--strong enough to go against the rules of the society that governed them. Humans need companionship and will seek that in their fellow human beings or animals. Humans are also shown as having different motives. Greed leads to destruction of the innocent. Compassion leads to relationship.

Inferential Comprehension

Karana could be described as a compassionate person. What examples could you use to support this observation?

She returned for Ramo, let Rontu live and nursed him back to health, befriended a sea otter and never killed animals, except fish, again after that.

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Constructing Meaning

Karana shows that certain animals are important to her by naming them. She doesn't wish to just call them dog, bird or otter. We do this also, not just for pets and people, but sometimes for objects that are special, too. What are some people, animals or objects you have named, and what meaning do those names have?

Individual answers will vary. Students may have named stuffed animals, dolls, blankets and pacifiers in their youth. Adults may name their cars and homes. Sometimes nicknames are given to friends.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting This story is based on the historical account of a girl that lived on San Nicolas Island, southwest of Los Angeles, California. Have the students locate San Nicolas on the map. Using the map legend, find out how far it is to the coast of California where Kimki canoed. The people of Ghalas-at watched for his return after one moon. What does this say about the length of his voyage? What factors needed to be considered to make this voyage? How could Kimki protect himself or compensate for storms, currents and dehydration? How did he navigate?

Understanding Characterization In order to survive, Karana had to break the rules of her tribe that governed social behavior according to gender. Find out who were the native people in your part of the country and learn about their culture. How were the tasks of the people divided? Choose one task that as a man or woman you would not normally perform and do it. For example, if women would cook, weave or fashion jewelry, a male student could prepare a native dish, weave a small rug, or learn beading. On the other hand, a female student could learn to fashion weapons, study tracking, or build a model of a shelter if those were normally the male roles. Class time may be set aside to see or taste each other's creations.

Understanding the Author's Craft *Island of the Blue Dolphins* contains many similes and

metaphors. Employ the students' artistic skills. Have them choose five or six similes or metaphors from the story and illustrate them.

Understanding Dialog Karana and Tutok are happy to have found each other and want to communicate. They go about pointing to things and telling each other the words for the objects in their respective languages. Pretend you have met a person from a foreign country. You do not understand any words from each other's language. You would like this person to understand who you are and what's important to you. Think about your dreams, as well as your favorite foods and music. Write down fifty words that would help describe you. Choose another language and look up those words in that language's dictionary. Do the words share anything in common? Are they derived from the same root word?