



## About Scott O'Dell

*"Always, I knew I would be a writer."*

—Scott O'Dell

**W**hen Scott O'Dell was born in Los Angeles on May 23, 1898, it was not the busy city it is today. "Los Angeles was a frontier town when I was born there," O'Dell said. "It had more horses than automobiles and more jackrabbits than people. The first sound I remember was a wildcat scratching on the roof of our house."

O'Dell grew up in California with his mother and father and a younger sister, Lucile. Because O'Dell's father worked for the railroad, the family moved often. They settled for a few years in the seaside town of San Pedro, California, and later lived in Julian, California, near the Mexican border. For a while, the family even lived on an island—Rattlesnake Island, near San Pedro. Their house was built on stilts, and when the tide came in, the seawater would wash under the house.

Wherever the family moved, though, they were never far from the Pacific Ocean or Los Angeles. "That is why, I suppose," said O'Dell, "the sound of the sea and the feel of the frontier are in my

books.” Many of O’Dell’s experiences on the California coast later became part of Karana’s story in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.

Scott O’Dell was not the name the author was given at birth. In fact, it was quite the opposite: He was named Odell Scott! When he was a young adult, a typesetter accidentally switched the two words. O’Dell decided that he liked the new name better and legally changed his name.

O’Dell started school in a one-room schoolhouse, then attended other, larger schools as his family moved from place to place. He always liked to read. When O’Dell was still in elementary school, his parents told him that he was related to Sir Walter Scott, the well-known Scottish novelist. O’Dell was so impressed that he decided to become a writer himself when he grew up.

During high school, O’Dell was a track star. He graduated from Polytechnic High School in Long Beach, California. School came so easily to him that he never studied very hard. When he went to college, he found that he did not know how to focus on his studies. That’s why, he once said, he wandered from college to college. He studied only what interested him—history, literature, philosophy, and psychology—and never earned a college degree.

O’Dell’s first job was reading movie scripts in Hollywood. Then he worked in the movie business as a set dresser—preparing movie sets for different scenes—and as a camera operator. Later he supported himself as a writer and editor for newspapers and magazines. All the while, he was writing books for adults. He

wrote seven altogether, including novels, a guidebook to Southern California, and a book about children's art.

During both World War I and World War II, O'Dell was a soldier, though he never actually fought in either war. He was still in training when World War I ended, and he was stationed in the United States during World War II.

O'Dell lived for many years in California, where he loved to sail and fish. For a while, he owned a sailboat that he sailed up and down the western coast of North America between Alaska and Mexico. O'Dell was married twice, the second time to Elizabeth Hall. He became a stepfather to Hall's two children from her previous marriage.

When O'Dell wrote *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, his first children's book, he was already in his early sixties. At a point in life when many people's careers are winding down, he was just beginning a second career as a children's book author. It was a career that would quickly bring him praise from around the world.

*Island of the Blue Dolphins* was published in 1960 and was awarded the 1961 Newbery Medal. The Newbery Medal is awarded each year by the American Library Association to the author of the most distinguished American children's book published the previous year. Earning this award for his first children's book was a great honor for O'Dell.

Six years after *Island of the Blue Dolphins* came out, O'Dell published his second children's book, *The King's Fifth*. The next

year his third, *The Black Pearl*, appeared. *The King's Fifth* and *The Black Pearl* were both named Newbery Honor books. Newbery Honor awards are given to books that the Newbery committee thinks are excellent but that did not win the main Newbery Medal. O'Dell received a third Newbery Honor in 1971 for *Sing Down the Moon*.

After *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, O'Dell never wrote another adult book. He wrote a total of twenty-six children's books and began two more that his wife, Elizabeth Hall, finished after his death.

Most of O'Dell's children's books are works of historical fiction, novels that are part historical fact and part fiction. One of them, called *Zia*, is a story told by Karana's fictional niece, Zia. It reveals what happens to Karana after she leaves the Island of the Blue Dolphins.


In 1972, O'Dell was given the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the highest international award granted to an author or illustrator. Given every other year, the award honors one author and one illustrator "whose complete works have made a lasting contribution to children's literature."

After living most of his life on the West Coast, O'Dell moved to the East Coast in 1975. His wife had accepted a job in New York, and they moved to Westchester County, north of New York City. There, they bought a home on a lake. When he was not writing, O'Dell liked to plant trees and grow vegetables. He also pursued his lifelong passions for traveling, sailing, and fishing.

In 1982, O'Dell began a project to encourage others to write about history. He established the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Each year since 1984 this annual award of \$5,000 has been given to the author of the best book of historical fiction for children.

O'Dell died of cancer on October 15, 1989. He was ninety-one years old. Although he died on the East Coast, his ashes were scattered in the sea off the coast of La Jolla, California. After the ceremony, as the mourners' boat turned back toward shore, a group of dolphins leaped from the water. The dolphins never left the boat's side until it turned from the ocean into the San Diego Bay.

## How *Island of the Blue Dolphins* Came About



"I have a sincere feeling that I am able to say something to children, that someone is listening. I am not just entertaining them; I hope somewhere in each of my books there is something they will take away from it that is important to them as a person."

—Scott O'Dell

Scott O'Dell based *Island of the Blue Dolphins* on the history of a real person, but facts about her life were just part of the story. The rest he wrote from his imagination, inspired by many of his own experiences.

*Island of the Blue Dolphins* is based on the story of the Lost Woman of San Nicolas Island. She lived alone on San Nicolas for eighteen years, from 1835 to 1853, before being rescued and brought to the mainland. O'Dell tells some of her story in the Author's Note at the end of the novel.

In the early 1800s, the Indians of San Nicolas were fighting with Russian and Aleut sea otter hunters. The Aleuts were natives of the Aleutian Islands that lie off the mainland of Alaska.

San Nicolas Island lies off the coast of what is now called California. When the Lost Woman was left behind in 1835, this land belonged to Mexico. At that time, the California region was inhabited mostly by Native Americans and by missionaries. The missionaries were there to settle the land and teach the Native Americans about Christianity. Up and down the coast of California, the missionaries had developed small communities, called missions.

When the missionaries heard that hunters were threatening the islanders of San Nicolas, the missionaries offered to bring them to live at the Santa Barbara Mission. The islanders agreed, and in 1835, the missionaries sent a ship to bring them to the mainland. As the ship was leaving the island in bad weather, a young woman said that a child had been left behind. The other people on the boat refused to turn back. The young woman leaped from the boat and swam to shore. Eighteen years later, she was discovered still alive on the island, dressed in a skirt of cormorant feathers and accompanied by a dog.

By the time the Lost Woman was rescued, all traces of her tribe had disappeared. No one could be found who spoke her language, so she could not tell people much about her experiences alone on the island. She died just seven weeks after coming to the mission, probably because she could not adjust to her new diet. The people at the mission, who never learned her

real name, gave her the Christian name Juana Maria and buried her at the mission.

O'Dell knew the Lost Woman's story for many years before he began to write about it. He first heard her story when he read a short magazine article about her in 1920. He found the story interesting but did nothing with it. As the years passed, he sometimes came across other mentions of the story. What finally inspired him to write about the Lost Woman? Hunters did.

In the late 1950s, O'Dell was living in the mountains of California near Mexico. He was not sure what he wanted to write about next. But he did know that he was angry at the hunters who were killing many animals in the mountains. He became so angry that he began to hate them. He wrote, "That hatred combined itself with the memory of this legend about the girl on the island, eighteen years alone . . . and it became an idea, not for a book, exactly, but just something that I wanted to say—really, to myself—and to sort this out."

O'Dell had two important pieces of his story: It would be a survival story based on the Lost Woman's history, and it would be a protest against the senseless killing of animals. But how would he bring the Lost Woman, whom he now called Karana, to life?

He found much of what he needed in experiences from his own life.

O'Dell knew the Channel Islands and the coast of California from his many experiences there as a child and as an adult. As a boy, O'Dell had hunted for devilfish along the rocky coast with his friends. Another childhood adventure became the basis for Karana's journey by canoe. O'Dell once described his adventure this way: "Many summer days we left the landlocked world and went to sea. How? Each of us on a separate log. The logs had been towed into the harbor in great rafts—from Oregon. They were twelve feet long or longer, rough with splinters and covered with tar." They might have been just logs, but to O'Dell and his friends, "they were proud canoes."

Some details of Karana's character were inspired by a Mexican girl whom O'Dell and his wife had met. She was a sixteen-year-old named Carolina, a strong, straightforward girl who "stood in her bare feet squarely on the earth as if growing from it." She was always careful to share the O'Dells' gifts with her brothers and sisters, showing the same loving spirit that Karana later showed to Ramo. Carolina also had a skirt that she treasured, much as Karana loved her skirt of cormorant feathers. "The two girls are much alike," O'Dell once said.

O'Dell loved dogs and knew how to describe a close relationship with one. He once had a German shepherd named Eric that went everywhere with him. In fact, O'Dell would only stay at hotels that welcomed the dog. When Eric became sick with his final illness, O'Dell nursed him sadly, fanning him through a long, hot summer. He once spoke about Eric's death in a way that sounds very much like Rontu's death: "Slowly, he walked to where I was

standing and fell at my feet. I put my hand on his chest. I could feel his heart beating, very slowly . . . and then no more.”

When he wrote *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, O’Dell also used memories of behavior he was less than proud of. As a child he had sometimes killed wild animals out of curiosity. When he grew up, he was always horrified to remember what he had done, and he was determined to help other people learn to treat animals properly.

O’Dell had an enemy as a child, much as Karana has enemies in the wild dogs and the Aleuts. O’Dell’s enemy was a bully, a boy who tormented him both in and out of school. When O’Dell and his childhood enemy met later as adults, O’Dell was prepared to hate him still. He found he couldn’t—and he used that feeling of forgiveness to show how Karana could befriend two members of enemy groups: Rontu, a wild dog, and Tutok, an Aleut.

After O’Dell wrote *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, he showed it to a friend, children’s book author Maud Lovelace. To his surprise, she told him that he had written his first children’s book. O’Dell once said, “I didn’t know what young people were reading and I didn’t consider [*Island of the Blue Dolphins*] a children’s book, necessarily.”

O’Dell’s editor agreed to publish *Island of the Blue Dolphins* soon after he submitted it. The book quickly became one of the best-loved children’s books ever written.