

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## ***Some Other Country: New Zealand's Best Short Stories* (4th edition) edited by Marion McLeod and Bill Manhire (Victoria University Press, 2008)**

This latest selection of thirty-four short stories from New Zealand delivers a wonderful array of themes and voices from the country's literary field. *Some Other Country* is the fourth edition of short stories from New Zealand, a collection from Victoria University Press which was first published in 1984. Stories about loss, adolescent confusion and failed relationships, amongst other things, populate the pages of this volume.

Arranged in chronological order, the stories date from Katherine Mansfield's story 'At the Bay' (1922) to Tracey Slaughter's confronting first-person narrative 'Consent' from 2007. In their introduction, the editors note that they wanted to be generous in their selection of stories from the last thirty years, and decided that each author could only be represented by one story, but that they were not overly concerned with considerations of length. In short, their choices were governed by the desire to print the 'best stories' they could find (xi). In reaching this goal, works by iconic authors such as Katherine Mansfield, Joy Cowley, Vincent O'Sullivan and Damien Wilkins sit alongside prose by emerging authors such as Tracey Slaughter and the more-established Alice Tawhai to span almost ninety years of writing in New Zealand.

The stories chosen reveal multiple communities under the signifier 'New Zealand', where Pākehā and Māori cultures sit alongside one another, and at times provide – obliquely – entry points into their companion stories' musings, and indeed, into other countries. In this sense, they fulfil the editors' claim that 'the New Zealand to be found in these pages is not the place depicted in glossy picture books or economic profiles' (x), at once complicating and enhancing how the place is imagined.

The first story, Mansfield's 'At the Bay' begins quietly, describing a shepherd's walk around a bay amidst a panoramic, beautifully blanched early morning landscape. The bay provides a locus for the stories of the Burnell family that weave through its waters and shore, and Mansfield's prose is luminous as it attends to fleeting details of connection and disconnection amongst its members. Hope within despair is evident throughout, such as in a little girl's entreaties to her grandmother to never die (23-4), a promise which is never made, yet forgotten about moments later in their laughter.

Joy Cowley's story 'The Silk', originally published in 1965, describes one autumn where an elderly couple – Mr and Mrs Blackie – prepare for Mr Blackie's death, both aware that the approaching season will be his last. Cowley's story centres on a treasured piece of Chinese silk that Mrs Blackie decides to sew into a pair of pyjamas for her husband. In the mottled afterglow of Mr Blackie's death, the beauty of the silk persists, along with its embroidered landscapes. Examining the cloth closely, Mrs Blackie notices bridges throughout the embroidery hitherto unnoticed, and one bridge grows to include other details where once only the bridge lay. The narratives in this collection function much like this bridge; as the reader peruses their pages, the stories ripen and expand to conjure miniature worlds of exceptional richness.

This productivity is also apparent in Alice Tawhai's story 'Māori Art' (2007), which traces a trajectory of colonial suppression through to the reclamation of Māori culture through the narrator's genealogy of family names. In this story, intersections between Māori and Pākehā systems of meaning are explored, and each of the narrator's family names is

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imbued with a particular association such as emulation, anger and recovery. In this way, the filial and the colonial are intertwined, as proper names demonstrate shifting relations between Māori peoples and their colonisers.

Tracey Slaughter's narrative, 'Consent' (2007) is the closing work in this collection and it provides a vivid and disturbing account of gang rape from a woman's perspective. The pain of rape is metaphorically expressed as a crown where 'it will be hard to stand in it, hard to balance, hard to walk under its throb' (490). Written from a first-person point of view, the story concludes by alluding to the ordeal of testifying to this trauma in court where the protagonist will be re-crowned 'Miss Consent' (491). Provoking vivid and visceral responses from the reader, this story ends the volume not with a whimper, but a bang.

In Vincent O'Sullivan's story, 'Palms and Minarets' (1978), the unnamed protagonist remembers that his father would 'take books up and lay them down as though there was something in them which roughness might spill' (276). Similarly, this volume deserves to be treated with respect, and yet the stories within it are testament to the tenacity of narrative and the persistence of details which constellate each tale.

A useful feature of this volume is the 'Glossary of Māori Words and Phrases' located after the 'Notes on Contributors' towards the back of the book. An important adjunct to the preceding stories, it highlights the power of language and the nuances of difference within language. Upon finishing this collection, readers can also look ahead to the next instalment that will surely complement this ever expanding homage to New Zealand and its imagined countries.

**Golnar Nabizadeh**