

Aotearoa was the shining land. Maybe it will be again... be that as it will, that thing which allied itself to us, is still here. I take care of it, because it sleeps now. It retired into itself when the world changed, when the people changed... but I am afraid for the mauri! Aue! How can I make you understand? How? How? How?"

"Most New Zealanders remain unaware that they have a dual cultural heritage and not a single one," wrote Witi Ihimaera in *Tihe Marui Ora: Aspects of Maoritanga* (1978). *The Bone People* is (with much else) a novel of that realised.

Witi has sketched in a view of what Maori writers have been doing (New Zealand Listener, March 17, 1984) which finds writing fixed in "the Maori pastoral tradition" from the 1940s through to the 1970s when the new literature of "the tide's turning" began to be heard. All those seminal works of the 70s, so different from the naturalistic regional work before, seem now to have liberated the novelist and poet of the 80s. They create a freedom for the writer to create his or her own factive reality by implying that all ideas about the real world are themselves fictions. I think *The Bone People* points us to a fiction of *lo real maravilloso*: Alejo Carpentier's phrase which translates as 'the marvellous in the real'. The wondrous and inexplicable becoming essential parts of ordinary perception. We should be reading *The Bone People* beside Gabriel García Márquez, Lawrence Durrell or Salman Rushdie. I haven't been so continuously surprised by a novel since I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Alexandria Quartet* or *Midnight's Children*. Like them, it is an immensely rich piece of writing. Here is surely one of those rare books which will change people's lives (and how we must write of ourselves as a consequence). Listen, for instance, to Kerewin returning to Moeraki:

"The wind has dropped.
It is growing very dark.
The shag line has gone back to Maukiekie, bird after bird beating forward in the wavering skien.
The waves suck at the rocks and leave them reluctantly. We will come back ssssoooo... they hiss from the dark.
Maukiekie lies there in the evening, that rock of an island, not much more than an acre and bare



except for a mean scrub of bushes and brown guano-eaten grass, where the shag colony spreads its wings in the sunlight and haggles over footspace at night; Maukiekie at nightfall, all black rock crusted with salt and birdlime and sleeping life, and nearest to land the stone hawk, blind sentinel watching the cliffs.

Aiieeee, pain and longing and relief ... too long I've been away from here."

(If *The Bone People* was conceived at Motueka and carried full term at Okarito, where Keri lives, surely the afterbirth lies buried at Moeraki.)

On Thursday New Zealand was rocked about noon by a major earthquake which had it occurred closer to the surface of the land must have taken many lives. As it happened I was reading page 76:

"Smudge. Then a razorfine line, so keenly black it ached. Illusion of looking into a knife-thin ominous chasm."

That earthquake took exactly as long as it takes the eyes to scan those lines. The dried corpses of moths rained down out of the skylight above me. Their dust still smudges the page.

In *Broadsheet* (June 1983) Keri sought to answer the question, "What do you draw and write about?"

"People, and their relationships with one another; with earth and sea; with other species; with the dead."

Can I add, she writes about herself.

In another essay in *Only Connect* Colin Partridge set out to explore the stages 'The Literatures of New Cultures' go through. Maori literature is

not that of a 'new culture' but New Zealand literature is. "The final stage in establishing a new culture, which often coincides with the shaping of home-made legends, is acceptance of — and pride in — the resources of local language. "Pakeha writers have given us a New Zealand colloquial English which we recognise as our own self-expression ... but it has remained a Pakeha self-articulation ... and thus incomplete as a voice for this place. No New Zealand novelist has yet given us a text like that of *The Bone People*':

"The sea rolls on.

A sheep coughs asthmatically behind the hill.

A bettle burrs past.

She stands on the old marae site.

The halldoor hangs crookely open.

"Tene koe ... whakautua mai tenei patai aku. He aha koe i karanga ai ki a au?"

It is very still.

Kerewin waits, hands on her hips, head cocked to one side, listening.

What do I expect? I come and say hello, I've come back, did you call me, and wait for... lightening? Burning bushes?

It is very dark behind the door.

"He aha te mahi e mea nei koe kia mahia?"

Sea distant on the beach; birds in the night; her breath coming and going. Nothing else."

Here, at long last, we find Maori and English together in a writer's hands. If for no other reason than this, the book is a remarkable tour de force. Approaching New Zealand literature solely through English has become increasingly untenable. For those who require help with this fusion of our father and mother tongues, there is an excellent glossary at the back.

"Many times, I have cursed bitterly, because I am doomed to live alone and lonely, and to what end? To keep guard over something that modern people deem superstitious nonsense, something modern people decry as an illusion, "laments the elder in this novel, but I believe Keri feels this equally. I have no doubt that many will read *The Bone People* and see not illusions but our collective future.

Elizabeth, Marian and Miriama kia ora koutou Keri arohanui, your book ka maharatia tenei e ahau e ora ana.

(A note: I have purposely avoided giving too much of the story away — I fear, in fact, that I've already divulged too many secrets. One of the great joys of this novel lies in watching its story unfold — listening to the characters discover each other beneath the spines. Too often I read reviews which spoil the dish. I hope instead I have but helped to set the table. Please forgive me, Keri, if I tasted some of the kai also when no one was looking.)