

# *The Fiction of Patricia Grace*

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NEW ZEALAND HAS PRODUCED the most distinguished of the ethnic literatures in English that have burgeoned in the South Pacific during the last fifteen years or so. The Maori represent a sizeable body (9%) in the total population of New Zealand and are the best educated of the native peoples of the South Pacific. In the course of their education, which in some cases continues beyond high school, they are introduced to English literature, whose conventions they follow in their own writings, for the literatures of the South Pacific islanders were oral and communal rather than individual in composition.

The two main figures among the Maori fiction-writers are Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace. Grace, the elder of the two (born 1937), published separate stories earlier than Ihimaera (born 1944), but did not publish a collection of her stories, *Waiariki*, until 1975, three years later than Ihimaera's first collection, *Pounamu Pounamu*. Both figures are short story writers and not really novelists, although Ihimaera wrote two novels, *Tangi* (1973) and *Whanau* (1974), before returning to the short story in a second collection, *The New Net Goes Fishing* (1977), and Grace herself produced one novel, *Mutuwhenua* (1978), before returning to the short story in a new collection, *The Dream Sleepers* (1980).

Although the Maori have not enjoyed the material benefits of New Zealand society on equal terms with the Pakeha (the Whites), they have not been excluded from the mainstream of that society to the extent that the native peoples have been in Australia or in Papua New Guinea. Consequently, the Maori have more confidence and pride in themselves than other Pacific peoples surrounded by an overwhelming White society, and the

Maori writers are much more concerned with establishing what constitutes the essence of their identity as a people.

Grace's aim as a Maori author is to present the Maori people as comprehensively as possible, mainly to the Pakeha society around her, but also to her fellow-Maori and, ultimately, to the English world at large. Her main audience is of course the Pakeha: by virtue of numbers, education, and affluence, the Pakeha constitute the principal buyers of fiction in New Zealand. Works by Maori writers, beyond their inherent literary quality, would appeal to various impulses in Pakeha readers: the desire for novelty, interest in a people they commonly regard as inferior, a well-intended (if somewhat superficial) egalitarianism, and an element of self-gratulation that their culture has enriched the scope of Maori life. (Similar reasons lay behind the bestselling success in Australia of Aboriginal writer Kath Walker's collection of poems, *We Are Going*, published in 1964.) Grace is aware that the quality of her work alone will not hold the continued interest of her predominantly Pakeha audience: she must make the Maori attractive to that audience and not alienate it. She must make it clear too that the Maori represent no threat to the privileges that the Pakeha have secured for themselves and, above all, must not accuse the Pakeha. In her Maori audience, Grace seeks to evoke the pleasure of recognizing themselves and to foster pride in their Maori identity. For Pakeha and Maori alike, she tries to establish what constitutes the essence of Maoridom.

In depicting her Maori characters, Grace is concerned most of all with establishing their common humanity. The activities she characteristically shows them engaged in are cyclic ones associated with the phases of life, familiar to all human beings: pregnancy and birth, schooldays, adolescence, courtship and marriage, aging, dying and death. In order to emphasize the universality of these cycles, she likes to link them to the progression of the seasons, like the spring births in "Between Earth and Sky" (*DS*) and "Mirrors" (*DS*).<sup>1</sup> "Valley" (*W*), Grace's most typical story and perhaps also her best, tells of such cyclic events as the raising of a baby, schooldays, and one's first encounter with human death. It is divided into four sections headed "Summer," "Autumn," "Winter," and "Spring"; it is in the "Winter" section, appro-

priate to the cyclic nature of the story, that the teacher in the small school dies, while the "Spring" section celebrates renewal as gardens are planted again and preparations begin for the Spring Fair. Grace is also fond of portraying human routines to emphasize the similarities of Pakeha and Maori lives, as in the title story in *The Dream Sleepers* and in the story that follows it, "Between Earth and Sky," where she depicts the routines of early morning. Her scenes of common recreational activities, too, would kindle in Pakeha and Maori alike an immediate response, the warm pleasure that comes from recognition. The series of five interconnected stories at the end of *The Dream Sleepers* shows the characters first as playing children's games together ("Kepa") and then, as they grow older, taking part in social activities as adolescents and young adults: going to the movies ("The Pictures") or a dance ("Kip").

If it is her fondness for presenting the Maori in scenes of everyday human activities that establishes their common humanity, it is Grace's depiction of them as warm and expansive in their relations with one another that makes them attractive to her readers. Here her own preference for the Maori as a people shows through: when her Maori are together, their warmth and expansiveness contrasts sharply with the Pakeha's tight restraint and withheldness. Even in company, her Pakeha characters seem always alone, while her Maori characters are most alive in the company of others, unreservedly enjoying visits from relatives and friends.<sup>2</sup>

Grace is careful to allay Pakeha fears by stressing that the Maori do not threaten the privileges the Pakeha have arrogated unto themselves. Her Maori characters never aspire very high: having learned early in life to make do with second best, they want only a modest slice of the pie. Only one minor character among her Maori cast is seen in a profession she shares with the Pakeha, the nurse Rawhiti in "Between Earth and Sky"; but while nursing is indeed a profession, it is a service profession in which one receives rather than gives directions. When Linda marries a Pakeha schoolteacher in *Mutuwhenua*, her aspirations do not rise with her social position: they remain the common desires of a young married woman, to have nice clothes and to

make her house attractive. But the house she lives in is rented, and she does not yearn for a house of her own. Continually in Grace's characters, and ultimately in Grace herself, one can perceive an aspect of deference to the Pakeha.

Grace is careful also not to alienate her Pakeha audience by showing her Maori as insisting on their rights. Her Maori are unaggressive, a gentle, noncompetitive people. They will fight for their rights only when it is a question of preventing the alienation of their land, for their land represents their very being. The old man in "Journey" (*DS*) steps out of his normal nonassertive self to fight for his family's land that has been marked out for Government redevelopment, and he responds to his defeat as a sort of annihilation: he is to be cremated when he dies, he announces to his family, for he does not want his bones to be disturbed by bulldozers come to gouge out the land. The Maori's relation to the land is an intensely personal one: they *are* the land. The young man in "And So I Go" (*W*), about to leave his ancestral lands to find work in the city, makes no distinction between his love for his family and his love for the land. In his farewell to the land, he addresses the earth as his mother: "[I] Stretch out my arms on wide Earth Mother and lay my face on hers. Then call out my love" (p. 47). The old Maori woman in "Transition" (*W*) acknowledges that her descendants are sprung from the land as well as from her: "And from the two — the land, the woman — these ones have sprung. And by the land and the woman held and strengthened" (p. 18).

Grace never directly accuses the Pakeha of a basic contempt for the Maori; the closest she comes to it is in the story "Journey," where her Pakeha characters behave with an obtuseness and indifference to Maori sensibilities and values that one has to acknowledge is widespread in Whites' dealings with people of other races who lack power. Throughout her stories (but much less in her novel) Grace illustrates clearly the Pakeha tendency to classify the Maori as a way of dismissing their importance. The opening story in her first collection, "A Way of Talking," focuses directly on this Pakeha habit. When Jane Frazer, the Pakeha dressmaker, mentions in a conversation with Rohe, a visiting Maori university student, that her husband is picking up "the

Maori" to help him cut scrub, Rohe picks up the phrase and leads Jane on to admit that she does not know their names although they know hers. Clearly, Jane does not think of the Maori men as individuals having any importance. At the end of the story Rohe does a send-up of Jane and the Pakeha generally by going on about how "friendly" and "natural" the Maori are, with "absolutely spotless" homes.

Two other stories that deal with Pakeha condescension, "Parade" (*W*) and "Letters from Whetu" (*DS*), avoid direct accusation of the Pakeha simply by presenting graphically the state of affairs in New Zealand. Both stories describe a situation in which a character makes a sacrifice of personal dignity in order to assert his or her dignity as a Maori. The central characters are younger, less sophisticated, and less educated than Rohe, which may be why their perceptions are less balanced than hers, not yet assimilated into their wider view of life. In "Parade," Matewai, realizing that the Pakeha look upon the annual Maori parade as a kind of circus, would like to dissociate herself from the performances, but she readjusts her attitude when her uncle reminds her that the parade is an assertion of Maori dignity that must be maintained, whatever the Pakeha attitude: "It is your job, this. To show others who we are" (p. 88). She must lose her dignity in order to maintain it. In "Letters from Whetu," the student Whetu is about to opt out from becoming an "honorable statistic" within the high school system — that is, a Maori who graduates from high school, presumably going on to a low level but secure office job. Whetu's graduation would stand less to his credit than it would flatter the Pakeha image of themselves as elevating the lives of a people they consider to be in the main shiftless, lacking in persistence and ambition, and so would reinforce rather than dispel racism. Whetu sees fakeries within the school — the posturings of the English teacher and the mutterings of the Math teacher — that to him are a miniature of the Pakeha system. He comes to reject that system with a cynicism beyond his years, but is unable to replace it with anything worthwhile. In depicting a life blighted as it is about to begin its separate existence, "Letters from Whetu" is one of the saddest of Grace's stories.

Although a number of the changes that have attended the Pakeha occupation and development of New Zealand have diminished the fullness of Maori life, Grace does not on that account point an accusing finger at the Pakeha. She is conscious of the damage to the Maori way of life and sense of identity, but restricts herself to recording the changes and their effects. One change that came with the Pakeha was the rise of an urban, wage-earning society that functions by buying and selling; the Maori drift to the city to find employment was in consequence inevitable, and their age-old ties to their land were severed and the ties to their family weakened (illustrated in "And So I Go"). Another change that attended Pakeha settlement and development was pollution of the sea with a lessening of its productivity. Grace not only refrains from holding the Pakeha accountable for the pollution, but actually diverts attention from their responsibility by being deliberately vague when she speaks of the lower yields from the sea at Waiariki: "There are several reasons, all of them scientific, why the shellfish beds are depleted" (p. 41). In further deference to the Pakeha, she invites her readers to assign part of the blame to the Maori, who have lost faith in the efficacy of their rituals, like the practice of urinating on one's kit before gathering the shellfish. "Waiariki" is a story of regret for times that have passed and will not come again as life becomes more complicated: "We cannot have the simple things. I cannot have them for my children and we cannot have full kits any more" (pp. 41-42). The story is not an occasion for accusation.

But Grace is writing to an audience of Maori as well as Pakeha, and in her Maori readers she wishes to arouse pleasure and pride at seeing themselves and their values presented with affection and respect. For both Pakeha and Maori, Grace seeks to clarify the nature of Maoridom. She does not directly discuss what being a Maori means, but her main ideas emerge pretty clearly from her fiction: Maoridom to Grace means such things as having faith in *aroha*, feeling close to the land, entertaining certain beliefs concerning one's relationship to the external world and to the after-life, and sharing the experience of being a Maori in a Pakeha world.

*Aroha*, or love for one another as members of an extended family, is the most basic of Maori values. Because of *aroha*, Grace's Maori characters are never isolated, whatever the nature of the problem that besets them. Whetu, for instance, who seems so alienated in the classroom ("Letters from Whetu"), has a number of good Maori friends outside it; in fact, he counters the tedium of his schoolday by writing letters to them. His friends represent his freer Maori side, a life lived with others in contact with the sea and the open land. And Linda in *Mutuwhenua* owes her happiness, even her life itself, to her Maori family at a time when she feels she cannot communicate with her Pakeha husband. Throughout Grace's writing, but especially in *Mutuwhenua*, there is a persistent contrast, pointed even though implicit, between the spontaneous *aroha* of her Maori characters and the emotional inhibitedness of her Pakeha characters. In *Mutuwhenua*, where her heroine and hero are Maori and Pakeha respectively, Grace is able to oppose the two sets of parents and grandparents and imply a value judgment upon the two cultures. Linda's parents are a vital couple with an ongoing relationship between them, but Graeme's parents are a drab couple of British origin such as one meets in the pages of Barbara Pym: sentient beings surprised early in their acquaintance by an access of enthusiasm and led by it into the long acquaintance of marriage. Even more marked is the difference between the grandmothers of Linda and Graeme: Linda's Nanny Ripeka is a lively and warm old woman who has remained an important member of the family, while Graeme's nameless grandmother is a truculent, cold woman who stands fiercely alone, tolerated rather than cherished. Grace does not actually say that the Pakeha are cold, but her attitude is clear from her portraits.

The Maori feeling of closeness to the land, we have already seen, can amount to near identification with it. We should remember that the Maori, after their initial settlement in New Zealand, were not great travellers or geographers (there is no evidence, for instance, that they ever visited nearby Australia before European settlement there); they saw the world in very local and personal terms. Grace conveys this feeling of a close relationship with the land, but it is not as intense in her as it is in

Witi Ihimaera. Ihimaera represents the relationship between land and people as symbiotic; in *Whanau* he has the land calling out for potatoes to be planted so that it can fulfill its function. Grace does not go as far as that, but empathetically has a plumtree put forth a flower when its owner is delivered of a baby ("Mirrors").

Grace endorses certain old Maori beliefs that do not clash with Christianity. In *Mutuwhenua* she presents the anger of the disturbed dead as an essential cause of the near tragedy. Although she does not explicitly state the Maori belief that it always rains when a Maori dies, as Ihimaera repeatedly does in *Tangi*, she is clearly sympathetic to it, for rain falls at both the death and funeral of Tahī in "Valley": "It is right that it should rain today, that earth and sky should meet and touch, mingle. That the soil pouring into the opened ground should be newly blessed by the sky . . ." (p. 68). There is a strong anthropomorphic strain in Maori thinking, a habit of seeing the physical world as an extension of oneself: the changing seasons seem like physical cycles in one's body, or like changes in mood. When in "Between Earth and Sky" the woman speaks to her slippers, sometimes as if they are an extension of herself, sometimes as if they are a blood relative, she seems to be indulging in this kind of anthropomorphic thinking.

Part of being a Maori, too, is the personal experience of Pakeha prejudice and discrimination, from which derives the ability to recognize quickly stereotyped Pakeha attitudes. In "Kip" (*DS*), for instance, Mereana sees the contempt that Reuben has for Maori girls as she watches him dance with Lizzie; she has obviously seen it before. The ability to see from a Maori viewpoint is only possible if one is a Maori; the most sympathetic Pakeha is necessarily myopic.

Grace was preceded by Ihimaera in her attempts to clarify what it means to be a Maori, and her ideas tend to reflect his. But there are also important differences between the two writers: Unlike Ihimaera, Grace does not deal with Maori ritual like the tangi. The word *marae* hardly occurs in her writings; and she never mentions the Maori meeting house, *Rongopai*, a central and indeed living character in Ihimaera's *Whanau*.<sup>8</sup> (Perhaps she felt that the meeting house, being a cohesive force in Maori cul-



ture, could represent something of a threat to the Pakeha.) Nor does she refer to Maori legends like those of Maui or Rongo or to Maori history, other than to have a group of Maori in "Parade" chant the names of the canoes that brought the original settlers from Hawaiki, a legend that is familiar enough to educated New Zealanders.

In the area of Maori beliefs, too, there are differences between Grace and Ihimaera, Grace being the more compliant Christian. Although like Ihimaera she writes sympathetically of the continued interest of the dead in the living (as when the spirit of the old woman warns of the danger to her grandson in "Huria's Rock") and of a bird as the medium of communication between dead and living (the morepork that announces death in "At the River"), she does not share his interest in the power of inanimate objects. The notion that certain objects have mana, like the greenstone *patu* (weapon) in Ihimaera's *The New Net Goes Fishing*, does not occur in her writings. The greenstone object washed down from the hills and found by the children in *Mutu-whenua* is returned to the hills, but from a feeling of appropriateness and respect, it seems, not from any fear of its mana. Unlike Ihimaera, too, Grace has shown no interest in Maori genealogy (one of the stories in *The New Net*, "Gathering of the Whakapapa," deals with the assembling of a genealogy). Maori genealogy has lost some of its meaning as intermarriage has increased between the races, and Grace herself is only part-Maori. What runs through the various differences that one notes between the two writers is an underlying difference in attitude and hence in purpose: Ihimaera is concerned with establishing a great and special past for the Maori — a past of legend, of gods and powerful forces, all expressions of a realm of experience outside that of the Pakeha — whereas Grace stresses what Maori and Pakeha have in common in presentday New Zealand. As a woman in nonfeminist New Zealand, she may be thought of as aggressive if she deals with the differences.

Grace rarely treats situations of racial tension, and when she does, she contrives to reduce the tension. The one clash that occurs in her fiction, between the old Maori man and the Pakeha officials in "Journey," has its roughness diminished by being nar-

rated in retrospect: we see the clash as the old man relives it in his tired mind during his journey home. The fact that few Pakeha appear alongside the Maori in Grace's short stories is itself evidence of her wish to avoid dealing with interracial tensions. Nearly all her stories are told from the viewpoint of a Maori, in the first person; she is fond of the Maori and identifies with them.<sup>4</sup> The Pakeha in her short stories are secondary figures with stereotyped attitudes and values. They are not portrayed favourably, although Grace is restrained in her criticism, showing them as obtuse or condescending rather than illwilled. Only the officials in "Journey" or Reuben in "Kip" are actually contemptuous towards the Maori.

Grace's desire to avoid offending her audience may be laudable, but it limits her artistic achievement. Nowhere is the force or even the relevance of her work so weakened by her earnest avoidance of giving offense as in *Mutuwhenua*. The novel deals with a Maori-Pakeha marriage, yet Grace avoids dealing with the very subject one would expect her to consider in undertaking such a theme: cultural gaps between the races that are possibly unbridgeable. Fears of problems that may develop in an interracial marriage are not given countenance in the novel, although such fears have a very real basis in everyday life; the problems that do arise are completely externalized, removed from Linda and Graeme personally, both before and after the marriage. Before the marriage, fears of difficulties arising from the marriage are transferred from Linda to her Nanny Ripeka, the family member most opposed to the marriage on the grounds that it would lessen Linda's Maori identity (as a grandparent, Nanny Ripeka stands for the preservation of traditional Maori values). Until her conversations with Nanny Ripeka, Linda has not had to contend with fears of her own devising. After the marriage, fears do breed within Linda of unbridgeable gaps between her world and that of her husband, and problems do arise from her Maori roots, but from an unexpected area — racial memories arising from her unconscious. The house where she and Graeme go to live is built over an old Maori burial ground, and she is beset by a series of dreams that call her to death. Not feeling sure of Graeme's understanding, she does not tell him about her

dreams until it is almost too late. When appealed to, he responds with quick sympathy, and the threat to their marriage proves no threat — they simply move elsewhere. Thus Linda's fears are made by Grace to be built on incorrect assumptions: the problems in the marriage come from areas outside personal backgrounds. Grace plainly does not wish to deal with personal misunderstandings within an interracial marriage: she seems to hurry the couple into the ill omened house so that marital difficulties can arise from Linda's racial unconscious alone. Grace's guiding purpose in this novel is to avoid hurting anyone, especially the Pakeha; but that makes her wind and set the alarm when Linda and Graeme marry only to prevent it from going off. The result is that the book is anticlimactic.

Grace's desire to bring Pakeha and Maori close together, to avoid stirring up old prejudices or resentments, puts constraints also upon her characterization of the hero and heroine in *Mutuwhenua*. Graeme is idealized and, in the process, stripped of individualizing characteristics. He is made extraordinarily affectionate for a Pakeha man, using expressions like "my love" and assuring Linda that nothing else matters so long as she loves him; Pakeha men are more remarkable for their inhibition than their articulation of the softer emotions. Linda is not idealized but rather "universalized," made into almost any Pakeha woman; only occasionally is she distinctly Maori. Grace's attempt to establish her common humanity tends to drain her, not only of her Maori identity, but of any strong individuality. Only within her family does Linda have a personality of her own; in her life outside her family, she is timid and pallid. Her aspirations in marriage are those of the conventional Pakeha housewife, to keep house and buy things. What Grace has done in her characterization of her two main figures, in essence, is to endow Graeme with Maori qualities and Linda with Pakeha qualities. Graeme's warmth will win Maori approval and flatter the Pakeha, and Linda's pursuit of the Pakeha dream will allay Pakeha nervousness about Maori women. In trying to bring the two cultures closer, Grace has lessened the vitality of the main figures, and with them the novel.

By renouncing unique qualities of Maori life as subject matter, by avoiding scenes of tension or aspects of discrimination (a word

that never occurs in her fiction), Grace considerably narrows the range of what she can write about. Her reluctance to give offense deprives her of a forceful stance, without which a strong narrative stance is difficult to maintain. She is not an outstanding teller of stories: her strength lies in presenting scenes where *aroha* rather than suspense or conflict prevails. Her stories remain within the dimensions she allots to them: her characters, for all their vitality, stay within their story, and her stories cover so short a period of time that narrative development is normally not an issue. Grace excels at vignettes: she is the master of the Maori pastoral. Even in her novel *Mutuwhenua*, the most memorable scene is the inset idyll, the gathering of the *kai moana* (sea food). Time dissolves and the adults become children again; all their usual preoccupations, which make up the substance of the narrative, evaporate. In simple pastoral scenes like this, Grace probably does more to promote understanding of the Maori than through her conscious efforts elsewhere to bring the two cultures together.

Although Grace's stories are for the most part non-narrative, they do not seem static, for there is in them a sense of ongoing life and continuing relationships. Appropriately, *Waiariki* is dedicated *mo aku tamariki* (for my children), for her children bear her blood to the generations that follow. The moral earnestness that runs through her writing is lightened by her humanity and enjoyment of life and the natural world around her, and by the lyricism of her style, as in her description of the various seasons in "Valley." Far from being alienated from her society, she is an acceptant person, and her stories overwhelmingly end in acceptance of the prevailing state of affairs. The young boy of "Beans" (*DS*) seems to reflect the rush of her own energy before she checks it and submits it to rigorous artistic discipline. Always these two aspects of Grace are present: on the one hand her exuberant enjoyment of life, on the other her moral seriousness, turned to advantage in her careful, exacting craftsmanship.

Patricia Grace is one of a number of ethnic writers given impulse, beyond their own creative drive, by special conditions that prevailed throughout the world between the late 1960's and the late 1970's. That short period was one of liberal hopes and ideals for a number of suppressed groups — students and women, for

instance, as well as various ethnic groups. It was an exciting time of discovering their identity, developing pride in it, and asserting it. In the South Pacific, Papua New Guinea, the Ellice Islands, the Gilbert Islands, and the Solomons all achieved independence during the 1970's, culminating a long and intensified insistence on their own identity, and they were joined in 1980 by the New Hebrides. But as the 1980's have advanced, many of the hopes and ideals of the 1970's have been replaced by timid conservatism. Over the last five years, the driving force behind the ethnic literatures in the South Pacific has weakened, and few younger writers of sustained talent are appearing there. The prognosis for a second flowering is not at present encouraging, any more than the prospect of an improvement in the position of women and Blacks is hopeful: literature is not divorced from wider world movements. In the near future, what is likely in South Pacific ethnic literatures is a fairly lackluster period until the ideological pendulum moves in a liberal direction again, when another body of writers will appear in response to the renewed cultural stimulus. Thanks to the work of writers like Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace, they will have a firm base to build upon.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The first time that any of Grace's stories is referred to, the collection in which it appears is indicated by the initials of the title (*W* or *DS*). All Grace's books have been published by Longman Paul in Auckland.
- <sup>2</sup> Grace's opposition of Maori and Pakeha temperaments is corroborated by the American sociologist David Ausubel, who visited New Zealand in the late 1950's and reported his observations in *The Fern and the Tiki: An American View of New Zealand* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1960).
- <sup>3</sup> The tangi is the formal Maori funeral ceremony, lasting several days. Ihimaera has maintained that it is the most central of all Maori rituals. The marae is the central square in a village, the focus of community life, where Maori protocol is strictly observed.
- <sup>4</sup> The five loosely linked stories at the end of *The Dream Sleeper* form the notable exception to this observation. Two other stories, "The Dream" (*W*) and "Journey" (*DS*), are told in what looks like the third person but is really a transposition of the first person: the idelect and view-point of the narrator are those of the main character.