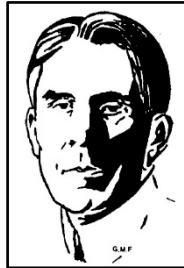


THE REEF GIRL

Synopsis and Research Summaries

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Zane Grey's West Society



Source: Paul Gauguin, *Parau api*, 1892

INTRODUCTION

THE REEF GIRL is the last of Zane Grey's novels. It was published posthumously after initially having been rejected by publishers. Grey's son Loren made some changes to the manuscript before it was finally published by Harper & Rowe Publishers. **THE REEF GIRL**, as published, is perhaps the most sexually explicit of Grey's novels. The following is taken from the *Foreword* by Loren Grey as it appears in the 1977 First Edition.

"This dramatic romance by a master storyteller takes place on the exotic island of Tahiti in the 1930s. It tells of the tempestuous love affair between a young American writer and a beautiful half-cast – a love affair that defies both the primitive superstitions of her background and the shabby prejudices of his.

"Donald Perth, who has come to the island on a visit with his American fiancée', is enthralled by Faaone, daughter of an island woman and an Englishman, famed for her beauty and her magnificent agility as a swimmer among Tahiti's thundering reefs. Torn between a sense of loyalty to his spoiled fiancée' and the 'civilization' she represents, and his attraction to Faaone and the savage splendor of Tahiti, Donald is caught up in a web of seduction, murder, and revenge from which only Faaone's love for him and his for her can save him.

"The Reef Girl has the sweep and vision that characterize many of Zane Grey's finest Western novels, along with a marvelous sensual, almost mystical awareness of the oneness of man with nature."

LIST OF MAJOR CHARACTERS

(XX) Denotes the page where each character first appears in the Harper & Row, publishers 1977 first edition of **THE REEF GIRL**.

- **Donald Perth (3)**...a young writer satisfying his lifelong dream of visiting the South Seas.
- **Winifred Gannett (4)**...Donald's financially independent *fiancée'*.
- **Mrs. Carlson Gannett (4)**...Winifred's mother who accompanies Donald and Winifred.
- **T. Bennet-Stokes (5)**...an Englishman, father of Faaone, aka Benstokes.
- **Captain Smollett (13)**...skipper of the *RMS Tahiti*.
- **John and Catherine Bellair (14)**...New Englanders who met Donald and Winifred.
- **Faaone (15)**...the Reef Girl, a strikingly beautiful half-blood English-Tahitian girl.
- **Tavarie (32)**...a native Tahitian sex dancer known for his affairs with white women tourists.
- **Sweet-Scented Man (33)**...Tavarie's father killed by neighbors for his rampant philandering.
- **Deverie, Mathie, Caldwell (78)**...three "gone native" men who rescue Donald from the surf.
- **Tupa (106), Frangi (108), Matureo (109)**...Faaone's nephew, cousin, mother.
- **Moto (113)**...Tavarie's cousin.

- **Punerie (114)**...a native from Faaone's village whom she had refused to marry.
- **Ena (130)**...Faaone's eldest sister who prevents her son from helping Faaone.
- **Toietu (131)**...a native leper with deadly *fefe* (elephantiasis leprosy).

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1. Donald Perth, his fiancée' Winifred Gannett and her mother Mrs. Carlson Gannett travel out of San Francisco aboard Captain Smollett's ship the ***RMS Tahiti*** as a climax to Mrs. Gannett's many travels. Winifred is more flirtatious than usual with other passengers on the boat, especially with T. Bennet-Stokes, who is approximately twice her age. Donald is jealous and upset with her dancing and encouraging of the much older man. Captain Smollett tells Donald about the half-breed illegitimate daughter of Bennet-Stokes named Faaone. The travelling three-some are amazed at the beauty of the island when they arrive. Captain Smollett takes Donald to French Café, the Cercle Bougainville, where he tells him everyone on the island drinks heavily. By chance they get a glimpse of Faaone. In Donald's mind she is a magnificent savage princess, and he promises himself to not tell Winifred he has seen her.

Chapter 2. Winifred thanks her mother for bringing them to what she describes as paradise. Donald sees a change in her from what she was on the boat. She seems sweeter and more contented than he had ever seen her. Her mother criticizes her for her skimpy clothing styles. Donald and Winifred thoroughly enjoy themselves wading in the surf, eating, and spending hours watching the moon after Mrs. Gannett goes to bed.

Chapter 3. Donald compliments Bennet-Stokes on his daughter's beauty and asks why he doesn't keep her in England, educating her and showing her off to his friends there. Her father says he did send her to school in New Zealand, but she prefers to stay on the island with her people, simple fun-loving creatures to whom drinking and eating, singing and making love are all of life. He says a native woman likes nothing better than to have a white child – a white pickaninny. He calls island people animals without souls. Donald tells Winifred that she is just another conquest to Bennet-Stokes. The more he thinks about it, the more Donald believes the Tahitian people have the secret of life since they had appeared and evolved on the island. He feels he has discovered the primal allure of the South Seas.

Chapter 4. Donald and Winifred attend a party at the Bellairs' and a ball at the Colonial Club where Bennet-Stokes is attentive to Winifred, who does her best to attract the attention of others as well as that of her fiancé. The primary attraction of the evening is the observance of the sex dances of the natives, the leader of which is a native Tahitian named Tavarie. Tavarie is openly attracted to Winifred in front of whom he shakes his powerful frame and toward whom he casts the lustful glare of his great eyes. It is apparent that Winifred enjoys the attention. Donald finds Tavarie to be barbaric and appalling. Bennet-Stokes tells Donald that Tavarie's father, who was known as Sweet-Scented Man, was killed by neighbors because of his rampant

philandering, a trait which his son has inherited. Bennet-Stokes asks Winifred to dance, after which Donald prevails upon the escort of Faaone to introduce him to the beautiful Tahitian half-breed, whom Donald subsequently asks for a dance. Faaone is impressed with Donald's gentlemanly approach toward her escort, and she tells Donald no other English or French man had ever shown her such respect. Donald escorts Faaone past the other guests and out onto the patio. Each of them express to each other that they wish the dance had never ended. Faaone tells Donald about her disgust for her father and that she generally hates all white men, and that gossip on the island labels her a whore. Donald tells her he is a writer. Faaone asks Donald to see her again, and she invites him to visit her where she lives out of Tautira, along the sea on the smaller island. She tells him she had never asked any other white man anything. Donald promises he will visit her. Winifred reacts to Donald's dancing and talking with Faaone by calling her a whore. She asks Donald if he is going to see her again, and Donald replies that he will, as he believes it is important in his writing. Winifred asks Donald to promise he will not see Faaone in exchange for her promise not to see Bennet-Stokes again and that she will marry him in June, shortly after their return home. Winifred removes her clothes as they walk along the shore in the moonlight, and she asks Donald to make love to her then and there. He refuses saying, "I can't. It's just not right."

Chapter 5. A week later Donald writes the first words of his novel. Winifred has developed the pattern of sleeping in, which gives Donald time to write. Winifred tells Donald she wants to go native. The two of them spend time walking along the shore, collecting shells, wading, swimming, and paddling an outrigger canoe. Donald continues to write. Winifred tells him that rumor has it Faaone's first lover was her father, and that is why she hates foreigners. She asks him if he is putting that in his novel. Winifred begins spending time walking along the beach and in the village without Donald, as he pursues his writing. She often returns from her jaunts wet and disheveled, wholesomely tired and ravenously hungry. She tells Donald that Tavarie and his brother had taken her out in their canoe, and she asks Donald to join them to go fishing. Donald goes patia fishing with them, and he notices Winifred's dark gaze smiling dreamily on the giant native whose half-naked body shines in the light. Donald realizes he has seen a change in Winifred as he sees her late in the morning, still in bed, looking tired and spent. He also realizes she has been learning to dance the hula. He finishes his story titled **FAAONE**. When he tells Winifred she seems upset. As he is mailing his manuscript to the publisher he runs into Faaone at the post office, and she again asks him to come visit her. She tells him that the "coconut radio", the gossip of the island, has it that Tavarie has been bragging about Winifred. She calls Donald "an innocent boy, a trusting fool". She says he is the only white man she ever respected, and that is why she waits for him by her reef.

Chapter 6. One afternoon Winifred makes flimsy excuses to say she is going to Papeete, and in a sarcastic tone she encourages Donald to go to see Faaone saying, "Go play with Faaone. Perhaps you'll understand Tahiti better." Donald sees a new cottage beyond the cluster of thatched huts, and he learns it is Tavarie's. He has a queer sensation about the hut that he does not care to analyze, but he remembers Tavarie's dark stare toward him and the story about Tavarie's father. A day later he sees Winifred lying in a hammock, flowers in her hair, and with an expression that reminds him of "a girl in the throes of intoxicated love." One night he

awakens abruptly to see Winifred sneaking into the palm grove, heading across the point. He follows her and sees her entering Tavarie's hut. He breaks into the hut and finds her on Tavarie's bed with Tavarie above her. A fight ensues during which Donald fatally stabs Tavarie with his harpoon. He carries a fainted Winifred back to her cottage, passing shrieking men and women in front of Tavarie's hut. Fearing he would be hung or beheaded in a French guillotine, Donald drives off in his vehicle, thinking he will perhaps commit suicide by jumping off a cliff. He runs the car off into a swamp at an area called Land's End. He runs down to the surf and jumps into the waves, which overpower him. He loses consciousness, and when he awakens he sees two naked men and feels strong arms pulling him out of the surf.

Chapter 7. Donald awakens to find three "gone native" men who had pulled him from the surf. Deverie, Mathie, and Caldwell explain they had been living like natives, spending no more than a half an hour every other day gathering fruit and catching fish. They say their life style protects them from news of the world that is full of politics, war, class hatred, murder, divorce, nations against each other – so much that is false. The men say they live without women. One of the men says he had asked one girl to live with him years earlier, a sixteen-year-old girl named Faaone who was evil, and who hated white men.

Chapter 8. Donald thinks about his plight, a murderer on the lam. He thinks about Winifred and about Faaone who he longs to once again meet. He leaves the men and wanders the island knowing he would never leave Tahiti. He happens upon Faaone.

Chapter 9. Faaone says she believed he would come to her, so she had a new house built. She tells him he cannot go back to the village because friends of Tavarie would likely kill him, even though he has been exonerated by authorities who thought he killed Tavarie when he found him raping his wife. She says she will make Donald love her. Members of Faaone's family meet Donald. Her mother fears he will bring her bad luck. Faaone nurses Donald back to health. Faaone starts wearing a white flower over her ear, indicating she has found a lover. Faaone tells Donald of a man from her village named Punerie whom she had refused to marry. Faaone tells Donald of the mythical people called *tupapa'us*, shadow-like people who make bad things happen to native people. Faaone fears that she hears *tupapa'us* stealthily creeping about in the night, and she sees shadows in their wake. Faaone tells Donald she loves him.

Chapter 10. Tiare prepares a salad for Donald's supper. After eating it, Donald becomes ill. It is discovered that someone had sprinkled a poison Paris green on the lettuce in the garden. Faaone goes to her old lover Punerie to ask him to find out who had put out the poison. They contrive a plan for him to tell everyone that he hates her with the hope that someone will tell him who poisoned the garden. Punerie agrees to do so believing Benstokes may have been involved in the poisoning scheme. Faaone's mother tells her Benstokes is not her father. Additional strange annoying events occur that are aimed at Faaone and Donald. Faaone's eldest sister, Ena, prevents her son Tupa from helping Faaone as he had routinely done. Faaone finds evidence that Ena has likely received some money from an unknown person, perhaps someone trying to get her to withdraw Tupa's services. Faaone believes Benstokes is behind the weird things happening that threaten her and Donald. She discovers that a local

man with deadly contagious *fele* (elephantiasis type of leprosy) has moved close to them on the trail they use. Faaone believes someone has arranged for him to move there with the hopes that she or Donald would contract the disease. One day Donald returns from gathering oranges with what appears to be a slight gunshot wound to his head. He only remembers feeling as if someone had struck him. During a hurricane Donald believes he sees a *tupapa'us*. Puerie learns from Moto, Tavarie's cousin, that Benstokes has hired a man at the leper colony with some medical training to inject Donald with leprosy poison using a needle. Faaone borrows Puerie's knife and tells him that she will handle it.

Chapter 11. The day following the hurricane Faaone tells Donald she is going to Papeete to sell her pearls. As she walks down the path she sees that Toietu's shack was gone. Donald learns from Puerie that Moto was found in the road stabbed to death. Donald goes to Papeete to find Faaone. Enroute he passes the leper colony. He sees Bellair in Papeete and learns Benstokes had been taken to the hospital the night before. He finds Faaone, who tells him, "I went to Benstokes yesterday and danced naked for him, and then while he was drunk and asleep, I...". Her voice trailed off. He realizes she had killed Benstokes. He did not then know that she had injected him with the same leprosy poison that he had intended for Donald. She is afraid that since she was a murderer, Donald may not want her any more. He assures her he still loves her and wants to marry her. Donald tells her that he can tell by changes in her that she is pregnant. Back in Faaone's home her family warms to Donald.

Chapter 12. Faaone takes Donald swimming out on the barrier reef where she showed him how to ride the waves. Donald tells her he knows why they call her the Reef Girl, because she is the embodiment of the ocean and the island with her physical perfection, her passion, her intense life and spirit.

Chapter 13. Donald takes Faaone to Papeete so she can see a doctor and to get his mail and to buy her a wedding dress for when her friends and family come to Papeete to attend their wedding. Donald learns that Benstokes had not died, but that he had left the island with leprosy. Donald finally realizes what Faaone had done to Moto and Benstokes. In his mail he finds a letter from Winifred. She writes that his book had been published and that she desires to return to Tahiti. He also finds in the mail a letter and a check from his publisher.

Chapter 14. Donald meets Faaone at the bar, and he drinks too much in celebration of his book being published. They take the bus home, and the following morning Faaone is concerned because she had read Winifred's letter. Donald reassures her he will not leave her, and he asks her to return to America with him. She does not want to go to America. Donald himself begins to have doubts, wishing he had never read the letters. When he realizes the sacrifice he is making for her, he strikes her, knocking her to the floor. He finally realizes he still wants to marry Faaone, and she agrees to go to San Francisco with him to meet his publisher and to marry him again in the church of his religion.

Chapter 15. When they arrive at Papeete before boarding their ship, Faaone goes shopping at Madame Reamy's to purchase a wedding dress. Later she tells Donald she wants to

honeymoon in New Zealand. She then tells him she has heard that Winifred has returned to Tahiti, and that she is in town. Faaone insists he must meet Winifred and tell her of their wedding plans. He meets Winifred and tells her of the wedding plans. She asks if she can attend the wedding in Tahiti before they embark to America. He agrees, not realizing Winifred had brought a wedding dress along with her hoping Donald would finally agree to marry her. She kisses him and wishes him good luck. Winifred secretly meets with Faaone, and she gives her the wedding dress asking her to wear it when she marries Donald.

Chapter 16. Donald and Faaone are married in Papeete with her friends present. She tells him her wedding dress was a present from Winifred. He realizes that Winifred had brought the dress hoping he would finally marry her. Before Donald and Faaone embark on their ship to America she gets him to promise he will return with her to Tahiti. As the ship turns into the channel through the reef, Faaone jumps overboard and starts swimming back to her island, after saying to him, "Come back to me someday, Don." Donald leaps over the rail and begins swimming trying to catch up with her. He tries to catch waves that will drive him toward the shore where he sees her crawling out onto the reef. She leaps back into the water and begins swimming toward him. She tells him to dive beneath oncoming waves. They reach a flat coral head. He tells her there are things more important than money and fame, and that he can still write from her reef. They ignore the pounding surf, the rising sun, and the returning ship as he draws his Reef Girl to his breast and fastens his lips to hers.

HELPFUL RESEARCH AND STUDY SUMMARIES

From the Foreword by Loren Grey in the 1977 Harper & Row Edition of **THE REEF GIRL** (ISBN 0-06-011624-2)

(vii) "Of all the places my father visited in his many travels, I think that, except for the American West, he probably loved Tahiti the most. It was here...that he realized one of his greatest ambitions – the first capture of a big game fish over one thousand pounds...a giant blue marlin swordfish."

- "It was Tahiti's incredible scenic beauty, and the curious me'lange of racial and ethnic cultures, that absorbed him...the superstitious, almost mystical alliance the natives seemed to have with Tahiti's forbidding mountains, her lush abundance, and flashing reefs."

(viii) "...he was fascinated, and yet in some ways repelled by the casualness of the sexual attitudes of the natives, particularly in their relationships with white men."

- "Another theme, his outrage at the way missionaries and other whites took advantage of Polynesians...also runs throughout this book..."

- “Though romanticized, *The Reef Girl* is a rather astonishingly accurate view of some of the realities of this culture as it existed in the 1930s. It is not too surprising that, when first submitted for publication shortly after his death in 1939, the novel was rejected as being too ‘daring’ for Zane Grey.”

- “...mysterious nature men...were white men who had renounced civilization and actually lived in isolation on Tahiti’s lonely east coast, far beyond the end of the road.”

“In *The Reef Girl*, the love story of Donald and Faaone defies both the primitive superstition and savagery of her background and the shabby prejudices of Tahiti’s white rulers...It has...a marvelous sensual, almost mystical, awareness of the oneness of man with nature...”

Frank Gruber, *Zane Grey: A Biography* (Amereon Ltd., First Edition – September 1, 1969) (ISBN 0891907564)

Reference (241)

(241) “While in Tahiti in the mid-1930s, Zane Grey wrote a long novel, which was totally unlike anything he had ever written. It was called *The Reef Girl*, a story of the South Seas, where he had spent so much time. His publishers were unenthusiastic about it, believing his reading public preferred to read his Western novels.”

Charles G. Pfeiffer, *Zane Grey, A Study in Values – Above and Beyond the West* (Zane Grey’s West Society, 2005) (ISBN 0-9768720-0-5)

References (32-33, 109, 350, 398, 528, 558, 574)

(32-33) Evolution is dealt with in *THE REEF GIRL* as Grey references Tahiti emerging from the sea (28-29), and that life began in the sea millions of years before it had begun on land.

(350) The heroine in *THE REEF GIRL* is a Tahitian-American prostitute, who is the mistress of the hero for some time before they are married.

(350) “Both G. M. Farley and Dr. Wheeler consider *THE REEF GIRL* to be one of Grey’s best despite its departure from the ZG norm...”

(558) *THE REEF GIRL* is one of several Grey novels where the hero and heroine have sexual intercourse both before and after marriage.

(574) “When it comes to the expression of primitive passion, **THE REEF GIRL** is in a class by itself...When Harper rejected **BLACK MESA** and **THE REEF GIRL**, (Loren Grey) revised both of them.”

(575) “It makes me wonder again if Grey did not try conscientiously to portray the thinking and way of life of people and of the areas in which the books were set. Perhaps his perceived ethical and sexual standards of the people about whom he wrote and the region in which they lived were more determinative of what he wrote than the ethics and moral standards of those for whom he wrote. Thus, there is much more explicit sex in his romance set among native people in the South Pacific than there is in his romances primarily involving Anglo-Americans and set in the agrarian West.”

Dr. Carlton Jackson, ZANE GREY: Revised Edition, Published by Twayne’s United States Author Series Edited by Kenneth Eble, University of Omaha, 1989 (ISBN 0-8057-7543-9)

References (139-140)

(139) Although Grey wrote several short stories and plays dealing with the South Pacific – its waters and people – he penned only one full-length work of fiction about it. This was *The Reef Girl*, for many years unpublished because it did not fit the “Zane Grey image”. Even after its publication in 1977 by Harper’s, the book did not fare too well among Grey readers, an unfortunate circumstance because it contained some of Grey’s best writing and most provocative themes.

The original title of *The Reef Girl* was “Faaone”, and the story dealt with a number of romantic themes, primarily man from West meets beautiful Tahitian girl and falls in love with her. This novel was Grey’s “most modern” in terms of Sexuality. In 1939, however, when the manuscript was submitted for publication, the editors rejected it largely because Donald Perth, the protagonist, and Faaone live together without benefit of marriage. (Edgar Rice Burroughs, with Tarzan and Jane, experienced the same problems.)

The Reef Girl was unacceptable in 1939 because of its sexual undertones, the likelihood that another controversy with organized religion would ensue, and because it was not “pure” Zane Grey. The great American West was first in Grey’s affections for places; what was not so well known about him was that his second favorite place in the world was Tahiti.

Also, Grey showed his continuing disdain of corrupt missionaries coming to the South Seas with life-styles worse than those of the natives they proposed to convert to Christianity.

(140) *The Reef Girl* was the most autobiographical of all Zane Grey’s novels and was the twenty-fifth of his books to be published since his death in 1939. It was the desert and the sea,

with an accent perhaps on the latter, that directed some of Zane Grey's most memorable moods. He could be lifted to the heights by either of these two great natural phenomena, but they also could throw him into the deepest depths of despair. The sea also taught Grey lessons in mortality. The sea had always been here and always would be; man was the transient, whose involvement with the sea was an injection of the temporary into the eternal. There was no ultimate fulfilment with the sea, no ultimate consummation, as with a man's life. Grey's life and activities were like the sea: restless, stormy, calm, serene, white-capping, and depressed. The sea prompted Grey to be introspective and to wax eloquent in philosophical thought. No wonder some of his best writings had to do with the sea.