

Island of The Blue Dolphins

Scott O'Dell

Reviewed by: Bailey McFadden, 15

Star Teen Book Reviewer of Be the Star You Are! Charity

www.bethestaryouare.org

Island of the Blue Dolphins is based on the story of a real woman (whose actual name is unknown, but who has been called Karana or Juana Maria by historians), who lived alone on an island off the coast of Southern California (San Nicolas Island), from 1835-1853. The story follows Karana from age twelve onward, and the circumstances that led to her being abandoned, her life during those eighteen years, and finally her leaving the island.

This story is a good survival narrative. It is small in scope, yet remains engaging and captivating by having an underlying mystery to the narrative (why didn't they come back for her?), and by focusing on the small details of her survival. However, I don't believe this book should have been written in the first place. The Nicoleño of San Nicolas lived peacefully there for thousands of years until a group of Alaskan otter pelt hunters came and eventually slaughtered most of the tribe. The remaining members were removed from the island in 1835 and Juana Maria was the only person left behind. She outlived every other member of her tribe while on San Nicolas. In 1853 she was taken from the island to Santa Barbara. Seven weeks after being taken from the island she contracted dysentery, and was baptized and given the name Juana Maria on her deathbed. She died on October 15, 1853, and to this day her real name or story is not known.

This is a story about a Native American tribe, all members of whom are now dead. The only way you could possibly portray them respectfully would be to portray their way of life accurately, in a way they would have endorsed. While we cannot feasibly do that, we do know that some of the assumptions Scott O'Dell makes about the Nicoleño are harmful and almost certainly incorrect. For example: a large source of conflict in the book is the fact that due to the gender roles present in her tribe, Juana Maria does not know how to do basic survival tasks. It is taken as fact that the women of the Nicoleño tribe would have been relegated to sewing or gathering food while the men hunted and fished. This is a reflection of European gender roles, not the roles present in Native American tribes like the Nicoleño. There is no reason for those gender roles to be in place, and the fact that they are present in the book means that Scott O'Dell did not research traditional Native life as a basis for the book. Examples like this show he did not take the time or effort to portray them respectfully, and while this book is well written, I would not recommend it.

Recommended Titles:

Hatchet, Gary Paulsen

Brian's Winter, Gary Paulsen

The Skeleton Tree, Iain Lawrence