

MANATEE BABY

For Sarita and Tim

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MANATEE BABY

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with illustrations by
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**WALKER
BOOKS**



Chapter One

Manuela's paddle slipped in and out of the dark water without a splash. She steered the big dugout canoe between the flooded trees as lightly as a windblown leaf, never breaking the silent rhythm of her paddling. A flurry of small bats flitted over the water and disappeared into a tree hole, like smoke sucked back down a chimney. High above in the branches, a party of parrots

quarrelled. Manuela took no notice. All her attention was on the huge *renaco** up ahead, and the oil-dark water around it. The fig tree's green fruits floated there, nibbled at from underneath by the pale shapes of fishes.

In the prow of the canoe, her father, Silvio, held up his left hand. The signal for her to slow down. Manuela didn't need to be told, she was already bringing the canoe to a stop within perfect range. Insects, frogs and birds called all around, but the deep shadow of the fig tree held a perfect stillness.

Father shifted his grip on the end of the harpoon, and fixed his gaze on the flicker of fins and tails under the surface. Manuela held her breath. Father was a good fisherman, but when the river was this high, fish were hard to find. They had been out since before dawn and caught nothing but a few little *bocachico**.

The whiplash action of Silvio's sinewy arm was too fast to follow, but the bobbing of the harpoon in the water showed that it had struck a fish, and a

big one. In three deft strokes of her paddle, Manuela brought the canoe alongside and a moment later a fat silver fish, bigger than a dinner plate, flapped in the bottom of the canoe.

Silvio hit the fish once with the handle of his machete and it lay still.

"*Gamitana!**" He grinned. "Not the biggest I've caught, but big enough. We can cook it with peppers and *celathro**. You'll like that, won't you, Frog?"

The thought made Manuela's stomach growl. She looked at her father and they both laughed. "Can we cook some *bocachico* before we go home?" she asked.

"Of course! I think Frog and her papa have earned some breakfast!"

Silvio took up his paddle and together they pushed the canoe out from the shade of the trees into the morning sunlight.

They put aside their paddles in the middle of a flooded clearing. All around floating plants covered

**renaco* the Spanish word for a giant forest fig tree.

**bocachico* a mackerel-sized fish, prized for its flavour.

**gamitana* a large fleshy fish that feeds on seeds in the flooded forest.

**celathro* the local variety of coriander.

the water, in a carpet so dense it looked like land. Manuela loved these clearings, shut away from all the world by their wall of trees. The only sounds were the booming call of a *camungo** echoing in the still air and the faint sizzle of the fish, over the little charcoal fire in a tin can. Manuela closed her eyes and let the sunlight warm her face. Fishing with her father was so much better than going to school. She was glad the council in the town, Puerto Dorado, had run out of money for diesel. Maybe the boat to school would never run down the river again!

Manuela's daydream was interrupted by a sharp *hiss*. Her eyes snapped open to find that her father had poured water over the fish and doused the fire! He was pointing at a small area of clear water, perhaps ten canoe lengths away. At its edge, a patch of floating plants quivered, and the faintest of ripples spread over its smooth surface. Underneath the water, something big was moving.

Silvio turned to her over his shoulder and silently shaped a word. "Manatee!"

Manatee! Manuela's heart raced, her hunger forgotten. She had only glimpsed a live manatee once before, and never this close, close enough to hunt.

"Not everyone can kill a manatee, little Frog," Silvio had always told her. "Only the most skilful."

There was a law against killing manatees, but out here, so far from town, no one took any notice of it. Catching a manatee was too special to bother what the police two hours away downriver might have to say about it. When someone brought in a manatee, the whole village got excited. There was so much meat that whoever caught the creature could trade it for almost anything.

But Silvio hadn't caught a manatee for a long, long time. They were getting scarce. Sometimes in the dry season, when the rivers and lakes shrank, somebody speared one. Sometimes one would drown by accident in a net or a calf would be caught alive and sold in the town downriver.

Manuela had always dreamed that one day she and her father would kill a manatee. Then people

**camungo* a large black and white bird with a mournful booming call.

would say how *skilful* she was and not how strange it was that a *girl* should go fishing with her father. She would be a heroine instead of a freak. Here at last was her chance!

“Manatees are very wary,” Silvio had always told her. “They can hear a bare foot shift in the bottom of a canoe.”

So Manuela slid her paddle slowly, slowly between the floating plants and pushed smoothly against the water’s resistance. Her senses were on high alert. Colours were brighter and even the tiniest sounds rang out: the scratch of a dragonfly’s feet as it perched on the gunwale; the *plink plink* of grasshoppers, jumping to avoid the canoe’s stealthy progress.

Up ahead, the manatee’s nose broke the surface. It was so easy to miss: just a disc of flesh with two black nostrils set in it, no bigger than a coin. It took a breath, making a soft *pfiff* and was gone.

“Remember,” her father had told her, “they swim backwards after taking a breath, so if you throw a

harpoon in front, you’ll miss.”

Manuela pointed the canoe behind the spot where the nose had appeared. They were almost close enough now. One more careful paddle stroke turned the craft to the side, to give them clear shots. Silently, Manuela put down her paddle and took up her own harpoon.

The pool was a smooth, dark mirror again now. Silvio and Manuela waited, their harpoons poised and ready to throw. A *jacana** screeched as it flew low over the floating mat of plants, its legs trailing, and the *camungo*’s mournful booming began again. Still they waited, eyes straining, their muscles tense.

There! A minute swirl on the surface, not quite a ripple, not quite a bubble. No ordinary person would even see it, but Silvio knew it was the trail of a tail, moving underwater.

Manuela caught the flick of Silvio’s arm from the corner of her eye. Her own arm, already on a hair trigger, shot like a coiled spring. Silvio’s harpoon struck. It had been thrown with such force that

when it hit the animal, it shivered with the shock of the impact. Just to the side, Manuela's struck, but glanced off and lay floating on the surface. Then Silvio's harpoon, upright and stuck in the manatee's body, disappeared as the creature dived.

"It will come up again in a moment," Manuela's father said. "Then we'll have it!"

They both took up their paddles and were at the spot where the manatee had dived in a moment. Blood blossomed in the water, but there was something else too.

"Father!" Manuela cried. "There's a little *cria**. Look!"

A bristly nose showed above the surface and a small dark body bobbed beside the canoe. But the calf was wounded. There was a bloody cut slanting across its black shiny back.

"You must have scraped it as I hit its mamma," said Silvio. "Quick, put a rope round its tail. Then we can be sure the mother will come back!"

Chapter Two

Manuela had imagined that killing a manatee would be like killing a very big fish, just more exciting. But it wasn't at all. The manatee mother fought hard and took a long time to die. Her calf tried to get up close to her, even when she was dead and Manuela and her father were straining to roll the vast body into the canoe. The sun was already sinking by the time they managed it.

"If we put the *cria* next to its mamma, it might wriggle out of the boat," Silvio said, looking at the huge corpse. "You'll have to hold it on the way back and I'll paddle alone."

Manuela nodded, but said nothing. The long, gruesome struggle had changed how she felt about manatees. Killing them wasn't heroic or exciting. It was just horrible.

The calf lay very still in the water, but it squirmed a little when Silvio lifted it into the boat. "It's pretty small," he said. "I don't think it's more

**cria* the Spanish word for the young of an animal.