

This Magnificent Accident: An Interview with Witi Ihimaera

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The writings of Māori novelist Witi Ihimaera, whose flamboyance matches his fame, and who, in public interviews and personal letters, frequently dubs his involvement with literature “a magnificent accident,” can indeed be considered, if not magnificent, then at least magical. Born in 1944 into the Te Aitanga A Mahaki, Rongowhakaata, and Ngati Porou tribes, Ihimaera is a controversial thinker, who, despite constantly comparing “profane” English with “sacred” Māori, nevertheless wins the hearts of readers with stories written in that very same “profane” English. While some of Ihimaera’s achievements owe themselves to twists of fate (for example, as we found out from our interview with him, his first collection of short stories being noticed by a prime minister), his enormous productivity can be credited mostly to hard work. Indeed, Ihimaera has tried his hand at novels, poems, plays, librettos, and children’s books.

It seems perfectly natural that Ihimaera, who has identified magic realism as one of the cornerstones of his writing quests, attributes his success not to himself personally but to “an accident.” Perhaps by somehow overshadowing his own will in becoming a writer, he appears to tap indirectly into the cosmic, supernatural powers responsible for the prosperity of Māori arts. It is not by chance that Ihimaera sometimes refers to Māori historical hero Te Kooti and his prophecy about the future triumph of the Māori. Te Kooti is a founder of the Ringatu religion to which Ihimaera’s family belongs, and Ihimaera, who encourages Māori writers to take a cooperative rather than a competitive approach to their task, sees himself as a vessel assuring this future triumph.

Metaphorically, the texts of Ihimaera can be seen as a grandmother’s keepsake box filled with myths, amulets, prophecies, and legends rooted in Māori tradition. The American poet Stanley Kunitz once proclaimed that

*in his poetry he makes his life into a legend. Ihimaera does not need to create any legends; he was born into them. For instance, once he quoted his relatives as saying that an ancestor came to Aotearoa (New Zealand's native name) on the back of a whale. This episode later evolved into the story about a little girl, the heroine of the novel *The Whale Rider*, who proved her leadership as the would-be chief of her tribe by rescuing and riding a whale (Ihimaera has a special talent for depicting strong and driven females).*

Even though Ihimaera—who refers to himself as an author struggling “with the dilemma of being Māori in a postmodern world”—knows that writing is a power in itself, he takes an active part in New Zealand's cultural and political life. To say that he is only a writer is not enough; he is much more. As a member of the Te Haa Māori writing committee, he makes sure that no young talent is being overlooked; as an editor, he checks that all Māori writing is being collected in representative anthologies; as a professor at Auckland University, he instills in his students pride for belonging to the Māori tradition and assures that this tradition is being continued and passed on to the next generations. He is a true modern Māori man.

*Fascinated by his writing, we were inspired to interview Ihimaera, who currently is being flooded by interview requests from the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Germany, and other countries where the movie *Whale Rider* is being shown. The release of the movie, which has won several awards, has once again confirmed Ihimaera as a leading Māori novelist and has motivated publishers to reissue the novel on which the movie is based.*

This interview, conducted by e-mail in August 2002, provides a glimpse into the cultural and political context of Ihimaera's writing, covering such topics as Māori culture and language, the role of women in Māori society, Māori acceptance of gays, Māori literature, immigration, and western values.

MM and AM We would like to know your opinion about the following statement by New Zealand MP Georgina Te Heuheu: “Traditional Māori culture is a lot more matriarchal than people give it credit for.” Do you agree with her? Does “matriarchal” really mean that women are considered to be equally as important as men in Māori society?

WI There will always be debate on just how matriarchal traditional Māori culture was and is. Often, women who have transcended the cultural pro-

hibitions, like my friend Georgina Te Heuheu, will assert the question more positively. Georgina has Te Arawa ancestry, and Te Arawa are noted for the very strong stance taken against Māori women speaking on the marae, for instance, so for Georgina to have accomplished her ascendancy to the top of national politics is a triumph indeed. However, my perspective is that while Māori women may have had *cultural* power, Māori women did not have *political* power. Certainly there are exceptions to the rule, like Te Puea Herangi or my own grandmother, Teria Pere, but even so, and no matter their triumphs, their whole lives were engaged in negotiations within a primarily patriarchal cultural and political framework. That is still the situation today.

MM and AM Did your novel *The Matriarch* somehow highlight the leading role of women in Māori society? Do Artemis (*The Matriarch*) and Pai (in the movie *Whale Rider*; Kahu in the novel *The Whale Rider*) share this very same strength? Or is the opposite the case: Are Artemis's and Pai's stories only wishful thinking? And, outside of fiction, could a Pai-like character really exist in a Māori marae in the year 2003?

WI The main character of my novel, *The Matriarch*, is an example of a woman who achieved power and control locally in her own iwi (tribe), but who, whenever she stepped beyond her iwi, had to have mana and whakapapa (lineage) to be able to negotiate both the Māori and the Pākehā male worlds. Artemis, as you can tell from her name, is not, however, a wholly Māori creation, and so she is, from that perspective, wrong but authentic. What I was trying to do with her was create a more universal character, despite the Māori location of the novel itself, and I therefore aligned her with the Greek Artemis. The other main character in the novel, incidentally, is called Tiana, or Diana, which is the Roman name for Artemis, so I was also playing with the roles of matriarch and mother, one political and the other personal.

With regard to the comparison between Artemis and Pai, they are, of course, two entirely different creations. Artemis is universal, Pai is local. Artemis is a hybrid creation, Pai is an essential creation. Artemis arises out of a metafictional text; Pai inhabits a Māori text. Artemis is at war with the Pākehā, so her ambition is not just to confront the patriarchal nature of her own world—she has to fight through that patriarchy before she is able to confront her real enemy: the Pākehā in power, not the Māori male in power.

These characters' stories are not wishful thinking. Artemis-type leaders

have existed at a national level—for instance, Whina Cooper, Eva Rickard, and Mira Szazy, and today we have Titewhai Harawira, Annette Sykes, Donna Awatere, Atareta Poananga, and Ripeka Evans, among others. Pai-like leaders also exist today, but they don't ride whales—they carry laptop computers and are to be found in the rūnanga (pan-tribal) networks at the tribal and local iwi levels.

MM and AM Are traditional Māori values slowly adapting to modern society? Is there any break between older and younger generations? Has anything changed in the ten years following the release of Lee Tamahori's movie *Once Were Warriors*?

WI Traditional Māori values will always remain traditional Māori values. What is changing is the accommodation of those values and the continued discussion of those values. These kōrero (discussions) have informed the establishment of runanga networks and the establishment of Māori-based and sovereignty-based systems for Māori throughout New Zealand. Since *Once Were Warriors*, there have been extraordinary transformations in all fields. *Once Were Warriors* was part of that transformation, not the creator of it. It's a transformation that, on the large scale, has achieved a huge transfer of power from the Pākehā to the Māori. The Treaty [of Waitangi] settlements negotiations have, for instance, begun the creation of economic and financial power to some tribes like Kai Tahu. It's a historical claiming of rights, which has put more Māori into Parliament and therefore in decision-making positions throughout the governmental and other networks of New Zealand. The involvement of Māori in education has meant Māori language and Māori cultural transfusions into New Zealand education that have made the education system more compatible with Māori needs: at my own university, 30 percent of the arts faculty are either Māori or Polynesian, a huge turnaround from figures of only ten years ago. And so on and so on.

MM and AM Through the ages, Māori have handed down their cultural heritage verbally. Then, some decades ago, they had the chance (or they were forced) to adopt the Latin alphabet to express themselves. Does the Māori language make perfect sense when transliterated into a written language? Could we say that the magic of the oral tradition has been lost?

WI The Māori language exists of itself and for itself, so, within its own sovereignty, it plays a major role in maintaining for its people the structures of meaning that are important for us. So the Māori language, and in

particular, the oral archives, have not been lost, and their wairua (spirit)—rather than magic—is intact. Insofar as its written form is concerned, it makes sense to Māori when transliterated, but of course there are difficulties when Māori is made to conform to Pākehā structures of meaning. I have always been of the view that the Māori language is sacred; the English language is profane, without sacred meaning.

MM and AM Does Māori literature actually exist? What needs to be authentically Māori to make an unspecified literature Māori literature: the writer's ethnicity? the language? the themes? Are there many (or any) publications written in the Māori language?

WI Māori are regarded as a sophisticated and erudite people, so, yes, a huge archive of Māori literature exists. This is literature in its extended meaning, not just written but oral, not just on the page but also on the walls of a meeting house, as imprinted by facial tattoo, and so on. Historically, the “writers” of this inventory are of Māori descent, and they are writing in the Māori language. Other inventories also exist, including Māori literature written in English. Māori writers have written it. Pākehā writers have written it. So it becomes Māori literature written in English by Māori on one hand; and Māori literature written in English by Pākehā on the other. Māori, of course, would place greater value and a greater weight of authenticity on work that is written by Māori, and originated from Māori literary forms like haka, waiata, oriori, and on Māori themes, than they would place on work written by Pākehā and originating from Pākehā literary forms like the novel, play, or film. Yes, there are many publications in Māori.

MM and AM How would you define yourself: a writer? a Māori writer? a writer with a Māori background? an English-speaking writer? none of the above?

WI I am a Māori writer.

MM and AM Try to imagine yourself a modern Ulysses. Where would you like to be shipwrecked—in your native land or somewhere else on this planet?

WI I think I am already a modern Ulysses—though I prefer a comparison with a hero from my own history, like Maui—trying to locate or fix a Māori destination for all Māori who negotiate their lives through the postcolonial constructs of a universal reality and a hybridized world. My

advantage is that I know who I am and where I am because I was an inhabitant of an essential Māori world. I am not trying to find my way back, but rather forward, to where Māori could be. Nor is this just a personal journey: By advocating for this Māori destination, by interrogating the processes that have sought to subjugate it, by prosecuting the primary imperatives that have endeavored to marginalize it, I like to think I am fixing its center so that others who might not know where it is—like my daughters or Māori children of the future—can find it.

MM and AM Are you the scion of a breed of chiefs? If yes, does this make any difference to you in your life? Are you proud of it? If not, do you feel somehow diminished?

WI I am the eldest son of an eldest son of an eldest son. Yes, it did make a difference, because I inherited all the expectations of leadership and a tribal perspective to decision making, eg, that one belongs to the iwi. My father is still living, and therefore all the challenges of leadership that might come my way have not done so yet. So I have been able to live a life away from the iwi somewhat inconsistent with that normally ascribed to any successor: I married a Pākehā woman, I am now a gay man, I have had daughters (not sons), and I don't live with the iwi. At some point I may have to engage with these problematics. In my view, I should maintain a role as leader of the family, but I am happy to relinquish that role at the tribal level to my aunt who lives in Waituhi. I never felt diminished by being Dad's son.

MM and AM Native societies always face a dilemma: to aim at a total assimilation, thereby dissolving into the ruling majority and losing their cultural references, or to try to preserve the traditional values, even if this might mean being cut off from the major sources of power and from material rewards. How do you place yourself? Do you consider yourself an individual part of the so-called "western values," or a part of an oppressed native minority? Moreover, was your coming out facilitated or even allowed by your acceptance of the western values?

WI Although two of my books, *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer*, involve universal indicators, I'm actually an old essentialist. My job is to reinforce the structures of power and meaning for the Māori body politic. But this is not an either-or situation in New Zealand. It doesn't lock us into monocultural structures, one for Māori and one for Pākehā. So at the same time that Māori are promoting sovereignty, they are also negotiating

space within Pākehā structures of power. I consider myself to be a Māori seeking sovereignty of both person and nation. Oppression is a historical condition from which Māori have now managed to emerge, although, of course, the primary structures of power are still Pākehā.

Insofar as my coming out was concerned, it was not facilitated by western values, but rather compelled by the need to be in opposition to those values. Māori gay men were doubly discriminated against, both by race and by sexual practice. I am not trying to establish a western framework for Māori gay men, but rather a framework that evolves from a Polynesian and Māori tribal perspective.

MM and AM New Zealand MP Georgina Beyer captured world headlines as the first transgender person ever to be elected to a country's parliament. At the same time, her being a role model may have helped some of more traditionally minded Māori to accept different lifestyles, never heard of before. Have you considered the possibility that your success may also contribute to the acceptance of gays among Māori?

WI Georgina Beyer is fabulous. Her being a role model has forced all New Zealanders, Māori and Pākehā alike, to confront their homophobia and their cultural conditioning about alternative sexualities. Yes, I like to think that I—and others like Ngahua Te Awekotuku—have also helped in the same transformation of all New Zealanders' thinking. But that wasn't my main imperative. What I wanted to do was to provide a model for gay men and women, the gay tribe; I don't in fact care whether or not Māori or other New Zealanders are affected by it. That was, and still is, secondary to the main imperative.

MM and AM Both as a New Zealand citizen and as a Māori, how do you consider new immigrants to New Zealand? Do you think of them as "twice invaders," or as a useful resource to boost the country's economic strength? Speaking of immigration, usually immigrants come from socially conservative countries. Are you confident that they will accept the progressive values of New Zealand? Or do you look at them as a possible threat?

WI Both New Zealanders and Māori are concerned about immigration. Some see this as a threat, others see it as a benefit. I take the latter point of view. I am a believer in cultural transformation, one that accepts differences and creates alternatives and options. I don't look at immigrants from socially conservative countries as threatening unless they begin to

influence national power structures so that they are malignant to Māori. What Māori have to make sure of is that they have the power to prevent this.

MM and AM A man who has to deal with his wife and his two daughters: it's what happened to Margaret's [the coauthor's] father, who later admitted that life wasn't always easy for him. How difficult was it for you to manage an analogous family setting?

WI I don't know what you mean by an analogous family setting. I am still married to Jane, and I see her and my two daughters every time I go to Wellington, which is once a month. We love each other and are fiercely protective of each other. As I have mentioned earlier, I have always taken a tribal approach to life. I try to maintain an inclusivity, even if it is often based on difference rather than unanimity. Life—and decision making—is never clear cut and some of the edges never join, but enough emotional congruence is maintained to ensure a tribal overlay.

MM and AM You've been a high-ranking New Zealand diplomat for a while. What were your feelings at that time? Were you proud of your role? Didn't it seem odd to you to represent Queen Elizabeth's New Zealand subjects in the world arena?

WI I became a diplomat after the then prime minister was given one of my books by the then US ambassador to New Zealand. The prime minister suggested to the secretary of foreign affairs that I be interviewed. The primary persuasion given to me was that a UN delegation on race relations had recently visited New Zealand and were surprised that its premier government department [ie, foreign affairs] did not have any Māori in it. I therefore became one of a small but brilliant group of three Māori colleagues who were inducted. The role of a Māori diplomat was of course different from that of a Pākehā diplomat, and we were not representing Queen Elizabeth. We were representing New Zealand. Since those days, the ministry has led the way with respect to devolution of its Pākehā base: at least 20 percent of diplomatic staff are now Māori or Polynesian, and we now have three Māori diplomats heading posts overseas.

The evolving of a bicultural framework within government practice is part of the bandwidth of change. Obviously, if one wants to achieve power, one doesn't only do it the way Tamatea does in *The Dream Swimmer*—an assault on the centre and achieving sovereignty. It's also done by bicultural means.

MM and AM We recently interviewed Alessandro Baricco in Italy. He's a celebrated writer, journalist, and professor. He recently recorded a pretty successful CD of one of his readings backed by a very famous French new-age [musical] duo. Moreover, one of his stories has been turned into a script for a movie starring Tim Roth (*The Legend of 1900*). Last year, we also got in touch with Michael Chabon: he is a Pulitzer-prizewinner and the author behind another famous movie, *The Wonder Boys*.

You're a writer, journalist, and university professor. *Whale Rider*, the movie based on your book, has become the "talk of the town" throughout the entire world. Do you think that in the twenty-first century a writer really has to extend his or her interests as broadly as possible in order to attain success and recognition? Has promotion become a very important part of the writer's job description?

WI Actually, I never think of myself as a writer. I think of myself as a person who, among other things, writes. I have never liked the iconization of my function. As I have said before, I take a tribal approach to life—and all of us, no matter whether we clean the toilets or lead the iwi, have a single, tribal, function. Like all other Māori, therefore, I do whatever I do.

MM and AM Journalist, diplomat, professor, writer: Who is Ihimaera? A Machiavelli-like Renaissance man born by chance in the Pacific Rim, or a very modern man well aware of every promotional tool offered by our current times?

WI As with my answer to your question 7 [about a modern Ulysses], I prefer any comparisons to be within my own structures of meaning. While I love Machiavelli, those references come from a different cultural dynamic. I like to think that one of my great exemplars is Maui. As for who I am, that should be obvious.

EDITOR'S NOTE: See review of the film *Whale Rider* in this issue, 422–425.