

novel. By August I was starving to death. If it hadn't been for my mother ringing up periodically and saying:

"Keri, how are you?"

"Well, I found these malt biscuits the other day and gee they were nice."

"Right, we'll send you over some money."

Things were getting fairly desperate. I lived on milk bottles at one stage. The people who'd lived at Fox St. before had had an even more eccentric diet. I found well over one hundred egg cartons throughout the house.

They'd made an amazing mess of Fox St. They'd chopped up part of the front porch for firewood. Also part of the kitchen floor. In one of the rooms there was the best part of an old car they were dismantling. They seem to have lived on cartons of eggs and milk. There would have been a good ten or eleven dozen milk bottles there. They were money in the bank.

About August (I'm still not sure how this happened) I discovered the existence of the N.Z. Literary Fund. They paid people to write!

Don — How many Literary Fund grants have you had?

Keri — Three (1973, 1977, and 1979). I had a mini-Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago in 1977. When that fellowship finished I was on the bones of my arse. I applied for a Literary Fund grant and Bruce Mason sent a telegram which said:

"Two white heron will shortly perch on your doorstep."

I gathered from that that there was a Literary Fund grant (which there was) but there was also the Maori Purposes Trust Fund prize which he'd heard about through the grapevine and I hadn't at that stage. I got \$2000 and that was much appreciated — quite a lot of sheets of galvanised iron.

Don — And you got grants before you published any books?

Keri — It's an interesting thing about getting your work published. My theory on all my applications was unless I had free time to write in I was going to have nothing available to publish. So the gist of my applications was "help now when I need it and not later when I've got everything more or less organised."

Don — You'd also won the Te Awamutu Short Story Award in 1973, the Katherine Mansfield Short Story Award in 1975 and been invited to the East West Centre in Hawaii in 1979 as a visiting New Zealand poet. How did you actually come to learn how to write? It seems you were teaching yourself.

Keri — I was and am an omnivorous reader. It doesn't feel right if I don't read. You must pick up a lot of things with that contact.

I had an absolutely magnificent correspondence with Rowley Habib. He was immensely supportive and helpful. He was the one who suggested why not try writing for publication.

But I can't remember being taught to write. My theory is that if you can do it you can do it. Either you write or you don't.

Don — What is your writing routine — do you spend a week writing non-stop for instance?

(from) **Moeraki Conversations 4**

Getting up shivering in the night, wrapping myself in the canvas-backed blanket like it's a cloak and pakehas haven't been invented, going outside to watch for shooting stars or the greenghost flicker of wildfire that is never where my eyes expect it, or anything

E tangi moana ...

coming inside in the dawnlight, I see our keyhole is plugged with cobwebs.

Keri — If there's something that's going to take that long to write, yes. What generally happens is that I like to get up around 12.00 or 1.00 and go to bed about 3.00 or 4.00. I find I work better at night. I spend the day whitebaiting ... and then around 9.00 my fingers get itchy.

Don — Do you work straight onto the typewriter?

Keri — I tend to. Stories straight onto the typewriter. I have a thick volume of notes, story ideas, sentences and things like that. It's an idea file. If I had to save one thing from the house in a fire that would be it. Absolutely irreplaceable. Given that, stuff goes straight onto the typewriter. I work in images.

Don — You picture something happening?

Keri — Yes.

Don — What about the dialogue?

Keri — Well, your characters start talking after a while. This must sound really silly. I think a writer's occupational hazard must be schizophrenia. Obviously there is a demarcation be-

(from) **Pa mai to reo aroha**

At night, the penguins bray under the cribs,
Sometimes the old ghosts from Khipuku steal in, for warmth and company.
The dog will prick his ears and growl, the cat snarl a little, then both sigh and stretch and settle again.
We eat and talk and read until the lamps flicker. Then we go to sleep in the narrow cupboard bunks, and the sea has all our dreams.

tween what goes on in your head and what goes on in real life. That must be maintained as clear cut, but it is quite strange when you have a story going how the characters start to take on independent lives and they really do. *The Bone People* grew over a period of about twelve years. Now, there were years when I did nothing to it. It was languishing in a heap of paper. And there were a couple of fairly intensive periods — I spent about two months down at Moeraki doing a final rewrite (I thought). And then I did another final rewrite here at Okarito. I had set ideas on what the characters were and more or less what the story was ... and what would happen. The central character was going to be the woman. Everything would spin around her and the peripheral characters — the man and the child — were just going to be there for the woman to react upon — and what happened, of course, was that the two peripheral characters started taking over the story. Joe is in 'The Kaumatua and the Broken Man' in *Into the World of Light*. He was originally a completely cardboard sort of figure — I just wanted him as a sort of background ogre. He started developing his own personality in a very strong fashion until by the end of the book my main woman character had become just one of a trio of dominating characters. They started speaking their own minds.

Dialogue? Dead easy. But stopping the dialogue, scalpel the characters down a little — much harder. I cut out between 60,000-65,000 words from *The Bone People* eventually. It was monstrous. But that was composed from little lines straight onto the typewriter.

Poems are slightly different. Poems I find come to you mostly intact. You might get a refrain from a poem. Then there's all the rest of it lurking just beyond that refrain. That comes out holus-bolus.

Don — Do you rewrite the poems a great deal?

Keri — Not once they've reached the stage of being complete.

Don — What is the significance of *The Silences Between* (Moeraki Conversations) as a title?

Keri — I regard time spent away from Moeraki and my family there as silence. Things at Moeraki seem to be almost larger than life. Moeraki to me is **heart place**. Moeraki conversations are really what the book is about. The plan of the book is six conversations (they are each maybe a little series of linked conversations — maybe conversations with someone in my head — maybe real things that have happened with bits of dialogue around them which are approximations of the conversations that took place) and inbetween each set of Moeraki conversations there is silence, nei. The silences are loud with their own words.

Don — When were these poems written?