

HULME Don Long

Don — So, did you leave school saying to yourself, "Now I'm going to be a writer?"

Keri — No. I was the great white hope of the family. I was supposed to be a lawyer. Always had the gift of the gab. Won speech competitions — things like that. Talking is my big thing. I've stopped, incidentally, being interested in speech making. I enjoyed it because I wasn't afraid of audiences and I wasn't afraid of playing with words. I was selected for the Anthony Eden Speaking Competition. So I got into the area finals for this and when it got to the stage of the finals I had my first attack of stage fright. I dried up completely in front of about three hundred people. My mother nearly sank through the floor with embarrassment:

"Keri, say anything, ANYTHING!"

I stopped making formal speeches after that. It was really traumatic.

Don — Has that ever happened to you since at a poetry reading: have you ever dried up?

Keri — No, it was just that one time. I must admit though that when I get up to read poetry in any situation I have shaking knees!

(from) **Nga Kehua**

Motoitoti, who joined with a sailor until her bruises broke her heart;
Emma who drew a plough where a horse should be;
Tommy Rangakino shovelling coal until the dust throttled him with canker of the throat
I carry my ghosts on my shoulders
though some have never been born

Don — So you left school and then what?

Keri — I went tobacco picking.

Don — Were you writing poems after a day's work in the fields?

Keri — Yes. There is a long poem of Hulme's called 'Of Green and Golden Days'; it led to a short story of the same title. By that stage I was writing for my own amusement as much as anything. Incidentally, I had had something published. I had got annoyed reading a letter in *The Women's Weekly* by some exasperating teenager who said "What can we do — the world's going to Hell and there's nothing we can do about it." So I wrote this letter saying "First of all you can get to work on yourself." That was the first thing I ever got paid for, because they printed the letter as an article. (And they sent us a postal note for 15/—).

In Motueka in 1967 I started writing *The Bone People*. It started off as a short story. The characters have changed completely. It became the second vertebrae in the spine of the book.

Don — So you were a prose and poetry writer right from the word go?

Keri — Songs initially. I like songs. I have no voice. Can't sing but I like songs. I still write them — called 'Wine Songs'. Left Motueka after a year and went to university.

Don — So you became a student by day and a writer by night?

Keri — No, I was, unfortunately, a writer by day and by night — to the degree that I failed one of my subjects in the second year ...

I became a very good fish n' chip cook. It was necessary to go to work.

Don — At this point did you leave university to become a writer?

Keri — No. I was leaving varsity to earn money. My mother had been left a widow at age thirty-one with six small children and because of the circumstances of my father's death, there was a massive set of death duties to pay. All my teenage years held this feeling that financial disaster was lurking just around the corner. Any moment it would slip on top of us. I didn't really start writing for publication until I'd retired.

Don — As a fish n' chip cook?

Keri — No, by that stage I'd gone through many jobs. I was working as a woollen mill winder. I was getting up at between 6.30 and 6.45 and I was working an hour and a half at night because this upped your wages — they were pathetic wages. They were something like \$29 a week. I read this letter to the paper by someone complaining about postal services. They said posties work about three hours a day, get paid \$80 a week, and get most of the day off and I thought, "That can't be true." Heaven. So I rang up the central post office and they confirmed it and I became a postie overnight; at Sockburn initially and later on the Coast in Greymouth.

Don — It's interesting how many other writers have also been posties.

Keri — James K. Baxter — Ian Wedde. By this stage I was starting to think of writing as a very good thing and I enjoyed it. I was seriously working

I asked for riches
you gave me
scavenging rights on a far beach

through the first draft of what was called *The Rocks of Whangaroa* which later became *The Bone People*, nei. At this stage it was starting to look like a novel and I was entranced by playing with it and it was starting to have shape — so I was starting to think of myself as a writer. This would be when I was twenty-one or twenty-two. I was only a postie for two and a bit years. I decided at about that stage that I'd retire at twenty-five. I often think back with considerable amusement over that. I was absolutely serious. I was going to retire at twenty-five and become a committed writer and nothing else (except painting — I was actually more interested in becoming a painter). I did retire at twenty-five. By that stage I'd bought Fox St., an old house; it was extraordinarily badly neglected but it was a house plus an acre of land for \$650 (this was the grand slump on the Coast).

Don — What made you think you could be a writer? Not a lot of people say to themselves "I could be a writer" and then actually go and do it as you did.

Keri — The driving force was I enjoyed it so much. I figured, if something gives me this much enjoyment it is to be pursued. But I wasn't, believe it or not, a writer for publication. I just wanted to write. I didn't think of getting an income from writing. It was right up there with fishing and painting. It was something I really enjoyed.

(from) **On the Other Coast**

I am polishing my grand-dad's tohu. It is a small piece of pounamu, translucent and shaped like an elongated tear. Or a mere.

His father was a traveller, a refugee from this Coast.

I have brought his tohu back home, but I don't know whether I have come home. They used to ask, in reproach of doubtful strangers, "I motu mai i whea, te rimu o te moana?"

And on what shore does the wandering fragment of seaweed finally ground?

Don — Is that what happened? Did you sit down in the house on Fox St. and write?

Keri — Literally — and I retired when I said I would — on the 9th of March 1972 — I left my job and stayed at home and wrote — mainly the third draft of the novel. That thing has changed so much it's unreal. It's actually a collection of short stories melted down to a