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Kensuke's Kingdom

Irene Halliday

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Morpurgo, Michael. *Kensuke's Kingdom*. Scholastic Press, 2003. ISBN 0439382025. \$16.95. 164 pp.

Reviewer: Irene Halliday;

Reading Level: Primary; Intermediate;

Rating: Excellent;

Genre: Adventure stories;

Subject: Castaways--Fiction; Survival--Fiction; Islands--Fiction; Book--Reviews;

Michael is having the type of adventure other boys only dream about living on board the family yacht, the *Peggy Sue*, with his parents as they sail around the world. Ten months have passed since their departure from England, all filled with the excitement of discovery and achievement. But Michael's idyllic life is soon to change. On the night before his twelfth birthday, Michael is swept from the deck of the *Peggy Sue* into the vast waters of the south Pacific, accompanied by his dog, Stella, and a soccer ball, to which he clings as a flotation device. His parents are below deck unable to hear his frantic cries for help.

When Michael awakens the next morning, he is lying on a sandy beach surrounding what he later discovers to be a small desert island. Stella has also survived and is playing in the shallows. Michael knows he must find food and water, but is unsuccessful in all of his attempts. Just as he is ready to give up in despair, a bowl of water for Stella and one for him appear on a flat rock, along with strips of fish on palm leaves covered by an upside-down tin. As grateful as he is, Michael now knows that he is not alone and begins to search, with some trepidation, for his benefactor.

Following a hesitant, and sometimes stormy beginning to their relationship, Michael learns that his fellow castaway, Kensuke, has lived on the island for forty-three years, since the bombing of his native Nagasaki. How their initial inability to communicate with and trust in each other slowly evolves makes fascinating reading. They develop something stronger than even friendship as they teach and learn from each other. Michael's eventual rescue, though satisfying, is bittersweet because of what he must leave behind.

Not only is *Kensuke's Kingdom* an engrossing survival tale, but it illustrates, through the natural events of the story, the importance of intergenerational and interracial respect and understanding. It was the winner of the Federation of Children's Book Groups' Book Award in England, where it was first published in 1999; it has also been adapted for the stage. Children from mid-elementary school age through junior high age will identify with Michael and vicariously become a part of Kensuke's Kingdom.