

# “Scott O’Dell”

*Island of the Blue Dolphins began in anger, anger at the hunters who invade the mountains where I live and who slaughter everything that creeps or walks or flies.*

--Scott O’Dell, in *Psychology Today*, January 1968

Writer Scott O’Dell was angry. Anxious over hunters killing wildlife near his Julian home, he needed to do something about it. He considered writing a letter to the newspapers but decided that such a letter would be unseen or easily dismissed. “So I wrote *Island of the Blue Dolphins* about a girl who kills animals and then learns reverence for all life.”

O’Dell’s novel of a young Indian girl abandoned on harsh San Nicholas Island in the early 1800s is a dramatic story of courage and self-reliance. Published in 1960, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* would become one of the top twenty selling, young adult books of all time, with over six million copies sold and translations in 28 languages.

Its famed author was born Odell Gabriel Scott in Los Angeles in 1898. The family moved frequently, living in San Pedro, Rattlesnake Island (Terminal Island) and eventually, Long Beach, where O’Dell graduated from high school. Several colleges followed but O’Dell never earned a degree.

An avid reader as a boy, O’Dell considered becoming a writer after his parents told him he was related to the British author Sir Walter Scott (his great-grandmother’s first cousin). He took up writing professionally in his early twenties by penning articles for local newspapers, where a typesetter accidentally transposed his first and last name. O’Dell liked the new name and soon had it legally changed.

In the 1920s O’Dell found writing work in the silent film industry. He critiqued movie scripts for Palmer Photoplay Company and taught a mail-order screenwriting course. At age 25, he wrote his first book: *Representative Photoplays Analyzed*.

Working for Paramount Pictures as a set dresser, O’Dell had brief role in the “Son of the Shiek,” where his slender hand appeared as a stand-in for Rudolf Valentino’s stubby fingers. He later worked for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer as a cameraman and shot scenes of Ramon Novarro in “Ben-Hur.”

His first novel, *Woman of Spain: a Story of Old California*, appeared ten years later. Greta Garbo convinced MGM to buy the screen rights to the book. The book was never filmed but sale of the rights supported O’Dell through the Great Depression.



Scott O’Dell in his Hollywood years.

After a brief stint in the Army Air Force during World War II, O’Dell joined the Coast Guard Auxiliary. He finished the war doing night patrol duty off the Southern California coast, sometimes alongside fellow volunteer, Humphrey Bogart.

O'Dell was fascinated by California history and used the setting of the U.S.-Mexican War for his second novel, *Hill of the Hawk*. A review in *Westways Magazine* called O'Dell's work "an usually fine historical novel," and praised his lively description of the Battle of San Pasqual.

After several years as the book review editor for the *Los Angeles Daily News*, O'Dell began writing historical works, full-time. *Country of the Sun: Southern California, an Informal Guide*, appeared in 1957. Tracing the history of the region, O'Dell wrote a descriptive account of the 1870s gold rush in Julian, a community he now chose to live in.

The O'Dell home in Julian was a remodeled packing house, with three-foot thick stone walls, set in an apple orchard called Stoneapple Farm. With his wife Dorsa, O'Dell grew apples and explored story ideas, usually based on incidents in California history.

From his research for *Country of the Sun*, O'Dell had discovered the true story of the "Lost Woman of San Nicholas," a Native American who had lived alone for eighteen years on California's most isolated Channel Island. She had been abandoned on the island in 1835 when the indigenous Nicoleño Indians moved to the mainland. Reportedly, she had jumped from the ship that carried her people to the coast. She was found in 1853 and brought to the Santa Barbara Mission, where she died a short time later.

Scott O'Dell's fictional reconstruction of the life of the abandoned "Karana" on the "Island of the Blue Dolphins" was an instant classic. The well-reviewed novel sold widely and was frequently adopted for classroom use in schools. In 1961, it won the prestigious John Newbery Medal for the most distinguished contribution to literature for children.



The book's success made the Julian writer a celebrity. O'Dell traveled throughout California, speaking to school assemblies and classes. In early 1963, O'Dell estimated that had spoken to 40,000 children in two years.



O'Dell with his second wife, writer Elizabeth Hall.

O'Dell had discovered the rewards of writing for the young. In 1968, he commented that with the publication of adult books the author could expect to hear "most from his friends and none from his enemies." Afterwards, "there is silence."

"But with children, if they like your book, the reverse is true. They respond in numbers, by the thousands of letters, over an indefinite period of time."

After the *Island of Blue Dolphins*, O'Dell would write nearly thirty more popular and critically esteemed novels for young readers. He spent his last years in Westchester County, New York before his death at age 91 in 1989. His ashes were scattered in the ocean off La Jolla.

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Photographs are courtesy of the O'Dell family, which can be found at [www.scottodell.com](http://www.scottodell.com), along with far more information about this outstanding writer.