

**Keri** — In the late 1960s to 'He Hoha' in 1980.

**Don** — In *Tihe Mauri Ora* Patricia Grace said that one of the reasons why she began writing was because of her concern about the way in which many Maori words came to be debased in Pakeha literature. She cites the case of 'wahine'. You are writing in English but there is a constant occurrence of Maori words in your work so have you been consciously thinking something like this, too?

**Keri** — I have been annoyed whenever I've encountered them — you get annoyed about weird things like "Maoris" — it's 'Maori' — if you are going to use a Maori word use it with a correct plural. I tend to use Maori words when there are no English equivalents ... and also, it's a very beautiful language. I'd like to see a whole lot more of it become common currency. You can't adequately (for instance) translate 'kuia' as "old woman". There's an affection and respect implicit in the word 'kuia' that isn't really implied by "old woman" ... or "old lady" even. It's just not there. What is the equivalent English to 'kaumatua'? "Elder", "respected elder", yes, all those things but there's both reverence for the aged which must be, and acknowledgement that this is sort of the final adult stage — you don't become fully adult until you've reached the dignity of your years — until you've had that wonderful experience. All of that is in the word 'kaumatua'.

**Don** — Witi Ihimaera once wrote "the main problem is that the writer who is Maori has both a dual role as a writer and a Maori and a dual responsibility to his craft and his people. Even if he does not see himself this way, you can bet your life that other people do."

**Keri** — In some ways fair enough. Your Maoriness, like everything else, is intimately part of you and it will normally show through your writing as well. It's a bit like what Samuel Johnson said of a woman preaching: "It's like a dog walking on its hind legs." It's not how well he does it but that he does it at all that is a cause for amazement; i.e. Maori writers ... oh, fantastic, they are writing in English and Maori, how nice! "An oral people turned literate at last." Pat, pat. With no insight into the excellence or otherwise of their work. Fortunately, there doesn't seem to have been any of that in the reception to *Into the World of Light*.

There is this nasty feeling that my work, such as it is, is being looked at through a different pair of spectacles: "This is a Maori woman writing, ah ha, we'll give it a little more time than we'd give if it was just a Pakeha woman. "I mean when I say just simply that there are a whole lot more Pakeha women writers than there are Maori women writers at the moment. It's population, nei. In the year 2000 that will be very different.

It is an advantage because you stick out because of your rarity value but I fear that because I want to be acknowledged one way or another as a **writer** ... and not for it to be the performing dog.

(Which is why I've launched a pen name which I keep very quiet about. I shall not give you any details of it except to say there doesn't seem to be anything Maori about it and it's definitely a male pen name. I have one very curious thing to tell you. The first story that's been accepted from this character came with an invitation saying "can we have more stories — we'd be interested in publishing a collection." Now this is one story? It took me, I don't know, my God, I don't know how long when I started writing!)

**Don** — Why have you chosen the isolation of Okarito?

**Keri** — I'm a loner, aue. I am a solitary person by nature. I think short sightedness plus a sense of having a very large personal perimeter contributed to this need for solitude. While I'm part of a large family group and would be nothing without my family (I'm just a husk) I don't like living with lots of people — having lots of people around. An area like this fits my two ideals: close to the sea and relatively people free. That's the reason.

**Don** — What are the essential things which you've taken from the oral tradition of Maori literature into your work?

**Keri** — Everything which I think belongs to my taha Maori: from the exciting nature of words themselves, the power inherent in words themselves, to things as basic as the kinds of images or the way things are alluded to when speaking — whether it is formal oratory or speaking at family hui or reading or listening to waiata. What have I taken? The heart, the bones, the brains, the spirit, everything I can lay my hands on, eh.

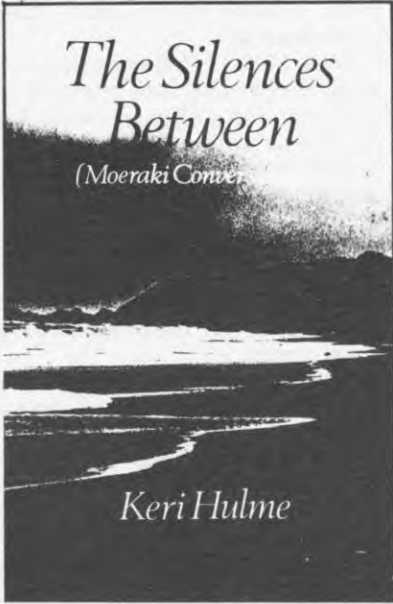
**Don** — On the marae people use the waiata — do you think that poems by Hone, Rowley, you and all the others — are they going to be used on the marae in that way?

**Keri** — Only if they are written in Maori. One of the things that makes the marae important is that it's one of the remaining bastions of Te Reo Maori. You don't feel right speaking in English in a formal situation. Until I start writing poems in Maori — no way! In non-formal situations — yes. But not in the formal ... they are not fitting.

With Witi Ihimaera, Don Long edited *Into the World of Light — An Anthology of Maori Writing*.



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