

Call it Courage by Armstrong Sperry

Setting

Hikueru, Tiveru, or Te Kārena,[2] is one of the Central Tuamotu atolls. The closest land to Hikueru is Tekokota Atoll, located 22 km to the north.

Hikueru Atoll's shape is roughly oval and it is 15 km in length and 9.5 km in width. It covers a land area of 8 square km and a lagoon area of 79 square km. There are many small isalnds on its reef. Its lagoon is deep, with numerous coral heads.

At the 2022 census, the population of the commune of Hikueru was 199, of which 125 on Hikueru proper, and 74 on the atoll of Marokau. Its most important village is Tupapati, located on the atoll Hikueru. There is a territorial airport on Hikueru which was opened in 2000.

Hikueru was the setting for Armstrong Sperry's novel Call It Courage, which won the Newbery Medal in 1941.

Author Biography

Armstrong Sperry

Armstrong Wells Sperry (November 7, 1897 – April 26, 1976) was an American writer and illustrator of children's literature. His books include historical fiction and biography, often stories of boys from Polynesia, Asia and indigenous American cultures. He is best known for his 1941 Newbery Medal-winning book Call It Courage. An accomplished artist, Sperry attended the Art Students League of New York from 1915 to 1918, and the Yale School of Art. Following World War I, Sperry travelled around the islands of the South Pacific. In 1930 he married Margaret Robertson, a doctor, and was employed as an illustrator for an advertising agency. His first book, One Day with Manu appeared in 1933. Call it Courage was first published in 1940 and has since been translated into several languages

Summary

Call It Courage tells the story of Mafatu, a young boy born on the island of Touana. From early childhood, Mafatu lives in fear of the sea. Though his people depend on fishing for survival, he trembles at every swell and avoids boats at all costs. His mother worries over him, and his father's disappointment weighs heavily on his heart.

As a young member of the tribe on the Polynesian island Hikueru, a people for whom sailing and fishing are a fundamental way of life, Mafatu's fear is a major social stigma. Although he experienced the great trauma at the age of three of nearly drowning and seeing his mother die, those around him have little sympathy or understanding for his fears. Even his father is

ashamed of the way Mafatu behaves. As a result of his inability to go out in a canoe and fish, Mafatu is left behind to build spears, nets, and other necessary tools.

Other youth his age tease and reject Mafatu, and one night he overhears their taunts and cannot stand it any longer. He doesn't want to continue to live with his fear and his shame, so he resolves to go out alone and face his inner demons on the sea. Mafatu takes a canoe and with his canine companion Uri and their albatross friend Kivi, he heads out toward the open ocean. Mafatu has not gone prepared however, and a storm nearly destroys his canoe and sweeps away the few things he brought with him, even his clothing. Uri and Mafatu drift in the canoe for days, growing more starved, dehydrated, and sun burnt. Just as it seems all hope is lost, an island appears in the distance. The current carries the canoe towards this island, and although the coral reef surrounding it smashes the canoe, Mafatu and Uri make it to shore alive.

When Mafatu comes to, he drinks some fresh water from a stream and bandages a cut on his leg. Revived by this, he begins to explore his new surroundings. The island has thick jungle and an inactive volcano at its center, and this terrain is strange to Mafatu, who comes from an island of flat plains and few palm trees. Towards the top of the volcano there is a plateau which offers an excellent view of the whole island.

On the other side of the island from the beach upon which he landed, Mafatu discovers a clearing with a pyramid and idol in it. This is a sacred site of sacrifice for the savage eaters-of-men, a cannibalistic tribe of which Mafatu has heard terrible stories. He is extremely frightened, because although there is no one on the island now, they are sure to return at some time. However, he sees a well-made spearhead at the shrine, and knowing it will be very useful to him he snatches it up before running back to the plateau. Mafatu will use this good vantage point to carefully watch out for any sign that the eaters-of-men are returning.

Meanwhile, there is much work for Mafatu to do in order to survive and make himself comfortable on the island. All of his time on Hikuera constructing tools and perfecting those skills is now coming in very handy. He builds a fire to cook his food, and a shelter from bamboo and woven leaves. Mafatu begins to make a new canoe that he can use to return home. He creates all manner of tools, such as nets, fishhooks, bowls, and mats. Mafatu replaces his lost clothing, and creates spears and knives from a whale skeleton he is lucky to find. He makes a raft to use until the canoe is complete, and a fish trap for catching more food farther offshore.

There is one problem with the fish trap, however, and this is the hammerhead shark that regularly raids the trap before Mafatu can get what he has caught. One day Mafatu goes out with a knife to end this trouble once and for all. When he sees the shark he grows afraid, however, and can do nothing even as the shark completely destroys the fish trap. It isn't until Uri is knocked into the water that Mafatu is driven to act. He dives in to save his friend

from being eaten, and stabs the shark with the knife, succeeding in killing it. Mafatu helps Uri back onto the raft, grateful to have found the courage to rescue his companion.

This is the first of several such victories for Mafatu. One day while climbing to the plateau to look out for the eaters-of-men, a wild boar charges at Mafatu. He wants to run away but instead acts quickly and uses a spear to kill the wild boar. This is a feat of bravery that even the warriors of his tribe have not succeeded in, and Mafatu returns to his campsite for a triumphant feast. He makes a necklace of the boar's teeth which he cannot wait for his tribe to see.

Once the canoe is finished, Mafatu takes it out to test it and to retrieve that day's catch from the fish trap. Unfortunately his knife falls into the ocean while he does so. Mafatu dives down to get it back, because he would hate to lose it, but is attacked by a large octopus while he is at the ocean floor by the coral reef. Mafatu stabs wildly at it, and he is quickly becoming desperate as his lungs scream for oxygen. It seems as if the octopus is going to win, when one well-aimed stab hits the creature in its eye. Mafatu makes it back to the canoe, gasping for air.

Distracted by all of these events, Mafatu did not check for the eaters-of-men that day, which was a huge mistake because they arrive the next morning. Mafatu observes the beginning of their ritual at the sacred site, trying to remain hidden, but he is discovered by four of the savages. They chase him back to his beach, where he leaps into his canoe and tries to get away. At first the eaters-of-men swim after him, but then they turn back and follow in their own canoes. They follow Mafatu out into the ocean and pursue him for over a day before finally giving up.

It would seem Mafatu is home free. However, the currents are now working against him, and he has difficulty making any progress towards his island of Hikueru. As days pass the food and water he brought runs out, and Mafatu once more grows dehydrated and weak. Finally, he notices signs of land in the distance, and realizes with great joy and relief that it is his home. On the beach, the people of his tribe have gathered to see this stranger that is approaching. Even his own father does not recognize Mafatu at first, but when they understand who he is they are amazed. Mafatu's father proudly announces his son's bravery, and the tale of Mafatu's adventures is told for generations to come.

Characters

1. Mafatu (Protagonist)

"I must learn not to tremble. The wind and sea will not wait for me."

Mafatu, the son of Hikueru's chief canoe builder, carries a hidden terror of the sea. Though his father and peers expect him to master the waves, he trembles at the water's edge. Yet

beneath his fear lies a spark of determination. When shame and mocking push him to flee alone, he unveils a courage he never knew he had.

On the deserted island, Mafatu transforms. He learns to hunt, to craft tools, and to face wild threats. His bond with the orphaned albatross Kivi reveals his compassion. In every challenge, he inches past his old limits until fear no longer binds him. His journey shapes him into the leader Hikueru needs.

2. Kivi (Companion)

“Kivi cried each night until I promised we face the dawn together.”

Kivi, a young albatross, emerges when Mafatu finds its fallen nest. The chick’s soft cries echo Mafatu’s own loneliness. Feeding it fish scraps, Mafatu grows protective. Kivi provides warmth and a reminder of home during long, cold nights.

Their shared survival cements a bond deeper than words. When Mafatu triumphs over sharks and storms, Kivi’s return flight signals victory. The bird becomes both symbol and ally, guiding the boy beyond fear.

3. Korutonga (Father and Mentor)

“The ocean’s fiercest teacher is fear. You faced it—and that makes you a true son of Hikueru.”

Korutonga, Hikueru’s master canoe builder, exudes quiet pride in his craft. He expects his son to inherit his skill. Yet he senses Mafatu’s reluctance. Though disappointed at first, he refuses to belittle the boy. Instead, he shares gentle lessons about the sea’s moods and respect for nature.

Upon Mafatu’s return, Korutonga greets him with a knowing smile. He sees his son has learned more than craft—he has claimed courage. In his embrace, Mafatu recognizes that true strength grows inside.

4. Uri and Tama (Rivals turned Respectful Peers)

“We thought you weak, Mafatu. Now we see we were the fools.”

Uri and Tama, two of the village’s strongest paddlers, once mocked Mafatu’s fear. They chased him with taunts about sharks and storms. Their bullying pushed Mafatu to flee.

Yet upon his triumphant return, they yield their swords of mockery. They clap him on the shoulder and seek his counsel during storms. Their transformation underlines the power of genuine courage to win respect.

Themes Analysis

1. Overcoming Fear

Fear drives the story forward from its first lines. Mafatu's dread of the ocean shapes his every move. It isolates him. Yet it also sparks his quest. By confronting each danger—shark, storm, isolation—he learns that fear is not a barrier but a gateway to growth.

Armstrong Sperry suggests that courage doesn't mean absence of fear. It means acting in spite of it. Each small victory chips away at terror until it no longer holds power. Readers sense that their own fears might shrink under sustained effort.

2. Man and Nature

The island and sea stand as both adversary and teacher. At first, nature seems hostile. Waves capsize the canoe; beasts threaten. But as Mafatu learns fishing, tool-making, and bird care, nature becomes a partner.

Sperry portrays nature with respect. He never romanticizes it. Instead, he shows its indifferent power and its quiet beauty. Mafatu's bond with Kivi reveals that sympathy and understanding can transform the wild into a source of wisdom.

3. Identity and Belonging

Mafatu feels alienated by his fear. His community expects a fearless seafarer. His inability to meet that expectation stains his sense of self. His flight to the open sea isolates him further.

Yet when the fishermen rescue him, his deeds shine brighter than any inherited skill. The village welcomes him not for his birthright but for his proved mettle. Sperry implies that true belonging grows from deeds and heart, not just from lineage.

Key Plot Features

1. The Canoe

The canoe serves as both lifeline and crucible. It carries Mafatu into the ocean unknown. Each crack and patch tests his resolve. When the canoe capsizes, Mafatu must swim to shore, forging a new bond with survival.

Thus the canoe embodies transition—from sheltered boy to self-reliant voyager. It marks each stage of his growth, from terror at launch to proud mastery at return.

2. The Albatross Chick (Kivi)

Kivi's orphaned vulnerability mirrors Mafatu's own. He rescues the chick and keeps it alive. This act of compassion fuels his will to live. The bird's survival depends on him.

In turn, Kivi becomes a constant companion. When Mafatu hears its cry, he recalls his promise. Their partnership symbolizes interdependence: courage can grow when we care for another.

3. The Storm

The sudden storm that capsizes Mafatu's canoe represents nature's indifference. It strips away his last illusions of safety. In the chaos, Mafatu must summon inner strength.

Surviving that night marks a turning point. The storm tests him beyond mere skill. It demands courage. By dawn, Mafatu's triumph signals his transformation.

Historical insight

1. This story tells us much about the history of the Pacific Islands before the coming of white missionaries. What similarities are there between historical features in this story and those of Fiji in the same era? Make a list of at least 5 points.
2. How significant was spirit worship? Give evidence from the story.
3. From your own understanding, how do you think the coming of missionaries helped the people of the Pacific Islands?