

*Island of the Blue Dolphins*  
**From Novel to Film: An Analysis of  
What Becomes Lost in (and Without) Translation**

**Grade Level**

High School: Ninth Grade through Twelfth Grade

**Subject**

Literacy and Language Arts, Social Studies

**Common Core Standards**

9–10.RL.5, 11–12.RL.1, 11–12.W.1, 11–12.W.2, 11–12.W.4

**Background Information**

The goal of this lesson is for students to analyze the 1964 *Island of the Blue Dolphins* movie adaptation. In many ways, the film adheres closely to the novel, with slight changes in plot easily explained by cost considerations (e.g., it would be difficult to stage a dog's battle with an octopus). However, other production choices seem more puzzling, including the casting of non-native actors for important roles, the identification of Karana's people as Chumash rather than Nicoleño, the on-site film location in northern (rather than southern) California, and the careful use of the Aleut language for Tutok but the stilted use of English for all other characters.

This lesson asks students to analyze the choices made and consider how they might produce their own film adaption of Scott O'Dell's classic novel: Are better solutions to the challenges presented available today? What challenges to telling the story remain?

Scott O'Dell's 1960 children's book *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is loosely based on the true story of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, a California Indian who spent eighteen years in relative isolation on her natal island after the rest of her people were removed to the California mainland.

The precipitating event was an 1814 battle between the Lone Woman's people and Alaska Native sea otter hunters left on the island by the Russian American Company; at its end, most of the able-bodied men on San Nicolas Island were dead.

In 1835, a Mexican ship was sent to bring those men and women still living on San Nicolas Island to the California mainland and into the folds of the Catholic Church. One woman and her son, a boy in middle childhood, were left behind. The woman remained on the island for eighteen years (her son died earlier), after which she accompanied a group of American and Native American sea otter hunters to Santa Barbara. O'Dell's novel includes most of these details.

Universal Pictures (now Universal Studios) purchased the film rights to *Island of the Blue Dolphins* shortly after it won the Newbery Medal in 1961. The movie was produced by Robert B. Radnitz, who was well known for his creation of high-quality films for the

whole family. Radnitz conducted extensive research on the real story behind *Island of the Blue Dolphins* prior to beginning production, including corresponding with a descendent of Carl Dittman, a sea otter hunter who was part of the party who brought the Lone Woman to Santa Barbara in 1853. Radnitz also spent time learning about the Nicoleño people.

Nonetheless, many of his production decisions appear to be presented in spite of his research. For instance, he chose Anchor Bay and Gualala—land of the Kashaya Pomo people—as the setting for the movie, despite these locations being nearly five hundred miles north of the California Channel Islands. This meant that Kashaya Pomo items were used as props for the movie, and many Kashaya Pomo people were cast as extras. Moreover, despite moving production away from San Nicolas Island and into Northern California, he reimagines the Lone Woman not as Kashaya Pomo but as Chumash (Chumash territory is in Southern California).

Radnitz is certainly not the first producer to struggle with native representation in cinema. The history of such representation begins in the late 1800s (nineteenth century), with the transition from staged Wild West shows to the movie theater's silver screen.

During the era of traveling Wild West shows, large audiences watched “real live Indians” perform dances and reenact historical battles in traditional dress. In these shows, “authenticity” was on display and for sale. Early filmmakers drew on this tradition, casting native peoples to play themselves. But as the film industry evolved from its roots in many small, local companies to a large, California-based studio system, a shift in Native American representation followed.

As historian Phillip Deloria has argued, it was no longer necessary to hire “real” Indians to play the parts of Indians; one could use a white actor in makeup instead. Whiteness was seen as universal, a blank canvas upon which any nationality, race, or ethnicity could be painted; conversely, actors of color were considered believable only if playing a part that matched their background. The use of white movie stars to play Indians ultimately shaped the way native peoples were portrayed in Hollywood, and by extension, in popular culture at large.

In the mid-twentieth century, many of the stereotypes popularized in the early days of film stood (e.g., Indians speaking broken English, Indians as Noble Savages, Indians as revengeful, bloodthirsty warriors). In many ways, the movie adaption of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* was innovative for its time. For example, instead of speaking the broken English common to many movie Indians (“How! Me kill deer.”), Karana’s language is almost too perfect: a dictionary/grammar textbook version of English.

Yet the film *resists* and *incorporates* stereotypes simultaneously. We can see this in part by the way the casting of Karana was handled. The studio explained that the young actor Celia Kaye was selected from among all the girls who auditioned not only because of her looks and talent, but also because she could “run like an Indian.”

After the casting was complete, the production team discovered that Kaye had a trace of Cherokee ancestry on her maternal grandmother's side. Although Kaye was largely unaware of this (and fully identified as "white"), the studio heavily publicized the fact that she had "Cherokee blood." Kaye functioned as the aforementioned white canvas upon which different identities could be projected, and although she spoke perfectly grammatical English throughout the film, the staging exemplifies the perpetuation of stereotypes into twentieth-century cinema.

## Materials

- Copy of activity sheet for each student (provided)
- Clark, James B., director. *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Universal Pictures, 1964.  
If using clips, the following are recommended
  1. Gender roles: **13:41–14:40**
  2. The Ghalas-at massacre: **16:54–17:40**
  3. Karana becoming Rontu's friend: **40:00–47:00**
  4. Rontu's fight and subsequent reunion with Karana: **53:50–1:02:00**
  5. Tutok's time on the island: **1:03:07–1:15:05**Total time: **30 minutes**; highlight the omission of secret names, devilfish, and black cave scenes, as well as the removal of Ulape's character.
- Geoghegen, R.H., "[The Aleutian Language](#)," U.S. Department of the Interior, 1944.
- Lee, Charles A., "[Aleutian Indian & English Dictionary](#)," 1886.
- Schwebel, Sara L., ed. *Island of the Blue Dolphins: The Complete Reader's Edition*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. For discussion of the film, see pp. 55–63.
- [Translating a Prize-Winning Book to the Movie Screen: Island of the Blue Dolphins, Study Guide](#). New York: Universal Pictures, [1964?].

## Procedure

1. Prepare materials and familiarize yourself with the texts.
2. Lead a class discussion on the challenges of book-to-film adaption generally, especially in regards to scene selection. What particular challenges do producers face when a character is alone for much of the story's plot?
3. Show the entire film or clips from the movie (suggestions above), asking students to take notes on what they believe is done well and less well. Students should also record the differences they note between the book and film.
4. Discuss what the students noticed, calling special attention to the differences they observed in setting, language, and scene selection. Explain to students that film and literary critics today seek to move beyond "fidelity criticism"—that is, being concerned primarily with how loyal an adaption is to its source text—and instead are interested in the way that adaptations can offer *new* insights.
5. Discuss student comments about casting in the 1964 film.
6. Introduce the film guide *Translating a Prize-Winning Book*, explaining that it was produced by Universal Pictures as a means to encourage students and teachers

to study the film together. Ask students to examine the film guide closely, paying special attention to pages 4, 9, 15, 19, 21–22.

7. Introduce contemporary movies with native representation. Some of the films listed below include native actors, in supporting or leading roles; others incorporate native languages. If possible, show scene selections from any or all of the following films, providing students with examples of more recent movies that feature native peoples as subjects.

Note to Teachers: Some of these films contain mature content and stark violence. School districts have different policies about film ratings. Be sure to preview all content and use your professional judgment about what media is appropriate for your classroom.

- *Dances with Wolves* (1990), rated PG-13
- *Whale Rider* (2002), rated PG-13
- *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), rated PG
- *The Snow Walker* (2003), rated PG
- *Sami Blood* (2016), not rated

8. Use the prompt below to create a student essay assignment. Choose a required page length appropriate to your students' level and your curricular needs.

1. We have discussed the challenges of adapting books to film as well as the history of representing indigenous peoples in movies. In doing so, we have carefully studied the Universal adaptation of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and explored more recent films featuring indigenous protagonists. Drawing on what you have learned, write a paper outlining how you would remake *Island of the Blue Dolphins* for the silver screen if given the chance. Focus on at least two of the categories below in your analysis.

1. Setting and Casting

1. What effect might choosing native vs. non-native actors to portray native characters have on the film produced? What challenges might each choice present for the producer? Discuss the idea of “authenticity” and how it relates to casting in your production.
2. What factors are most important in choosing your setting? How does using accurate geographical setting influence the final production? Locations often change over time, and film crews, of course, bring human traffic and other disruptions to remote settings. Think of possible problems that may arise with regards to where studios would be allowed to film and the expenses associated with shooting on location. How much of a role would CGI (computer-generated imagery) play?

2. Language and Costume (Culture)
  1. Would you film your remake in English? In both English and other languages? Would you use subtitles? Explain your rationale.
  2. Consider the costumes used in the 1964 production. What would you retain? What would you change? Discuss your rationale.
3. Characters and Scene Selection
  1. Translating a book to a movie is difficult for many reasons, including time constraints. How would you handle the limits of a two-hour movie? Would you include or exclude the same scenes as Radnitz's production? Would you eliminate the same characters? Make a compelling argument for the choices you would make and how they would change the end product.
  2. Consider how Karana's introspection translates to film. The novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins* contains little dialogue after Ramo's death. When Karana speaks to Rontu and other animals, her remarks are brief: in the book, the storyline is advanced instead through introspection. This poses an obvious problem for film producers. Analyze how the 1964 film translated Karana's internal reflection. How would you show introspective thoughts in a visual medium? Are there options not utilized by the 1964 production?

### Further Reading

"About the Author." National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

Brown, Noel. "'The Apostle of Family Films': Robert B. Radnitz, Children's Cinema and Anti-Disney Discourse in the 1960s and 1970s." *Red Feather Journal* 4, 2 (2013).

Deloria, Philip J. "Representation: Indian Wars, the Movie." In *Indians in Unexpected Places*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004, pp. 52–108.

Schwebel, Sara L., ed. *Island of the Blue Dolphins: The Complete Reader's Edition*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.

Lee, Charles A., "[Aleutian Indian & English Dictionary](#)," 1896.

Geoghegan, R.H., "[The Aleutian Language](#)," U.S. Department of the Interior, 1944.

["We Want to Learn Aluttiq/Liicugtukut Aluttiq"](#) language website. Note: This is the language that would have been spoken by Tutok and the other Alaska Natives fictionalized in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

*Island of the Blue Dolphins*  
**From Novel to Film: An Analysis of  
What Becomes Lost in (and Without) Translation**  
Guided Note-Taking

Book	Movie
What works well?	What works well?
What doesn't work well?	What doesn't work well?