

Māori Novelist and Indigenous Envoy: Writing to the World

Witi Ihimaera

Abstract *Nga mihi*. In this address, given on the 5th of July 2023 at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, I position “The Whale Rider” (1987) as an act of reclamation of Māori and Pacific sovereignty. My sixth book, I traverse the original *purākau* of Paikea who travelled on a whale from Hawaiki (Raiātea, French Polynesia) to Aotearoa, New Zealand. I then cut cyclically to the geopolitical context of 1986 in New York, USA, where I wrote “The Whale Rider”. Te tōrino haere whakamua, whakamuri, I continue the circularity of my narrative by returning to the centre: New Zealand and the Pacific in 2024. I look at the security concerns of the region, the impacts of climate change and the continuing political, economic and cultural instabilities inflicted on the region by the larger, predominating countries, which define the future for everyone in the world of āpōpō – and the resilience required by a younger generation. Finally, I preview my next book, “Metura’a”, a sequel to “The Whale Rider”, returning to the original origin myth. Tēnā koutou katoa.

Keywords *Nga mihi* (greetings); *purākau* (origin myth); *te tōrino haere whakamua; whakamuri* (at the same time that we are going forward; we are returning); *āpōpō* (tomorrow); *tēnā koutou katoa* (greetings; again; to all)

1.

Utaina mai hii! Utaina mai hii!
Utaina na mai nga waka o te motu
Ki runga Tiamana e tau nei!
A hikinuku e! A hiki Rangi e
A hikinuku e! A hiki Rangi e!
Ahaha!

And so, I begin with a canoe-hauling chant, pulling my waka of stories with me from Aotearoa, New Zealand, to Mainz.

I have been writing them for many years, ever since I published my first book, *Pounamu, Pounamu*, a collection of short stories, in 1972. Up until that time, Māori creative literature had been primarily an oral tradition.

I was a young man of 28, my brain was filled to the brim with listening to stories that Māori told of themselves and all I did was transfer them from the tongue to the pen. In doing so, my black marks leapt onto a page that had previously been white. And the following year they leapt again, and I became the first Māori novelist with my book *Tangi* (1973). At that time, New Zealand had been colonised for some 132 years by the British Government, and the relationship with the Māori people was set out in the Treaty of Waitangi, which was signed on 6 February 1840. The Treaty was broken, however, and the mid 19th century was notable for what became known as the Māori Wars, during which Māori tribes fought mainly British settlers. My own ancestors from the Waituhi Valley were among the war's most fierce combatants against Pākehā, and as a consequence, our land was confiscated as punishment. When I was a boy in the 1940s and 1950s, I lived within this colonised setting, having no land or culture. The reason why I turned to writing was that for me and all my kin, land and culture still existed in the memory.

Writing became an act of reclamation.

2.

Taku waiora nei, tupu taku kino nei?
 Aue te matakau e! Kare kare ka matau e
 Kare kare ka matau e! Karu karu ka te hi au e
 Karu karu ka te hi au e! Karu karu ka te hi au e!
 Ka haere ki te ora mou -

I sing you a Cook Island fishing chant now because all my career and all I have ever done has been to go fishing in a huge sea of Pacific oral stories. All my work is propelled by whakapapa, by a genealogy that links Māori to this huge resource of pūrākau, of oceanic myth and history and of narratives that are still present today, a continuum of stories that Māori still live within. My job has always been to make manifest those stories and one of them was the narrative of Paikea, the whale rider.

The Whale Rider was the sixth time the black marks leapt onto the white page, and it was published in 1987. It is set in Whangara, a place that has profound importance for Māori of the East Coast of the North Island because it is where our eponymous ancestor, Paikea *The Whale Rider*, landed.

He was a Māori Ulysses, and the very idea of a man riding a whale from Hawaiiki in the region of French Polynesia to New Zealand has all the stuff of an epic in it, it is breathtaking. He was a prince of Polynesia, highborn and firstborn son of Uenuku,

the greatest warrior king of Ra'iātea. But he had a half-brother, Ruatapu, the half-blooded son of all mythology, who was jealous of him. And Ruatapu realised he could never be heir to the kingdom when his father, after styling Paikea's topknot with a comb at the beginning of a great celebration, turned to Ruatapu, who had reached for the same comb, and stopped him.

"No," Uenuku said, "not that comb. That has already been used on the head of your brother."

Slighted, Ruatapu decided to kill not only Paikea, but also all the other legitimate heirs to the throne, so that he, the illegitimate one, could ascend to it and seat himself on it. He put his plan into action on that very day, when a new ceremonial canoe was to be launched and sailed only by all his father's sons. He punched a small hole in the new waka and, when it was far from land and nobody on shore could see his plan, he opened the hole. The canoe began to sink. As his brothers laughed in the shining sea he swam among them, killing them one by one with a sharp club and staining the water with their blood.

Only one more prince to go: Paikea. But at that moment, a giant tattooed whale surfaced, the sea split apart and the waves pushed Paikea away from his brother, who caught hold of one of the whale's pectoral fins, and it pulled him from the scene of the royal assassinations.

Lucky boy. However, the whale was on its migratory odyssey from French Polynesia to Antarctica. And so, instead of taking Paikea back to Ra'iātea, it took him forward to a surprising new destination: New Zealand. After many days and nights, the whale delivered Paikea to his new destiny. In Aotearoa he met Huturangi who became one of his wives. And from their union springs the people of the east coast that I have referred to earlier.

I was working as a New Zealand diplomat in New York in 1986 when I wrote the novel *The Whale Rider*, but that is another story. It was not sufficient for me to just repeat the ancient myth. In my case, my contemporary whale rider was not a young prince called Paikea but a young girl called Kahutia-te-rangi, and she was living in the modern rather than ancient world, where the leadership qualities of women within a patriarchal environment were yet to be recognised. When she rides the whale, she becomes Moby chick. In my novel Paikea, the original prince has, of course, died a long time ago, but the conceit of the story is that the original whale, who is now ten centuries old, still lives on. He arrives in Whangara in the 1980s and beaches himself. The villagers are faced with existential questions: is he real or unreal? Is this event natural or supernatural? What is the ancient whale's purpose in living for so long?

Well, one of the purposes is to ensure Kahutia-te-rangi's succession to tribal leadership. But the other is just as important: to remind the tribe of the kinship between humankind and whale-kind, of tangata with the Mysticeti whale species, and of the urgency that attends climate change as well as the environment. For just as

the Anthropocene Age appears to witness humankind hellbound on our extinction, so does it seem we are hellbent on taking all other animal and plant species with us, including the whales. In the book, the old whale arrives to tell us: don't.

Thus, there are two journeys and two destinies threaded through *The Whale Rider*: the human and the cetacean. And they came about through a whole set of circumstances that surrounded my writing of the book when I arrived in New York. It coincided with a dramatic event, the cloud of nuclear waste making its way down the Atlantic coast following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on 26 April 1986, and I wrote the book two months later. Another circumstance was my job: I had arrived to safeguard New Zealand's relationship with the United States because of our nuclear-free policy, so a nuclear-free Pacific was very much on my mind, and in fact, New Zealand at the time was negotiating with Pacific nations a Nuclear Territorial Land, Sea and Air Space Free Zone, which was implemented the next year. At the same time, the Antarctic Treaty, of which New Zealand was one of twelve countries, was much under consideration at the United Nations, and, as you know, most of the world's fresh water is still sourced from Antarctica.

Saving cetacean whale species was also on my mind at the time. The International Whaling Commission met constantly during the 1980s to seek agreement for a moratorium on commercial whale hunting, but Iceland, Norway and Japan objected, and Japan still hunts whales for so-called research purposes. There was another threat on the horizon: the Soviet Union had begun harvesting huge amounts of krill in Antarctic waters, thereby affecting the food supplies for migratory species to Antarctica.

The *Te Māori* exhibition of Māori artefacts began in Los Angeles in the early 1980s and toured San Francisco, St Louis, New York, and Chicago, so indigenous sovereignty was also rising in my mind.

A whale came down the Hudson River.
My two daughters arrived for vacation.

You could say there was a confluence of factors or maybe my life was hijacked. Ah well, things are always darkest before they become totally black. I grabbed all those inspirations out of the air and, in a state of spontaneous combustion, the novel was written.

3.

Ko Witi Ihimaera tenei, I am Witi Ihimaera, ka nui te honore kua homai ki au.

The Māori people say that before you set forth on a journey, be sure to know your stars. Me matau i whetū i mua i te kokiri o te haere.

I pay my tribute to the whenua and iwi of the Rhineland Palatinate that is your place of departure, and I am so humbled that Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU) chose *The Whale Rider* as the book for the 2023 *One University – One Book* project. I thank Prof. Dr. Stephan Jolie, Vice President for Studies and Teaching, Prof. Dr. Christoph Bläsi for his incredible organisational acumen and for many JGU colleagues who have now become firm friends, including Anke Vogel, Julia Sander, Kerstin Rütger, Birger Petersen, Angela Kölling and Mita Banerjee, whom I met in Toronto, Canada many years ago. My warmest greetings also go to Svenja Völkel and her son Tim, whom I met in Auckland prior to travelling to Germany.

I would like to pay my respects to the rangatira tohunga, your Kaumatua Johannes Gutenberg. Māori took up his letterpress printing technology very quickly during the early years of colonisation in the 19th century as an act of decolonisation: by printing pamphlets, handbills, tracts, posters – you name it – in te reo, the Māori language, on their own printing presses – their notices of land alienations and cultural dispossession so that the iwi Māori would never forget. Indeed, we tell one particular story in New Zealand of two Māori warrior scholars, Wiremu Toetoe Tumohē and Te Hemara Rerehou, who, in the 1850s, made the long sea journey from Aotearoa to Vienna, became literate in the Austrian and German language and familiarised themselves with the printing press by working in the printers of Emperor Franz Joseph. They entranced the locals, and when the Emperor's brother Maximilian offered them a farewell present, they asked for a printing press. Returning with the press, the men used it to print one of the most influential of all Māori newspapers, known as Te Hokioi. The paper's nine issues during 1862–1863 appeared with a grateful thanks to the King of Austria.

Their early newspapers became the Alternative Discourse to the Main Discourse, and the early writers and printers wrote against it. And all that me and my contemporary colleagues in Aotearoa are doing today is only the continuation of this whaka-papa, this genealogy.

Na reira e te rangatira tohunga, e te whare wananga mauria mai to ingoa ariki, ki o koutou tupuna, greetings to your ancestors, they are as the stars of heaven. Rātou, koutou, tatou, nga rangatira ma, kui ma, koro ma, iwi ma, greetings. Huri noa ahau ki te hunga ora, the audience tonight.

This year, in 2023, I celebrate my 50th anniversary as a novelist. I have learnt a lot about life, love and the whole universe, and I know I can write much better than

I currently do. I always aim for excellence. I own my role as a Māori writer, a Pacific writer and an indigenous writer. A special mention on my indigenous responsibility: there are estimated to be 476 million indigenous iwi in the world, including Māori, which is about 6 per cent of the global population. There are people such as the Wari in the Amazon rainforest or the Rohingya in Myanmar who are facing genocide. Man's inhumanity to man is one thing, man's inhumanity to indigenous man is another, which must be our special responsibility. They are certainly always on my conscience.

Turning back to the topic, I mentioned earlier that in all my work, I create new myths out of old to give them new currency – as you are all doing in Mainz, rewriting your history out of the social, geographical and historical ur-texts, contexts, pretexts, subtexts, intertexts and textualities of the Rhineland Palatinate. Over the past few days, I have been asking questions about Mainz, mainly, who the real people of this city are and who the thinkers among you are who will ensure that the public record of your history is not overwritten by those who currently oversee your future.

I have been impressed by the qualities of the answers I have been given in scholarly halls and coffee bars, the vigour, the clear concern, the passion and the astute thinking. It all reminds me of what our own younger generation are articulating as we face the future hanging on the horizon. That future has been shaped into new structures by world events, including of course the main driver for us who live in the Pacific: environmental survival.

New Zealand is a party to the COP Convention. We signed it in 1992. The Convention provides a structure for negotiating climate change agreements. We are gearing up to become *kaitiaki*, humanitarian, with a holistic approach to maintaining the Pacific environment.

There are now 450,000 Pacifica people living in New Zealand, comprising 30 distinct Pacific groups. They now make up 9 per cent of the New Zealand population. And so they are not out there, they are actually inside us, like all your immigrant population – a Pacific diaspora in our case – making more visible through their pain and tears the dilemmas of island nation kinship, generational trauma and loss from the increasing number of catastrophic climate events which have decimated islands and island ecosystems: tidal waves, earthquakes, rising sea levels, coastal erosion, flooding, tsunamis, loss of corals, and global emissions.

We know that we must have a plan for the resettlement of Pacific Islanders in New Zealand as they lose their island homes, and this is being worked on. The crisis is inevitable. We are preparing for climate-induced displacement. At the frontline is the small island nation of Tuvalu, which is predicted to disappear under the waves by 2050. The resettlement of Tuvaluan citizens is being planned for, but what about their physical artefacts of culture – their culture itself? Well, Tuvalu is pivoting online. As their land disappears, they have no choice but to become the world's first

digital nation, with their land, ocean and culture – the most precious assets of their people – being moved to the cloud.

Climate change has become a non-traditional security concern. Every New Zealander is part of the conversation just as they are here in Germany with your Climate Action Programme 2030. New Zealand children are involved through Schools Strike 4 Climate. They know it is important to tell their tale or someone else will – or won't. As your schoolchildren do.

As a nation of thinkers, we are trying to find technological and communication solutions through proactive, critical conversations in geosciences, terrestrial and marine research, or in metaverses, new frontiers in cyberspace for digital communication platforms to meet local, glocal and global needs. Here you are developing a crucial relationship with Biomed, which will offer worldwide solutions in medical diagnostics.

Through the growing relationship between Pākehā and Māori, we are also becoming more aware of the relationship between the seen and unseen worlds. That may very well become the main asset we can offer from our part of the globe as we all try to go back to basic humanitarian concepts, namely to maintain the tapu, mana, mauri, tika, pono, aroha of Rānginui above and Papatūānuku below so as to preserve the holistic space between that in which we live. That really is *The Whale Rider's* message.

In the meantime, I am glad to see that we still survive, that we are still here as a species and that we can still hold hands together in optimism. Then we will ask the next question: how will we thrive in the survive of the survival?

This morning, a young, and beautiful German student said to me, "I am a Meenzer Maedsche." But what did she mean? Which Mainz was she referring to? I thought about her eagerness to learn and to go out into the world. And then I took a workshop in Kerstin Rüter's writing class and I thought again, how like young thinkers everywhere, all young people have such hopes, how will they survive, what can we offer them as their elders? How can we ensure their strong leadership? Who among them will speak for their generation? They are, after all, the future. After today, I have every confidence in them to rise to all the challenges that await them.

Kia kaha, kia manawanui koutou tamariki. Become your own Paikea. Become your own Kahutiaterangi. Always remember that when Paikea landed in Aotearoa New Zealand, that was not an end. It was just another beginning for the saga of the human odyssey which must go on and on.

Whakarongo ake au ki te tangi a te manu nei.
 A te ma tui tui tuituia! Tuia i runga tuia i raro,
 Tuia i waho, tuia i roto! Tuia te here tangata
 Ka rongo te Ao, ka Rongo te Po,
 Tuia i te kawae tangata i heke mai

I Hawaikinui, Hawaiki roa, Hawaiki pamamao,
Ki te hono i wairua ki te Whai Ao ki te Ao Mārama!

Listen to the voices from the past, for they are calling you to unite, to unite in humankind! Unite with the skies above, the earth below and the surrounding sea. Join together all your ancestral lines from the past with all the lines of your genealogy that you possess and twine them fast as you move into the future. You have your own truth, write it. You have your own truth, talk it. You have your own truth, walk it.

E nga rangatira ma, the future is here now. We all have to react faster, learn quicker and go further. As famed futurist Ray Kurzweil has said, our intuition about the future is linear. But the reality of information technology is exponential, and that makes a profound difference. If I take thirty steps linearly, I get to thirty. If I take thirty steps exponentially, I reach a billion.

I have truly been honoured to have been in Mainz at your eminent and leading international Gutenberg University. Here, I have truly found exponential thinkers, talkers and walkers.

Kia hora te marino, kia whakapapa pounamu te moana,
Kia tere te karohirohi i mua i tou huarahi.

May the calm be widespread, may the ocean glisten like greenstone
And may the shimmer of sunlight ever dance across your pathway.

Ka pine a koe au ki te pine o te aroha
Ki te pine e kore nei e waikura e!
Hoki hoki tonu mai te wairua o te tau
Ki te awahi rei nga ki tenei kiri e!

4. A Preview of the Sequel to *The Whale Rider*

Now a special surprise.

I am previewing for you my sequel novel to *The Whale Rider*. It is called *METURAA*,¹ Methuselah, and it is about the very ancient whale that Kahu rode back out to sea in the original book to symbolically save her tribe and convince her grandfather that, despite being a girl, she could assume leadership.

¹ The novel is eventually published with the title *Le Pacte des Baleines* by Au Vent Des Iles in 2025. The extracts previewed here have undergone significant changes for publication.

Metura'a, the new novel, is expected to come out in 2025 or 2026. It is based on the premise that the ancient whale is still alive today. He is over a thousand years old now. He is the living embodiment of the ancient contract from the beginning of Time between the two gods of humankind and the ocean, Tane and Tangaroa, and of our connectedness one species to the other.

At the beginning of the new novel, *Metura'a* feeds with his whale herd in Antarctica. But he is ailing. Will he be able to make the epic journey back from the Antarctic summer to the warm waters of the Pacific?

Three Māori waka are despatched to the Antarctic to help him. On board one of them is Kahu, the leader of the expedition, who is now a grandmother. She has brought her grandson, Wiremu, with her. Will they be in time? Or will this finally be the year when *Metura'a* dies?

Two sequences: first, a glimpse of *Metura'a*

Uia mai koe whakahuatia ake
Ko wai te wharenuī e, Ko Te Kani,
Ko wai te tekoteko kei runga, ko Paikea, ko Paikea,
Whakakau Paikea, hii! Whakakau he tipua, hii! Whakakau he taniwha, hii!
Ka u Paikea kei runga ia o *Metura'a*

And then *Metura'a*, the pod's ancient leader, appeared.

The ice cracked, moaned, shivered and susurrated with rippling glissandi, a giant organ playing a titanic symphony:

He came to evidence the age when Gods had once communed among the leviathans. When Ta'aroa, Lord of the Sea, had created great creatures, real and unreal. Rumbling out of the eye of Time he was a whale of extraordinary appearance. To see him was to tremble because he was over ten centuries old. No other creature in the world had lived as long. When you were in the presence of *Metura'a*, you were privy to the extraordinary, the unbelievable, the incredible.

Forty metres long and weighing over 120 tons, *Metura'a* was also double the length and weight of any other whale living or dead. Already marked out by his immense size as a giant among giants, he was also distinguished by his breathtaking markings. For during the time of early humankind great artists had tattooed him from his nose to his giant caudal flukes. They had inscribed him with moko, emblems of his mana, whorls, chevrons, double and triple twists, spirals and other ancient figurations. What was the purpose? Why, to embody him as Ta'aroa incarnate. This was how humankind thought their god should look like. Otherworldly. Supernatural as well as natural.

Over the years the deep etched markings had gained further dramatic power and charisma by having been thickened by time, the skin gnarled and covered in ancient bruises and discolourations. His left side was slashed with huge wounds from

fighters with other bull Mysticeti. His fins were scarred from protecting the herd from killer whales and sharks. And everywhere else were the cuts from the propellers of a thousand whaling ships and the pockmarks from a million harpoons hurled at him. Over the centuries, humankind had tried to hunt him down! He had truly earned his symbols of ari'i status. No other beast had faced such travail from the ravages and assaults of his world.

But he was arthritic now. Moving slower. As the pod's kaumatua he no longer possessed the flexibility to manoeuvre at speed. Half blind, he sometimes needed guidance, a nudge here, a delicate shove there, to keep him on track, Oops, sorry Koro. In his old age he sometimes had to be guided to his food, positioned in the middle of the krill eating field where all he had to do was open his mouth and swallow.

How could such a mammal like Metura'a confound time and still be living? Even he would not be able to tell you. Only, perhaps, to reply that this was what Ta'aroa had commanded. And as the god had commanded, so had he obeyed.

A pi'o i mua i te ari'i.
Bow down to the great chieftain.

The second glimpse: Kahu, the grandmother and her quest. Once Metura'a had helped her. Now, it was the time for her to help him.

Kokiri kokiri kokiri! Hei ha hei ha!
E Tangaroa e, Homai to aroha ki ahau e!
E Tawhirimatea, Homai to aroha ki ahau e!
Ko taku ahau he uri e o Tane ia e!
Help me to find him, Tangaroa, I entreat you,
Tawhirimatea, I entreat you,
Kokiri kokiri kokiri! Hei ha hei ha!

And they were three waka, only days away from their destination. Kahu looked at her grandson, Wiremu, and the girl who had come with them, Mareva. What had she done to bring these two young adolescents on such a perilous journey?

"Well, my eyes are heavy," she said to Wiremu. "Don't stay up too long, a busy day tomorrow."

Really she should keep an eye on him and Mareva but what could they get up to on a small waka like theirs!

Well...a lot...because Wiremu was already planning a move as Kahu left. However, Mareva was occupied in another thought. "Your Grandmother's up to something."

"Like what?" Wiremu asked, moving closer for the kiss.

“When plotting our coordinates tonight she told me not to lay our path on Sigma Octantis which is the pillar star for the south celestial pole, but to aim the fleet to the west of its pointer arm. Oh well, no good trying to second guess the boss. She will have her reasons.”

At that moment, the heavens were suddenly illuminated by a shower of streaking, falling stars. And one of them flamed as it fell earthbound.

Thinking this was his chance, Wiremu went in for the kiss.

But Mareva moved away from him. “Wrong, romantic moment,” she said. “That was one of the many satellites orbiting the earth. Chinese, Russian, American, who knows! All spying on each other. The sky is filled with as much junk as the ocean. And do you want our first kiss to be associated with rubbish!” She laughed “Try again tomorrow.”

And then tomorrow came with the hourglass dolphins that had been escorting the three waka flipping and dancing with excitement.

Wiremu realised why his grandmother had ordered the fleet to sail west of Sigma Octantis. From the very beginning, she had plotted a course that would enable them to intersect with what was known as the humpback highway, the traditional, long-established route for whales returning from Antarctica to Oceania.

Ahead was an amazing sight. The surface of the sea was lumpy with the sliding shapes of hundreds of tohorā: sperm, humpback, southern right, rorqual, beaked, killer and sei – huge, long shapes and curving. The air above the highway drifted with puffs of spray as, first the crowns of heads and the convex, dimpled orifices of blowholes appeared. Then the lengths of the backs curved up and over to the erect, triangular dorsal fins far down the bodies, near the tails.

“Karanga ahau ki a koutou nga Mysticeti,” Kahu cried.

She turned to Wiremu and Mareva. “Just imagine what the highway must have looked like in the old days,” she said to them. “More birds in the sky, more marine creatures in the sea, more vivacity in the natural world, so much singing and joy. The whales were like other nations, as numerous as human tribes, the birds had their own many iwi. They were tuakana to us, our elders. The whales would help our travelling waka by shepherding them down from Oceania to Aotearoa.”

Her words turned haunted and sad.

“Their mana was our power. Their mauri was also our life-giving force. We have abused it and the sea speaks to us of our guilt. The children stolen by overfishing. Poisoned by plastic. There are gouges in the sea’s belly from marine dredging. The life-sustaining coral forests are dying because of the warming, acidifying polluted junk filled sea. And the whale’s food source, krill, now has another eater: humankind, and he is gluttonous. Nuclear testing has been replaced by nuclear waste dumping. And as for slaughter: two million whales were killed between 1904 and 1986 in the Southern Ocean alone. These are the survivors. They carry on. Hoping. That we will remember.”

For a while longer, the three waka stood away, taking in the procession. Then:

“Timata ano,” Kahu said. She signalled to Wiremu:

“Lay the prow down the rori tohorā, Grandson,” she said. “At the end of it the koroua, Metura’a, is waiting. So too, our destiny.”

Kokiri kokiri kokiri hei ha hei ha

I thank you for being my hosts here while I have been in Germany.

I leave to go back to Aotearoa tomorrow. Nā reira, tenei taku poroporoaki:

Whakataka te hau ki te uru, whakataka te hau ki te tonga,
Kia makinakina ki uta, kia mataratara ki tai,
E hii ake ana te atakura, he tio, he huka, he hauhunga,
Tihei mauriora.