

*Keri Hulme's "The Bone People,"
and the Pegasus Award for
Maori Literature*

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GREAT EXCITEMENT HAS ATTENDED the publication of this novel in New Zealand. So far, nothing I have seen written about *The Bone People* could be described as "critical." It has been received with acclamation. The *New Zealand Listener* gave it not one review but two—both by women, one Maori, one Pakeha (European). As far as I can recall both were direct addresses to the author. They told her she had spoken for us all, or for all women, or all Maoris; but it was impossible to guess what kind of novel was being reviewed. The book's first printing sold out at once. Its publisher, Spiral, a "feminist collective," reprinted and again it sold out. Now it is to be reissued by a commercial publisher, Hodder & Stoughton. Foreign rights are being negotiated. It has won the New Zealand Book Award for fiction, and also a one-off award called the Pegasus Prize for Maori Literature, about which I will have more to say. Television, which in New Zealand is usually uninterested in the literary scene, has turned its cameras on Keri Hulme. From being unknown to all but a few, she has probably become one of the best-known New Zealand writers. Bits of mythology have begun to form around the book, abetted by an introduction in which the author says three publishers "turned it down" before Spiral accepted it.

Criticism is always a dialogue. One seldom has the chance to speak first, and what the critic says is always partly in answer to what has been said already. In the case of Keri Hulme's novel "what has been said" is largely a babble of excited voices in

public places. *The Bone People* touches a number of currently, or fashionably, sensitive nerves. New Zealand intellectual life, limping along in the wake of the world, has been lately lacerating itself into consciousness that racism and sexism exist. Where they don't exist, zealots nonetheless find them. Keri Hulme, a woman and, let's say for the moment, a Maori, her novel published by a "feminist collective" after being "turned down" by three others — this is the stuff for those zealots! As in the case of most books which take off publicly like rockets, a lot of the energy has nothing to do with the quality of the work. It is, however, the quality of the work that will determine what future the book is to have.

For the record let it be said first that of the three who were offered the novel before Spiral saw it, one was a feminist publisher who thought it insufficiently feminist for her list; another was a woman publisher who thought the book needed more work before it was ready for publication; and the third was a commercial publisher who was anxious about the novel's length and its prospects in the market-place. The latter two deny having "turned it down." They wanted more work done on it. From a purely commercial point of view it could be said they made a mistake in not accepting the book as it was when the author declined to make cuts and revisions. From a literary point of view I think the author made a mistake in rejecting all advice about how the typescript might be edited and improved.

It should also be said that Spiral received a government grant which made the publication possible, and that this was on the recommendation of the Literary Fund Advisory Committee, consisting at that time of five men and one woman. Spiral then produced a book as badly edited, printed, and proof-read as any I have seen, mismanaged its finances, and had to ask for a further grant before a reprint could be done. The Literary Fund Advisory Committee, which had never been in doubt about Keri Hulme's talent, or that her book deserved support, bent its rules a little to make a second grant possible.

If *The Bone People* is not in any very obvious way a "feminist" novel, in what sense is it a Maori novel? The question arises especially because of the Pegasus Award mentioned above. Every

year (or second year?) the Mobil company chooses a country to which this literary award shall be made. The prize on this occasion was to be \$4000 US, a visit to the United States valued at \$6000 US, and a guarantee of publication there. For 1984 the company chose New Zealand and decided, after consultation with government and other officials, that the prize should be offered for a novel or autobiography by a Maori, written in the past decade, in English or in Maori. It is hard to see the inclusion of the Maori language as much more than a gesture (and in fact at least one of the judges knew no Maori). If any modern literary writing has been done in the Maori language, none has been published; and that is likely to continue to be the case. For the present, anyway, all Maori writers of any consequence write in English; and probably few of them know more than a little of the Maori language. The works entered had thus to be considered "Maori" not in language, or in form, but by virtue of the racial antecedents of the authors.

The award raises the question of the usefulness, and even the honesty, of what is called "affirmative action" in favour of groups disadvantaged by history. Maori writers now sell at least as well as, often better than, the most successful Pakeha writers. They compete successfully for government grants and literary awards. Why then a special award for a Maori writer? If the intention had been to promote traditional Maori culture, surely the language ought to have been Maori. And if not Maori language, then at least the form required would need to have been one of those belonging to an oral tradition — poetry, songs, laments, or some re-telling of local myth or legend. If the intention was simply to help a Maori writer, even then it is hard to see why poetry should have been excluded, since poetry is something which exists in the Maori tradition, while the novel, obviously, does not. And finally, what is "a Maori writer?" Of Keri Hulme's eight great-grandparents one only was Maori. Hulme was not brought up speaking Maori, though like many Pakeha New Zealanders she has acquired some in adult life. She claims to identify with the Maori part of her inheritance — not a disadvantageous identification at the present time — but it seems to me that some essential Maori elements in her novel are un-

convincing. Her uses of Maori language and mythology strike me as willed, self-conscious, not inevitable, not entirely authentic. Insofar as she is an observer of things outside herself, Hulme has observed Maoris and identified with them. If that is what constitutes a "Maori" writer, however, then Pakeha writers like James K. Baxter and Roderick Finlayson (to name two obvious cases) could be said to have been more successfully "Maori" than Keri Hulme.

The Bone People, I would be inclined to argue, is a novel by a Pakeha which has won an award intended for a Maori. The fault is not Keri Hulme's. It is in the conception of such an award, which is thoroughly confused, and is in any case patronizing, suggesting that Maori writers can't compete openly with Europeans. It doesn't surprise me that Witi Ihimaera refused to enter his work for the Pegasus award.

The Bone People is a novel about violence. It is also about love and about identity. The love and the violence have a common source. All three of the main characters, a woman, a man, and a child, could be described as violent, though the propensity exhibits itself in different ways. All three are strong characters. All three, but especially the woman and the child, are sharply portrayed. They form a close unit. What is interesting about the novel is that their bonds exist outside biology. It is the biological pattern imitated. The man's own wife and child have died. The boy he acts as father to comes as from nowhere, born out of the sea. And although a bond like sexual love grows between the man and the woman, there is no physical contact. That, I think, is the imaginative strength of the work — that it creates a sexual union where no sex occurs, creates parental love where there are no physical parents, creates the stress and fusion of a family where there is no actual family.

Interviews with Keri Hulme have shown how closely her central character, Kerewin Holmes, is based on herself. Both the novelist and her character describe themselves as sexless, sexually drawn neither to male nor female, "neuter."

I spent a considerable amount of time when I was, o, adolescent, wondering why I was different, whether there were other people like me. Why, when everyone else was fascinated by their de-

veloping sexual nature, I couldn't give a damn. I've never been attracted to men. Or women. Or anything else. It's difficult to explain, and nobody has ever believed it when I have tried to explain, but while I have an apparently normal female body, I I don't have any sexual urge or appetite. I think I am a neuter.
(p. 276)

This is Kerewin Holmes speaking. Most of it, almost word for word, Keri Hulme has said of herself in a television interview.

Many — perhaps most — works of fiction are fuelled by sexual energy. Here is a novel fuelled by its lack. What for most of us would be merely the domestic subject is for Keri Hulme, I think, the equivalent of romance — the realm of the unattainable. I mean this in no derogatory sense. Whatever confusions of motive and propulsion there may have been in responses to this book (and I think it is worthwhile attempting to unravel some of them) it is not for nothing that there has been so much excitement. *The Bone People* is at the core a work of great simplicity and power.

The narrative creates a simple pattern. The three principal characters are drawn slowly together to form a strong unit, though one in which negative forces are working. A catastrophe occurs which blows them apart. Each, alone, is driven by circumstances, through pain and suffering, to the edge of destruction. Each of the two adults has been partly to blame for the catastrophe, and each is saved from death by the intervention of what appears to be a force from the lower echelons of the Divine. At the end the three come together again, purged, and certain of their need for one another.

To recognize this pattern in which are mixed, not always successfully, a remorseless realism with elements of the mythical, the magical and the mystical, one must stand off at some distance from the novel. Seen from a nearer point of focus it is likely to be described in sociological terms. Joe Gillayley loves his adopted child dearly, but is subject to pressures he cannot quite recognize or control. He drinks, beats the child, and finally very nearly kills him.

Simon, the child of unknown parentage, survivor of a wreck, with the marks still on him of beatings previous to those inflicted

by Joe, never speaks, but is able to write and signal messages, and to communicate his love, his rages, and his intelligence. His love for Joe is almost unwavering, despite the beatings. Simon is a major fictional character, the most complete, convincing, and fascinating of the three, and all the more remarkable in that his personality has to be conveyed to us without spoken language.

Kerewin is the isolated artist who has run out of inspiration. She lives, literally, in a tower of her own making, which (again quite literally) has to be broken down before she can paint again. The obviousness of the symbolism doesn't detract from the authenticity of the portrait. Kerewin, one feels, is bold enough and innocent enough to live by her symbols, as Yeats did when he bought a tower from Ireland's Congested Roads Board for £35 and restored it so he could write of himself "pacing upon the battlements." In fact Kerewin strikes me as more Irish than Maori, word-obsessed, imaginative, musical, unstable, something of a mystic, full of bluster and swagger, charm and self-assertion. All this is shown, not from the outside, but from within, so the novel partakes of Kerewin's strengths but is not detached from her weaknesses. Like its central character, *The Bone People* seems at times disarmingly, at times alarmingly, naive.

The novel is successful from the start in portraying the character of Simon and the way he insinuates himself into Kerewin's isolated life. Joe, on the other hand, strikes me as a character who is never quite perfectly formed in the novelist's imagination, and there are times when his cast of mind and turn of phrase seem to belong to Kerewin rather than to himself. The relationship between the two is less than convincing in its early stages; and though it becomes more real as the novel continues, this reader, at least, never felt entirely secure in his "suspension of disbelief." To give only one example: Joe is represented as physically powerful, a fairly traditional Maori male, though with more education than most. He is kind, affectionate, but with a dangerously short fuse, precarious pride, and a propensity for violence. Yet when an argument between him and Kerewin turns into a fight, Kerewin, who has learned something like kung fu during a visit to Japan, beats him effortlessly, a beating which he accepts with great good humour and with no apparent

damage to his ego. That is not the only point at which the reader is likely to feel the novel has taken a dive from reality into wishful daydream.

Worse, however, is the sequence in which Joe comes close to death and then is rescued by an old Maori man who has waited his whole lifetime under semi-divine instruction to perform just this rescue, so he can pass on to the man he saves proprietorial rights over a piece of land and the talisman in which its spirit is preserved. There would be no point in recounting in detail the physical and mystical experiences which make up this section of the novel. It should be enough to say that I found it, read either as Maori lore or as fiction, almost totally spurious. There is a parallel set of events in which Kerewin, who appears to be dying of cancer, is saved by the intervention of an old woman and a magical, or simply herbal, potion.

From the first time I read letters Keri Hulme addressed to the Literary Fund Advisory Committee requesting assistance (that was more than ten years ago) I have never doubted that she has a powerful and original literary talent. I have admired some of her stories published in *Islands*. And I was sure Auckland University Press made the right decision when it accepted her collection of poems, *Moeraka Conversations*, for publication. Her talent is abundantly clear in *The Bone People*. But all the indications are that, for reasons which are not strictly literary, the achievement of this novel is going to be inflated beyond its worth. I'm glad *The Bone People* has been written and published. I'm sorry it wasn't revised, decently copy-edited, and presented to better advantage. I'm sure its author will go on to better things. But I have to admit that when I stand back from the novel and reflect on it there is, in addition to the sense of its power, which I have acknowledged, and which is probably the most important thing to be said about it, a bitter aftertaste, something black and negative deeply ingrained in its imaginative fabric, which no amount of revision or editing could have eliminated, and which, for this reader at least, qualifies the feeling that the publication of this book is an occasion for celebration.

I'm not sure whether I should even attempt to explain to myself what it is constitutes that negative element, or whether it

should simply be mentioned and left for others to confirm or deny. But I suspect it has its location in the central subject matter, and that this is something it shares (to give another point of reference) with Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*, a work which also presents extreme violence against a child, yet demands sympathy and understanding for the man who commits it. In principle such charity is admirable. In fact, the line between charity and imaginative complicity is very fine indeed.