



# Call It Courage

*Armstrong Sperry*

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## **Call It Courage** Armstrong Sperry

A boy tries to overcome his fear of the sea in this treasured classic and winner of the Newbery Medal.

Maftu was afraid of the sea. It had taken his mother when he was a baby, and it seemed to him that the sea gods sought vengeance at having been cheated of Mafatu. So, though he was the son of the Great Chief of Hikueru, a race of Polynesians who worshipped courage, and he was named Stout Heart, he feared and avoided the sea, till everyone branded him a coward. When he could no longer bear their taunts and jibes, he determined to conquer that fear or be conquered-- so he went off in his canoe, alone except for his little dog and pet albatross. A storm gave him his first challenge. Then days on a desert island found him resourceful beyond his own expectation. This is the story of how his courage grew and how he finally returned home. This is a legend. It happened many years ago, but even today the people of Hikueru sing this story and tell it over their evening fires.

## **Call It Courage Details**

Date : Published April 30th 1990 by Aladdin (first published 1940)

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Author : Armstrong Sperry

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# From Reader Review Call It Courage for online ebook

## Grace Kao says

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## Duane says

We are all enchanted by the tales of adventure in the South Sea islands, probably because most of us will only travel there in the pages of the books we read. They are a mystery to us, their history, their beauty, their people, and that fuels our imagination, that need for the ultimate adventure. This is a coming of age story set in the Polynesian Islands centuries ago, and it's the tale of a young boy who has something to prove to his father, his friends, but most of all to himself. It's a feel good story that has a predictable ending, but it still gives us what we want, to be transported for a few hours to paradise.

1941 Newbery Medal Winner.

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## Connor says

The genre of the book is fiction.

Setting is the element because he doesn't stay at the same island, he goes to a foreign island and takes a spear, kills a boar, goes underwater to kill a shark and bring it back to his home island. All to prove he has courage.

i was not interested in this book because it was slow i never understood it, he had to go to many different places in order to murder creatures that could kill the boy, Mafatu to bring back to the island dead to prove to people that he is not a coward. plus he stole a spear from an island that he didn't live on to kill the boar and take its tooth.

Why Would Mafatu Care About What People Think About Him?

Would He Had Needed to kill the shark to face his fear?

Why Would He Use The Boar Tooth To Kill The Shark?

Why Would People Call Him A Coward After What Happened to his mother?

would you kill something to prove courage?

i dont have to show courage to anyone because i have my mother

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## Constance says

I missed this classic entirely. A student came looking for it in the library and I didn't have it. A mistake I quickly corrected! I knew of it, but confused it with Jean Craighead George's, *My Side of the Mountain*. Call it *Courage* has a mythic and bold storytelling tone; like gather around the fire and listen to this tale. Imagine being the child of a coach and being scared or even terrified to play a game? That's Mafatu. He's the son of a warrior and he's a scared boy: scared of the sea, scared of everything. He is the Boy Who Was Afraid. "They whispered courage, those early Polynesians," is the start of the second paragraph. The vocabulary is great for kids who want a bit of a challenge at 4th or 5th grade, but it has a deeper message about challenges and obstacles we encounter in life. Is it a "boys" book? Maybe, but I think it is a classic because the message reaches into anytime and either gender. It's as much about overcoming fears as surmounting obstacles and gaining confidence. I would pair this book with Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* and *Guts* and look for comparisons. Excellent!

"The tide was running out of the lagoon with the sunset in a whispering hum of sound, like the reassuring hush of a mother to her child. Mafatu lay there under his lean-to, relaxed in every nerve. He had fire, food, shelter. He had faced Moana, the Sea God. He had dared the sacred marae of the eater-of-men to win his spear. There was a new found confidence singing in his heart. He had found a new belief in himself."  
—Armstrong Perry, *Call it Courage*.

I think everyone should read it at some point in their lives.

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## Jeff says

– I give this book to all my nephews, my friend's kids, and of course to my son as soon as I think they are ready for it. It was the book that created my love of reading.

It is a Polynesian fable told through the eyes of a fifteen year old boy trying to overcome his fears and win the respect of his family and tribe. Mafatu, due to the loss of his mother, is afraid of the sea. He sits on the shore making and mending fishing nets while the other boys go out fishing to feed their families. Determined to overcome his fears and win the respect of his peers, and most importantly his father, he sets out, alone except for his dog, Uri, and Kivi, his pet albatross. He sails across the sea and is ship wrecked on a tropical island. There he battles wild pigs, an octopuss, sharks, cannibals, and of course himself. Eventually he conquers all, including his fears, and returns home a hero with a boar's teeth necklace.

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## Travis says

This was a super good book, I couldn't put it down at times!

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## **Regina Spiker says**

I haven't read Call It Courage, a juvenile Newbery Medal winner, in many a moon. A friend had returned it to the library and she left a note about how much she had enjoyed reading it as a child. So to refresh my memory - I reread it myself. This particular copy included the preserved original, beautiful blue and white illustrations.

Mafatu, 15 year old son of a Polynesian island chief, has had great loss in his life. His mother died when he was only three. Both had been at sea in their small canoe when a great storm flung them into the shark infested water. Barely alive, both had been washed to a nearby island. Only Mafatu survived - but was left with nightmares and a fear of the water so great that it impairs his daily life. At last, tired of the talk and judgment in the eyes of his people, Mafatu decides to strike out and confront his fear of the ocean - with only his friends, Uri, his pup, in the canoe and Kivi, his pet albatross, in the air. In the coming days, Mafatu's courage is tested over and over again and although he feels very small and alone in the world, he rises to meet the many challenges. With each hurdle crossed, Mafatu becomes more self assured and confident.

Anyone that is bullied or has a fear confronting an issue, juvenile or adult alike, would be advised to read this simple but rich story of historical fiction published originally in 1940. And in its simplicity, lies part of the charm...

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## **Wendy says**

Meh. This is pretty much everything I dislike about what I thought of as "boy" books when I was a kid. It's like something that'd be published in BOY'S LIFE (the Boy Scout magazine). Definitely not better than THE LONG WINTER, which won an Honor that year.

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## **Amber says**

I was glad when this book was over sad , but true. it had some good and interesting parts, but then there was a lot of dragging going on. Then suddenly something would happen. Then some more dragging and then something would happen and so on! The book just wasn't laid out very well.

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## **Luisa Knight says**

Cleanliness:

Children's Bad Words - None

Illustrations - 1 Incident: a sketch of a naked boy

Religious & Supernatural - 8 Incidents: "They worshiped courage, those early Polynesians." Mentions "Moana, the Sea God." Mentions a "tupapau - a ghost-spirit." "He called a prayer to Maui, God of the Fishermen." Mentions demons, referring more to a boy's internal struggles of fear and cowardice. A boy

finds an idol where the cannibals offer sacrifices. The boy offers a six-stanza prayer to a god. A boy sees cannibals dancing in front of an idol.

Romance Related - 3 Incidents: “Breast” meaning chest. A shipwrecked boy is “naked as the daystar.” “Breast” meaning heart.

Attitudes/Disobedience - 1 Incident: Boys tease another boy for being afraid.

Conversation Topics - 1 Incident: Cannibals are referenced a couple of times. Mentions tattoos.

#### Parent Takeaway

A boy decides to overcome his past and his fear of the ocean by setting sail. Through the adventures he faces, he learns what courage means. A great story that portrays character development. The religious content listed above is presented for cultural purposes.

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## **The Captain says**

Ahoy there me mateys! This be the second read in me April BookBum Club Challenge! This read is long overdue. Ye see it all stems from a post I read from me matey Jackie @ deathbysundoku back in October 2017. She be on the Great Newbery quest wherein she be reading all Newbery medal winners by January 2022 when the 100th Newbery Award happens! Worthy goal indeed. I meself had embarked on this journey many years ago before adverse winds and scads of other adventures sent me off course. I had managed 24 of them at last count.

So this be number 25. Arrrr! As always I love me sea yarns. This one is short but sweet. It is the story of Maftu who grows up on an island. A childhood mishap caused him (rightly) to be afraid of the sea. Due to the fact that the sea supports the livelihood of the tribe, Maftu is known as a coward. The day comes where he resolves to face his fears. So he steals a canoe and takes off with his trusty dog companion to sail on the sea only to be thrust into an even bigger adventure. Can he face his fears, learn to accept himself, and survive long enough to make it back home?

As me matey Jackie says, “Yes, this 1940 Newbery Award winner certainly has some representation issues. Yes, *Call It Courage* does play on all the noble-savage action-adventure boy serial tropes, such as those in the Tarzan serials. Yes, it portrays sexism, bullying, and submitting to peer pressure in a positive light. Yes, it does fall into a bit of a predictable storytelling mode where our protagonist magically conquers everything.”

That said, I also very much enjoyed this tale when cultural context is taken into account. Ye cheer on Maftu in his journey and come to respect his resourcefulness, hard work, and fortitude. From the modern perspective, it is interesting to note that Maftu would not have survived his ordeal if he hadn't mastered the “women's work” that is scorned by the men of the tribe.

The author was well known for his travels to the South Seas and the stories he brought back. The tale of Maftu was one such tale that was still told around the fires of the Polynesian islands. One of the highlights of the book were the author's own illustrations. He became known for this artwork and illustrated over 40 books and magazines. His pictures of Maftu adventures and island life were wonderful.

I do think all readers could find something to enjoy in this tale. I highly encourage all the crew to read Jackie's review because it is basically perfect in its representation of the book and its impact. Much thanks to the BookBum Club for giving me the incentive to finally read this delightful "short and sweet" book (128 pgs).

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### **Judy says**

This children's classic does a wonderful job of portraying Polynesian island culture. I was disappointed in the illustrations since they are only blue and white and not the beautiful flamboyant colors of island life. The book itself took a little effort on my part to finish because it seemed unrealistic to me that a young boy who was almost an outcast of society because of his fear of water could all of sudden do an about-face, travel to another island, weather a storm and take care of himself.

I didn't like the message that peer pressure was important enough to risk one's life over. I did like the message of if-you-want-something-badly-do-something-about-it, but it did seem that a "don't do this at home" label applied to most of what Mustafa did alone with no instruction.

Of course, if I had been a child growing up in the 1940s I probably would have loved this book!

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### **Emily says**

I remember absolutely LOVING this book as a kid - the adventure and the suspense of Mafatu's plight. The book did not hold up to my memories of it. I found Sperry's descriptions rather flat and unengaging this time round, and found it difficult to keep up with the rapid changes in Mafatu's courage.

Another thing that bothered me about the book was that the two main conflicts were at the beginning and the end (the storm, and the arrival of the eaters-of-men). Both can be argued as conflicts as results of Mafatu's actions, but he didn't seem to have any real failures - he doesn't fail in his making of the canoe or gathering of food - effortlessly kills the shark (which, in illustration, is not a hammerhead, by the by), octopus, and boar... where is his strife?

I feel like I'm being overly negative of the book, perhaps because I remember loving it so much, so I apologize for that - I just can't seem to find any good in the book right now.

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### **Tal says**

i was glad when this book was over ... sad. it had some good and interesting parts, but then there was a lot of dragging going on. then - suddenly something would happen. the book just wasn't laid out very well. i don't think any of my students will read this book, let alone enjoy it. i could be wrong though.

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## Donna says

A delightful adventure, and a most deserving winner of the Newbery Award. Ten-year-old Mafatu, a boy from a Polynesian Island tribe, doesn't seem to measure up to the standards set for being a "man" in his tribe. Most troublesome at all is his fear of the water. How can he grow up to be a powerful, confident, courageous chief if he is afraid to paddle out to sea and go fishing with the other boys? A wonderful tale of overcoming challenges and reaching through barriers to achieve your goals. Every child could benefit from this inspiring read.

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## Kate Matson says

### Summary:

Maftu was afraid of the sea. It had taken his mother when he was a baby, and it seemed to him that the sea gods sought vengeance at having been cheated of Mafatu. So, though he was the son of the Great Chief of Hikueru, a race of Polynesians who worshipped courage, and he was named Stout Heart, he feared and avoided the sea, till everyone branded him a coward. When he could no longer bear their taunts and jibes, he determined to conquer that fear or be conquered-- so he went off in his canoe, alone except for his little dog and pet albatross. A storm gave him his first challenge. Then days on a desert island found him resourceful beyond his own expectation. This is the story of how his courage grew and how he finally returned home. This is a legend. It happened many years ago, but even today the people of Hikueru sing this story and tell it over their evening fires.

### Plot:

The plot was okay, it wasn't long at all though. There wasn't many plot twists, and when there were, they were 2 pages long. I thought overall the plot was pretty good, just lacked in some areas.

### Writing:

I was pleasantly surprised that Armstrong Sperry's writing style is actually good. I thought i was going to be reading children's writing style, but no, his writing was mature and complex.

### Characters:

This story is really all about mafatu's becoming a fearless man. But, he didn't have any density to him. He was a bit dull, the only true emotion I saw him feel was love for his dog, Uri.

### Overall:

This was a pretty good story. The plot definitely lacked depth, but I don't regret reading this book.

### Recommendations:

8+. I would say don't buy this book, just get it at the library if you're interested in reading it.

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## DaNae says

A survival story that fans of HATCHET or ISLAND OF THE BLUE DOLPHINS may enjoy. It ages okay, but I'd like a better sense of the cultural research done by the author.

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## Ensiform says

This Newbery winner tells of the trials of Mafatu, a fifteen-year-old Polynesian boy, the son of a chief. Due to a tragedy that took his mother when he was a baby, Mafatu has a great distrust of the sea, so one day he takes a small boat and, accompanied by his dog, forces himself to face his fears. After a storm, he washes up on an island of cannibals. While building a shelter and another boat, he also faces predators and then the return of the cannibals.

This slim story is, unfortunately, rather simplistic, and is dramatic only in the way that, say, old Tarzan serials are. First, the book validates the importance of conformity to existing social values; although Mafatu has made himself useful in the making of spears and nets, this is dismissed by his peers (and the tone of the narration) as “women’s work.” Also, disappointingly, Mafatu’s victories are not a result of his being particularly clever or adept; bravery and brute force are the only attributes extolled here. He kills a boar, a shark, and most ludicrously, a giant octopus capable of grabbing him by the waist, not through clever stratagems, but simply by standing his ground and stabbing them. Admirable, perhaps, but not exactly thrilling plots. Certainly, Sperry means well, and he’s good at describing this Adventure Story For Eager Lads, but I question the book’s underlying message, and its one-note hero, as a model for young minds.

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## Shanna Gonzalez says

Mafatu, the ten-year-old son of a Polynesian chieftan, has always feared the sea because in his toddlerhood he and his mother were swept away by a storm in which his mother lost her life. As he approaches the edge of manhood, his fear prevents him from winning a place in his community. Realizing their indifference to him, he sets out to sea alone in his canoe, taking only his dog and a few tools. That night he is caught in a storm, in which he loses his paddle and all his tools, and he washes up on an island where cannibals are known to live. He builds a shelter and canoe and chooses to survive; while living there he kills an octopus, a boar, and a shark, and faces the human terror of ritualistic cannibals, barely escaping with his life. At the end of his journey he returns to his village having proved himself a man.

The story is set in a mythical Polynesia, but is written in a European voice: at one point the author describes a canoe caught in a current “like a millrace,” a term which is decidedly foreign to this island culture. The great weakness of this book is that the tribal societies which provide a backdrop for the story are caricatured: The tribal fishermen represent noble savages, living so close to nature that they become “ill at ease, charged... with an almost animal awareness of impending storm” (3). Conversely, the cannibal tribe represent a class of wordless, brutal primitives -- dancing with oiled bodies, beating drums around fires and stone idols, wailing, and shouting with guttural voices. Mafatu appeals throughout the story to Maui, “god of the Fishermen,” and repeatedly challenges his nemesis Moana, the Sea God. Sperry’s Maui, however, hardly resembles the Polynesian trickster named Maui, and the Moana of the story is only a personification of the sea (In some of the languages “moana” does mean sea or ocean.)

No one having read this book should believe they have learned anything about the real Polynesia -- it is no more a story about Polynesia than Little Red Riding Hood is about the European forest. Notwithstanding this, if a reader can accept that Call it Courage is a lesson not in history but in moral courage, they may benefit from the moral example this hero represents. Although Mafatu is limited by his youth and inexperience, he faces great dangers and survives, facing down one fear after another. By making critical choices under pressure, and by refusing to succumb to the elemental, animal, spiritual and human forces

arrayed against him, he finally wins his victory. This coming of age is an accomplishment any young boy can aspire to.

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### **Jeannie says**

My 13 year-old son brought this book to me two days ago and said that it is one of his all time favorites. So I put it next to the computer to read when I finish "Toward the Gleam." He mentioned it again yesterday, so last night I took it with me to read at bedtime. He saw that I had it on my bedtime stack and picked it up and began telling me again how much he enjoyed this book. You could see the story play across his face as he held it almost reverently. So I put my novel away, and took the time to read something that my child cares about. Now I know why he enjoyed it so much.

This youngest son of mine is the original intelligent caveman and this gripping adventure goes right to the heart of such a boy. It also goes right to the heart of a mom who was so much like him as a child. I couldn't put it down. I don't know why I never read "Call it Courage," but I remember reading adventure stories similar to this one and wishing that such exciting things would happen to me. I am amazed at how quickly those old feelings came back as I read this book.

Occasionally 21st Century Mom kicked in (This book was published in 1940.)and I was distressed at some of the old stereotypes that our society has now abandoned, but I finally told her to be quiet and just settled in for a great read that transported me back to my childhood. I was lost in a world where anyone can have a seemingly impossible adventure and rise to victory. Maybe I needed a reminder that this really is the case if we just give it our best.

I love Mafatu's determination to overcome the label he has been given. And I absolutely love that once he is resolved to this he never turns back. He gives it his best; and although he is war-torn and weary, he overcomes the challenges and trials that he faces--one step at a time. None of it is easy, but his confidence in his own abilities grows with each challenge that he overcomes. This too was a real-life-here-and-now reminder for me.

My son is going to read the book again, and with it fresh in both of our memories, we are going to have a great book discussion.

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