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Introduction

This guide is divided into eight units of study, and includes the following components:

Pre-reading Discussion

This is a detailed section on the key elements that readers will encounter in the reading assignment. The Pre-reading Discussion centers on the literary elements of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and gives suggestions for provoking interest in the chapters ahead. The section ends with ideas for initiating class discussions about the important concepts in the book.

Study Guide and Vocabulary List

Each unit contains a study guide and vocabulary list, along with a corresponding reading assignment. Study guide pages are designed to be duplicated and distributed when the reading assignment is given. Students should answer the questions and study the vocabulary words. Each study guide contains a “Writing Forum” section, in which students are asked to write a brief explication of some textual element. You may want to choose one or all of the questions listed; students may keep the Writing Forum questions in a continuing notebook. The following day’s class session could begin with a review of the written work before proceeding to a discussion of the chapters.

Discussion Concepts

This section details the important concepts that students have encountered in their reading of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and may be used to initiate class discussions. Discussions should involve events in the story and their relevance to the characters, important themes, and comparing and contrasting actions and statements. Students should be able to find quotes to support their opinions when necessary. Teachers may want to ask students to practice note-taking periodically during this discussion.

Tests

Tests of comprehension and vocabulary are included in the *Island of the Blue Dolphins* guide. Varied formats challenge students to think intently and creatively about the material.

Writing Projects

The writing projects at the end of the guide may be used as students progress through *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, or after the class has finished Unit 8.

Background

Type of Literature

Island of the Blue Dolphins is categorized as historical fiction. The novel is based on a factual account of a Native American woman who lived alone on a small island for eighteen years, but the author has created the details of what this woman's life may have been like.

Setting and Atmosphere

The setting of the story, or the time and place in which the events of the story occur, is a small island in the Pacific. The author, in his note at the end of the book, reveals that "The Lost Woman of San Nicolas" lived on the island between the years 1835 and 1853, which is the time that the events of the book take place.

The location of the island, its climate, and the resulting conditions in which the main character, Karana, must live are the seeds from which the events of the novel grow. Because of her isolation from the rest of the world, Karana's behavior and feelings are developed through her interaction with her setting.

The fact of Karana's physical separateness also contributes to the atmosphere of the novel. Just as Karana begins to pay less attention to the passage of time, so the novel enters into a type of dream-world or paradise. Because the natural world changes so little, it embodies a sense of timelessness in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.

Character Development

The characters in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* are developed through their words, actions, and feelings. The events of the novel are experienced through the character of Karana, whose life is changed by the events that occur. In essence, Karana is the only character who experiences change; the change that occurs in Rontu, the wild dog, is more a development of the plot than a development of character.

The character of Ramo does not change during his life in the novel. His behavior shows him to be headstrong and impulsive, as first he returns to the village to retrieve his forgotten spear, and then disobeys Karana's warning of the danger in searching out the hidden canoes.

Karana's character changes greatly throughout the course of the novel. In the early pages of the book, she is a child, obedient and respectful in her role as daughter, gatherer of food, and caretaker of Ramo. By the time the book ends, she has grown into a capable young woman who has overcome unique obstacles and the isolation of the island to emerge as a survivor whose skills have been tested fully.

In the beginning, Karana feels great love and responsibility for Ramo, as she leaps from the ship to protect him. As they adjust to the new situation, she instinctively senses his need to prove himself if he is to survive the dangers ahead.

Ramo's death, following so closely the loss of the rest of her family, triggers in Karana a determination to survive until a ship returns for her. Once that hope is lost, her attempt to leave the island in search of a homeland, and her subsequent return form a pivotal point in her development. From the moment she touches the shore of her island again, she stops fighting and decides to accept the island as her home.

Karana focuses her energy and talents on surrounding herself with the necessities for survival. She begins to use all her powers of resourcefulness and creativity, as she gathers food and, altering the rules of her tribe, makes and learns to use weapons. With this, Karana abandons her old life to embrace the new traditions that will keep her alive.

Karana's need for companionship is the next stage of her development. In her loneliness, the noise of the sea elephants is comforting, and the risk in taming the wild dog is worth the reward of its companionship. There is contentment for a while, until Karana's need for human contact is felt in the paragraphs describing her joyous relationship with Tutok. This need intensifies as Karana matures, and it culminates with the day she ceremoniously dons her favorite clothing and prepares to approach her rescuers.

Karana's severe disappointment in Chapter 28, when she discovers that the visitors have left without finding her, brings to the forefront her need to leave the island and move on. When her rescue is finally complete, Karana's metamorphosis from child to adult seems complete. Though she continues to hold onto her memories and the lessons she has learned from her life on the island, Karana sails forward to her new life with hope.

Plot

The plot consists of the series of events that introduce, develop, and resolve the major conflict in the story. Conflict exists in every narrative, and may appear in various forms. Conflict may exist between one person and another, between one person and a group, or between one person and nature or the environment. Several major conflicts may exist within one story; these are subplots. Conflicts are resolved, though not necessarily happily, by the end of the text.

The plot of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* includes all the events leading up to Karana's desertion on the island, her adventures on the island, and her final departure from the island. The major conflict of the novel involves Karana's struggle to survive and grow. Karana must fight for food and shelter, she must protect herself from the wild dogs, and she must learn to adapt to the isolation of her existence. Her conflict with the natural world is resolved step by step as she devises solutions for each problem. By the end of the book, Karana emerges as a mature victor who is ready for new adventures.

Point of View

Island of the Blue Dolphins is told from the first-person point of view. The reader is allowed to see and understand only what Karana sees and understands. In this way, the reader progresses with Karana through her adventures.

Theme

The theme of a book may be either directly stated or implicit. In disseminating a text, the theme, or central concept of the story, becomes recognizable as a universally known idea.

Island of the Blue Dolphins presents the theme of the passage from childhood to adulthood within the framework of Karana's struggle for survival. As Karana successfully accepts the responsibilities of resolving her problems, she leaves her carefree childhood behind her.

Another theme of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is Karana's ability to adapt to her environment. Karana learns from her mistakes, unlike Ramo, and uses the natural world to her advantage in order to overcome the difficulties with which she is presented. Her decision to allow the young sea elephant to deal with its challenger enables Karana to obtain the sea elephant's teeth, her original goal, with no threat to her well-being.

Other themes, including the human need for companionship, overcoming challenges, survival, love (between Karana and her dog, Rontu), and perseverance contribute to the central theme of growing up.