

# *“The Techniques of Storytelling”: An Interview with Albert Wendt*

JUNIPER ELLIS

**A**LBERT WENDT is an acclaimed novelist, poet, and short-story writer from Western Samoa. He is currently Professor of English at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. Beginning with the publication of his first novel in 1973, he has been central to the creation of a written Pacific Islands literature. His epic novel *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1979) won the New Zealand Wattie Book of the Year Award. He has promoted Pacific literature by teaching literature and writing at universities in Samoa, Fiji, and New Zealand. He has also edited two landmark anthologies of contemporary Pacific literature, *Lali* (1980) and *Nuanua* (1995). Wendt spoke with me at the University of Auckland on 3 September 1996.

*I would like to begin by discussing your most recent works, the novels “Ola” [1991] and “Black Rainbow” [1992], and the collection of poetry “Photographs” [1995]. You have also published part of a sequel to “Black Rainbow,” to be called “A Guide to Whistling.” One of the most prominent aspects of these works is your use of experimental narrative techniques. Could you comment on that?*

My main interest has been in storytelling *and* in the techniques of storytelling. That is really the challenge for the storyteller: how do you change the story as you go along to maintain your interest and the interest of the listener or the reader? What is at issue is the way a story is told. Samoa is still very rich in oral traditions and literature. I was introduced to these stories when I was very, very young. That is why I have always been interested in the techniques of telling stories.

After *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* [1979], which took me about 12 years to write, I did not want to write any more *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*. So there was a long period in which I did not publish another novel. I was working on what eventually came to be called *Ola* [literally, "life"]. And one of the challenges I had was how to use a lot of my travel experience in the novel. I made a long trip, for two weeks, to Israel as a guest of the Israeli government. I do not normally keep notes on my travels. But on that particular trip, I sent aerograms to my three children, and the aerograms were really a record of my journey. When I returned to Samoa, where we were living at the time, I used that as the basis for writing long, journalistic pieces on Israel, pieces which I never published. Those became the basis of the section on Israel, in *Ola*. But I did not want to just make it a travel book. For me, there is no difference between biography and fiction; this is why you will notice in my more recent novels that I use a lot of immediate personal experiences. I had a problem deciding the voice of the main character. At the time I was accused of being anti-female and anti-women, by some of the critics. I agreed with some of the criticism. So I thought that I would make the main character a woman, and see if I could explore my feminine side, using this fairly factual information I had written down. I felt the novel was still unbalanced, then the character of her father entered, and the story became that of a daughter and father.

That relationship became the main thing I was interested in exploring. What would happen if he accompanied her to Israel? That, of course, fits in with the Samoan dream. My father's generation dreams about going to the Holy Land and exploring the world of the Bible. So I take them on that journey, from her viewpoint. I discovered, as her character unfolded, that *Ola* was educated in New Zealand, on scholarship, and, later, travelled widely in the world. She was also undergoing the breakup of her third marriage. Marriage breakups are, of course, a common happening in our stressed-out century.

After Israel, they return to Samoa, and the last section of *Ola* addresses the heart of Samoan culture. If you want to understand Samoan culture, one of the most central rituals is the death ritual, the funeral. I do not describe her father's funeral in detail

in the book, but it allows her father, before he dies, to make his *mavaega*, his last will, and to play a trick on her by giving her 20 blank pages and making her promise she would accept their highest family title. That would tie her to the huge responsibility of leading their *Aiga* [or extended family].

*“Ola”* presents a number of different narratives, from the travel narrative to letters, lists, even two complete short stories published in your previous collections. In the opening and closing pages of the novel, there is a suggestion that an editor must assemble these texts into some form. And there is a playful relationship between you, as author, and that figure of the editor.

I learned a hell of a lot writing *Ola*, in putting it together. It has puzzled many people. I think a lot of people were expecting me to publish another *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*. There is a lot of *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* in *Ola*, but *Ola* is a very different novel. I could have told the whole story in chronological order—the trip to Israel, New Zealand, the return to Samoa. But I thought, “What would happen if I split it up and threw in these other chapters?” And it did not really matter to me whether it worked or not as a whole unit. It does not matter what novel you give a reader, parts will work, other parts will not, depending on the reader.

The reaction to *Ola* was what I had expected. My children loved the sections on Israel and New Zealand and Samoa, because those were some of their experiences. Some of my Samoan friends loved the Israel and New Zealand sections; they did not much like the Samoan section because they thought I was too tough on our own people. They should have read the original manuscript, before I toned it down. A particular generation of *Pakeha* [white] elderly males thought I was unfair to racism in New Zealand. (How can you be unfair to racism?) Samoan women, who were *Ola*’s age and had been through the same experience of being educated abroad and who were widely travelled and had survived broken marriages, loved the book. I had tried to rewrite the whole book, turning *Ola* into a male character, but *Ola* had refused to become a man. So to be true to the character, I had left it as it was.

Throughout *Ola*, I also play some tricks. At the end of the book, the novel is attributed to someone called Pati Tuaopepe. I gave it to my publisher, who really liked the novel but said to me, “You are distancing yourself too much from it by attributing it to this fictitious person.” I said, “But it is not a fictitious person, that’s my Samoan name, that’s the name my family calls me by.” All the people really close to me call me Pati. People who do not know will think that it is another fictional character, and you are deliberately left with that.

I put in the name to create the question—whether the narrator is really male or female. Some people will say it is a cop-out; I do not mind that either. I mean, how could *Ola* have been written by someone else but me? A novel is artifice; it is a bag of tricks to persuade readers to believe what the novelist is saying. I want readers to work out the tricks I use.

*Ola* was published 10 years after *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, and it has puzzled a lot of people. But the biggest tribute paid to it was when the novelist and ex-Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, Tom Davis, came here to give a series of lectures, and at a public reception afterwards I overheard him telling someone that *Ola* was the greatest novel that he had ever read. It was quite a tribute to the book, to my friend Ola.

*“Black Rainbow” in particular juxtaposes texts that derive from multiple cultures and forms. It is a novel that calls attention to its own status as a novel. How do you relate its concern with history to its setting in a futuristic dystopic New Zealand?*

While *Ola* was still being written, I published a short story called “Black Rainbow” [1988] in *Metro* magazine. That story led to the novel, *Black Rainbow*. Every time I write a story it threatens to become a novel. That is why, at times, I end up having three novels on the go. So *Black Rainbow* started with this futuristic short story, which became a challenge to write a novel about “the future.” Science fiction, or futuristic work, is not really about the future but about the present. (This is the premise that most reviewers forget.) In *Black Rainbow*, I write about race relations and power in New Zealand; about the manipulation of power, who suffers from it, and how that affects the people in power. As

you know, I have been writing about that in all of my books. Now I wanted to set it in the future. *Black Rainbow*, as you say, is really about other science fiction novels, other futuristic novels, and other novels about power and race relations in New Zealand and anywhere. It allowed me more freedom. Instead of tying it to actual historical events, I could create events, and so on.

I also look at the way New Zealand history has been constructed. It has been constructed by the colonizers who took over this country, and wrote it to suit themselves. Their histories are their version of things, and they do not want other competing versions. Now that the Tangata Maori and other indigenous people are strong and wanting decolonization, you cannot stop their versions, their histories; and the colonizers do not like it. So I explore what could happen if this power group tried to ban history, any type of history.

The novel was influenced by Milan Kundera. With me now, one of the strengths of a novel comes from a reader understanding where you, the author, are coming from. Readers are very interested in the way you include books and other literature, authors, artists, film and television. Readers recognize that a novel is artifice, anyway. A novel is artifice, but I also want to address political issues. Even though I realize now that novels cannot change society really, they may be able to influence the ways some people perceive some things—for example, how to see marriage, sunsets, babies, the wind and rain.

*You call attention to the sources and influences on your works, and you also retain specific cultural and historical situations. How would you relate your work to Samoan storytelling and to features of postmodernism?*

Moving into this freer area in *Black Rainbow* allowed me to do all sorts of things which can be called postmodernist. As I have said, postmodernism is not new. For instance, my grandmother used to tell us *fagogo*, traditional stories, and she would stop if she realized we were getting bored and falling asleep; she would wake us up by saying, "Wake up or the story will not continue," or she would say, "I want you now to sing the *tagi*." In *fagogo*, there is a chant that you must chant back, so the storyteller will know you are still listening. If she found you getting bored, she would

switch the story, she would go off on another tangent. Even though a *fagogo* has a set form, she would go off onto another subplot. She would say, "Well, remember this other story," and off she would go, and then come back to the main story. Or she would start singing a song. The supposedly "postmodernist" mix is not new.

We see the world through our own experience and culture and we forget that there are other ways of viewing reality. For instance, most postmodern literature (and the analysis of that literature) that I have read have been very Western; and when they say that postmodernism is new, it is new within that Western context. But it is not new in other literary and cultural traditions. It depends on how you define postmodernism; if you define postmodernism as pastiche, as acknowledging all the sources, making the artifice visible, and having the process of putting the book together become a major part of the book, then it is not new in Samoan ways of seeing. The first visual postmodernism I encountered was when I saw the Pompidou Centre, where all the plumbing and innards of the building are "exposed." It was the first time I had seen that—the artifice and blood vessels and entrails exposed. And it is great, what is wrong with showing it?

Also, to keep myself going and to remain interested in a novel I am writing, I have to explore and develop different literary tricks. In *Black Rainbow*, as you have quite rightly recognized, there are many books I have read, a library full of them. Many films too. My favorite food. My children also. When Mele, my second daughter, launched the book on the university *marae*, she said, "Of course I knew that we would be in this book, me and my sister and my brother. We are in there. My father has just spelled our names backwards. Some of our characteristics are also in there!" I name some of the hotels, streets, and places in *Black Rainbow* after some of my friends. There is a Selwyn Muru hotel, a Bill Pearson hotel. So at a recent party, Selwyn Muru greeted Bill Pearson with, "It's great meeting another hotel." I also have fun playing with the names of friends (and people I dislike).

But if you give the novel to American readers, who know nothing about Auckland and nothing about my friends, they will read it just as a novel. They will get something different from it. It

is an added dimension, really. Some criticize it, saying I use a lot of stereotypes, such as the Master Computer. They do not realize it is deliberate. I am parodying what happens in science fiction and in films of the past. And what escapes them is the significance of *The Bone People*, the Master Computer's favorite novel. In *Black Rainbow*, there is even a novel called *Black Rainbow*. It is all constructed. But the novel is political, and I am committed to the political views in it. *Black Rainbow* continues my exploration of colonialism and its effects.

The reaction of the younger generation to *Black Rainbow* has been very positive. There is, however, little respect for fantasy or science fiction writing in New Zealand. *Black Rainbow* did not get many reviews in this country, or very perceptive reviews. Some people criticized me by asking what the hell I was doing writing this type of novel.

*The published portion of your sequel to "Black Rainbow" takes up the same issues of power and history. In what directions do you take the sequel?*

*A Guide to Whistling* began because for a long time I had this young boy, a siffleur or master whistler, whistling in my head. I wrote a short story about him, which I titled, "The Don'ts of Whistling" [1992]. The story was going to be called "A Guide to Whistling," but I thought, "No, I'll leave that for a novel." I started exploring his life, and it dawned on me that I was writing a continuation of *Black Rainbow*. His father is going to be a character from *Black Rainbow*, with a very mysterious background. In *A Guide to Whistling*, the father visits his family, his wife and child, only once a year. And there is an unwritten rule in the family: you must never ask him what he does. There is an ominous feeling that the father's secret life is quite menacing, that he is involved in activities that you and I would not be involved in. I explore that in the novel, and I explore the life of a very bright young man, who instead of going to piano lessons, goes to a whistling teacher. The extinct volcanic cones of Auckland feature very prominently in the novel. I restore to the landscape of Auckland the original Maori maps. (As you know, I do the same in *Black Rainbow*.)

I am restoring all the maps that were here before. Geogra-

phical maps, political maps, cultural maps, and emotional maps. The other day, I talked to a Sixth-Form class [equivalent to Grade 12] about the novels I am writing now, and I said, "Do you know where Maungakiekie is?" Most of them shook their heads. I said, "Well, that's the original name for the cone you call One Tree Hill. Do you know where Maungawhau is?" Some of them said Mount Eden. Colonizers always impose their arrogant maps on the peoples and countries they colonize. They erase or rewrite the histories of those peoples. My novels try to decolonize.

*How does your poetry relate to your concern with the different boundaries that people create, in geography or in culture?*

My favorite reading is still poetry, even though I love reading fiction. I publish only about one or two poems a year. The poems in *Photographs* are a selection of poems written over the last ten years, since 1986. Most of my poems are about my life and extended family or *Aiga*. I tell people that most of the family members in the poems actually exist, but there are some who exist *only* in my poems, that I conjure up. Readers have to distinguish between the two, if they have to distinguish at all. In many ways, my *imaginary* family are more real to me than my *real* family. When I say that to my students, they look at me and ask, "What do you mean?" My answer? "Look, the most influential people who ever existed on this planet have been imaginary people." If you look at all the stories of our culture, the oral traditions, at the stories of *atua* and mythological heroes and creatures, they are absolutely crucial in shaping our ways of thinking and behaving and dreaming.

Even if I dislike Walt Disney's right-wing politics, the fictional characters he created, like Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse, have been very influential, internationally, in the way that we perceive the world. Film and television media reach millions of people. (The most powerful nation on earth voted an *actor* their President.) Donald Duck is more real to most people than other human beings. Can we separate the "reality" of cartoon and fictional characters from "real" characters? So *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* [1988] becomes a very important film in *Black Rainbow*. In that marvellous, frightening film, "real life" detectives enter



the cartoon world to hunt killers who are cartoon figures. It is a very philosophical film, a view of reality that suits mine. There is no difference between constructed characters and real life characters. All people, individuals, once we *write* them down, become substitutes, constructions of the author. For me, well-rounded fictional characters are more memorable than “real” people. So I do not try any more to hide the artifice and the process.

*Your continuing examination of narratives and identities includes identifying the political implications of literature and art. Could you comment for a North America audience about some of the story behind the Black Rainbow lithograph that appears throughout that novel?*

Ralph Hotere, one of Aotearoa’s major artists and a Maori, is one of my closest friends. One of the first things he gave me was a print, a *Black Rainbow* print. Every time the French exploded a nuclear test in Moruroa in the Pacific, he would attack it by doing another print in his *Black Rainbow* series. That print became the central icon in *Black Rainbow*. In the “Black Rainbow” short story, the print appears on the wall, in the sitting room of the two main characters’ apartment. (In a novel, one of the techniques I use to hold it together is recurring symbols or motifs.) In the *Black Rainbow* series, Ralph always has a clock with numbers from one to fourteen somewhere on the prints. A clock of doom? I have never asked him. When the time runs out, it is going to be all over for us. And how can you have a rainbow that is black? The rainbow becomes, in Ralph’s symbolic system, an image of destruction. But then there is always a double meaning: in Maori and Polynesian cultures, *pouliuli* or the colour black is a fertile colour, a fecund darkness. So by calling it “Black Rainbow” there is still an element of hope. Of course, a rainbow, no matter how black it is, is also a symbol of hope—for me, that is.

Most of Ralph’s work makes us re-examine darkness in the Maori way, in the Polynesian way. We have to look on the night as a fecund image out of which life comes. It is not a dying, sterile color. By exploring blackness, Ralph revives the Polynesian meanings of darkness. Of course, it takes a very negative meaning in nuclear explosions. So I use the *Black Rainbow* print and have it disappear and reappear in the novel; the narrator buries

the picture and the dagger among the roots of that lone pine tree on Maungakiekie. (A friend of mine, Martyn Sanderson, the director of the film *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree* [1990], is working on turning *Black Rainbow* into a film.)<sup>1</sup> Not long after the novel came out, a Maori activist named Mike Smith used his chainsaw to try and chop the pine tree down. He just made symbolic cuts, a protest against *Pakeha* domination.<sup>2</sup> People forgot that there was a Maori tree up there before that pine tree replaced it.

*It seems to me that your works have long addressed the ways in which stories are told, histories are created, and culture is produced. Your recent works extend this concern with the construction of personal and cultural identity, and historical and fictional narratives. How do you view these works in relation to your earlier projects?*

There is no break from my other writing, only a continuation of it. Even though *Sons for the Return Home* [1973] was written in a fairly realistic style, you will notice there that the challenge was what would happen if I did not give any names to the characters. I started off with a short story and the short story turned into a novel. If you remember, the only person I name in the novel is Albert Camus. At that time, my life was heavily influenced by Camus's writing.

So the interest I have in the techniques of storytelling has always been there. In the next novel, *Pouliuli* [1977], I started off wanting to write a short story about this old man who gets up in the morning and wants to vomit. When he started vomiting, he was actually vomiting out this novel. I decided to make it a short novel, pursue the consequences of this man's disillusionment with his village, and that is what turned out to be *Pouliuli*.

It is a very dark novel. One of my friends described it as "Judaic gloom." He was actually quite accurate. At that time, I was influenced by the American Jewish writers, and by the great Jewish writer, Elie Wiesel, who now lives in Israel and has won the Nobel Peace Prize. I believe, now looking back at my whole career, that novels are about other novels, stories are about other stories, poems are about other poems. The changes come about in the way you "tell" them.

Then I went back to *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, which I had been working on for many years; it is much older than even *Sons for the*

*Return Home*. I revised it, and the revisions were influenced by what I had learned by writing the other two novels, and by writing poems. The *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* that I came out with, even though I retained the three-part structure, was a very different novel from that which I had started writing. In *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, I experiment with using four or five different styles and registers of English. These are the styles that I have been trying, even in my earliest days at university, to develop: straight English, pidgin, combining the two, using a simple, laconic style, and then a more elaborate one using long sentences. The middle book of *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, "Flying Fox," was written in a laconic, lyric, simple style. That style was reflected also in *Sons for the Return Home*.

*Almost from the very beginning of your publishing career, you have played an important role in teaching and editing Pacific literature. Could you discuss the factors that have influenced your choices of texts and your ways of presenting the literature? Would you, for instance, place it under the postcolonial rubric, as is increasingly occurring in the United States and Europe?*

That is how we teach it at the University of Auckland, as a postcolonial literature. Witi [Ihimaera], Reina [Whaitiri], and Malama Meleisea and I teach a course called Pacific Literature, and it includes Aboriginal writing and Maori writing. In postcolonial, the prefix "post" means a lot more than just being "after." It is ridiculous to assume that it only means "after." If you take the Maori situation, it is still a colonial political situation. But the literature is postcolonial in that it offers an analysis of colonialism and what it has done to the Maori people. It is a literature which is rejecting colonial literature. So you can be in a totally colonial situation and produce postcolonial literature, like the Maori, the Aborigines, and the Polynesian Hawai'ians have done.

In that writing, the styles go beyond realism, as I have done in my own work. For instance, if you take oral literature in the Pacific, you have straight storytelling, but you also have a very rich mix of fantasy, parody, pastiche, poetry. This is why if you look at writing by Maori and Pacific Islanders, it offers straight

hunks of poetry, or a mix of prose and poetry, in very poetic language. Sia Figiel, who wrote the novel *Where We Once Belonged* [1996], is 29, and she is now the next phase in Pacific writing in English. The novel is a beautiful mix of satire and parody. It is a pastiche of styles; she breaks into poetry, straight sequences of it, and I think that is where we are heading. That is where my work has been heading.

I am privileged to have started writing in a period when the indigenous peoples of the Pacific were beginning to react against colonialism, and the expression of that reaction began to take the form of art, music, dance, fiction, and poetry. I have been part of that movement for the last 30 years. I am lucky to have a whole family living in the Pacific today, from here to Samoa to Tonga to Hawai'i. These people are artists, actors, film-makers, sculptors, writers, dancers, musicians, and so forth. When I go to Samoa next week for the Arts Festival, I will know most of the writers there, most of the artists from around the Pacific.

And, of course, like any other literature, as it grows and spreads, it is being taught. So along with it has developed a literary criticism, a critique of the literature. What I like about that is that there is an unusually sensitive generation of critics who have a lot of respect for the literature they are critiquing. They go out and learn about the culture and the history of that culture. I have always believed that you cannot separate an artifact from the context out of which it has come. So to critique a novel on Samoa, you have to know something about the history of that country and of its culture. It is not enough to take just the text. I teach literature more as a form of cultural studies than as literary studies.

I do not believe, as many white critics do, that fiction is not political. An anthology is totally political. You are the one in power making the selection. Who do you leave out? Your taste does not represent a universal standard of selection. It is your own personal selection; you must admit that right from the beginning. And if you put a group of writers together in one book, you are actually deciding their power relationships. When you issue the artifact, which is the anthology, and people read it, they perceive certain political things in it. It is like saying you

should leave politics out of sport, which is rubbish. Or leave politics out of literature.

Even when I play games in my books, I am very serious about certain themes that I have been exploring all my life: power relationships between parents and children, between the children themselves, between that family and the society, and power structures. You do not have to have that information as such in your novel, but you must have it informing your writing. There are very few New Zealand novels about politics. There tends to be a tradition here among *Pakeha* that frowns upon that type of novel. But they cannot stop it. Most Maori novels that have been published are extremely political, in their analysis of the way Maori have been treated, in the context of the colonial situation of New Zealand. When *Pakeha* writers say that their writing is postcolonial, some of it is postcolonial, but a lot of it still continues the whole colonial perceptions of Maori and other people—women, for instance.

*You have taught writing in Samoa, Fiji, and New Zealand. In what ways has the university as an institution worked as a site where many Pacific Islands cultures encounter one another? The University of the South Pacific, for instance, serves eleven different Pacific Islands countries, and Auckland has been termed the largest Polynesian city in the world. How has that meeting of Pacific cultures played out in the universities where you have taught writing?*

The tertiary institutions in the Pacific have been crucial in the development of a written literature. The first generation of Pacific writers have been at the universities either as students or as teachers. In 1967, it began when Ulli Beier joined the University of Papua New Guinea and had creative writing classes. And his wife ran art classes. Ulli's students produced the first written literature—fiction, poetry, and drama. With the opening of the University of the South Pacific [in 1968], I taught Pacific Literature and creative writing, and held writing workshops. The South Pacific Creative Arts Society was important there. I shifted here [Auckland] in 1988. Witi Ihimaera and I have creative writing classes, with 12 students every year, and that seems to be working well. A few Maori and Pacific Islands students have been in our classes.

You do not have to go to university and take a creative writing course to write; if you do not have the drive, you are not going to make it. Universities are important because they are fairly free institutions: within them, you can do what you like, you can teach what you like. I have always loved teaching; this is why I am here. I have taught at every level of the education system; I even helped start the first pre-school in Samoa.

I have produced most of my writing part-time. The only time I have written full-time was in 1986 when I came here for a year's leave from the University of the South Pacific. That is when I wrote the bulk of *Ola*. In many ways, the writing is only a small part of arriving at a novel. The other part of it is the reading and the dreaming, and having a life that allows you to exercise your imagination. The process of writing itself does not take that long. When I sit down to write, it comes very quickly. Then I rework it and rework it and rework it. Because I have been lucky to have a job, I can take my time. If I had had to depend on my writing for a living, my writing would have been quite different. I would have been in many ways more compromised, in order to make money to feed my family and my expensive habits.

I could have written and published much more. My excuse is that I have had to do a lot of administration and raise a family and help a large *Aiga*. When I was only 29, I was asked to run the biggest high school in Samoa, Samoa College. I ran it for four years. I loved working with the brightest school of young people I have ever known. The school culture was very rich, but I could not see myself as a headmaster for the rest of my life. I shifted to Fiji for a year, then went back to Samoa to set up a university centre, and run it. When I returned to Fiji in 1982, I had to run the English Department, the whole School of Education, and I became the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the university. I shifted to Auckland, where I was the head of the English department from 1993 to 1995. I am relieved not to be doing that now.

The teaching I enjoy very much. Basically what I do is try and inspire students to go and do their own reading and research. I try to make them enthusiastic about reading novels, poetry, drama, and then get some of them to write their own. The ones who do the research and study literary theory can hopefully get

over the jargon of literary theory and develop their own language which I can understand. I tell my students they can learn from any source, but to take from it what is useful.

*Study of literature of the Pacific and the Pacific Rim is a burgeoning field. What are your own personal priorities now in terms of artistic and scholarly work?*

Study of the Pacific is nothing new. New Guinea is probably the most written-about country in the world. The Maori people I think are one of the most written-about and researched people in the world. Most of that has been by outsiders. What is even more important, and has always been important to me, is that the insiders, the Maori, the Pacific Islanders, the Tongans and Samoans, and so on, should do their own research, and do their own art. That is happening a lot now. It has been happening more in some countries than in others. That is what I have tried to promote and encourage. That is where my main interests are. It is very selfish. But the Pacific is the region I love, even though it has enormous economic, political, and social problems. One of these major problems is the corruption which has taken over in politics in the Pacific. The euphoria of the first 15 years of independence is gone, and our elite groups are now running our countries and bleeding them. Some of them are my friends, my generation, so I feel some responsibility. I want to encourage the art and the literature and a clearer analysis of the politics of our cultures, because it would allow us to lead better lives.

Writing is important in my life, but other things are more important. My children are important, my grandchildren are important, my extended family is very very important, being able to travel around the Pacific is very important, paying my mortgage is important, living a good, wise life is important. The writing is not the end-all of my life. It never has been. I feel sorry for an artist or writer whose whole ego and self-esteem is based on her work. There are more important things in life. Writing has allowed me to explore myself, and explore the people around me, and the cultures I live in. And some people like reading it; some people do not—it is their privilege. I love teaching literature. Through the literature I teach other things.

My father is 86. He was a plumber, and he is also the highest ranking *Ali'i* in my *Aiga*; so you see the combination of the two in my *Aiga*. He only stopped working about four years ago, when he was 82, and he could not walk anymore. This is why I have an enormous admiration for the working class, out of which I came. My family was very poor. But if you look at my family today, most of us were educated abroad, and are well off. My father was a marvellous musician, but he sacrificed most of that to develop a successful plumbing business and support his *Aiga*. I hope I never forget the roots out of which I came—Samoan culture and the working-class ethics of my family—the hard work and love you have to put into something to be successful.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Two of Wendt's works have been made into feature films: Wendt's first published novel, *Sons for the Return Home* (1973), and *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree* (1974), the title novella of his first published story collection. A revised version of *Flying Fox* forms the central third of *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1979).
- <sup>2</sup> Hineani Melbourne's *Maori Sovereignty* (Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 1995) contains a chapter that examines Mike Smith's political activism.