

Island of the Blue Dophines

Book Review

New York, New York: Dell Publishing; 1960

189 pages

grades 5-8

ISBN 0-440-94000-1

RATING: Harmful -1

By Marlette Grant-Jackson

Overview:

Off the Santa Barbara Coast of California is San Nicholas Island, an island that looks like a dolphin sunning itself in the sea. Abundant wild life: cormorants, sea gulls, sea elephants, abalone, otter, dogs, dolphins, and devil fish inhabited the island as well as the Ghalas-hat Indians. The Ghalas-hat Indians traded otter hides/pelts for trinkets (beads) from the ships such as that led by Russian Captain Orlov and his Aleut hunters. Captain Orlov and his hunters killed twenty seven of the Ghalas-hat Indian warriors due to the miss negotiated worth of otter pelts. One of those killed was Chief Chowig, he had three children Ulape Wonapalei (Karana) and Ramo, whom had lost their mother a few years earlier. After the death of twenty seven of their tribe a new leader was elected Kimki. After a grief stricken winter the next spring Kimki decided that he would take a canoe and row for many days to the east to make a place for the tribe amongst the people there, he never returned. Matasaip then became the leader of the Ghalas-hats', and when the next ship came he made the decision to have the tribe leave the island with white men that came specifically to take them away from Ghalas-hat. In the rush to pack their things and board the ship Ramo was left behind, while gathering his spear. Wonapalei feeling obligated to take care of her brother jumped overboard and swam back to her little brother. Brother and sister then lived on the island gathering food and water, anxiously waiting for the ship to return for them. Ramo declares himself Chief Tanyositlopai and tries to prove to his sister he is now a man by attempting a task only the men in the tribe had done. On his way to attempt the task Ramo is surrounded and killed by the wild dogs of the island, leaving his sister alone. Wonapalei lives on the island alone for the next 22 years making friends of the animals, and solving numerous obstacles during her isolation. Finally two springs after a big tidal wave and earthquake had come a ship came to get her and took her across the sea into the morning sun.

Before you start

- The first recorded visit to the San Nicolas Island was in 1602 by the Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino.
- There are four different reports of removal of the Indians from the island and they are: Captain Robbins, Captain Sparks, Captain Williams and Captain Hubbard.

- This story is very loosely based on the life of a woman taken from San Nicolas Island in 1853. Father Gonzales of the Santa Barbara Mission gave her the name of Juana Maria, she died within seven weeks of Captain Nidevers bringing her to the mission in California.
- Juana Maria's belongings that she brought from San Nicolas Island are said to have been sent to the Church in Rome.
- The story is supposed to be similar to Robinson Crusoe.

Passages to consider:

"...it's sails showing red through the morning mist...."

"By the time I filled the basket, the Aleut ship...."

So on page 11, the Aleuts sailed with red sails distinguishing them from the whites? And who exactly are the in the class of whites? And the whites only sailed with white sails?

"Behind them in the boat stood a tall man with a yellow beard. I had never seen a Russian before, but my father had told me about them....."

On page 12 we find that the "Aleut" ship is commanded by a Russian. Doesn't this make it a Russian ship? Making it a "WHITE" ship?

"I am the Chief of Ghalas-at," he said. "my name is Chief Chowig."

According to the story, a person of the Ghalas-at did not give their real name to strangers. So would this mean that the Chief knew the Russian Captain? Or is this just used to create more drama, in the fact that the Chief gave his real name knowing that he would soon be killed?

"In the spring, Kimki called the tribe together. He had been thinking, he said, during the winter and had decided that he would take a canoe and go to the east to a country which was there and which he had once been to when he was a boy. It lay many days across the sea, but he would go there and make a place for us. He would go alone, because he could not spare more of our men for the voyage, and he would return."

Doesn't this suggest that the Ghalas-at people traveled further than their own island? Why would a people that lived in one place for centuries or millenniums want to move because of one isolated incident? They weren't strong enough in their culture to know how to survive on such a bountiful island? If the new Chief Kimki had been to other lands before doesn't this mean that their canoes were sea worthy? Why, if they believed the island to be a bad place to be, wouldn't they make enough canoes to take all of them to the new land?

“I was overcome with fear, “Where is my brother?” I cried. He repeated what he had told me on the beach, but as he spoke Ulape who stood beside him pointed toward the island....”

“The ship will come back for him on another day, Matasaip said. He will be safe. There is food for him to eat and water to drink and places to sleep.”

P.45 why would the “Chief” of a tribe want to leave a 6 or 7 year old boy deserted on an island? Why would it be Wonapalei’s responsibility to take care of Ramo, she was only 13? Ulape would have been the one left in charge of the children, she was the oldest? Wouldn’t it have been more believable if the ship captain and the crew would have taken the tribe forcibly? Leaving only the children un-shackled? It is unconceivable to me that none of the men swam back to stay with the boy, he was the son of a chief.

“I kept thinking over and over as I swam how I would punish Ramo when I reached the shore.....”

“The only thing that made me angry was that my beautiful skirt of yucca fibers, which I had worked on so long and carefully, was ruined.”

P 46. & 47. After losing her mother, watching her father get killed, losing her community, her sister, and having to worry about the “Aleuts” coming back the only thing that she is worried about is losing her skirt?

“The wild dogs came again that night.”

P.49 Wild dogs? How did wild dogs get on the island? Were they left by previous fur traders? Brought over by boat by ancestors of Wonapalei? Were they a source of meat to the tribe previously? Why didn’t they tame them to make them “work” animals for the tribe?

Pretty much all of Chapter 8 is questionable. If the Ramo was small for 7 and there were “wild dogs” wouldn’t the children be afraid of the animals? Would he actually have gone out to try to paddle a canoe he wasn’t even sure if he could get into the water? Wonapalei did not realize that the canoes were near the den of the “wild dogs.”

“...I took them from the nest, and put them in a small cage that I made of reeds. So later in the spring, when all the birds except the crows left the island and flew off to the north, I had these two for friends.”

p. 120. How would she know how to make a cage or what a cage was? Why would she even think of putting the birds into a cage?

“Before summer came the cage was too small for my two birds, but instead of building a larger one, I cut the tips of their wings, one wing of each, so they could not fly away, and let them loose in the house.”

p. 121. This she would have learned from whom? Was it something that her tribe did was to confine birds and capture animals for pets? And how exactly was she able to clip their wings, scissors?

Chapter 27 is basically talking about a Tsunami and Earthquake that hit the island. According to the California Seismology (<http://www.notfrisco.com/calmem/earthquake/chrono.html>) took place in December 12th of 1812

1812	December 21	A tsunami washes over Santa Barbara. The earthquake epicenter lies somewhere beneath the Santa Barbara Channel.
-------------	----------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

But according to the Authors notes Wonapalei was alone on the island from 1835 to 1853.

“Dolphins rose out of the sea and swam before the ship. They swam for many leagues in the morning through the bright water, weaving their foamy patterns. The little birds were chirping in their cage and Rontu-Aru sat beside me.”

Okay why did we end the story hear? We have already learned in the story that Dolphins swimming with the boat is supposed to be good luck. But we don't read that Wonapalei only lives seven weeks after she is taken from the island. We also find out in the authors notes that the rest of her tribe never made it to land, their ship supposedly sunk in a terrible storm. The Father at Mission Santa Barbara was only able to communicate with Wonapalei (who he renamed Juana Maria) by making signs with their hands. Other than a marker at the Santa Barbara mission supposedly marking her gravesite, there is nothing left of the Ghalas-at people at the mission. The Fathers sent all of Wonapalei possessions to the Church in Rome.

Discussion ideas. (So you are going to use the book anyway.)

- What was the approximate year that this story was set?
- Why would the Ghalas-at be wary of the Aleuts?
- Why weren't the Ghalas-at afraid of the “whites”?
- What kinds of things were happening at the missions during Wonapalei stay on the island? (1823 to 1853?)
- Could the Ghalas-at people have been forcibly removed off the island?
- Wouldn't it have been important to know if the Ghalas-at people were sea faring people. Kimki's said that he had traveled to the lands to the east.
- How far is San Nicolas island from the shores of California? If you were to go there today could you stand on the top of one of the hills/mesa's that Wonapalei stood on and see the beaches of California?
- What do you think the hardest part of living on the island would have been?
- What happened to other tribes in the Santa Barbara area?
- Can you find out who they are?
- Are there any Ghalas-at Indian descendants today?

Credentials:

As a Yurok & Karuk and mother of three children I have gotten an education to increase the success of our Native Students. I have a degree in Native American Studies with an emphasis on Education, and a minor in American Indian Education. I am also the Curriculum Resource Coordinator of the Indian Teacher & Educational Personnel Program at Humboldt State University.