

“RIDING ACROSS CULTURAL BOUNDARIES”: AN INTERVIEW WITH WITI IHIMAERA.

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Witi Ihimaera (Te Ainga A Mahaki, Rongowhakaata, Ngati Porou) was born in Gisborne, New Zealand in 1944. After completing his degree in English at Victoria University of Wellington in 1971, Ihimaera became the first Maori writer to publish a collection of short stories, *Pounamu Pounamu* (1972) and later on a novel, *Tangi*, which came out in 1973, followed by *Whanau* (1974). During this time Ihimaera became part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and later on he was granted with the Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago in Dunedin, where he wrote his second collection of short stories, *The New Net Goes Fishing* (1977).

In the 1980s Ihimaera combined his writing career, receiving the 1982 Writer's Fellowship at Victoria University, with several diplomatic posts in Australia and the United States, where he wrote *The Matriarch* (1986), the narration of a Maori saga whose members partake in the long history of anti-colonial struggle which goes back to the nineteenth century. The novel, which was followed by a sequel, *The Dream Swimmer* (1997), illustrates the meaning of contemporary political movements of Maori Sovereignty, while focusing on the internal conflicts of the Mahana clan in Waituhi, the Valley which has served as the set for most of Ihimaera's works.

Ihimaera has written many other works; in 1987 he published *The Whale-Rider*, which has just been made into a film; in 1989 *Dear Miss Mansfield*, where he rewrote some of Katherine Mansfield's stories from a Maori perspective; in 1994 *Bulibasha*, where he returns to Waituhi offering a detailed portrait of rural New Zealand in the 1950s, a novel he wrote in France, while he was enjoying the Katherine Mansfield Fellowship in 1993. All these works evolve around issues related to Maori politics and cultural identity, whose most recent extensions he explores in *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* (1992) or *The Uncle's Story* (2000), by looking into Maori sexual identity. His work as a novelist and short story writer is completed with an opera, *Waituhi, Life of the Village*, a libretto performed in Wellington in 1984, and with his only play to date, *Woman Far Walking* (2000).

Despite his prolific career as a writer, Ihimaera prefers to highlight his role as the editor of dozens of works, dealing with Maori art, photography, culture, autobiography, politics and literature, amongst which his five-volume anthology of Maori Literature from the 1990s, *Te Ao Marama*, stands up most prominently. Both Ihimaera's work as a writer and

as an editor gains significance within the overall development of Maori writing in New Zealand, a process he pioneered, together with the poet Hone Tuwhare and the novelist Patricia Grace, and whose evolution he has witnessed while contributing to it. From its time of emergence in the 1970s to its most recent examples well grounded in the postcolonial and the multicultural, Ihimaera's works may have evolved politically and aesthetically, but they have remained grounded on a firm purpose: the faithful portrayal of Maori identity and the need to rescue the indigenous profile of New Zealand culture.

This interview took place in October 2001 in the English Department (University of Auckland), where he currently teaches Pacific and New Zealand literature, as well as Creative Writing.

My approach to your work focuses on the eighties and on the nineties, so I would like to start asking you about the way in which you perceive your writing in those two decades in comparison with your earlier work, especially in terms of its social context.

Every writer has got to escape the context and in the seventies I was writing within a national context of Pakeha¹-Maori relations which privileged Pakeha discourse. All of that early work is trapped within the notions of that discourse, whose primary imperative was to put more emphasis on the literariness or the aesthetics of work rather than on the politics. So that work —and that includes *Tangi*, *Whanau*, *Pounamu Pounamu*— is constrained within lyrical settings, within settings and relationships in which there is no real political engagement with the Pakeha or the condition of being Maori in New Zealand. Writing was a way of beginning within that construct but then I began to write my way out of that, motivated also by the politics of the 1970s and 1980s which then shifted New Zealand into another paradigm; that was one in which Maori were seeking a bicultural solution to their condition. So those are the days in which I wrote *The New Net Goes Fishing*, *The Matriarch*, *The Whale-Rider* and also began to do a lot of edited works, like *Into the World of Light*. *The Dream Swimmer* belongs to the third kind of transformation of New Zealand society, in which Maori were then saying that they wished to have *Tino Rangatiratanga* or sovereignty. So the work during the 1990s is informed by a strongest sense of politics and they include *The Dream Swimmer*, *The Uncle's Story* and the work that I think is actually my strongest work to date in terms of a political platform and that is the play *Woman Far Walking*.

What about your personal motivations in those early works? Did you feel that there was a need to inscribe a Maori perspective specifically for a Maori audience?

I was pretty cold-blooded about it at the beginning. I had read an essay in a book called *The Maori People in the Nineteen-Sixties*, edited in 1968 by Erik Schwimmer² in which he stated that there were no Maori novelists. And because I had been at Auckland University as a student and was, as far as I was aware, probably the only Maori student or one of the very few students who had taken English as their study course, I decided cool-bloodedly that I was probably the best positioned and equipped to do this novel. So, as I said, it started off in a cold-blooded way

¹ Pakeha is the term used in New Zealand to refer to people of European descent.

² Auckland: Blackwood & Janet Paul.

but the kaupapa or purpose of my work has always been to interpret to Maori who they are. The irony is, of course, that the first books and also my current books reach a predominantly Pakeha audience. The latest statistics that I've seen, for instance, is that most of my work, at least 70 or 80 percent of it, is purchased by Pakeha readers and insofar as the *Woman Far Walking* play is concerned, the percentage of people who were coming to the play was running at around 80 or 90 percent Pakeha and 10 percent Maori. So Maori writers do have a long way to go yet to create an audience for their own work. I have never written for a Pakeha audience, never. The fact that my readership ironically is primarily Pakeha is a bonus for them.

Did you ever see yourself as setting a path for other Maori writers?

No. The ones that I think have set the path for Maori writers are Jacquie Sturm, whose book *House of the Talking Cat* was published in 1983,³ but it actually predates my work in about twenty years, and Patricia Grace whose work, as far as I am concerned, is centrally placed in the most magnificent of all Maori writers. These are the ones I look to in terms of people who are setting a path or a direction. I guess a lot of that feeling has got to do with the fact that even now I still don't consider myself to be a writer. I know that I have written all of these books but they have come easily to me. I have not had to engage in the kind of hard work that the others have had to do and I suspect that it is because I never really felt that it was something that I wanted to do, I did it cold-bloodedly, I did not do it warm-bloodedly or in the sense that "I want to do this". It was never a personal ambition of mine. That is why I honour the other two, plus of course Hone Tuwhare, and all of those for whom literature is a career.

Funny you should mention that because I've always been fascinated by your comments regarding your writing process, especially when you say that you know the exact number of books left for you to write, that these books are still inside you and once you have finished them you will be able to stop and turn to something new...

Yes, I have another three and at the end of all of that there does not seem to be another one. It was quite a surprise to me when I realised that. I then took two weeks to think, "well, when that's finished, should I continue just because there might be something, just because I am supposed to be a writer?"; but I then decided that I should not. If that's how many I feel that I have to write or I have in me, then that's it. So writing to me has been a magnificent accident. It has not been something that was actually there for me, even though I had a kind of interest in creativity rather than in writing itself.

You have just mentioned your editorial work. I am interested in how you put Te Ao Marama together. You said once that in Te Ao Marama you were "manipulating" the idea of literature. Was that a way of saying that at that point it was necessary to do a conscious mapping of what Maori literature should be like?

When it became obvious that, for the fullness of Maori achievement to be seen, I was to take on an editorial position, which would provide edited anthologies, again it was

³ Wellington: Spiral.

because I was the most competent person to do it, and I am still probably the most competent person to do it, and that is because of my university training and because of my training in English. That training even from the beginning had enabled me to become an editor and an anthologist who understood very well what all editors and anthologists do, which is to create a sense of a tradition, to demarcate different kinds of literature. And as I said, I actually manipulated the ways in which people could look at that literature. There had only been a very small anthology of Maori literature called *Contemporary Maori Writing* published in 1972 by Margaret Orbell.⁴ Then I edited *Into the World of Light* with a friend of mine, Don Long, ten years later. The manipulation we adopted there was to try and create a more holistic definition of writing to include oral literature, waiata, haka, poi, whaikorero, within an anthology and also to add in theatrical pieces, film scripts, poetry in a way that in fact had not been done before in New Zealand and this was to show the expansion of Maori creativity within the literary arts beyond the short story and the novel.

The manipulation continued with the *Te Ao Marama* series a decade later, the first one began in 1994, in which I was then also able to use the same holistic definitions of writing to create a five-volume monolithic kind of work, which in my opinion had a dual role. One of those roles was to show readers, not only popular readers but academics, that Maori writing was not something that was unsophisticated, that it was postmodern, it was postcolonial, it was post-postcolonial, it was complex. They could not bring the same kind of simplistic notions to it as they wanted to. The second was to provide a five-volume set that would create a sense of academy of constituency among Maori writes and to provide a level of mentorship to them. And on both those points it's been a terrific success, especially on the mentorship level because young Maori writers now have a kind of crossroads from where they can begin, or a kind of history that they can look back to, a kind of position that they can entertain their beginning is from. I also like to think that the *Te Ao Marama* series creates a kind of indigenous origin so that people from other countries can also see that in fact Maori literature like all indigenous literatures has come out of conflict, out of confrontation, out of sovereignty, out of the need to create one's own discourse.

But I don't only edit literary works, I edit books on Maori art, books on Maori history, books on Maori sociology, books on Maori health, because again that is my skill and there is very few people who have that skill. I've now been asked to do some more editing work. One of them is a book called *Art from the Sunrise* which will look at contemporary Maori art. I have now found a young wonderful artistic critic and art historian and she will be co-editing this book with me. The other project I am also currently engaged on is *The New Maori Book of Myths and Legends*, co-edited with a younger writer whose name is Bred Harmy. So I hope that they are not to indicate that I am not actually doing this for myself, I'm actually planning now to create opportunities for other people to have the kinds of skills that I've developed and also that young people that I can pass those skills onto so that they can articulate and begin to do it for their generation.

⁴ Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed.

How do you reconcile that wide definition of Maori writing you have been forging in those anthologies with labels like “postcolonial” or “postmodern”? Do you find them useful to define your work?

They are still outside labels that are attached to a specific literature. At the moment Albert Wendt and I have about six students who are looking at the definition of Maori literature from the inside and pushing those postcolonial definitions to the outside. I actually like to consider Maori literature really as Maori literature; the other literature which is the way in which most Maori actually look at their lives anyway is what we call *taiwi*⁵ literature. There is Maori literature and then there is other literatures. And that might be a terribly egotistical thing to say but if we continue to look at it the other way, which is to look at ourselves as a box, within a box, within a box, then we are buying into the automatic assumption that Maori literature is a minority literature and a lesser literature.

When you talk about Maori identity you define it in an essentialist way.

Yes.

That essentialist position is clearly articulated in your work, but how do you understand that essentialism within the bicultural framework which officially defines New Zealand’s cultural profile?

Generally all people live within a very inconsistent and a postmodern world where the structures of meaning between one thing and another have all being blurred or obliterated. I take the essentialist position only with respect to maintaining a sense of Maori identity. So I say that I am a Maori writer. Of course, my work goes to and fro and across that essentialist boundary as you mentioned. So the essentialist position is a philosophical position but the actual writing takes me outside that philosophical position into a practical position. However, I still say that the heart of that work is still an essentialist heart, what I have always said is that one goes backwards and forwards, back to the centre and out again.

*One reviewer said that you wrote *The Dream Swimmer* carrying your ethnicity as “a citizen of the world”.⁶ Would that movement you were talking about actually account for the fusion of so many different traditions in your novels?*

Again, my academic background and my background in English literature and theory has meant too that I possibly have a better training and a better understanding of the universal mythic possibilities or international possibilities, of taking my work and of course Maori literature into an international dimension. Of all the Maori writers I think that my work is probably the most internationally inclined. But I am not saying that that comes from a Maori source, that comes from my training as an academic and a literary enthusiast within the study of English.

⁵ Foreign, non-native.

⁶ Ritchie, James 1998. “Lord of the Rings in Waituhi”. *NZ Books* 8. 2: 11-13.

But wouldn't the incorporation of all those foreign aspects be in disagreement with the essentialist definition of Maori identity?

The way that I look at it is that it is important for me to be a kind of boundary-rider. Somebody who is working on the expansion of what is possible for Maori to write about. It is also important for me to maintain a sense of sophistication for my work. And I know that this automatically comes to Keri Hulme, to Patricia Grace, and passion automatically comes to Alan Duff and to Apirana Taylor and dignity automatically comes to Hone Tuwhare, and youth and vigour automatically comes to all of our younger writers. So it is great that together I also manage, with them, to create a sense of an organic framework of Maori creativity. I like to think sometimes that we are like the weavers of that cradle and that what I bring in terms of all of that is a transformational impulse.

That idea of being a boundary-rider, of expanding the limits, is also clearly related to your latest work The Uncle's Story. In this novel you propose the term "The New tribe" to deal with the intersections between ethnic and sexual identity and you seem to expand the Maori political agenda to new areas...

Today there are few writers who write politically. The politics of being a minority is something that I wear on my sleeve. I don't think that you would find many writers who are so immediately and strongly engaged in the politics of minority in creative work. There are of course a lot of writers —African writers, Caribbean writers, Black writers— who write out of a condition of being black or of being African, but I don't think many of them actually berate in the same way that I have done in my work or maintain an accusatory position in these days which are considered to be days of reconciliation. Many of the political themes come out in Patricia [Grace]'s work, but her work is not dominated by it, her work is dominated by a stronger sense of humanity and community. And that is why she is the better artist at what she is because she has not let the polemics rule the contents and the humanity of her work. Whereas I don't care. I'd much rather be a person who is critical even if in practice my life does not seem to be a critique at all of Pakeha life and the Western condition. It is because I believe that if you have a voice like that then you should use it. It is just my condition.

*It is interesting that you are talking about the necessity of engaging in politics because, reading through different reviews of your work, especially of The Matriarch, one is shocked to encounter completely different responses. I am talking about C.K. Stead's review in Landfall in which he criticises the novel for being too explicitly political, as opposed to Atareta Poananga's review in Broadsheet, where she takes you to task for reinforcing patriarchal and colonial stereotypes. How do you cope with these radically different approaches?*⁷

⁷ Poananga, Atareta 1986. "The Matriarch: Taiha Wahine Toa. Trample on Strong Women" Part I. *Broadsheet* 45: 24-28; Poananga, Atareta 1987. "The Matriarch: Taiha Wahine Toa. Trample on Strong Women" Part II. *Broadsheet* 46: 24-29; Stead, C. K. 1989. "Ihimaera: Old Wounds and Ancient Evils". *Answering to the Language*. Auckland: Auckland UP. 189-95.

A lot of the work that I do, especially the current work like *The Uncle's Story* or *The Dream Swimmer* or some of the statements that I have made in some of the edited work like *Mataora*, which was about contemporary Maori art in 1996, do not allow place for any other position than Maori centrality. Someone once said that they exhibit actually a very oppositional approach with respect to what people call inclusivity. So what happens for instance with *Woman Far Walking* is that I simply present the Maori case. And I am well aware that I present it in a formidable and forbidding kind of way. There have been people who have walked out of the play because of its text; there had been people who have been moved by the text; there have been people who have disliked the text and argued against it. That's what in my opinion it is supposed to do, to create opportunities for discourse, dialogue, it is not intended to be right. A lot of my work could be called dishonest in that sense because it is very subjectively Maori and adversarial.

But that does not necessarily make it dishonest... on the contrary, it is honest to you.

Yes, well it is honest to me, but it is adversarial and dishonest because it only takes the Maori position. It is so focused on that position that it does not see anything that mitigates that position. So when you get people like C.K. Stead on one side and Atareta Poananga on another side what I most admire is that the work is doing its job, and its job is to either change the way that people think or create another discourse. Then people will read Stead's discourse and then they will have their own opinion. In that way both responses are absolutely wonderful because they belong to a whole transformational framework of possibilities.

This is why some of the greatest books that I admire are the books that I argue with, and I always will hope that people will argue with my books in much the same way that I have argued myself with other books. I love to argue for instance with people like Camus and the French philosophers, and with the Canadian, American and Indian critics, like Edward Said, with people and books of the quality of Salman Rushdie. I really enjoy all of the various discourses that one is able to have and the arguments that one can have in their work. Those are the sort of books that I remember because I can have arguments with them and I hope that it is the same with my work, that people can have an argument with it and not necessarily accept mine.

*You said that, despite its overtly political tone, you approached *The Dream Swimmer* with “controlled anger”. What did you mean by this phrase?*

With *The Dream Swimmer* I wanted to create a metafictional text and that is one that works both universally and essentially, both internationally and nationally, both publicly and personally, both personally and intimately. The design of it was to construct a book which provided a millennial history of New Zealand, not only of New Zealand, but of all indigenous countries, of indigenous people of the world. The controlled anger that you are talking about is with reference with the need to create a text in which there was some sense of reason as well as of irrationality, there was a sense of balance. Because if you get a text

that is too overtly politically weighted then it becomes an unbalanced text. And I know enough of writing as a framework to know that that is not good literature either. So although the whole book is motivated and positioned within passion and within politics, its content is balanced out by a sense of understanding that in fact in all of those millennial movements and even within Maoridom itself, given the various fractures that have occurred within all essentialist traditions because of Western civilisation, there is now this other psychic control to our lives, something which prevents us from achieving an essentialist destiny.

Could we talk about your controversial female characters? How challenging was it for you to create these women?

My understanding of Western Literature has shown me that there are certain paradigms that exist within it that are not mirrored within indigenous literature and yet we know those characters exist. Most of the women who exist within Maori literature are not women who have a psychic dimension or a dimension which places them on a national stage. They are women within Keri Hulme's work who are believable women whom one would even expect to meet; or Patricia Grace's women who are ordinary women within the tribe. Because of my background and because of the women who had been in my life and in my father's life, I wanted to create women who were leaders not only in a national stage but in the historical stage and also in a supernatural sense, women who could reflect the iconic role of Maori women. Today I don't think that we have any heroines within indigenous literatures of the kind of women that I have created in my work, because they are the kind of women that you meet in Greek or Roman or Celtic mythology, the kind of women who are warrior women, who are strong women, and who create a sense of matriarchy rather than a sense of patriarchy. So that is one of the reasons why they are like the way they are, because my grandmother was the matriarch of that particular iwi and I've had a particular conditioning to that kind of matriarchal world. I know that I get criticisms and I get those kind of criticisms from people who come from a patriarchal world, there is nothing I can do about that.

These female characters are based on members of your own family, but also on historical leaders as well as on very determinate and strong women who are at the forefront of New Zealand political movements nowadays, aren't they?

Yes, anybody who reads *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer* will know that they are based on people like Princess Te Puea in the past or like Donna Awatere and Eva Rickard today. They are intended to be iconic in that way.

A week ago I was actually thinking that, despite most novels are actually about relationships between men and women, about love relationships or falling in love, none of my characters have never fallen in love, I've decided. I also wondered why that was and I think that maybe one of the reasons may be that the women in my work are not motivated by love for men, they are motivated by love for their iwi and that was the great love affair of their lives and has also been the great love affair of my life with my iwi. My characters

are able to accept people to bring a sense of humanity into their lives and chose them and love at that intimate level, but their great love is for the iwi. Even a character as problematic as Tiana, although her love is for her son, it is also for her iwi. So I would say that most of the women in my work are not real in that sense, they are not real in the same way as women who get involved with men and have weaknesses as Kerewin in *The Bone People*, or Beth in *Once Were Warriors*, or Te Paania in *Baby No-Eyes*. They show a vulnerability which my women don't and I think that this kind of position, this invulnerability is probably a major flaw. It is humanity but from another level, not at the level of romance but at the level politics and aroha ki te iwi.⁸

How do you see the future of Maori Literature?

We've just had Maori literature week in Wellington where three books were published. One of them was another anthology, number four, of new work by Maori writers by *Huia Publishers*. I can see that there is a vigorous strength of Maori writing that is taking place and I am very excited about it because they are, what I call, filling in the gaps. One could say that people like Hone Tuwhare, like Jacquie Sturm, like Patricia Grace, like Alan Duff, like Keri Hulme, like myself have created the pillars for the house. *Te Ao Marama* created a sense of structure too and now we are giving these wonderful grounds for these people coming into their house and animating it. There are a lot of them who are writing short stories, a lot of them who are writing plays, and children's stories.

The one area that they are not entering is the novel. And that is because the novel is an alien construct, which requires you to do it of yourself and for yourself and sustain your own energy. However, we come from a tribal ethos and from within a situation which is not as confined as the novel requires. But they will come. Patricia Grace and I have often talked about this and she and I have both realised that to be a novelist you have to have ironically a kind of background that she and I have, someone whose training has put them in a position of being able to write in that Western framework. I think if you really wanted to discover what Maori literature really was you would have to find that in its oral position. For that you have the most wonderful opportunity in the marae⁹ where there are hundreds of people who are taking their literature throughout various transformations in a tribal retelling.

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⁸ Love for the tribe.

⁹ Maori meeting grounds.

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