

his grasp of the situation is always being deferred. Barth at present is at work on a book which he plans to call *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel* and which he hopes will be a complement to *Sabbatical*. Perhaps *Sabbatical*, besides deepening Barth's previous explorations into the mysterious and magical domain where art and life become inseparable, can be seen as a foil against which a future embrace of the reader's concern will take place.

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The Blending of Traditions: Witi Ihimaera's Contribution to New Zealand Literature

As with the other islands of the Pacific, New Zealand was overwhelmed during the nineteenth century by a series of European invasions. In the course of a mere sixty years, native societies that had been evolving for a thousand years were shaken and, in most cases, irretrievably changed. Their complex social, political, and religious life was disrupted, and their ceremonies, so critical for an oral culture, were discredited and almost forgotten.

In New Zealand, where the size of the land and its climate made it more suitable for English colonization, the process included a series of land wars as a result of which most Maori land was confiscated. Indeed, by the end of the century, the Maori appeared so dispirited that their disappearance was taken for granted by Pakeha (i.e. white New Zealanders) and Maori alike. But, in what must be judged from any perspective to be an unprecedented comeback, under the leadership of some farseeing chiefs, the Maori displayed unanticipated resilience and tenacity and are now enjoying a cultural revival. The unique fact is that it is not a backward-looking, nostalgic re-creation, but a carefully fashioned, though fragile, claim to what is best of both the old and the new.

It is about this still unstable amalgam that Witi Ihimaera (1944-) writes. He states his goal most clearly in an interview with John B. Beston.¹ His first three books (inaccurately described as a trilogy) are about Maoris in a rural setting, each from a slightly different viewpoint. His fourth book, and the two planned to follow it, look at the Maori in an urban setting.² Although in his books Ihimaera deals with two locations, the village of Waituhi and the City of Wellington, it is clear that his sympathies are most deeply engaged by the village. "The spirit of Maoritanga is most alive in the rural areas: the villages hold the hearts of our culture."³ He does not, however, allow his sympathies to obscure his seeing. Waituhi is run down, its inhabitants are the usual mix of good and bad. Nevertheless it is home, the place to which one returns open-eyed, but still full of love, and the place where one's family is most real.

The first book, *Pounamu*, Pounamu (1972; the word means Greenstone, a hard jadeite that was used for weapons and jewelry and consequently precious to the stone-age Maori), is a series of stories some of which adumbrate the later novels,

¹John B. Beston, "An Interview with Witi Ihimaera," *World Literature Written in English*, 16, No.1, (1977), 120-21.

²Witi Ihimaera, *Pounamu*, Pounamu (Auckland: Heinemann, 1972), Short stories; *Tangi* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), Novel; *Whanau* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1974), Novel; *Maori* (Wellington: A.R. Shearer, 1975), Historical essay; *The New Net Goes Fishing* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1977), Short stories.

³John B. Beston, p. 120.

but most of which center on family relationships. In this book Ihimaera manages to avoid the temptation of building on the exotic aspects of the traditional culture to produce a work which titillates, as most white writers had done.⁴ As Winston Rhodes said, in reviewing this book, he does not sentimentalize the Maori and "his characters act, speak and feel as authentic human beings, not as formalized figures in a humanizing tract."⁵

Tangi (1973), on the other hand, concentrates on one of the central ceremonies of Maori life: the celebration of death, not in the cold Anglo-Saxon manner, but with something of the grief of the Celt and the expansiveness of the Latin. Of all his books, this one has given the critics the most difficulty. The problem seems to relate most to the relationship between content and literary technique. Simms claims that the "techniques . . . detract from the strength of the novel. . . instead of deepening the awareness in both Tama [the narrator] and the reader, they merely label the experience."⁶ Since such a view, if sustained, would suggest total failure in the matching of mood and symbol, it is important to look closely at the intention behind the fiction. To Beston, Ihimaera himself said: "I looked for the one major physical institution that Maori people retain in the most positive way and found it in the tangi, our ceremonial of mourning . . . virtually the only institution we have for conveying our feelings about being Maori."⁷ and continued by describing his personal and technical difficulties with the theme, emphasizing the importance of form, particularly of repetition, an integral part of the ceremonial itself. Richard Corballis and Graeme Wynn point out that the organization of the novel not only reflects the pattern of the tangi, but provides a structure that sustains it where the series of parallel events accompanied by the collapse of time would otherwise overwhelm its meaning, and matches Tama's own psychological vacillations in contemplating his future.⁸ The book is ceremonial, and follows the same patterns. By repetition, by the proper use of introduction and evocation, the whole family is involved. A tangi is as much a coming together as a farewell: it represents a coalescing of past and present and a contemplation of the future, all sustained by the underlying love of the extended family, in Maori, *aroha* and *kotahitanga*. This richness and intricacy is alien to the Pakeha, who tends to conceal any sentiment beneath a certain irony, hence his difficulty in coping with the novel's otherness and open use of emotion.

In contrast to this intricate and decorated novel, the third, *Whanau* (1974), is relatively sparse. The whanau (the family in its physical location), is the single character and subject of the book. The seemingly disorganized doings of each individual gradually mesh together and end in a climax when the whole village (previously lacking cohesion) joins together to search for its missing patriarch. Behind and sustaining this movement is the deep, almost religious sense of place. Brian Murton, a geographer, has explained most urgently the spiritual significance to the Maori of the land. His perceptive study of Waituhi should be read by all

⁴Alfred Domett, *Ranolf and Amohia: A South-Sea Daydream* (London: Smith Elder, 1872); Alfred A. Grace, *Tales of a Dying Race*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1901); William Satchell, *The Greenstone Door* (London: Methuen, 1902; rpt. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1971). By contrast, two modern writers are more realistic: Roderick David Finlayson, *Brown Man's Burden and Later Stories* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1973); Noel Harvey Hilliard, *Maori Girl* (London: Heinemann, 1960).

⁵H. Winston Rhodes, "Good Work Without Making a Noise," *New Zealand Monthly Review*, March 1973, p. 23.

⁶Norman Simms, "Maori Literature Written in English: An Introduction," *World Literature Today*, No. 52 (Spring 1978), p. 226.

⁷John B. Beston, p. 118.

⁸Richard Corballis, "Witi Ihimaera: Literary Diplomacy," *Landfall*, 33 (March 1979), 64-71, and Graeme Wynn, "Tradition and Change in Recent Maori Fiction: The Writing of Witi Ihimaera," *International Fiction Review*, 2, No. 2 (July 1975), 129-30.

who seek to understand not only Ihimaera, but other Maori and Pacific writers. "At the centre of all this lies the basic meaning of place, but from the largely selfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human existence."⁹ Such a deep emotion could easily slip into nostalgic sentimentality, but Ihimaera avoids that trap by eschewing falseness, seeing the unpainted house and the untended garden, and presenting "a fascinating and honest record of one day in the life of the whanau, threatened by disintegration from within and contamination from European values outside."¹⁰

Having thus sought to set out the more traditional, rural values of the Maori, Ihimaera has undertaken the much more difficult task of examining the Maori in an urban setting. He began this task once more with a collection of stories, *The New Net Goes Fishing* (1977). Ihimaera realizes the need for a different approach, where style and content are less simple and must reflect the more complex relationships and the concurrent impersonality of the city.¹¹ He has reduced the role of the narrator and let his characters speak in their diversity, so that their conflicting viewpoints help the reader to understand that there are no clear-cut answers to interracial problems. This same fact may also explain why further novels have not yet appeared.

The Pakeha now assume a greater role, as is appropriate to their overwhelming urban presence. The tenuous nature of racial relations is explored in "The Kids Downstairs," where the stereotypical, slovenly Maori youngsters in the lower flat threaten the precarious social status of Rangi and Susan, whose loyalties are torn between the "kids" and their chosen society. In a different way "Gathering of the Whakapapa" (the family genealogy) by understatement underlines the great problem of reconciling Maori and Pakeha values, when Tama, despite the problems it may cause on the job, responds automatically to a summons home to the village. In "Cousins", however, the intrusion of the traditional is unwanted yet the conclusion is in its own way very traditional. The narrator is diverted from attending a history lecture to assist at the funeral of an unknown cousin, and is thus brought face to face with his dual responsibilities.

The symbols of death and journeying, found throughout Ihimaera's work, are used in this collection of stories to connect urban and rural experience and to suggest that both Maori and Pakeha values can come together. Openness to people and place is the supreme virtue. If this moral lesson is sometimes unduly stressed, perhaps the critics might for a moment lower their insistence on stylistic subtlety and acknowledge the fresh air brought in by the clear-headed and incisive exploration of the values of another culture. Could he, indeed, have served his purpose or our need better by writing against the tenor of his culture? Perhaps his further novels will help answer the question, but for the present his impact on Pakeha New Zealanders is best summed up by Winston Rhodes as "an impressive attempt to communicate between two cultures which, however much they mingle, are likely to remain different until that remote and unforeseeable time when the traditions on which they are based become undistinguishable."¹²

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⁹Brian J. Murton, "Waituhi, a Place in Maori New Zealand." *New Zealand Geographer*, 35 (April 1979), 27.

¹⁰H. Winston Rhodes, "Whanau," *Landfall*, 29 (June 1975), 164. In a fascinating aperçu of the differences between cultures, Murton notes that untended gardens, while natural to the Maori, are immoral to the Anglo Saxon. *Bridging such a gulf is indeed difficult.*

¹¹John B. Beston, pp. 121-22.

¹²H. Winston Rhodes, "Tangi," *Landfall*, No. 108 (Dec. 1973), p. 351.