

# Inside Out

## *Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*

edited by  
Vilsoni Hereniko  
and  
Rob Wilson

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.  
*Lanham • Boulder • New York • Oxford*

## 6

---

### Influences on Writing

*Patricia Grace*

I was born on Te Upoko o Te Ika, the head of the fish, that, a long time ago was fished up by demigod Maui from the great Ocean of Kiwa. Or, to put it another way, I was born in what is now known to most as Wellington, New Zealand.

I am of mixed parentage, my father being Maori and a mixture of other, my mother being Pakeha of an Irish, and other, background. My parents met at secondary school but came to know each other when they left school during the Depression years to work in a stationery factory in Wellington.

I was conscious of living in two family worlds—the contrasting worlds of my mother’s and father’s families. I became adept at moving from foot to foot between these two families and was comfortable and secure in both of these family worlds. But it was outside of my families, in the world of school, and particularly in the world of the neighborhood, that life sometimes became troublesome and unfriendly.

I was the only Maori child at the schools I attended, and though I enjoyed school and liked learning, I was often puzzled, as a small child, by my “difference” and by the low expectation that some teachers had of me as a scholar; on the other hand, they always recognized my sporting abilities.

We were the only Maori family in the neighborhood, and it was particularly in that mainly working-class but upwardly mobile neighborhood that life was often difficult. It was a remembered (or never to be forgotten) incident from those days that gave rise to the story *Going for the Bread*, in which a small child is viciously attacked by two other children.

I lived and went to school in the city and spent weekends and holidays at the home of my grandparents on the coastal, rural, ancestral land of the Ngati Toa people, where we now live. The place where we live is a remnant of tribal land that was not confiscated, deviously purchased, or legally stolen through Public Works acts or government legislation, and it is still in our ownership,

a situation that has become more and more unique since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. There are about thirty houses in this settlement, set around a rugged coastline, which at times can be rough, windswept, and cold but at other times can be calm and warm, and where we like to go fishing, shell fishing, and picnicking when the weather and tides are right.

From where we live we look out toward Whitireia, the maunga tapu (sacred landmark), which marks one of the boundaries of the Ngati Toa people. We look also toward the island called Te Mana a Kupe Ki Aotearoa, named to honor the deeds of the explorer and navigator Kupe, who sailed from Hawaiki, as we've been told, and was the discoverer of our land, Aotearoa.

Families in our community are all related to one another, either closely related (my brother, daughter, first cousins live there) or more distantly related through ancestry. We have our own meeting house and *marae* (tribal common) complex there, and it is here that we welcome visitors and organize our social, cultural, political, and educational programs as a community and as a family.

I was a small child during the years of World War Two. My father went to the war in Italy with Maori Battalion reinforcements when I was five years old. I remember the sense of importance I felt when I learned that my father was going to war, because soldiers had special prayers said for them each morning before the start of school.

On the morning that my father was to leave for overseas I was most excited because we were all going to the wharf to see the boat off. I imagined a large dinghy full of soldiers being rowed out to sea with all of us standing on shore watching, just as we would stand on the beach and watch adults go fishing. However, when we did arrive at the wharf all I could see were crowds and crowds of people and what seemed to be a large building in front of me, with rows and rows of soldiers looking down from it. There was no boat, there was no sea. We eventually recognized my father up there on the side of the "building", waving his lemon squeezer at us.

It wasn't until the "big building" moved out from the wharf that I saw the sea, and the "big building" became a ship sailing out into the harbor.

There is a section in my novel *Cousins*, which takes place during World War Two. Because I was a young child during those years and couldn't remember enough of what it was like then, I had to do research, which included reading but which also included discussion with my mother and with relatives of my parents' age who were in Wellington during those times.

It was through these discussions with elders that I found out about an unhappy event that took place in the early days of the war, when parents, wives, families of the second echelon (among whom were the men of the Maori Battalion) converged on Wellington to say final goodbyes to the soldiers, only to find themselves locked out of the wharf.

I have described these events in *Cousins*. The family in the story has trav-

eled by train from the middle of the North Island to Wellington, but no details have been given to them about the departure of the men. Makareta and Mata, two of the three main characters in the book, are babies at the time:

Coming. Coming. It wasn't a shout or a whisper, but a movement that ruffled the crowd. It was like a knowing that came from the air—air that had become cold enough to show breath as we began to stir, to stand, turning first one way and then another, not knowing which way to go. There was a train coming, a sound far back, but no one knew which platform it would come into.

Then the station began to empty. The train was coming, but not into the station.

We followed the people out on to the street and there we saw it making its way slowly along the wharf tracks. There was no sign that this was a train filled with soldiers on their way to war. It looked instead like a line of empty carriages with their shutters down being taken to a wharf shed or a side track, finished for the day.

Then the wharf gates opened, the train went through, the gates closed. 'It was them,' someone said. 'Blackouts down and guards by the doors.' And we all hurried across the road to the gates, calling to the officials to let us through. We had gifts to give, letters, messages, photographs, keepsakes and food. We had husbands, sons, fathers to see on their way to war. But our pleas were not listened to.

After a long while of waiting we knew that the gates were not going to be opened for us. I needed to get Makareta out of the cold.

Kui, Gloria and I returned to the station while the others remained at the gates. We tended to Makareta then sat in our blankets to wait. 'In the morning,' Kui said, 'they'll open up in the morning.' But I knew the men would all be on board by the morning. The ships could have gone by then.

After the war my father and his partners started their own stationery business, and my mother went to help in the factory which was first set up in a garage next to a bakery in the suburb of Karori. I often went there during school holidays, and I remember the lovely smell of new bread that wafted in. Sometimes when people ask me why I became a writer I say it's because my parents were stationery manufacturers and that we always had plenty of paper to write on!

When I left school I trained as a primary-school teacher and married at the end of the two-year training course. My husband and I went to teach in some remote areas of the North Island, and it was during those years that I began writing.

One's own background and experience is central to one's work. Events, lives, relationships, circumstances, environments, what our senses tell us, what touches and moves us, what our thoughts, feelings, dreams, concerns, imaginings are, all affect what we produce and, along with the research that

we do, are the knowledge base on which creativity is brought to bear. Or that's how I see it. That's how it is for me.

So far I have given two brief examples of work springing from surrounding experience and circumstances, first in mentioning how the short story, *Going for the Bread*, came about, then through an extract from the novel *Cousins*. I wish now to turn to the novel *Potiki* in order to describe what is typically my approach to my work.

Prior to the writing of *Potiki* I had spent a little time at a marae to which I am tribally affiliated, where poupou, or posts, were being carved for the interior of a new meeting house. The work there was being organized and carried out by a master carver assisted by three or four others. My husband was spending one day a week there working on one of the carvings.

One day when I was visiting I looked into the workshop. There was an older man there whom I hadn't seen before. He was near the back of the room, bending over the workbench working quietly away at his piece of wood, and when I left there I had a strong impression: he was so at ease with what he was doing, and so in tune with it, that I couldn't help but understand that this was his life's work, that carving, something he'd been doing since he was young, was an integral part of his being. The impression remained with me, and I began *Potiki* just with that impression, and the part sentence, "There was once a carver who spent a lifetime with wood." At that stage I had no idea where that part sentence would lead me and had to invest a great deal of trust in it, as I nearly always need to put trust in a handful of words when I begin a new work. I knew the story was going to be about a carver but wasn't sure whether it would be a short story or a longer work. When I first wrote it (for those of you who might know the work) it didn't have the carver's predictions in it or the uncarved space that was to be left for some future time. I made adjustments to it as the longer story developed.

Once I'd completed the carver's story the next idea came from the thought that a house had been built and carved, and the question that I was asking myself then was, "Who are the people who belong to this house?" I thought of a woman who became Roimata, and thought about how she came to be there. Thus her story began, bringing in the members of her family and extended family, and the wider story opened out as they told their stories. It was a matter of allowing one idea to develop from another, and one chapter to develop from the one before.

There was a lot going on at the time, in Aotearoa, that legitimized the political thread of *Potiki* that I began to work into the story. There was the issue of Bastion Point, an area of prime land in Auckland from which the Ngati Whatua people had been removed in the 1940s, prior to their own houses being destroyed and their meeting house being burned down.

The descendants of those people occupied an area of that land in the 1970s when the national government, under Prime Minister Robert Muldoon, de-

ceded that the land should be developed for high-cost housing. The occupation ended when the prime minister sent in hundreds of police, backed up by the military in bus loads, to arrest a handful of people (about sixty or seventy), several of whom were elderly.

There were tragedies during that occupation. A house burned down (accidentally), and a little girl died in the fire. After removal of the occupiers from the site some people despaired. There was a suicide, and some of the old people who had been there gave up hope and died.

But on the positive side the land was not developed for housing: the issue had become far too sensitive. Some land was returned to Ngati Whatua, though not all issues to do with it have been resolved yet.

There was also the case of the Raglan Golf Course, in which a woman named Eva Rickard, after much struggle, won family land back through the courts. The golf course had been created on land that had been taken from Eva's people during World War Two, supposedly for an airport. It was not used for that purpose but was never returned to its owners. There was a burial ground on part of the land.

The protests over this land escalated until one Sunday, Eva Rickard and others occupied one of the greens on the golf course and held a church service there. This upset the golfers, who couldn't get on with their games and couldn't get a word in edgewise through the hymn singing, so they called the police. Several people were arrested, and the whole matter was taken to court. In the courts Eva Rickard's claims were found to be justified, and the land was eventually returned to her family.

These were the national events that we all took an interest in. But in the writing of *Potiki* there were issues closer to home that had an influence.

The private land where we live, and which I briefly described to you earlier, has for many years been under one threat or another, from housing developers, industrial developers, shipping companies, local council, the lands and survey and conservation departments, all wanting a slice, or a reserve, or public access. We have always had to be watchful and resistant regarding our land and our privacy, and land issues are very much part of our everyday lives in the place where we live, as they are in the lives of many Maori people throughout Aotearoa.

So *Potiki* is the family story of Roimata, Hemi, their children, and the wider whanau (family), but there is the political thread, too. As well as that, underlying both the family story and the political strand is the connection to mythology.

I had been researching and thinking a lot about the ancient creation stories, and prior to the writing of *Potiki* I had written text for a book on Maori women in mythology, called *Wabine Toa*. Because Tokowaru-i-te-Marama was the youngest of the children in Roimata and Hemi's family, in other words the potiki, I decided to make him a modern Maui Potiki.

In the ancient story, Maui Potiki was the youngest son of Taranga and was described as the child of her old age. He was born on the beach when Taranga was alone. He was supposedly stillborn, and Taranga cut off her topknot of hair, wrapped him in it, and floated him out to sea to be cared for by the birds and fishes. None of the rites that would normally be performed for a stillborn child were performed. This meant that he would be likely to return to the world as a mischievous being. And so later, it was Maui Potiki, part human and part "other worldly," who obtained his grandmother's jawbone, who fished up land, who captured the sun and made daylight longer, and who obtained fire for the world. It was Maui Potiki who met his death when he entered the toothed vagina of Hine Nui Te Po as he attempted to gain immortality for the people of the earth.

Tokowaru-i-te-Marama became the modern Maui Potiki: He was the last born. He was born on the beach in unusual circumstances. His mother was of this earth but his father was maybe not. He was given a gift from his grandmother's ear. He was born disabled (the ancient Maui was misshapen and ugly and had one eye of obsidian and one of greenstone). He had a big fish story. He had a fire story. He had a water story. He met his death when he entered the toothed aperture. In this case the aperture was the doorway toothed with flame.

I worked through *Potiki* chapter by chapter, letting one chapter, or one idea, lead to the next. (But also there was a sense of beginning in the middle, that the idea was central and could be expanded outward in wider and wider circles). This way of working, of allowing ideas to develop and allowing one idea to come out of another, is the way I prefer to work. It is working in the dark, or the half light, not quite knowing what will happen but knowing that whatever does happen will happen because it is being driven, pushed along, by the created characters. Because it is characters that interest me most.

I am not so concerned about plot, story line. It is the people, the characters, that I like to work with. Events take place because of the people. The environments, the circumstances, the voices, the moods and emotions, the words, the language, all belong to the people. I give myself the task of knowing the people and showing who those people are, knowing what they will say and how they will say it, what they will do and how they will do it, what will happen to them because of who they are, who they will become because of what has influenced them already.

I'm interested in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people and in exploring these lives. I'm interested in relationships, in particular wider family relationships—those between young and old, children and parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, people living in wider family relationships, people living in communities—because this is what I know and understand. Also there are relationships between people and the environment, people and the spirit

world, people and the authorities that govern their lives. There are interracial relationships, and people relating to their pasts and to their futures.

But I'm also interested in dislocation, people removed from their groups, the breakdown of communities and the forming of new ones as people find themselves on the fringes, the type of people written about, in particular, in *The Sky People* stories.

So we take what we know and upon that we bring to bear the research that we do, the thoughts, feelings, imaginings, dreams, fantasies, concerns that we have, and as we attempt this we push at the edges of understanding, of language, of structures, of enlightenment, of possibility; and we shed new light, find new angles, seek out something different and unexpected—or perhaps we do for some, or at least we do for ourselves as writers.

But now I'd like to say something about what *is known*, the body of understanding that informs work, which of course is not the same body of understanding for everyone. As a member of a small population culture in a small country I am aware that I come from a different background from a lot of other people in the world. The knowledge base that informs my work is a different set of knowledge from that which informs the work of Albert Wendt, Nora Vagi Brash, Epeli Hau'ofa, Haunani-Kay Trask, Subramani and Marjorie Crocombe, or from that which informs the Vietnamese writer, the Nigerian writer, the English writer, the American writer. Naturally some areas of the work will be out of reach for some readers and commentators. To understand certain references in Witi Ihimaera's work, for example, one would need to know something of the Ringatu religion. Yet one would need to be born into the circle of that most unique religion in order to "know" it, and in order to have a clear understanding of those parts of the text.

Nevertheless, writers of small population cultures must have the same freedom as other writers to be true to what they know and true to who they are. I need to be free to write in the way that I judge best for the stories I want to tell. I want my writing to be able to stand with the rest of the writing of the world without encumbrances such as glossaries, italics, footnotes, asides, sentences in brackets, introductory notes, or explanatory paragraphs disguised as plot. At the same time I want my work to be just as stringently judged as anyone else's, if judging, analyzing is what people want to do.

When I'm writing I never want to think of readers, or audience, or to feel that I'm being influenced by what anyone has said or written, because that is a constraint. It's rather like receiving ticks and crosses and good-work stamps, A pluses and C minuses, as we do at school. It's a form of control if, for example I read a review and say to myself, "That's good, that worked, I'll try that again," or, "That went down like a lead balloon, I'd better not do that again." No, I have to trust my own judgment, be myself and be responsible for what I do aside from all opinion, which does not mean at all that I don't want my work to be hacked up in the marketplace along with everyone else's. I want

my work to be read and debated, reviewed and analyzed along with the work of other writers. But reviews, analyses are not for me, and it is important that I keep myself out of the picture, out of the debates, aside from what is said, so that I can feel free to work in my own way. I can't afford to be overly influenced by other people's appraisals.

There are some parts of *Potiki* that won't be completely understood by everybody but that will provide the challenge that most of us enjoy when we read. I have already mentioned the mythological strand, which would require a knowledge of the ancient stories of the Maori in order to be fully accessible.

Another area of difficulty for some readers is that of language that is not English. My first language is English, and my knowledge of Maori is limited. When I was a child playing with my cousins and interacting with my father's family, we spoke all the time in English, but in our English sentences we sometimes used Maori words. In some of the more rural areas of New Zealand the reverse would have been the case: Maori would have been spoken, but the occasional word in English would have been used.

Now, because of the renaissance of Maori culture and language, more and more Maori is heard in urban areas, and more and more words of Maori, more and more phrases and sentences, are used along with the English. Even non-Maori people are using Maori words now. Sometimes politicians try to gain what are cynically called brownie points by using words such as mana and kaumatua and kia ora in their speech making and by greeting people in the Maori language.

I use Maori language in my work where I believe it is right and natural to do so, where the people that I've created demand that I do so because the words are their words. I do not italicize because the words are not "foreign" to me or my characters and are indigenous to my country.

As well as language there will be some areas of content that are not familiar to everyone, those having to do with custom and tradition. A whaikorero for example, is an oration, or a formal speech. I decided to use the pattern of whaikorero for the shape of *Potiki*. This is not something that would be generally obvious to readers, and I'm sure it does not matter a great deal. But it's what I wanted to do, to give a circular shape suitable to the storytelling content of the book and to reflect the way that talk moves in a circular fashion inside the meeting house.

These orations may begin with a tauparapara, which draws attention to the speaker, and may be in the form of a chant, a song, or a haka. After the tauparapara, the orator goes into the main body of the speech and at the end sings his or her waiata, usually accompanied by others. The waiata may be followed by a few final words.

So I shaped *Potiki* in that way. I begin with a chant, move into the main story, then end with a song and a final greeting. And then at the very end are the words "ka huri," words that turn the talk over to the next speaker.

And so from *Potiki* here is my song and my greeting:

Ko wai ma nga tekoteko  
Ka haere mai?  
Ko nga tipuna  
O te iwi e.

Ko wai ma nga tangata  
Ka whakarongo atu?  
Ko te iwi  
O tenei whenua.

Ko wai te tamaiti  
Ka noho ai i tera?  
Ko ia  
Te potiki e,

Ko ia  
Te potiki e.

No reira, e kui ma, e koro ma, e hoa ma. Tamariki ma, mokopuna ma-Tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.  
Ka huri.

[This is a revised version of a speech given at a Pacific Writers' Forum held at the East-West Center, Honolulu, in 1994.]