ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

The Turtle-Girl from East Pukapuka
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With a tsunami about to overrun their home, the islanders of East Pukapuka stand with hands linked, facing the end that their gods have created for them. But one small girl named Butter is missing, as she desperately tries to rescue the sick animals she nurses. According to her culture, animals cannot enter heaven. Thus she believes it's vital to prolong their lives. The island is heaven to Butter: "What would eternity be like if you couldn't lie on a sandy beach with a chirping gecko sunning himself on your belly, licking his eye membranes and trying to change his color to look just like you?"

Butter's mother was The Keeper of the Books, books left to the island by a soldier but that have since become waterlogged and unreadable. The islanders named their babies after the authors or characters. Hence the old sea captain who rescues Butter is named Jesus. After Butter evades drowning by clinging to the shell of a turtle, Jesus mistakes her for a half-girl, half-turtle and imagines the riches that will reward his discovery. She, in turn, mistakes him for a god named Jesus.

Meanwhile, two small-time crooks accidentally become big-time pirates when the light from a meteor abets their robbery of a shipload of cocaine. Like a modern-day Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, Ratu (a kingly title) and Jope (urban slang for weed) are friends of unequal intelligence waiting for the cannibals they have been warned by the shark god are coming to avenge the cocaine theft.

In another part of the world, a paralyzed, seemingly comatose ex-ski racer named Dante can move only one finger, but it's enough for him to click the remote control to travel channel footage of East Pukapuka, which he determines is his "home." Who better than Dante to lead Butter back to her island, with the help of Jesus and a lovely companion named Ophelia?

The book is playful and comic in its creation of such misunderstandings and coincidences. As their stories unfold and intersect, one comes to believe the island is indeed paradise, as Jesus plays a heroic role and the cannibal, Albino Paul, the shark god, and the birds play out a finale resounding with echoes of myth.

Cole Alpaugh is a former award-winning journalist and Pulitzer Prize nominee. Currently a freelance photographer and writer, Alpaugh is also author of *The Bear in a Muddy Tutu*.

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