



Island's End

Written by Padma Venkatraman
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Uido, an adolescent girl of the En-ge tribe, has been chosen to begin her training as the next spiritual leader of her people. Within the Bay of Bengal, on an Indian-owned Andaman Island, Uido has dreams that foretell the future, in which the spirits speak to her and guide her. In a dream, Uido sees strangers from another island appear on her shore. When this dream becomes reality, she understands what Lah-ame, the En-ge leader, has warned her. The strangers are so different. Their ways go against the En-ge way of life, but are very appealing, especially to the younger members of her tribe. When Uido's little brother falls ill from a disease brought by the strangers, Uido

chooses to go to the strangers' island to use their medicine in order to save her brother. Upon her return, she worries that her people will not respect her or the traditional En-ge ways of life because they have seen the power of the strangers' medicine. As she struggles with how to talk about what she saw on the other island, she has another premonition that a great wave is coming to devour her island. She tells the others to seek higher ground, warning them of her vision. Many heed her warning, but a few do not respect her authority, perishing as the great wave demolishes the lowlands of the island. When the sea calms again, Uido's people are calmed as well, safe in their belief that Uido has proven herself to be a true and wise leader.

This book provides a feminist perspective of a young girl becoming the leader of her tribe, facing opposition not only because of her age, but also her gender. It also tells the story of a tribe that is out of contact with our modern age. Reading *Island's End* with Indigenous rights in mind, the reader is guided to a positive message about not disturbing uncontacted tribes. The possibility for contact is left open, as Uido leaves her island to seek modern medicine; however the sickness which necessitates the medicine was brought to the tribe by uninvited visitors. When Uido is on the mainland, she sees a woman related to her own tribe, who is haggard, begging and hungry. Uido learns that modern society has a negative impact on her people, draining and ruining a once healthy culture.

The book *Whale Rider* (2012) by Witi Tame Ihimaera and the movie by the same name would provide an excellent complimentary narrative through the story of Kahu, a Maori girl in New Zealand. The leader of her tribe is looking for a successor, but he has no heirs except Kahu, his great-granddaughter. In contrast with *Island's End*, there had been no female leaders of the Maori tribe to draw on as example, as Maori tradition had not allowed female leaders. But when hundreds of whales are beached and dying, Kahu reveals her ancient connection and hidden gift of being able to communicate with whales. Like Uido, she saves lives with her extraordinary gift, proving her ability to lead her people.

Venkatraman, an outsider to Andaman culture, explains in an author's note that the impetus for writing a book about cultures of the Andaman Islands came from a scientific research trip during which she stayed briefly with some members of the Onge tribe. In order to write the book, she spoke with anthropologists and read texts and peer-reviewed literature to get a greater understanding of the people of the Andaman Islands. Because the five tribes who live on the islands are not interested in contact from outside cultures, there has been little written about them and their lives. Therefore it is difficult to assess authenticity in this novel. However, within the small amount of writing that does exist about the peoples of the Andaman Islands, there is a lot of negative stereotyping. The two most destructive stereotypes are that the islanders are cannibals (based on their wearing of the bones of the dead) and the descriptions of their nudity (based on experiences of companies offering human safaris). Venkatraman beautifully treats these subjects by weaving them delicately into the plot, erasing the negative implications of both the bone wearing and the nudity.

Venkatraman did not spend a great deal of time with the people of the islands. She fictionalized the tribe, the En-ge, as an amalgamation of the five island tribes in order to fit the knowledge she had gathered into her idea for Uido's story. This is a sensitive topic as, in the United States, it is considered inauthentic and disrespectful to write about a general Native American tribe rather than a specific culture. There is a great difference, though, between these two situations. An enormous amount of information exists about Native American tribes, and the youth of these tribes are also potential readers of the literature. It is vital to see oneself reflected in literature. However, because of the paucity of information about the tribes of the Andaman Islands and the extreme unlikelihood that a member of these tribes would read the literature produced, this novel attempts to educate non-Andamese individuals about the desire and right of the tribes of the Andaman Islands to remain secretive and uncontacted. Fiction is one of the most powerful forms of education. The lack of specific authenticity in *Island's End* seems acceptable in order to get out the message about the rights of uncontacted tribes to youth, the leaders of tomorrow. This is a question that is worthy of classroom debate with informed young readers who might visit the sources of information concluding this review. *Island's End* is thought provoking and strong, a powerful read for those interested in how Indigenous youth navigate "two worlds."

Sources of information about Andamanese cultures:

<http://mathildasanthropologyblog.wordpress.com/2008/04/08/the-jarawa-onges-and-sentinelese-of-the-andaman-islands/>

<http://www.andaman.org/BOOK/text-group-BodyChapters.htm>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/07/andaman-islands-tribe-tourism-threat>

<http://thedailybeagle.net/2013/02/13/uncontacted-tribes-of-the-andaman-islands-do-we-approach/>

Celeste Trimble, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZZ

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