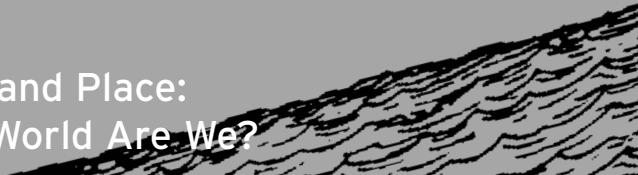


Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"The Island of the Blue Dolphins was my home; I had no other. It would be my home until the white men returned in their ship."

—Karana, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*

I *Island of the Blue Dolphins* takes place entirely on the island and in the nearby ocean during the mid-1800s.

Time

Although O'Dell never mentions any dates in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, we know the general time period since the novel is based on a true story. The real Lost Woman of San Nicolas lived alone on the island for eighteen years, between 1835 and 1853. Certain details of the story show us that O'Dell kept his novel in the same time period.

We see that the story takes place when the islanders are just beginning to be affected by outside cultures. Hunters have been to the Island of the Blue Dolphins only once before in the islanders' memory. Also, the white men helping the islanders are missionaries from the Santa Barbara Mission. Missions were the

main white settlements in California from the late 1700s to the mid-1800s. The hunters and the white men arrive in sailing ships of the sort that were used a hundred years or more ago. The Aleuts and the Russians have tools and objects that are almost as simple as the ones the Indians use: They fish for otters with spears, and as payment they offer beads and iron spearheads.

A number of years pass during the course of the book. The author shows this by letting whole seasons or years go by with a simple comment such as, “For many summers after the Aleuts had gone . . .” or “After two more springs had gone . . .” He also gives us a dramatic sense that many years have passed when he describes how Karana has marked the passage of time. For a long time, Karana counts the passing moons (months) by making a mark for each on a pole by her door. So much time passes that “there were many marks, from the roof to the floor.” After a while, though, she stops marking the moons and begins marking only the four seasons. Finally, during the last year when she doubts that she will ever be rescued, she does not mark the passing time at all.

Place

The author creates the island setting by weaving details into nearly every paragraph in the book. O’Dell describes the island itself and the many creatures that live on or near it. He gives us many details of the Indians’ culture, as well as some details about the cultures of the Aleuts and the white men. He also uses language to help make the setting real.

The island in the title of the book is based on the real island of San Nicolas. San Nicolas is one of the Channel Islands that lie off the coast of California, southwest of Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. Just as O'Dell describes it in the novel, San Nicolas was once home to American Indians and was a hunting place for the Aleuts and the Russians who came in search of sea otters. The island is now used by the U.S. Navy, and the public is not allowed to visit.

O'Dell loved the ocean and island life. He had lived near the sea for many years and had lived on an island for part of his childhood. So he knew many details of island life and used them to help establish the setting.

O'Dell describes the island in such detail that it is possible to draw a map from his descriptions. *Karana* gives us an overall picture:

Our island is two leagues long and one league wide, and if you were standing on one of the hills that rise in the middle of it, you would think that it looked like a fish. Like a dolphin lying on its side, with its tail pointing toward the sunrise, its nose pointing to the sunset, and its fins making reefs and the rocky ledges along the shore. [A league is about three miles long, or five kilometers.]

The author uses vivid details to help us visualize the island setting. Right from the beginning of the story he gives us details such as these: The ship sails around the *kelp bed* and between two *large rocks* that guard *Coral Cove*. The men race down the

trail to the *shore*; the women gather on the *mesa*. Karana moves through *heavy brush* and down the *ravine* to the *sea cliffs*, where she hides in the *toyon bushes*.

O'Dell describes other aspects of the environment, from the island's constant wind and the motion of the sea to descriptions of the changing seasons and of a frightening earthquake.

The characters in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* act and speak in ways that show they are living in and have a deep understanding of their natural environment. As the story begins, they are digging for roots to eat. From a distance, the ship looks like a shell to Karana, then a gull with folded wings. Ramo guesses that it is a cloud or a whale, then a very large canoe. Karana compares Ramo with a cricket, and thinks his eyes are like lizards' eyes. Karana and Ramo also talk about some of the animals on their island, the dolphins, gulls, cormorants, otters, and whales. We are immediately as immersed in their island world as they are.

As the story unfolds, we can see island life through its many other creatures, too, from wild dogs, sea elephants, and devilfish to red foxes, sea gulls, and pelicans.

O'Dell uses his knowledge of Channel Island Indian culture to make his setting seem real. Because of his careful research, O'Dell knew a great deal about how the native people lived. He describes the Indian village and the things that the islanders made and used, from their houses to their clothing, tools, and weapons. He shows us what they ate and how they prepared

their food. Though O'Dell does not go into such detail about the Aleuts and the white men, he tells us enough about their appearance, equipment, and habits to make them seem real.

The author uses language to help involve us in island life. Karana tells the story using simple words and ideas that show us she has little knowledge of the world beyond the island. O'Dell introduces some words in the characters' native languages, too. We find out several of the islanders' everyday names and their real, but secret, names. We also learn some of the Aleuts' words as well as those of the islanders. Sometimes we can compare them. For instance, we see that the Aleut word for "pretty"—*wintscha*—is similar to the islanders' word for "pretty"—*win-tai*. Using similar words is also a way for O'Dell to say that different groups of people are not really so different from one another, after all.

Thinking about the setting

- Describe the setting of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.
- How does the author use language to establish the setting?
- When does *Island of the Blue Dolphins* take place?

Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?

"I tried to convey a simple, but profound, message: Forgive your enemies and have respect for life—all life."

—Scott O'Dell

Scott O'Dell often said that the two most important themes of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* were forgiveness and respect for all life. The book has other themes, too, including the themes of survival and of the place of girls and women in society.

Forgiveness

O'Dell wanted to show people how important he thought it was to get along with others and to forgive your enemies.

The first enemy Karana forgives is not a person, but a dog. Rontu is an enemy because he is the leader of the dog pack that kills Ramo and threatens Karana. He is also an enemy because he is an Aleut dog, and the Aleuts are Karana's enemies.

After Ramo dies, Karana vows that "some day I would go back and kill the wild dogs in the cave. I would kill all of them." This is

a promise of revenge as much as one of self-defense. She wants to kill them not only to punish them for killing Ramo but also because they threaten her.

Karana kills some of the dogs with the weapons she makes. She decides that she has to be sure to kill the leader, because he has made the pack bolder and more dangerous.

Karana wounds Rontu, but she finds that she is reluctant to kill him. She says, “Why I did not send the arrow I cannot say. . . . The big dog lay there and did not move and this may be the reason. If he had gotten up I would have killed him.”

Karana feeds the dog and nurses him back to health. She does this out of a sense of duty rather than because she cares about the dog. “I had no thought that he would live and I did not care.”

As the days pass, Karana’s caretaking of Rontu has an effect on them both: They begin to truly care about each other. When Karana returns with a fish for Rontu on the fourth day, she is relieved that he has not left. Rontu looks “first at the fish I carried and then at me and moved his tail.” Soon Karana’s worst enemy has become her first friend on the island since she was left alone.

Later, Karana has another chance to forgive and befriend an enemy—this time, an Aleut.

In the years before the story begins, the Aleuts had come to hunt on the Island of the Blue Dolphins and had treated the islanders

poorly. Karana's tribespeople have distrusted the Aleuts ever since. When the Aleuts return at the beginning of the story, they cause bad feelings again by cheating the islanders. The two groups fight and many men die.

But when the Aleuts come to the island a third time, when Karana is alone there, Karana learns that an enemy can become a friend. This happens when she gets to know one Aleut, a girl named Tutok.

When Karana first sees Tutok, Karana almost attacks her with a spear. Karana surprises herself when she does not throw the spear at Tutok, "for she was one of the Aleuts who had killed my people on the beach of Coral Cove."

Though Tutok can see that Karana distrusts her, Tutok is friendly. She tells Karana her name and smiles at her. She touches Karana's cormorant skirt and holds it against her body. Karana admits to herself that the skirt looks nice on Tutok, but "I hated the Aleuts and took it from her."

Though Karana struggles to hold on to her hatred, it is weakening. She has not heard a human voice in so long that Tutok's words sound good to her, "even though it was an enemy who spoke them."

When Tutok gives Karana a beautiful necklace, Karana begins to see that Tutok could be her friend. Still, Karana does not trust Tutok completely. Only after two more days of visiting does Karana trust Tutok enough to tell Tutok her real, secret name. After that, the girls spend many days together. Karana has made

a true friend—a well-earned reward for learning to forgive an enemy.

Respect for all life

When O'Dell wrote *Island of the Blue Dolphins* in the late 1950s, it was one of the first children's books to suggest that animals deserve to be treated with the same respect as people. O'Dell loved animals, though he did not always treat them well as a child. When he grew up he was ashamed of his behavior and wanted to help others learn to treat them properly.

Karana's tribespeople must hunt animals to survive. They depend on animals, especially fish, as food. They need animal skins to make clothing. They need animal bones, teeth, and sinews to make tools and shelters. When the Russian and the Aleut hunters come, they change the islanders' traditional relationship with animals. Now, animals are hunted for profit as well as to fulfill basic needs. Many more animals are killed, and because the hunters want only their skins, many otters' bodies lie wasted on the shore. The islanders approve of killing the otters because they, too, will share in the profits.

Though Karana kills animals to satisfy her needs, we see from the beginning of the story that her feelings about animals are already different from other islanders'. Karana is the only islander who worries that the hunters will kill too many otters. She sees these gentle, playful creatures as her friends.

Karana slowly becomes more and more sympathetic toward animals. She plans to kill a sea elephant for its sharp teeth, but instead she is injured as she watches a bloody battle between two sea elephants. Hunting begins to lose some of its appeal.

Karana has her first real change of heart about animals when she befriends Rontu. Now she begins to see some animals as individual creatures and potential friends. She soon makes pets of the birds Tainor and Lurai as well.

When Karana tries to kill the giant devilfish, it fights back hard, hurting both her and Rontu. Karana decides never to try to kill a devilfish again. She is beginning to respect even the animals that threaten her. Still, she then kills ten cormorants to make a feather skirt.

A turning point for Karana comes when the hunters return to the island after Karana has lived there alone for years. After the hunters finish their hunt and leave the island, Karana is disturbed to see the dead and dying sea otters they have left behind. She tries to undo some of the harm the hunters have done, killing the badly injured otters and nursing one back to health. Soon, she befriends the otter's pups and realizes that she can never harm another sea otter again. More than this, she realizes that she can never again harm a cormorant or a seal, a wild dog or a sea elephant. Her tribespeople would have laughed at her, she knows, but even then she would not have changed her mind, for "this is the way I felt about the animals who had become my friends and those who were not, but in time could be."

Karana must be practical, of course. She must still eat, and she does continue to catch fish and gather shellfish. The author doesn't discuss how Karana will satisfy her other needs. We can imagine how ourselves: She could, for instance, make use of animals that have already died, or she could substitute non-animal materials for the ones she would have taken from animals.

At the end of the story, the white men who rescue Karana ask her to show them where they can find otters to hunt. Karana will not do it. "I shook my head and acted as though I did not understand." Even though Karana is grateful that the men have rescued her, she will not repay them by helping them kill animals.

Survival

Another important theme of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is survival. How will Karana survive alone on the island? Will she ever leave the island and live with other people again?

Karana has many skills because in her culture children are very involved in the tasks of daily living. She knows how to gather and prepare food and how to make clothing, for instance. But after Karana is left alone on the island, she must do many more things that adults once did for her. She has to make a shelter to protect herself from animals and the weather. She has to improvise tools, repair the canoes, and make weapons.

Karana also learns that survival means more than just keeping yourself alive. She must take care of her needs for friendship, comfort, and pleasure, too.

Because there are no other humans on the island, she makes friends with the animals, including Rontu, the sea otter Mon-a-nee, and the birds Tainor and Lurai. After Karana befriends Tutok, she realizes how much a human friend means to her, too.

To fulfill her needs for comfort and pleasure, Karana makes herself a comfortable and clean house. She sews herself a beautiful skirt from cormorant feathers and makes earrings to match the necklace that Tutok gives her.

Girls and women in society

Another theme is that of girls' and women's place in society. O'Dell admired girls and women, and felt that they did not always get the respect they deserved. To do something about this, he liked to make them important characters in his books. In many of his books, a girl is the main character. When O'Dell wrote about girls, he always portrayed them as strong, capable people.

In Karana's tribe, men and women usually do different work. The men hunt, fish, and build canoes. The women are "never asked to do more than stay at home, cook food, and make clothing." But after most of the young men are killed, the women begin to do the men's work, too. It turns out that they do the work well. "So hard did the women work that we really fared better than before when the hunting was done by the men."

But the men do not want to share their work with the women. The chief again forbids the women from hunting. If the tribe had not left the island soon after, this might have become another crisis.

Alone on the island, Karana struggles with her society's rules for women when she needs weapons to defend herself against the wild dogs. In her tribe, women are not allowed to make weapons. Karana asks herself what will happen if she breaks the law: "Would the four winds blow in from the four directions of the world and smother me as I made the weapons? Or would the earth tremble, as many said, and bury me beneath its falling rocks?..."

Despite her fear, Karana makes weapons and uses them. When she is not punished, Karana realizes that the law was unfair to women and that it made sense for her to disobey it.

Thinking about the themes

- What are the two main themes in the book, according to the author?
- What are some other themes in the book?
- Why do Karana's feelings about killing animals change?
- Why do Karana's feelings about enemies change? Do you consider any people or animals your enemies? Did your feelings about enemies change after you read the novel?

Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?

There are a number of characters in the novel, although by chapter nine, most of them will no longer appear in the story. The main characters are Karana, Ramo, Rontu, and Tutok.

Here is a list of characters. Following that is a brief description of each of the main characters.

People

Karana	main character, twelve years old when the novel begins
Ramo	Karana's six-year-old brother
Chief Chowig	Karana's father
Ulape	Karana's fourteen-year-old sister
Captain Orlov	Russian captain in charge of the hunting ship
Aleuts	hunters who work for Orlov
Kimki	new chief after Chowig's death; he leaves the island by canoe
Matasaip	new chief after Kimki leaves
Nanko	island man whom Ulape loves
Tutok	Aleut girl who befriends Karana

white men	men who come to take the islanders to the mainland
Father Gonzales	missionary Karana meets after she leaves the island

Animals

Rontu	dog that Karana tames
Tainor and Lurai	birds that Karana tames
Mon-a-nee	otter that Karana helps (later called Won-a-nee)
Rontu-Aru	Rontu's son

Karana: Karana, the main character in the book, is a twelve-year-old girl at the beginning of the novel. She is responsible, loving, and brave. She likes animals and pretty things. She considers the Aleuts and the wild dogs her enemies. As time passes, Karana changes in important ways. She learns that sometimes she has to disobey the rules. She comes to care deeply about animals. And she befriends two former enemies.

Karana is always a responsible girl. Like the other children on the island, Karana has important work to do, and she takes it seriously. At the beginning of the story she is taking care of her brother, Ramo, while gathering food for the tribe. She takes good care of Ramo. Even though he is annoying her, she is patient and cheerful. And though she wants to run off to see the ship coming into the cove, she goes on digging roots until her basket is full, "because they were needed in the village." Only when she finishes her work does she go to see the excitement in the cove.

After her father and many other island men die, Karana must become even more responsible. She works harder than ever for the tribe and struggles to care for Ramo without her father's help.

Later in the story, Karana still wants to do what is expected of her, but she eventually does something that her tribe would not approve of. She disobeys the law that women cannot make weapons. She decides that it is more important for her to survive than to obey this law.

Karana is brave. She first proves her bravery when she dives back into the sea to go back to Ramo, knowing that he will be frightened and in danger alone on the island. Karana will have many more chances to show her bravery, from fighting the wild dogs to trying to cross the sea alone in a canoe.

We also know that Karana likes animals, even at the beginning of the story when she is still willing to kill them. When she sees the Aleuts killing so many sea otters, she is angry, "for these animals were my friends." Her father laughs at her "foolishness," and so we learn that she is more sensitive to animals than others in her tribe. Karana's love of animals becomes even stronger as she comes to know them better. By the end of the story, she decides that she will never again kill an animal unless she must do so for her own survival.

After Karana's tribesmen are killed by Aleuts and her brother is killed by wild dogs, Karana decides that the Aleuts and the wild dogs are her enemies. She is afraid of them and willing to injure

or even kill them to protect herself. Later, after she befriends the dog, Rontu, and the Aleut, Tutok, she realizes that enemies can be forgiven and can become friends.

Karana loves pretty clothes and jewelry, and sometimes dresses up just for herself. When the tribe leaves the island, she is told to take only necessary things. But she cannot stop herself from packing her skirt of yucca fiber, “for I had spent many days making it and it was very pretty.” As she hides from the Aleuts in the cave, she passes her time making a skirt of cormorant feathers. Finally, when the ship comes to take her from the island, she wears her most beautiful clothes and jewelry and decorates her face with the tribal marks that show she is unmarried.

Ramo: Ramo is Karana’s six-year-old brother. He is small for his age, but “quick as a cricket.” Ramo is smart and observant, too. When he sees a ship for the first time, he has no idea what it is. Suddenly he realizes that it must be something like an enormous canoe and shouts, “A great one, bigger than all of our canoes together. And red!”

Ramo is also “foolish as a cricket” when he is excited. He forgets all about his work collecting roots and rushes off as soon as he sees the ship. He “tossed the root in the air and was gone, crashing through the brush, shouting as he went.”

When the boat comes to take the Indians from the island, Ramo, excitable as ever, “hopped along far in front with one of our baskets.” But “before long he ran back to say that he had

forgotten his fishing spear.” Karana refuses to let him get his spear. Ramo disobeys her, and the ship leaves without him.

Even after he and Karana are abandoned on the island, Ramo is still excited. He thinks it will be fun to be alone with Karana. He does not realize that he has put them both in danger. He brags that he is now chief of the island. He says that he is strong enough to bring a canoe to the cove and sneaks off to do so. This final, unwise adventure leads to his death. While traveling to the place where the canoes are hidden, Ramo is attacked by wild dogs and killed.

Rontu: Rontu is the leader of the pack of wild dogs that kill Ramo. Karana first sees him as she carries Ramo’s body back to the village. The dog is “a big gray dog with long curling hair and yellow eyes.” He has thick fur around his neck. Because Karana had never seen him before the Aleuts came, she guesses that he is an Aleut dog. The dog is much larger than the native dogs, which all have short hair and brown eyes. Karana thinks that the pack has grown even bolder since the Aleut dog became their leader.

The dog pack threatens Karana many times. Since the Aleut dog is their leader, Karana decides that she must kill him. Still, Karana sometimes sees him watching her quietly, and her special awareness of him lets us know that he will be important to the story.

When Karana finally aims an arrow at him, he is not frightened. Rather than running away, he faces her bravely, “his front legs

spread as if he were ready to spring, his yellow eyes narrowed to slits." After Karana strikes him with an arrow, he runs off into the brush.

When Karana finds him again, he is too weak to defend himself. She takes him home and cares for him. At first he is so weak that he does not respond to her at all. Later, he growls when she holds out her hand to him. Finally, as he begins to recover, he wags his tail at her. Karana names him Rontu, and they become friends.

Tutok: Tutok is an Aleut girl who comes with the hunters on both of their trips to the island. During the first trip, we learn very little about Tutok. In fact, Ulape is the only one who sees her. Ulape says that the girl "is dressed in skins just like the men. But she wears a fur cap and under the cap she has thick hair that falls to her waist." None of the other islanders believe that Tutok even exists. But when the Aleuts return on their second trip, Tutok is with them again, as Karana sees for herself.

Soon, Tutok discovers Karana. Tutok is a warm, friendly girl. She agrees with Karana that Rontu is now Karana's dog rather than her own. She tells Karana her name and admires Karana's skirt. Tutok brings Karana a beautiful necklace of black stones. Karana slowly begins to trust Tutok, and finally they become friends.

Tutok visits many times before the Aleuts leave the island. Tutok never returns, but Karana does not forget her or her kindness.

Thinking about the characters

- Is Karana like other twelve-year-olds you know? Do you like or admire her? When she is older, how has she changed?
- How would you describe Ramo? Does he seem like a typical six-year-old? Is he someone you would like or admire?
- Why do you think Ramo adapts so easily to being Karana's dog, after being a wild dog?
- If Tutok had been a less friendly person, what might have happened when she and Karana met?