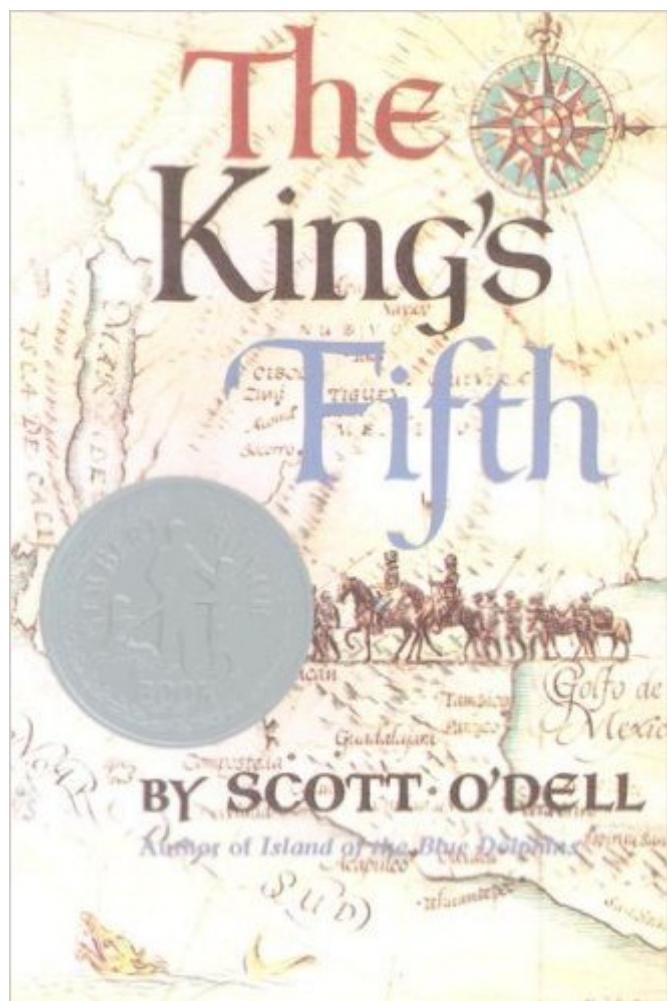


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The King's Fifth



Synopsis

In this deeply affecting novel Scott O'Dell envelops the reader in the heroic world of the conquistadors—a world that is at once somber and many-colored. Though they may have been ruthless, these steel-helmeted young men of Spain lived their lives on the very edge of eternity with style and uncommon courage.

Book Information

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: HMH Books for Young Readers; Reprint edition (September 4, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0618747834

ISBN-13: 978-0618747832

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.7 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars (See all reviews) (31 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #86,651 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #3 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > Aviation > Helicopters #5 in Books > Teens > Historical Fiction > Exploration & Discovery #27 in Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Historical Fiction > Exploration & Discoveries

Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

In my continuing quest to read all that is historical fiction based during the Spanish conquest of the Americas, I finally jumped into Scott O'Dell's "The King's Fifth." I recently finished O'Dell's "Seven Serpents" trilogy which follows the young Julian Escobar as he travels from Spain to the New World in a quest to save the savage souls of the New World's natives. While his early journey established his innocence, his travels across the Yucatan, central Mexico and eventually Peru expose his personal fall from grace. O'Dell's hero in "King's Fifth" is different from Escobar, but mostly in name and location. In this short novel, we find Esteban de Sandoval imprisoned in the Spanish fortress of San Juan de Ulua on the far east coast of Mexico. Having found a significant treasure, Esteban is charged with refusing the Spanish King his fifth of the treasure - the standard percentage that all explorers are due their king. The key drama is not Esteban's innocence or guilt of the crime...he fully admits to withholding the King's fifth. The core mystery is determining where the treasure is exactly

and why, as Esteban contends, it will never be found. O'Dell's narrative bounces between Esteban's flashbacks of his adventure in the new world, and his trial which spans the course of several weeks. A young mapmaker on board a ship in the Sea of Cortes, Esteban becomes associated with mutineers and finds himself in western Mexico with the explorer Coronado who's in search of the fabled Cibola. His brush with the non-fictional Coronado is quite brief, but is reminiscent of Julian Escobar's travels with both Hernan Cortes and Francisco Pizarro.

The setting is in New Spain, the area of North America occupied by Spain during the 1500's. The year is 1541, with a young seventeen year old man being held in a small prison cell in a fortress in Vera Cruz. In the opening chapter, we meet Esteban de Sandoval, a cartographer or map maker, as he is being questioned by the jailor, Don Felipe. We immediately learn that Sandoval is being charged with defrauding the King of Spain from his share of one-fifth on a treasure of gold, that Sandoval has hidden in a remote wilderness. Don Felipe is treating him kindly by bringing paper, quills, an inkwell and candle because he wishes for Sandoval to draw him a map of Cibola, the area in which the gold was found, and a map showing the location of where the gold is hidden. By candlelight, Sandoval begins to work on a map from memory, but most importantly, he begins to write his story of what has brought him to this moment. We learn that Sandoval was on a Spanish ship, when he left with a small crew of adventurers led by Captain Mendoza, a gold hungry opportunist. They join up with Coronado's army where they meet Zia, a young Indian girl who speaks five languages, and Father Francisco, who wishes to preach Christ to the natives. Soon they leave Coronado and with Zia as guide and interpreter, set off in search of Indian tribes said to have gold. The story fluctuates Sandoval's writing of what happened on the quest, and what is happening in the prison and courtroom. There is lots of excitement and danger from the Indians, deception by Mendoza and his soldiers, and a deepening affection between Sandoval, Zia, and Father Francisco. Sandoval is constantly under scrutiny by everyone, as they seek to find where he has hidden the treasure.

Esteban was a cartographer, or map maker, on a ship on the coast of South America. Their ship was to rendezvous with another to make a search for the Cities of Gold. One of the officers aboard the ship wants to mutiny, and strike out to search for the cities, in hopes of collecting even more gold and fame. He talks Esteban into accompanying him, along with some others. They travel and encounter all kinds of dangers from nature and from the natives. They ask the people they come across for gold, but to them, it is not important. Esteban and his companions find it all important. As

they travel on toward the Cities of Gold, their lust for gold gains a tighter and tighter grip upon them. At the beginning, Esteban marveled at the way the desire for gold had warped others, but later on, he ceases to care for others, and is willing to sacrifice whatever and whoever may come between him and the riches his soul so greedily craves. He ends up with a great amount of gold, which he tries to carry back with him. Eventually, he sees that his greed was killing him, and deposits the gold where it can never be recovered. The story is told from Esteban's prison cell. It is the law to give one fifth of all discovered treasure to the king of Spain. The chapters alternate with Esteban recalling his journey through South America, and his recording what is happening in the prison. He says his indictment is true; he did discover treasure, and he did not give the king his fifth. His prosecutors and jailor are not so much concerned with the king's fifth, however. They want to know where the treasure is, so they can find it. They ask for maps, which Esteban draws; but he says they will never find it. Even he, who knows where it is, could never find it.

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