



Seafaring Guys and Island Girls

[The Book of Puka-Puka: A Lone Trader on a South Sea Atoll](#)

by Robert Dean Frisbie

Honolulu: Mutual Publishing Company, 1987

(originally published in 1928)

Paperback, reprint edition, 353 pages, \$5.95

[White Savages in the South Seas](#)

by Mel Kernahan

Verso, 1995

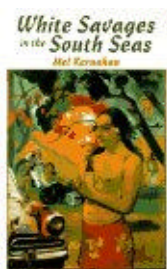
Paperback, 203 pages, \$19

[One of the Guys](#)

by Robert Clark Young

New York: Cliff Street Books, 1999

Paperback, 306 pages, \$13.00



RELATED WEB SITES

[Focal Point on Sexual Exploitation of Children](#)

[Web Site for Robert Dean Frisbie](#)

["First Amendment Sweethearts, Bob and Isabel"](#)

[Elizabeth Sherwin on Robert Clark Young and Isabel Allende]

[Hanging with Bob Young](#)

JAN ALEXANDER ELSEWHERE ON-LINE

[Excerpt from *Getting to Lamma*](#), a novel [Asia 2000]

["Variations on Asian States of Mind,"](#) *Chicago Tribune* [Search archives. Small fee.]

Paradise, Robert Clark Young, and the Christian Right

Fresh out of graduate school at U.C. San Diego, where he earned an MFA in creative writing, Robert Clark Young was eager for an adventure. "I'd never been on a Navy ship before, and I'd never been to the Far East before,"

[Jan Alexander](#)

A man can lose his head in the South Pacific. Those Polynesian islands, those Southeast Asian beaches where palm trees sway and the nubile female of the species looks oh-so-come-hither, are, according to a long Western literary tradition, what makes the White Man's Burden worth bearing. Tales of men who sailed to the South Pacific from the West begin even before the *Bounty*, with the diaries of British Captain Samuel Wallis, who landed in Tahiti in 1767 and wrote of being greeted by local women who played droll, wanton tricks. A year later, after six months at sea, French Captain Louis Antoine de Bougainville spied a topless Polynesian girl paddling alongside his ship. She climbed onto the deck, untied her *pareau* (Tahitian sarong), and stood stark naked under the delirious gaze of the crew. In the twentieth century, Somerset Maugham's story "Red," among other narratives, has depicted the romance between a sailing boy and an island girl as a metaphor for love at its purest.

Robert Dean Frisbie was a literary heir of Maugham who "went native" in Tahiti and wrote of South Pacific love as a state of perfection reserved for white men. A man disembarks and surrenders; the girl he chooses is happy to devote her life to him no matter how much rum he drinks, no matter how many nights he stays out. The native men speak in the childish trills of eunuchs and escape the label of savages out to despoil the purity of Western women simply because there *are* no such ladies about. That tradition has become so pervasive that even today, in stark reality, a Western woman traveling around Pacific ports may feel invisible to men from her own part of the world. Well, to a certain element among them, anyway. Asian women refer to these guys as the ones with Asian fetish—a sickness that Western men catch throughout the South Pacific, including Polynesia. These fetishists delude themselves that they've landed in a paradise sprawled wide open to the great white conqueror. Such a man enjoys feeling like a savior to a girl from a simple village who might truly love him for his wallet and passport. (The Asian-fetish tradition necessarily excludes Pacific princesses and other elites who would only look down upon a motley mariner.) Anyone with the power to be a rescuer, of course, also has the power to conquer and exploit. Since Frisbie's time so many Westerners have followed the adventurer's trail that entire islands and villages have been virtually gang raped, whether by sex tourists, domestic and foreign, or military exercises. We know the story all too well, at last exposed by insiders as only before by human rights

he recalled in a recent telephone interview from his home in Sacramento. So he jumped at the chance to be a civilian instructor, teaching college courses to sailors and marines on U.S. Navy ships, frequently bound for the South Pacific.

He never imagined that the book he wrote about his experiences would make him a whipping boy of the Christian right.

On R&R, Young watched countless servicemen descend upon whorehouses and sex clubs in places like Subic Bay in the Philippines and Pattaya Beach in Thailand. What shocked him most was the fact that so many of the girls in the Asian sex trade were minors, a factor in the plot of [One of the Guys](#). Indeed, Pattaya Beach is home to approximately eighty thousand child prostitutes, according to the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.

"I saw these scenes with my own eyes," said Young. "It's illegal for an American to travel overseas for the purpose of having sex with minors, but there was a lot of it in Thailand and the Philippines. Now, I didn't write those scenes to titillate, but to expose, and show how servicemen abuse women and children."

In 1996 Young, who was then living in Ohio, received government subsidy for [One of the Guys](#) in the form of a \$5,000 grant from the Ohio Arts Council, which had obtained 7.7% of its funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) that year.

The American Family Association (AFA)—the same group that nearly wiped out the NEA in the 1990s with its attacks on the works of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe—smelled another example of government-funded obscenity

workers and sympathetic reporters. Two recent books by outsiders with no lust on the brain, Mel Kernahan and Robert Clark Young, offer exposés of another sort—Kernahan, the escapades of a white woman lured by Frisbie's tales; Robert Clark Young, a look at what modern-day sailors talk about when they're about to storm a South Pacific whorehouse.

It is impossible to appreciate Kernahan's wry observations fully without first reading the siren songs of Frisbie, whom she credits as her muse. The cover illustration of his [The Book of Puka-Puka](#) did nothing to prepare me for the truly voluptuous prose in this long-forgotten collection of essays. Against a purple sky, with an aqua sea and an outrigger canoe, a couple strolls along the shore, their arms around each other, their *pareaus* damp and clinging. He is big, bearded, and white; she has long black hair like the Polynesian women in Gauguin's paintings. *Ah hah*, I thought, *this will be the story of one more great white god amongst the brown people.*

Frisbie was a soldier, not a seaman, but "soldier" is close enough to the sailor-in-paradise stereotype. He arrived in the Tahitian islands in 1920 with a disability pension and a typewriter, having received a medical discharge from the U.S. Army at the end of World War I for chronic tuberculosis. Soon the words he pounded out onto the page from his typewriter were seducing readers all over the West, just as the island girls—the ones he wrote of seemed to be well under eighteen—had seduced him. Yes, his essays reveal a man who felt entitled by virtue of his white-maleness to help himself to any of the goods in paradise that he wished, but still—Frisbie's somewhat purple prose seems to come from the heart. Witness his description of the night he first went to call on Little Sea, who became his wife, albeit while another girl was waiting for him in his hut:

The islet seemed to pant like a lustful tigress, her breath redolent with odors of a heavy Oriental fragrance. Of a sudden I understood: all this land and sea, dormant by day, had awakened at dusk, refreshed, hungry, carnal, to lie with damp breasts bare for her lover.... lying on the beach, Little Sea pointed out the stars, told me their native names and some quaint little legends about them... I taught her how to kiss in the civilized manner, for she knew only the calllike rubbing of noses and sniffing. But when she had mastered the civilized art, she in turn became teacher, giving me lessons in the native ongi-ongi (smelling).

A note of interest: Frisbie found the frigate birds that inhabited the isle of Puka Puka "as succulent as squab would be at home." Even while he made me long for the sound of Pacific surf, though, his carnal appetite filled me with a prickly hankering to lay bare his psyche and expose the rancid belief that a man can stagger around stinking drunk but still be loved by any nubile native girl who strikes his fancy.

Fortunately, however, I don't have to snap on my rubber gloves to deconstruct the Great-White-Adventurer-in-Paradise stereotype. Kernahan, a woman journalist from California, performed a masterful autopsy with the essays she wrote over thirty years of traveling to Tahiti, collected as [White Savages in the South Seas](#). Granted, Frisbie stayed in the Pacific, while Kernahan, who had a husband and son in the U.S., went back and forth. By the time a young World War II Navy Lieutenant named James Michener met him, Frisbie had grown to be larger than life, becoming "the atoll man" who infuriated governments and encouraged native rebellion. He died a beachcomber's death in 1948, penniless and tubercular, but with a posthumous stake in the islands through the children he had had with Little Sea. Kernahan, by comparison, was a voyeur in Tahiti, but nonetheless a keen, sharp-fanged observer, with a sense of outrage that felled French legionnaires and gullible vacationers with a few swift pen strokes.

Kernahan first arrived in 1966, a time of pivotal change in paradise. MGM crews, who threw around more money than most Tahitians had seen in a lifetime, had been there to film *Mutiny on the Bounty*. The MGM crews were followed by hordes of French scientists, soldiers, and contractors

and Christian-bashing in Young's book. The national AFA has been holding [One of the Guys](#) up to Congress as a pretext for killing further NEA funding. Barry Sheets, director of the Ohio branch of the AFA, began similar lobbying efforts with the Ohio state legislature this spring.

According to statements he has made in the press, Sheets has not read [One of the Guys](#), but has pronounced it "more scatological than anything else," speculating that Young himself never served his country in the military.

"If the AFA's members really want to eliminate tax-supported obscenity, they should stop protesting the funding of a book and start protesting the funding of a crime," Young retorted.

The Ohio Arts Council has hardly been steadfast in standing up for its right to fund such projects as Young's. A fact sheet that the council has issued claims council members didn't know what they were funding when they approved Young's grant. "It's a lot of bureaucratic sidestepping to preserve their [NEA] funding," Young said. "I'd prefer that they defend what they did."

Since Young was in the Pacific, Olongapo City has become a ghost town. In 1992 the Philippine Senate rejected a proposed treaty that would have extended America's lease on the facility at Subic Bay for another ten years. The pullout followed the devastating volcanic eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, an event Young tied into the conclusion of [One of the Guys](#). However, in March 1993 a California law firm filed a \$69 million class-action lawsuit against the U.S. government for compensation and child support on behalf of some 8,600 Filipino Amerasians who are the children of U.S. servicemen. The lawyers argued that the U.S.

who threw around even more cash; this contingent had come to test atom bombs. A runway equipped for jets, originally set up for the French army, soon brought tourists. At the same time, Tahitians themselves were taking off for Southern California, seeking their own vision of paradise. Often they ended up performing risqué versions of their native dances in Polynesian theme joints.

Kernahan tells about a ship's purser who, on the author's first trip, dismisses her worries about a rock-throwing mob at a political demonstration by telling her the Tahitians would "rather sing, dance and make love all day. That's all they're good for." Once she arrived, Kernahan quickly began to see the French Foreign Legion as a sinister band of thieves, rapists, murderers, and other deviants who came with the atom-bomb-test conglomerate. "You could find them in the hot tropic night by their body odor.... Dance-hall fights now seemed the rule.... Tahitian women, unaccountably, were pairing up with these newcomers, even marrying them. Frustrated, [Tahitian] men retaliated, raping French women and occasionally a tourist" on islands where rape had previously been unknown.

Stories about the rape of foreign women by island men stimulated Kernahan's own concerns about gadding about in a bikini that covered far less than a blouse and *pareau*; this was quite a different world from the South Pacific of sailors' lore. No doubt, in the days when my own pale foremothers in the West were bound by whalebone corsets and elaborate courtship rules, a Western man might have felt liberated amongst bare-skinned brown beauties whose society made room for sexual curiosity. Indeed, he might have felt the enlightened hero in the face of racial prejudice back home.

Kernahan has her own take on romance between Tahitian women and foreign men:

Polynesian heirs of these Edenlike bits of geography have an unsettlingly pragmatic attitude when it comes to romance, more related to survival of the tribe than to finding "true love." The myths survive anyway, their perpetual flames sheltered by the rather large egos developed by sexually satisfied western male visitors who don't speak or understand Polynesian languages and haven't a clue when they've been "had."

Kernahan pulls no punches about the island men and their assumptions, either. At a club on Rarotonga Island local men, disheveled and beer-belching, grab and grope her on the dance floor. A teenaged boy almost rapes her late one night. A policeman upbraids her, insisting that the local girls know how to fight back, then the hermaphrodite who has rescued her comes scratching at her window. The district chief who takes her on a motorcycle ride around the remotest parts of Aitutaki persists in asking her what the word in English is for "dat t'ing"—as in "Dat black GI, he had t'ing dat big!"

By her own admission, Kernahan never got a real-life take on the quintessential South-Pacific love story she sums up as follows: "[In] a magical meeting of two people from different worlds, she rushes to his arms offering love, he rushes to hers, they consummate their passion, then he irradiates her island, her seas and her food supply with poisonous nuclear fallout."

Kernahan tried to shed some light on this story by probing the mind of a French Foreign Legionnaire and his local bride—any couple would do—but in going through official channels instead of just hanging out in a bar and waiting for a likely interviewee, she made one false move that cost her the trust of the local people. Even so, she has clearly articulated the tragic irony of Western military presence in paradise.

In [One of the Guys](#), his satirical novel of sailors in the South Pacific, Robert Clark Young also sticks it to uniformed Westerners in Paradise. It's a novel I might have loved except that it seems to flow like two separate

government can be held accountable for the births of children who are the direct result of a deliberate fifty-year policy of sexually oriented R&R.

Pattaya Beach is still an active playground for military and civilian men on sex holidays. Young knew of older military men who had retired there: in the eyes of many, a beautiful beach packed with prostitutes is truly a paradise. Since Young, as a civilian, was always free to leave his job, some of the sailors asked him why he continued on with them, rather than staying in Pattaya. "I had to explain that my girlfriend is back home and that I had to earn a living," he said.

If a captain gave permission, marriage ceremonies did occur while Young was on ships in the Pacific. He remembers seeing one captain put his feet up on his desk and admonish a young enlistee, "So, you want to marry a whore?"

"Some of the guys were naïve," Young said. "One guy was surprised that his prostitute girlfriend had been with other guys while he was gone. The others tried to tell him, well, she has to eat."

The saddest part of the whole wretched business, noted Young, is that Amerasian children, found wherever there is an American military base in Asia, grow up with a social stigma against them. "Often," he said, "their only option is prostitution."

ocean currents, one toward an adventure at sea, the other back to rocky American shores. Parts of the story are sidesplitting if you're amused by the thought of sailors as racist, misogynist scum. Young defies you to think otherwise with graphic descriptions of the Philippine sex trade that have brought the book a fair amount of notoriety (see sidebar). Yet running throughout is an overly earnest quality that comes from Young's efforts to make the protagonist, Miles Derry, a sympathetic loser who finds his way.

In another century, a similar protagonist might have happily lost himself in Olongapo City, where erotic island fantasies are for sale by the half-hour. The character of Miles, however, is conceived in a more politically correct manner. Miles twelve-steps his way to self-awareness—a practice that has never been enthusiastically embraced by the spiritual descendants of Fletcher Christian, let alone by the ragtag horny sailors of old.

Miles at 33 is sweeping floors in a porn shop in San Diego when opportunity for self-improvement first knocks. Miles exchanges identities with a Navy chaplain—a hoary Shakespearian plot device that Young succeeds with mostly because he sets Miles up as so remorseful about his past as a drugged-out drifter, so devoted to a daughter he isn't allowed to see, that the reader, too, wishes Miles could get reborn. The chaplain, James Banquette, is as pathetic as he is smarmy. But since he's dead when Miles finds him, it falls to Miles to deal with Banquette's wife, children, closet lover, and assignment on a Pacific-bound battleship.

Young's title, *One of the Guys*, reflects what Miles has most wanted to be all of his life. Shouldered with the responsibilities of redeeming both himself and the man he's pretending to be, however, Miles really has no choice but to rise *above* the guys. Unfortunately, he grows just a little too astute for a novel that keeps wanting to get down and dirty. At liberty time in Okinawa, for example, Miles watches aghast as five thousand sailors disembark. He thinks, "This was a war machine, and the beach they were charging had probably been a war beach, though the boys around him were no warriors, ready to storm onto the island only for beer and pussy." Coming from a sad-sack observer who is just a chaplain's frock away from his own past flirtations with paradise, this flash of superior insight distances both Miles and the reader from the book's real action.

Miles is even more aghast when the ship rams into Subic Bay and the sailors begin their institutionalized rape of Olongapo City. In this Pacific port are warehouses as far as the eye can see. Alongside a black river that reeks of excrement, red neon signs flash in daylight, beckoning sailors to the Concubus Club, Samurai Massage, the Mamasan, the Tiger Pit, and the Pussy Club. Pre-pubescent prostitutes call out from every doorway. A teenaged girl pulls a string of razor blades out of her vagina while sitar music plays. Miles hears about similar vaginal tricks with coins, which the sailors sometimes heat with a cigarette lighter to cause the girl pain. One of the officers, warning Miles that he's about to be saddled with marriage duty, says "These guys do it [marry a native woman] because they think they're getting a subservient wife, but after six months in the States she either disappears or she's running his life...it's the price we pay for maintaining a first-rate pussy paradise like this..."

Had Miles either joined the sailors in their plunder or fallen for one of the girls, this would have been a far more disturbing novel, as well as a more effective one. Instead, a brawl ensues and stops the wedding the officer had predicted, though no doubt the wedding scenario will reoccur. If Young had truly singled out "one of the guys" to carry the burden of his story, readers would have been able to enter more fully into the consciousness of a sailor who believes for an hour that he's lost in paradise—or what's left of it after too many ships have dropped anchor.

Robert Dean Frisbie (1896-1948) was born in Cleveland, Ohio, but escaped to the South Seas in 1920. After several years of wandering, he became the resident trader on Puka-Puka. Many of his articles about life in the South Seas were published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He also wrote a dozen books, the best known of which is *The*

Book of Puka-Puka, a collection of his articles.

Mel Kernahan was the first woman selected by the government of the Cook Islands to hold posts as the overseas Media Officer and Public Information Officer. Her articles have appeared in *Cosmopolitan*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Sacramento Bee*. She has served as Polynesian Cultural Consultant to the city of Los Angeles and to UCLA for Pacific Island Festivals

Robert Clark Young's work has appeared in the anthology *Bless Me, Father: Stories of Catholic Childhood* (Penguin Books), as well as *Black Warrior Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *West Branch*, *Gulf Coast*, and *New Orleans Review*. He has been writer-in-residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, California and has been awarded First Place in the New Millennium Writings National Competition.

DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

Day, A. Grove, and Carl Stroven, Eds., [Best South Sea Stories](#). Mutual Publishing of Hawai'i, 1985. Paperback, \$6.95.

ALSO OF INTEREST

Bell, Gavin, *In Search of Tusitala: Travels in the Pacific after Robert Louis Stevenson*. Out of print.

Birkett, Dea, [Serpent in Paradise](#). Doubleday, 1998. Paperback, 368 pages, \$12.95.

Day, A. Grove, Ed., [The Lure of Tahiti](#). Mutual Publishing of Hawai'i. Paperback, 324 pages, \$5.95.

Gauguin, Paul, [Noa Noa: The Tahiti Journal of Paul Gauguin](#), ed. John Miller (with woodblock prints and sketches by Gauguin). Chronicle, 1994. Hardcover, 168 pages, \$19.95.

Hall, James Norman, [The Forgotten One: And Other True Tales of the South Seas](#) (1911). By the co-author of *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Mutual Publishing of Hawai'i. Paperback, 320 pages, \$5.95.

London, Jack, [South Sea Tales](#). Mutual Publishing of Hawai'i. Paperback, 324 pages, \$4.95.

Melville, Herman. [Typee, Omoo, Mardi](#), with commentary by George Thomas Tanselle. Library of America, 1982. Hardcover, 1333 pages, \$40.00.

Michener, James. [Rascals in Paradise](#). Fawcett, 1987. Mass Market Paperback Reissue, \$6.99.

Sacks, Oliver, [The Island of the Colorblind](#). Vintage, 1998. Paperback, 320 pages, \$13.00.

Malcolmsen, Scott, *Tuturani: A Political Journey in the Pacific Islands*. Poseidon, 1990. Out of print.

Theroux, Paul, [The Happy Isles of Oceania: Paddling the Pacific](#). Fawcett, 1993. Paperback reissue, 528 pages, \$12.95.

©2000 Frigate: The Transverse Review of Books www.frigatezine.com

All rights reserved on behalf of the authors.

We welcome your comments and suggestions on our site. Please email [<webmaster@frigatezine.com>](mailto:webmaster@frigatezine.com).

Back to [Frigatezine Home Page](#)