



Scott O'Dell on Writing

“**W**riting is hard,” Scott O'Dell once said, “harder than digging a ditch, and it requires patience.” The most important part of writing, he told people, is to discipline yourself to sit down and do the work.

Most of O'Dell's book ideas came from reading history or biography, or from stories people told him. He always did a lot of research before beginning to write. Often, the research alone would take two or three months. O'Dell loved this part of writing and even said, “Research is what I enjoy most. I often write of events, people, and backgrounds that I know little about, just because I want to know more.”

After O'Dell researched a topic completely, he began to write. The process of writing the book usually took him another six months.

O'Dell's daily work habits changed over time. When he first began to write, he wrote all day, from 7 A.M. until 5 P.M., and he typed his work on an electric typewriter. Later, he did most of his writing in the morning, and he wrote with a pen on a yellow pad of paper.

During this latter part of his life, he was already awake and thinking about his writing before dawn. His routine, he once said, was “to lie in bed between sleeping and waking, cultivating my subconscious mind, the mind that we dream with. I go over what I’m going to write that day, not line by line but rather thoroughly.”

Between 5 A.M. and 5:30 A.M., O’Dell usually began writing at his desk. He wrote until noon or so. At that time, O’Dell always stopped in the middle of a paragraph that was going well so that it was easy to get right back into his work the next day. Sometimes he went back to writing for a few hours later in the afternoon. But whether he went back to work or not, the story was always on his mind.

O’Dell did a lot of revising as he wrote, often rewriting a paragraph over and over before going on to the next paragraph. After a while he could no longer read what he’d written, and he’d have to start over with a clean sheet of paper.

When he was writing a book, O’Dell became very private, often refusing to see friends or to speak in public. Once or twice a week, he would go out to lunch with his wife, and he would discuss his current project with her.

When he had the time, O’Dell loved meeting his readers and writing to them. He received thousands of letters from children and considered this one of the best parts of his work. He loved children’s enthusiasm and honesty, and even appreciated their occasionally critical comments.

For aspiring writers

O'Dell told aspiring writers that the most important part of writing was putting in the time and effort needed to get the writing done. He himself showed a lot of patience and perseverance in his writing life, not only day to day, but over his lifetime. Though he had written seven books for adults before he wrote his first children's book, these books had not received much attention. He was already more than sixty years old when he turned to children's books and his work finally became well known.

O'Dell offered another piece of advice for aspiring writers: Write one quick first draft of the whole book before you begin revising. This was not his method, of course. He revised his work many times before he had a complete manuscript. But O'Dell felt that most people would benefit from writing a complete draft of the piece first. "There is enthusiasm in that first draft," he said.

You Be the Author!



- **Survival story:** Survival stories are exciting to read—and to write. Write one of your own! Imagine that you have been left alone someplace. It could be any isolated spot, from an island to a desert to a mountaintop. Write about one or more of the following:

- What happened? Why were you left alone?
- What do you do now? Figure out the basics: food and water, shelter, clothing.
- What skills and objects do you have that will help you survive? What are you missing that you wish you had?
- What dangers do you face? What are you most afraid of? How will you protect yourself?
- How will you be rescued? What will you do to help make a rescue possible?

- **The Channel Island Indians and the Aleuts:** Karana's tribe was one of the Channel Island Indian tribes, which all shared a similar culture. Find out what is known about these people and write about them. What was everyday life like for other Channel Island Indians? How was their culture similar to that of Karana's tribe? What happened to these tribes?

You can also learn more about the Aleut Indians. The Aleuts originally came from the Aleutian Islands in southwest Alaska. They also had a fascinating culture during the time when *Island of the Blue Dolphins* takes place. Research and write about the Aleuts during the 1800s, when they sailed to the Channel Islands to hunt for sea otters.

- **Animal tale:** Strong feelings often inspire good stories. Write an essay about an animal you have felt strongly about. Your feelings may have been positive or negative—or they may have changed over time, as Karana’s feelings for Rontu changed from fear and hate to love. Write about your relationship with an animal from start to finish, making sure the reader understands how you felt about the animal and why, as time passed.

- **Historical fiction:** In historical fiction, an author mixes history and fiction to help us experience what life was like for people in another time and place. Learn more about a historical time and place that interests you. Then, imagine that you were there and write about it. Put yourself right in the middle of the action! For instance, imagine that it is the early 1900s. You and your family have just immigrated to the United States from your farm in another country. Now you are all cooped up together in a small, noisy city tenement building. Where did you come from, and why did you leave? What will you do next? What is the biggest problem your family faces in this new country? How can you help solve it?

Activities



- **Map the island:** Scott O'Dell describes the Island of the Blue Dolphins so vividly that you can draw a map using his descriptions. Try it yourself. See if you can figure out the correct locations for places such as Coral Cove, the headland where Karana builds her house, the village of Ghalas-at, the cave that Karana uses as a second shelter, the place where the Aleuts camp, Black Cave, and Tall Rock.
- **Make a poster of the wildlife:** Many animals live on the Island of the Blue Dolphins or in the nearby ocean. These include wild dogs, red foxes, gray mice, cormorants, red-winged blackbirds, sea otters, blue dolphins, sea elephants, devilfish, whales, starfish, and shellfish. You can find more by looking through the novel. Locate photographs or drawings of these animals. Use what you have gathered or drawings you have created to make a poster of the island's wildlife.
- **Illustrate your favorite scene:** Many of the scenes in the novel would make dramatic drawings, paintings, or dioramas. Illustrate your favorite. Consider such exciting scenes as: the first meeting on the beach between the islanders and the Aleuts, the ship leaving the island as Karana dives into the sea, the dogs circling as Karana sleeps on her rock, Karana paddling out to sea in her canoe, Karana and Rontu trapped in Black Cave, or

Karana in all her finery as she greets the white men who have come to take her from the island.

- **What's in a name?:** Karana's tribe gives each person two names, an everyday name and a special, secret one.

The everyday name describes something about the person. Karana's everyday name is Won-a-pa-lei, which means "The Girl with the Long Black Hair." Pick a new, everyday name for yourself that describes something positive about you.

Each person in Karana's tribe also has a special, secret name that is rarely used, such as Karana and Chowig. What secret name would you choose for yourself? You can also imagine new everyday and special, secret names for everyone in your family or for your closest friends.

- **Make something useful or beautiful or both:** Every object Karana has is made from natural materials. Some of her things are simply useful, such as her spear, and some are beautiful, too, such as her skirt of cormorant feathers and her seashell earrings. Make yourself something useful and possibly beautiful from natural objects. Stick to materials that are clean and dry, such as wood, bark, well-cleaned shells, dried leaves, and stones. You could make something that would help you survive or something that would make your life more comfortable.

- **Discover the wild animals that live near you:** You might be surprised by how many wild animals live near you—even if you live in a large town or city. To find out about them, you can

begin by talking with a local librarian, a veterinarian, a parks department wildlife expert, or an animal-shelter assistant. What you do with the information you find is up to you: Use it to make a poster illustrating the local wildlife, write a report for school, or make a booklet to give to your friends. You may be inspired to volunteer with an organization that helps protect wildlife.

- **Read the books that won the Scott O'Dell Award:** Scott O'Dell developed the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction to encourage people to write and read historical fiction. He wanted to inspire children to be more interested in history, which is so important to understanding the world. Besides that, it's exciting! Read some of the books that won the Scott O'Dell Award, and see if you enjoy historical fiction as much as O'Dell did. You will find a list of these award-winning books in the Related Reading section at the back of this book.

- **Read about Karana in another Scott O'Dell book:** O'Dell wrote a novel called *Zia* because he wanted to explore what happened to Karana after she left the island. The sad truth is that the real Lost Woman of San Nicolas Island died seven weeks after she left the island. Read *Zia* to see how O'Dell imagined those last weeks of Karana's life, in a novel narrated by Karana's fictional niece, Zia.

- **Watch the movie:** *Island of the Blue Dolphins* was made into a movie in 1964. You can buy it or borrow it from the library or video store. As you watch it, think about how the movie is similar to the book and how it is different. Which do you like better, and why?