

The Whale Rider Around the World – Publishers, Editions and Audiences

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Abstract Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* (1987) holds the distinction of being New Zealand's most translated literary work, garnering international recognition, particularly after its 2002 film adaptation. This article explores the book's production, publication, and dissemination, tracing its geographical and temporal reach, as well as its broader cultural influences. The piece begins by examining the novel's creation, noting Ihimaera's quick process, inspired by personal experiences and frustrations with patriarchal Māori structures. The article contextualises the book's success within the broader literary and political movements, including the struggles of Māori writers to gain recognition in a Pākehā-dominated publishing industry. Using Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker's "New Model for the Study of the Book," the study highlights the collaborative forces of authors, publishers, and distributors in shaping the book's legacy. Furthermore, it delves into the novel's historical and political influences, such as New Zealand's nuclear-free stance and the global whaling moratorium, which align with the book's thematic exploration of environmental and Indigenous rights issues. By examining the book's reception through its numerous translations, adaptations, and popularity, the article illustrates *The Whale Rider*'s significant role in promoting Māori culture and its continuing relevance in global literary and cinematic spheres.

Keywords publishing history; film adaptation; translation history; international recognition; political influences in literature; environmentalism and nuclear policy; whaling history

The journey begins – writing and publishing *The Whale Rider* in 1987

According to the online platform Preply, *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimarea is the most translated work from New Zealand (Fig. 1; cf. Ellis 2021). Harriet Allan from Penguin New Zealand informed me that the book has sold very well and to many countries¹

1 *The Whale Rider* was published in Macedonia, Taiwan, Tahiti (French), Spain, Denmark, Italy, Estonia, Thailand, Ukraine, Brazil, Germany, the UK, the US and in a Māori edition (E-Mail from Harriet Allan, 17.04.2023).

over the years. This article provides a rough overview of the publication history of *The Whale Rider*, using some data to trace the book's temporal and geographical distribution and to show intermedial influences.

Fig. 1: *The most translated books from Oceania*

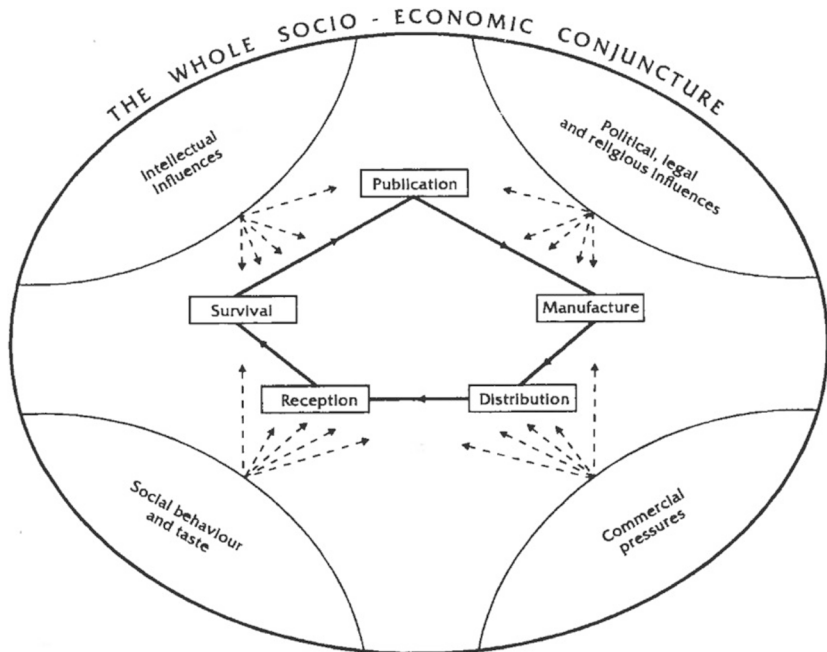


Source: Preply, https://static.preply.com/static/ssr/_next/static/images/oceania-full-97bf3d18f9cfc2a91568d05557368c16.webp?_ga=2.260712325.946040405.1678697330-1517361402.1654185240

First of all, the circumstances of the production of the book published in 1987 are examined. In order to analyse the creation, dissemination and reception of Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* and to place it in a broader context, it is worth taking a

look at the ‘New Model for the Study of the Book’ developed by Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker:

Fig. 2: “A New Model for the Study of the Book”



Source: Adams and Barker 1993, 14

As David J. Gary summarises, Adams and Barker look at publishing as the initial decision to multiply a text or image for distribution.

Four parties are involved: the author, patron, manufacturer, and distributor. They have four concerns: creation (to present the text in a particular form), communication (make it known to others), profit (make a return), and preservation (ensure survival through multiple copies). (Gary 2013)

Regarding the first publication of the short novel, Eckstein explains that Ihimaera wrote nearly 150 pages in just three weeks in 1987 in Cape Cod and New York, where he worked as a diplomat. He was apparently inspired by a whale that had become stranded in the Hudson River, as well as by his anger at the patriarchal structures in his Māori culture. According to Eckstein, *The Whale Rider* is not one of Ihimaera's most literarily sophisticated works, but it has always enjoyed great popularity, es-

pecially among Māori. After the adaptation into a film script and the publication of the film version by Niki Caro (2003), the novel leveraged Ihimaera – who, along with Patricia Grace, was considered the most famous Māori author in New Zealand – to achieve an unexpectedly high level of international fame. To this day, *Whale Rider* is New Zealand's most successful film and has won numerous international awards (Eckstein 2020).

In an interview with New Zealand poet, academic, and illustrator Selina Tusitala Marsh, Witi Ihimaera reflects on his difficulties that were connected with writing and publishing the story of the Māori in New Zealand in comparison with the Pākehā New Zealanders. He explains that there was neither a publishing industry in New Zealand in the 1960s nor the framework conditions to encourage it. The situation differed little from that of other Black or indigenous authors worldwide. From Ihimaera's point of view, it was not surprising that his first book was published by William Heinemann, since Heinemann Educational had been successful with its *African Writers' Series* and was keen to repeat that success. He attributes his ability to publish in New Zealand to international trends, as well as to influences within the literary scene and mentors such as the writers Bill Pearson and Noel Hilliard. He particularly emphasises the writer and linguist Ulli Beier, who was instrumental in promoting and developing literature, poetry and theatre, both in Nigeria and later in Papua New Guinea. Subsequently, the writer and scholar Albert Wendt, with his series of anthologies, and Ihimaera himself, with his *Te Ao Marama* series, have supported the continuation of Pacific literatures (Marsh 2010, 286–287):

From the start getting published in New Zealand has been a huge dilemma. I think that our success has been in spite of New Zealand not because of it. Sometimes, frankly, I really wish that all industries supporting New Zealand culture would understand the difficulties involved for Maori artists and writers to get through the dominant system, a system which traditionally supports Pakeha literature but not Maori literature. This was the reason why, in 1974, as a member of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, I established the committee originally known as the Maori and South Pacific Arts Council (MASPAC) which eventually became Te Waka Toi and the Council for Pacific Arts. It was to enable Maori and Pacific writers and artists the opportunity of their own gateway without the necessity to compete on grounds which privileged Pakeha arts activity, and where we invariably lost. (Ihimaera in: Marsh 2010, 286–287)

The *African Writers' Series*, Ihimaera mentioned, is an English-language book series of works by African writers which was founded in 1962, spearheaded by Alan Hill and West Africa specialist Van Milne (Maja-Pearce 1992). The series was initially published by Heinemann Education Books, an offshoot of the British Heinemann Group, and was later acquired by Pearson. The series became an important forum

for writers in several African countries that had recently gained independence. The first editor of the series was Nigerian author Chinua Achebe (1930–2013), who would become one of Africa's most famous writers. Achebe served as its editor until 1972. In the year of the 30th anniversary, Heinemann was awarded the 1992 “The World Aware Williamson Tea Award for Social Progress”. Inspired by the *African Writers' Series*, Leon Comber launched the Writing in Asia Series in 1966 from Singapore (Chan/Harris 1991). In 1970, the Caribbean Writers Series – modelled on the *African Writers' Series* – was launched by James Currey and others at Heinemann Education Books to republish work by major Caribbean writers (Heinemann Caribbean Writers Series 2010). So, in a way, these series prepared the ground for the publication of Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*. The importance of this is illustrated by a report by the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle on the occasion of New Zealand's appearance as guest of honour at Frankfurt Book Fair 2012, which states:

Only about five to ten percent of New Zealanders today still speak fluent Te Māori, the language of the indigenous population. Their storytelling tradition was an oral one; their stories and myths were passed down mainly by Christian missionaries. Only in the last 20 years or so have they been recorded in writing. (Sommer 2012)

Cultural journalist Andreas Platthaus also emphasised that the Māori language was not initially written down, and that is why there are fundamentally few books in this language. He estimated the number of people able to read Māori at around 200,000. Since the rich Māori narrative culture is not only expressed orally, but also through carving, textile art, tattooing, dance and painting, it was hardly surprising that the guest country appearance was designed to be transmedial and, in addition to workshops and exhibitions, also focused strongly on films that could spark interest in authors, Platthaus states (Platthaus 2012). On the occasion of New Zealand's appearance as guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2012, 68 authors and around 100 artists were scheduled to travel to Frankfurt, including names such as Anthony McCarten, Paul Cleave, Alan Duff, Witi Ihimaera and Paddy Richardson. International newcomers such as Emily Perkins, Paula Morris, Kate de Goldi and Greg McGee, some of whose works were published in German for the first time this year, were also present. More than 40 publishers presented themselves at the collective stand of the New Zealand Publishers Association. A central component of the Frankfurt Guest of Honour appearance was a translation funding programme to make New Zealand literature accessible to a broad international reading public. It was set up by the Publishers Association of New Zealand (PANZ) and provided financial and organisational support to publishers from around the world who wanted to translate New Zealand authors into their respective national languages. Up to 50 per cent of the translation costs for individual titles were covered, up to a maximum of NZ\$5,000 (around €3,000) (buchreport 2012). While an average of 10 New

Zealand titles were translated into German in other years, according to Kevin Chapman, President of the New Zealand Publishers Association PANZ, 83 translations had already been made by July 2012 (Börsenblatt 2015). Chapman saw the Frankfurt Book Fair as an opportunity to present New Zealand, a multicultural country of 4.4 million people with roots in Māori, in Europe and in Asia, as a centre of culture. Until then, the Germans had mainly perceived the island state as a tourist destination. Every year, around 60,000 to 70,000 Germans came to New Zealand, including many young people (Göpfert 2019).

Framework for the publication of *The Whale Rider*

The scope of this article does not allow to address all of the frameworks listed in Adams and Barker's model for the book *The Whale Rider*, but some intellectual and political influences will be briefly elaborated.

In 1951, the three countries Australia, the USA and New Zealand allied to form the ANZUS security pact in order to be able to jointly prevent future conflicts in view of the recently passed Second World War. Due to differences over New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy, the pact was suspended by the U.S. in a largely symbolic act in 1984. The "US Congress retaliated with the Broomfield Act, downgrading New Zealand's status from ally to friend. Labour Prime Minister David Lange responded that if the cost of New Zealand's nuclear-free status was the end of the ANZUS security alliance, this was a 'price we are prepared to pay'." (New Zealand goes nuclear-free). In connection with opposition to the French nuclear weapons programme in French Polynesia, the Greenpeace flagship Rainbow Warrior was sunk by French secret agents in Auckland Harbour in 1985. Two years later, New Zealand declared itself a nuclear-free zone. Alice Te Punga elaborates on the connection with Ihimaera's novel as follows.

Although the narrative of *The Whale Rider* is deeply rooted in the oral traditions and territory of real tribal groups and a real town on the East Coast of Aotearoa, Ihimaera pushes the scope of the story beyond Whāngārā to Australia, Papua New Guinea, nuclear testing sites in the French Pacific, and, ultimately, Hawaiiki. This locates very specific Māori-centric events and struggles within a wider regional framework: Pacific connections are reaffirmed when Māori recognize their links with other Pacific people through shared cultural concepts and similar colonial histories. The whale story that parallels the human story in the novel makes the issue of nuclear testing in the Pacific visible and prompts an orientation of political energy towards Pacific (rather than metropolitan) politics. (Somerville 2012, 63)

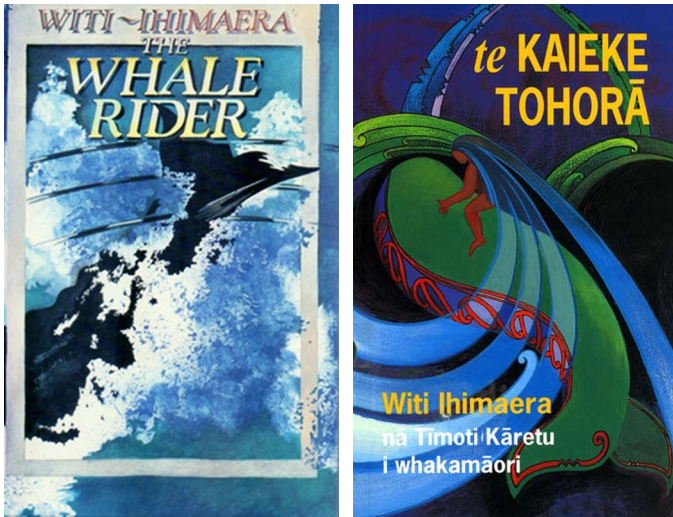
A year before the novel was published, the nuclear accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant had brought the dangers that radioactivity can pose to the attention of the world.

The whaling moratorium that came into effect in 1982 can be seen as another element of the contemporary historical background. In the 1930s, the populations of numerous whale species had declined to such an extent that the major whaling nations joined forces to ensure the sustainable management of the animals. On December 2, 1946, 42 nations signed the “International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling.” The International Whaling Commission was established, and catch quotas were set, but hardly anyone adhered to them. Michael Dähne, curator for marine mammals at the German Oceanographic Museum in Stralsund, points out that various whale species, in particular large whales but also bowhead whales, were still hunted intensively, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Whaling then gradually switched to the faster whale species, which were more difficult to hunt. In the 20th century alone, three million large whales fell victim to hunting. In the 1960s and 70s, calls for a complete ban on whaling grew louder. In addition, most whale products have now been replaced by plastics and fats based on petroleum or plants. In 1982, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) finally decided to ban commercial whaling and prepared a moratorium, but it did not come into effect until 1986. That was the first time that an industry, in this case commercial whaling, was actually stopped, which was a real milestone in international environmental legislation (Seynsche 2021). Similar to radioactivity, discussions about whale conservation were virulent at the time the novel *The Whale Rider* was published. And today, nuclear weapons and the protection of the oceans are still, or even increasingly, topics on society’s agenda, which gives the novel an astonishing topicality even almost 40 years after it was first published.

Reception of *The Whale Rider*

The aspects of manufacturing and distribution addressed in Adams’ and Barker’s model will be skipped in this article, although they too provide ample material for more intensive analysis. But let us take a closer look at the reception of *The Whale Rider* – not on the basis of reviews or published commentaries, but based on the novel’s popularity, measured by the number of new editions, adaptations and translations. From the union catalog WorldCat (2024), which lists the collections of tens of thousands of institutions (mostly libraries) in many countries, the following languages into which the novel has been translated can be identified, most with multiple editions: English (490), German (49), French (21), Māori (10), Italian (9), Spanish (8), Chinese (6), Korean (5), Slovenian (5), Japanese (4), Thai (3), Dutch (2), Finnish (2), Hungarian (2), Polish (2), Czech (1).

Fig. 3 and 4: First editions of “*The Whale Rider*” by Heinemann 1987 (left) and “*Te Kaieke Tohorā*” by Reed publishing 1995 (right)



Source: Heinemann – AbeBooks, Fair use, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=70718460> (left); Reed publishing, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/ephemera/27625/te-kaieke-tohora> (right)

After the novel was first published in English by the Heinemann publishing house in 1987 (Fig. 3), the New Zealand publisher Reed published a translation into Māori in 1995 under the title *Te Kaieke Tohorā* (Fig. 4). Sam Timoti Karetu served as a translator. No further translations were made until 2002, and it was not until the film adaptation and its great international success that the book finally achieved a worldwide breakthrough. Witi Ihimaera’s novel was adapted into a film in 2002 as part of a New Zealand-German co-production. The production involved: South Pacific Pictures, the German ApolloMedia Film Management GmbH, Pandora Film, New Zealand Film Production Fund, New Zealand Film Commission, NZ On Air and the Film Foundation North Rhine-Westphalia from Germany. For New Zealander Niki Caro, born in 1967, *The Whale Rider* was only the second feature film that she directed, and it caused a sensation in New Zealand and beyond in the 2002 movie season. The production, which won a total of 33 festival and critics’ awards and has been nominated for 68. At a cost of \$3.5 million, it was also one of the country’s most expensive productions. It ran in theatres for 26 weeks and grossed US\$41 million worldwide. It advanced not only to become the most successful New Zealand film of all time, but also a worldwide audience favourite (Box Office Mojo 2024). Alistair Fox points out the great success both nationally and internationally:

The most important New Zealand movie of 2003, Niki Caro's *Whale Rider*, first shown at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2002, where it was voted People's Choice, and released elsewhere the following year, was one of the most successful fiction films made in this country, winning twenty-nine international awards. Apart from being highly successful in New Zealand, with ticket sales of 752,941, making it the fourth most popular locally made movie to date, even more significantly, it was a huge hit internationally, with foreign box office earnings of \$20,662,277. In addition, it was the first feature-length film to be adapted from a novel by Witi Ihimaera, the most prominent Māori writer of fiction, inaugurating several other adaptations based on his work [...]. (Fox 2018, 221)

Subsequently, the book was repeatedly linked to the film through the cover design, for example, in a French edition: *Paï*. Paris: Thélès 2003, a Dutch edition: *Het walvismeisje: een Maori-vertelling*. Rijswijk: Elmar 2003, a Finnish edition: *Valasratsastaja*. Helsinki: Like 2003, a Spanish edition: *La leyenda de las ballenas*. Barcelona: Juventud 2004, a Slovenian edition: *Legenda o jezdecu kitov*. Domžalah: Miš 2004 and a Hungarian edition: *A bálnalovas*. Pécs: Alexandra 2004. The first German edition, *Whalerider: die magische Geschichte vom Mädchen, das den Wal ritt* (translated: *Whalerider: the magical story of the girl who rode the whale*), was published in 2003 by Rowohlt Verlag (Reinbek) in paperback. However, there are not only a number of translations that have been driven by the international success of the film adaptation, but also a number of other adaptations that suggest a wide reception of Ihimaera's novel. In 2004, *The Whale Rider* was published by Bolinda Audio Books, based in Tullamarine, Australia. The approximately 4.5-hour audiobook was narrated by the New Zealand-Australian actor Jay Laga'aia. In Germany, the novel was adapted as a radio play in 2005 by the public broadcasting station WDR in collaboration with the publisher Der Audio Verlag. Among the speakers were the well-known actress Monica Bleibtreu and the actor Andreas Pietschmann. A 50-minute stage version of the novel *The Whale Rider* from 2014 was performed again as children's theatre in Auckland from September to November 2022 by the Tim Bray Theatre Company. It shows that the text can be read both as children's literature and as literature for adults (*The Whale Rider – Live on Stage*).

In 2005, the New Zealand publishing house Reed in Auckland published an adaptation of *The Whale Rider* as a picture book, illustrated by Bruce Potter. The New Zealand Picture Book Collection by the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato suggests a number of activities for using this picture book in the classroom. These include both borrowed Māori words and the Māori myth of Paikea (cf. *The Whale Rider* Activities). In 2006, Storylines Children's Literature Charitable Trust put *The Whale Rider* on its list of notable books. The Storylines Trust

promotes awareness of the importance of reading and books for all children and young adults; works to ensure children and young adults in New Zealand have access to high quality literature; and supports the writers and illustrators of literature for children and young adults in New Zealand. [It aims] to inspire children, young adults and their whanau to enjoy the magic of books and reading, especially reading books created for them by New Zealand writers and illustrators. (Storylines Children's Literature Charitable Trust of New Zealand)

In Germany, Ihimaera's novel has also found its way into the school textbook market, albeit with a slightly different objective, namely, to aid the acquisition of English as a foreign language. In 2006, the German textbook publisher Cornelsen published an annotated version of *The Whale Rider* in its Senior English Library. A year later, a teacher's manual was also published (Drebenstedt and Hüllmann-Passeick 2007).

A large print edition (16-point font) was published by ReadWhatYouWant, an Australian-based publishing company that produces accessible formats for people who have difficulty reading or cannot read standard print editions, to make it easier for people with visual impairments to read in 2012.

In 2022, *The Whale Rider* was selected for the "The Big Jubilee Read list" as part of the "The Big Jubilee Read" campaign, which was dedicated to promoting reading for pleasure and celebrating the platinum jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. A list of 70 books by Commonwealth authors, 10 from each decade of Elizabeth II's reign, was selected by a panel of experts and announced by the BBC and the Reading Agency on 18 April 2022. Organisers said the novels, anthologies, short stories and poems were "shared stories that define our social and cultural heritage" (Sherwood 2022).

Survival - the story does not end

To follow Adams and Barker's model to the last point, let us briefly address the book's survival. As explained before, numerous editions of the book have been produced over time in different languages and with different target audiences. The text has been adapted several times and has frequently won awards. Witi Ihimaera, a New Zealand writer, is often regarded as the most important living Māori author. He taught as a professor and Distinguished Creative Fellow in Māori literature at the University of Auckland. Today, Ihimaera's books can be found in numerous libraries worldwide and are also used in some classrooms. To this day, *The Whale Rider* continues to be reprinted and also celebrated, such as in the university-wide Big Read project at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz in 2023.

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