

Reading Nature and Cultures: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on *The Whale Rider* and its Contexts

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Abstract *The introduction emphasises the importance of books as essential tools for research and learning in universities and the need to promote reading among students, especially as reading levels decline. It examines the “One University – One Book” programme, through which Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz selected “The Whale Rider” (1987) by Witi Ihimaera to foster a shared reading experience and rebuild social connections post-pandemic. The novel, blending Māori mythology with contemporary themes, served as a tool for intercultural learning and interdisciplinary dialogue. The project collaborated with the author himself as well as the University of Otago and engaged various academic disciplines to deepen understanding of Māori literature. The resulting volume presents scholarly and personal analyses of “The Whale Rider” and its contexts, relating them to global challenges like decolonisation, environmental protection and cultural resilience.*

Keywords *Māori culture; intercultural learning; interdisciplinary dialogue; decolonisation; environmental protection; reading promotion*

Introducing *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera

The book chosen for the journey that Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU) undertook as their *One University – One Book* project was *The Whale Rider*, first published in 1987 and written by Witi Ihimaera (<https://www.penguin.co.nz/authors/witi-ihimaera>), who is considered to be the most important contemporary Māori author. Born in 1944 near Gisborne, New Zealand, he was the first Māori writer to publish both a short story collection and a novel. Among his notable works are *The Matriarch* (1986), *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* (1995), and *The Whale Rider* (1987), the latter being the best known internationally also due to the success of its film adaptation. Ihimaera's achievements extend beyond writing short stories and novels, with contributions to opera and theatre, as well as editing multiple anthologies of contemporary Māori and Pacific literature. He has been recognised with numerous awards,

including the Māori arts award Te Tohutiketike a Te Waka Toi, the New Zealand Book Award and the New Zealand Order of Merit. He also worked as a diplomat before becoming a professor and creative fellow in Māori literature at the University of Auckland. Ihimaera's fiction combines the mythic and the ordinary, and he continually reinterprets Māori traditions and stories, including revising his own earlier works. His writing reflects his Māori heritage and addresses themes of Māori-Pākehā relationships and Māori identity in modern New Zealand related to broader social and political developments. This blending of Māori culture with broader narratives distinguishes Witi Ihimaera's unique and influential literary voice (Kennedy 2011; Moura-Koçoğlu 2011, 51–96; Hawkins 2023).

The novel *The Whale Rider* tells the story of Kahu, the daughter of a respected Māori family who traces her roots back to the mythical ancestor Paikea, who founded the country and possessed the ability to ride on a whale. For the grandfather, Koro Apirana, Kahu's birth is a bitter blow, since he has been longing for a male heir for a long time, a successor, according to Māori tradition, to whom he can pass the leadership of the tribe. In his desperate search, Koro overlooks both the unconditional love of his granddaughter and the signs of her being chosen. Only when an old bull whale threatens to beach itself off the coast of the village does the tide turn. While her grandfather already sees the end of his tribe in this ominous sign, Kahu mounts the whale and leads it back to the open sea.

The Whale Rider has been translated into more than 20 languages (German translation by Sabine Schulte). The German title of the book is *Whalerider. Die magische Geschichte vom Mädchen, das den Wal ritt* (2003, engl. *Whalerider. The magical story of the girl who rode the whale*). The current, seventh edition of the novel in German was published in 2013 by the Rowohlt-Verlag; it is part of the *repertoire* series, which aims at making long-out-of-print titles – “Literarische Schätze” [literary treasures] – available again. The text has also been produced as a radio play (2005, WDR) and adapted into a picture book and a film. Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (D/NZ 2002) received multiple awards (Toronto International Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival [audience award], International Film Festival Rotterdam), and the lead actress Keisha Castle-Hughes was nominated for an Oscar in the category of Best Actress. While on the one hand this globally successful adaptation is praised for its “representations of gender empowerment and cultural preservation that reflect the events of the late 20th and early 21st centuries” (Zautner 2015, 21), it has also been criticised because its dramaturgy narrows the scope of the plot to Kahu as the main character and reshapes the material through a feminist lens that critics perceive as Eurocentric (see Fox in this volume).

The language of *The Whale Rider* – a rather slim literary volume (158 pages) – is comprehensible and it has a linear narrative style. Through the characters, the novel enables a variety of approaches for readers: the narrator is a young man in search of his cultural identity, the heroine is a young girl who desperately tries to win her

grandfather's love and recognition and who has a very special connection to the sea and its inhabitants. The grandfather, who gradually becomes more and more obsessed with the search for a successor, and the grandmother, who critically accompanies this search (she comes from another, matrilineally influenced tribe), are also key whanau actors (Māori for extended family). The setting New Zealand, 'land of the long white cloud', is a dream destination and place of longing for many. The text enables (European) readers to explore the unfamiliar and reflect on questions of individual and global significance. Unfamiliar is, for example, the linguistic surface with its mixture of Māori and English or German as well as the cyclical time structure of the story. The myths that the text invoke and the traditions that derive from them are new to many readers. The presence and perspective of whales, also in their intimate connection with people, is special and fascinating. The described effects of underwater nuclear tests, however, may be frightening, especially as they are told from the perspective of these whales.

With its unique approach, the novel also touches on universal themes like the search for identity and maturing, gender roles, tradition and transformation, exclusion and racism. Consequently, it invites personal reflections and artistic adaptations as well as interdisciplinary academic dialogue. This applies in particular to the relationship between nature and cultures that is framed in the novel in a specific way: The old whale bull, who has swum into the plot of the novel from mythical times, longs to be guided by a human. At the same time, Kahu is repeatedly drawn to the water and its inhabitants. Human and nature, the novel postulates, are fundamentally interdependent. In contrast, the realistic passages in the text describe in great detail the devastation that humans inflict on nature. The description of a pod of whales dying on the beach, which is also portrayed in the text as a media sensation, is particularly vivid and moving.

The novel appeals to and challenges readers in equal measure. The continuing topicality of *The Whale Rider* is aptly captured by the slogan of the Rowohlt publishing house – 'A look back ahead': The novel's themes relate to pressing questions and socio-political issues of our time, inviting reflection from individual, regional and global perspectives and encouraging exchange. This makes *The Whale Rider* a particularly fitting choice for a shared reading experience that seeks to inspire intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue.

One University – One Book: a literary invitation to travel

The *Eine Uni – Ein Buch* (*One University – One Book*) programme, launched by Stifterverband and Klaus Tschira Foundation in co-operation with Zeit Verlag, states the goal of promoting reading at universities and a vibrant exchange: It aims at encouraging a book-related campus culture in which as many members of a university as possible

– so not only students – exchange ideas and opinions related to a chosen book and also share them with members of their local community. The text to read as well as the ways in which the book is dealt with can be determined by each university itself. While universities might make use of formats like reading circles and author readings, the book could also become the subject of academic teaching in seminars and lecture series and the starting point of creative approaches such as literature slams or film projects.

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz applied successfully for the programme in 2023 and was one of ten universities to receive funding. This allowed the project team¹ to develop a specific approach to promoting reading at the university: A 'new space' was opened up between private and institutional use of literature, promoting reading and follow-up communication within an institutional setting but removed from classical (objectifiable) performance expectations (Scherf and Sander 2024, 403). At the same time, the project aimed to strengthen the university as a place of departure, community and exchange.

Universities are intended to be centres of learning and research and as such have been associated with books from the very beginning. Books have been the fundamental source of knowledge, forming the basis of higher education and intellectual progress. Almost every university has its own library, often with extensive collections of books, manuscripts and digital resources. They are important spaces of contact for students and researchers looking for information, inspiration and exchange. Reading in a university context is primarily a specific form of problem-solving for the purpose of information acquisition and generation. As a core activity of studying, teaching and researching, reading is therefore (still) the primary stimulus for academic achievements (Kuhn 2022, 327–328). And while libraries – in general – also fulfil a social function and democratic mandate (Schüller-Zwierlein 2023), reading is proving to be positive for the individual and society in many ways, as the authors of the *Ljubljana Reading Manifesto* (<https://readingmanifesto.org/>) on the importance of higher-level reading point out:

Higher-level reading is our most powerful tool for analytic and critical thinking. It exercises metacognition and cognitive patience, expands our conceptual capac-

1 The group comprised Prof. Dr. Mita Banerjee (Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies), Prof. Dr. Christoph Bläsi (Gutenberg-Institut für Weltliteratur und schriftorientierte Medien, Buchwissenschaft), Jun.-Prof. Dr. Angela Kölling (FTSK, Anglophonie / Anglophone Literatures and Cultures), Prof. Dr. Birger Petersen (Hochschule für Musik Mainz), Kerstin Rütter (Dekanat FB 05, Studierendenberatung PHILIS), Prof. Dr. Julia Sander (Deutsches Institut, Lese- und Literaturdidaktik), Prof. Dr. Virginia Gail Toy (Institut für Geowissenschaften), Dr. Anke Vogel (Gutenberg-Institut für Weltliteratur und schriftorientierte Medien, Buchwissenschaft) and Dr. Svenja Völkel (Department of English and Linguistics, Language Typology).

ities, trains cognitive empathy and perspective-taking [...]. To participate as informed citizens in a democratic society we need higher-level reading skills and practices that go far beyond the mere decoding of texts. Reading is not only the main road to personal development, the foundation of life-long learning and the basis of so much of our information exchange, but it is also a central dimension of social interaction and participation. (Schüller-Zwierlein et al. 2022)

Since the ability to read and think critically as well as creatively and to adopt a social and intellectual perspective is linked to reading skills and practices, it is all the more alarming that reading levels are falling also at universities (Kuhn et al. 2022; Agarwala and Spiewak 2025). Reading promotion should therefore no longer exclusively be aimed at school children and young adults, but also focus on students in higher education in order to prevent a further erosion of the book and reading culture.

The idea behind the application for the *One University – One Book* programme, that aims to face the described challenge, was an invitation to go on a journey together. The semesters during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023) and the related state of emergency had tied students and teachers as well as administrative staff of JGU to their desks. Everyone was suddenly confined to the closest circle at home, and those who could, worked and taught from there. Those who remained on site had to look after things in mostly abandoned buildings. The university, this vibrant network of individual and sometimes self-willed actors, was torn apart from one day to the next and had to be painstakingly rebuilt digitally. Of course, this was only partially successful: While some students quickly adapted to digital learning spaces and academics enjoyed connecting across countries and oceans with people in their specialist community, chance encounters on campus, informal exchanges with students from other disciplines, chats with colleagues from other fields, occasional meetings and hallway conversations with staff – all of this had largely disappeared during the pandemic. It seemed necessary – the project group determined – to create new meeting spaces: Related to a book, events were organised and follow-up communication initiated. The book was read together and discussed by many different members of the university, people engaged with the text – personally, academically and artistically. The possibilities of digital interaction were used just as much as face-to-face formats, like a student reading night and shared meals during New Zealand Week in the canteen, which had just become possible again at the time.

This addressed a problem that is fundamentally related to a lack of social interactions: if we only deal primarily with people with whom we are connected through our immediate familiar contexts, we all too easily settle into a comfort zone of established patterns of thought and action. What is missing are resistant encounters: the confrontation with different practices, contexts and aesthetics, with divergent perspectives and world views. Confrontation with the unfamiliar may be exhausting and uncomfortable at times – after all, it calls into question our patterns of percep-

tion, thought and action – but is precisely why it is indispensable as a driving force for individual and social development. Countless reports of journeys to other countries and communities bear witness to this influence. Therefore, the project group was not only trying to promote reading and bring different individuals and groups at university back into dialogue with each other, but to do so as part of a trip, a trip to a faraway place. Together, they considered where you would end up if you stuck a – very long – needle through the globe from Mainz, Germany: You emerge near New Zealand. And if you swim ashore from there, you enter a world that was considered completely inaccessible in antiquity and the Middle Ages, that of the antipodes. The worlds have come closer together in recent centuries, but they are anything but synchronised. When it is day here, it is night there; when it is summer here, it is winter there. An ideal destination for anyone who is prepared to turn their thinking upside down (cf. Rütther et al. 2022)

Engaging interdisciplinary perspectives

In the context of *The Whale Rider*-project, literature appeared as both a window to the world and a mirror: reading the novel together enabled new perspectives on the unfamiliar and the familiar, and invited discussion – both offered opportunities for experience and learning, not least from an intercultural perspective. The reading project at Mainz University opened up interdisciplinary exchange that promoted the exploration of literature as a form of cultural participation at university, in the city, and with the other side of the world.

Māori culture was the central element to this process. The programme aimed at enabling members of JGU to learn about and experience the history and present of New Zealand's Māori culture – through the book and beyond. Lecturers from the fields of human geography, linguistics and translation studies were involved, as were numerous colleagues from the University of Otago (Māori: Ōtākou Whakaihū Waka)² as well as the author Witi Ihimaera, who visited Mainz. Intercultural encounters should not only seek the familiar in the unfamiliar and not get lost in exotic settings but explore the personal and political dimensions of Māori culture in a sensitive and reflective way transcending narrow conceptions of 'self' and 'other'.

This volume is based on an interdisciplinary lecture series that formed a key-stone of the project and brings together different perspectives as well as points of

2 The valuable and indispensable perspectives came from Prof. Dr. Jennifer Cattermole (Te Kāhui Tau/School of Performing Arts), Prof. Dr. Karyn Paringatai (Te Tumu/School of Māori, Pacific and Indigenous Studies), Prof. Dr. Susan Sandretto (Te Kura Ākau Taitoka/College of Education) and Prof. em. Dr. Alistair Fox (Te Reo Inarahi me te Mātai Wetereo/English and Linguistics).

reference for a (new) reading of *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera. The articles present both scholarly and personal approaches to the text and its themes. They can also be read as an attempt to initiate, accompany, and reflect on the intended intercultural encounters with Māori literature and culture. That this is a challenging and complex teaching/learning experience is evident, among other things, in the different ways in which the authors use Māori terms in their English lectures and how they attempt to articulate their own positions from which they speak about cultures and their interpretations of the novel. Each perspective contributes to a multi-dimensional understanding of the novel and account for its significance in times of debates about postcolonialism, decolonisation and environmental protection.

In the first section of the volume, *The Whale Rider*'s global reach and impact is put into contexts. Its literary and cinematic success, serving as both a cultural reclamation of Māori and Pacific sovereignty and a bridge between Indigenous narratives and international audiences, is related to local and global challenges. The novel's journey through global publication highlights the struggles and triumphs of Māori literature in a Pākehā-dominated industry, reinforcing its significance in broader literary and political developments. The book's international translations and adaptations, it is shown, have played a crucial role in promoting Māori culture, aligning with contemporary discussions on environmental and Indigenous rights.

In his contribution *Māori Novelist and Indigenous Envoy: Writing to the World*, **Witi Ihimaera** writes about his novel *The Whale Rider* as a seminal work that not only reclaims Māori cultural identity but also addresses broader geopolitical and environmental issues. Ihimaera's exploration of the Paieka myth – an ancestral figure who arrives in Aotearoa New Zealand on the back of a whale – serves as a vehicle for a commentary on Indigenous sovereignty and resilience: In his own words, the novel can be read as part of a practice of reclaiming Māori and Pacific sovereignty, drawing a circular narrative from the myth's origin in Raiātea (French Polynesia) to the geopolitical realities of New York in 1986, and back to the Pacific in 2024, where climate change and the region's security challenges are discussed. Through this cyclical storytelling, Ihimaera reflects the ongoing need for cultural preservation and a renewed focus on Indigenous resilience.

Anke Vogel traces the global journey of *The Whale Rider* through its publications, translations, and adaptations, noting that it has become New Zealand's most translated literary work. Vogel examines the book's creation in light of the Māori writers' struggle for recognition in a Pākehā-dominated publishing industry, highlighting how the novel's themes of Indigenous rights and environmentalism resonated on the global stage, particularly after the 2002 film adaptation.

Subsequently, **Christoph Bläsi** addresses the internationalisation of *The Whale Rider*, discussing the role of institutions in promoting literary works across national and linguistic boundaries. By focusing on the book's journey from New Zealand to Germany, Bläsi provides insights into the dynamics of book markets and how a text

like *The Whale Rider* travels, impacting diverse audiences and featuring the novel's universal themes of cultural identity.

Angela Kölling explores Ihimaera as a translator, discussing how his works, including *The Whale Rider*, function as acts of cultural translation. Kölling argues that Ihimaera's storytelling represents a form of problem construction, which requires attention to both content and political articulation. She examines how translations of the novel help to extend its themes of cultural reclamation, decolonisation, and the ongoing negotiation of Indigenous relationships with the world.

In the second section of the volume, literature is suggested as a lens through which humans interpret and engage with nature, inviting various perspectives such as education, law or evolutionary science to foster sustainability. An interrogation of *The Whale Rider* shows its connection to ecological discourse, for example how it anticipates legal and philosophical developments such as granting personhood to natural entities. The presence of whales in the narrative further allows the reflection of the relationship between nature and culture. The insights into the evolution of whales from land mammals to ocean giants just like their portrayal in contemporary literature and film reflect enduring human fascination and their significance. Through the different perspectives, reading nature becomes an act of both interpretation and transformation, shaping how individuals connect with the natural world.

The article by **Julia Sander** and **Wolfgang Jäger** examines the role of literature in advancing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Taking the UNESCO SDG Book Club initiative as an example, the authors assess literature's potential to enhance understanding of global challenges and promote transformative action. They propose critical literacy as a way of engaging with texts, suggesting that through critical literary conversations, learners can be encouraged to engage in democratic discourse and take action for sustainability.

In **Mita Banerjee's** and **Dieter Dörr's** contribution, *The Whale Rider* is situated within the contexts of legal scholarship and the emerging field of the Blue Humanities. They analyse the novel's anticipation of the legal recognition of natural entities, such as rivers, as legal persons in New Zealand, connecting Ihimaera's environmental themes with real-world legal developments regarding Indigenous and environmental rights.

Thomas Tütken, providing a fascinating backdrop to *The Whale Rider*, explores the evolutionary history of whales, tracing their transformation from small, land-dwelling mammals into the massive, fully aquatic species we know today. It highlights key morphological and physiological adaptations as well as the influence of geological and climatic shifts on their evolution, with fossil evidence from the Indo-Pakistan region providing crucial insights. The reconstruction of the paleontologist shows parallels to the literary scholar's endeavour to establish meaning from elements and contexts.

Bettina Wild explores the significance of whales in contemporary children's and young adult literature. The examination results in a systematisation in which other narratives such as *The Whale Rider* can be located. The author highlights the literary tradition of the whale as a mythical creature, showing how stories contribute to the preservation and transmission of myth.

Michaela Castellanos approaches *The Whale Rider* from the perspective of cultural and literary animal studies, analysing the symbolic role of whales in the novel. Her "cetopoetic reading" focuses on how the novel's treatment of whales reflects Māori cosmology, arguing that the presence of whales in the story is central to understanding the cultural and spiritual landscape of the text.

In the third section of the volume *The Whale Rider* serves as a rich site for exploring how literature navigates cultural identity and mythology. Across various perspectives, a common theme emerges: the novel functions as a bridge between past and present, myth and reality, Indigenous narratives and audiences around the globe. At its core, the novel reinforces Māori cultural identity through its retelling of the Paikea myth, highlighting the interconnectedness of people, nature, and spirituality. This connection is further deepened through Māori language, music, and oral traditions, which serve as cultural markers of resilience and continuity. Additionally, the novel lends itself to critical literacy, encouraging readers to engage with its themes: Whether through feminist readings, anthropological insights, or decolonial perspectives, *The Whale Rider* illustrates how literature not only reflects culture but actively shapes its ongoing negotiation within and beyond its original context.

In her article, **Svenja Völkel** provides an anthropological and linguistic contextualisation of *The Whale Rider*, examining the Māori social structures, their deep connections to the sea, and how Māori identity evolved after European contact. The author emphasises the importance of myth in the Māori worldview and how *The Whale Rider* encapsulates the process of reconnection with Māori values that were threatened by colonialism.

In **Jennifer Cattermole's** article, the significance of whales in Māori instrumental music is explored, particularly through the taonga pūoro (traditional Māori instruments). Cattermole demonstrates how these instruments facilitate communication between Māori characters and whales, reinforcing the interconnectedness between humans, ancestors, and nature in the narrative of *The Whale Rider*.

In **Karyn Paringatai's** contribution, the ongoing influence of Paikea's mythological legacy on his descendants is explored, reinforcing the idea that the story is not just fiction but an integral part of the spiritual and cultural life of Māori people today. Paringatai's analysis shows how the story of Paikea continues to shape and guide Māori identity in the modern world.

Susan Sandretto engages with *The Whale Rider* through the lens of critical literacy, reading it as a reconstruction of a traditional Māori story. She argues that

Ihimaera's novel invites readers to critically examine the Māori pūrākau of Paikea, highlighting the pedagogical value of the text in fostering a deeper understanding of Māori culture and identity.

Anton Escher examines the mythological aspects of *The Whale Rider*, arguing that myth plays a crucial role in preserving community and identity, not just for Māori but for all societies. Escher's interpretation challenges the notion that Māori escape into myth, instead asserting that their cultural survival hinges on the integration of myth with everyday life. He emphasises how *The Whale Rider* reveals the importance of collective identity through mythic storytelling.

Alistair Fox approaches the feminist readings of the 2002 film adaptation of *The Whale Rider*, noting that some Māori critics found the film's portrayal culturally offensive. Fox explores how Niki Caro's adaptation shifted the narrative, emphasising a more universal feminist message, and in doing so, potentially distorting the original Māori cultural context of the novel.

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