



Koa Kai

D. R. Pollock

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Koa Kai is a thrilling transformation story in which a boy from New England becomes a powerful warrior.

Informed by real events, D. R. Pollock's historical novel *Koa Kai* follows a teenager's inspiring adventure in 1790s Hawaii.

After his mother's tragic death, Zachary is sent to live with his aunt and uncle in New England. He falls in love with Lizzie, whose father distrusts him and forces them apart. Zachary's uncle invites him on a sea expedition to get him away from Lizzie; it's a year-long trip around Cape Horn, north to the California coast, then back again. The journey is arduous, but Zachary excels as a sailor. When he is left behind after an incident in California, he joins the ship *Fair American*, heading to trade with Hawaii.

Meanwhile, Hawaii's King Kamehameha seeks to unite all of the Hawaiian islands under his rule. When he captures the *Fair American* as a tool for his conquest, he allows Zachary to live, admiring of the way Zachary fought against the invaders. King Kamehameha nicknames him Koa Kai, or Sea Warrior. Over the next few months, Zachary trains with King Kamehameha's army and assimilates himself, helping the king to conquer the islands, though Lizzie and his Christian upbringing remain on his mind.

For the first few chapters, Zachary's age is unclear. Several months are compressed into a few paragraphs. Later, long scenes devoted to short spans of time detail important interactions better. Tense battles move the plot forward, while emotional scenes are illustrated with vibrant language. The prose balances between being descriptive and dramatic.

The intertwining fictional and historical characters and events are harmonious and logical. Plot points and historical figures are portrayed with authenticity. Zachary fits right into his surroundings, whether he's in New England, aboard a ship, or in Hawaii. Though it is initially hard to believe Zachary's easy adjustment to native Hawaiian culture, his assimilation is made more plausible because of two real-life sailors, also characters in the book, who followed the same trajectory.

Zachary's characterization is subtle for much of the book. He acts in the moment, and his scant internal dialogue centers on whether his actions are in alignment with his beliefs. The New England cast is conventional for its setting and time; Lizzie's reverend father is stern and by-the-book, while Lizzie follows his orders even as she fawns over Zachary. The Hawaiian characters are more dynamic and have engaging subplots. Missing commas and misspellings confuse the text.

Koa Kai is a thrilling transformation story in which a boy from New England becomes a powerful warrior and a worldly, respectable gentleman.

AIMEE JODOIN (August 15, 2019)

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