

*Striding Both Worlds: Witi Ihimaera and New Zealand's Literary Traditions*

Melissa Kennedy

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Reviewed by Peter H. Marsden

“Striding both worlds”—the transitive use of the verb may appear somewhat solecistic, but Melissa Kennedy is in fact faithfully quoting the object of her study: Witi Ihimaera, no less, whose first-person narrator in *Tangi* (1973) describes himself as taking “a firm step forward into the Pakeha world,” thereby “somehow [...] manag[ing] to stride both worlds” (78). The author is quite fond of the image (though he usually favours the more conventional “bestride”); it might even be considered a leitmotif of his work. Today, four decades on, Ihimaera could without exaggeration be said to bestride the not-so-narrow world of New Zealand literature like a colossus. From being the first Māori to publish both a collection of short stories (*Pounamu, Pounamu* [1972]) and a novel (*Tangi*), Ihimaera has become one of the most productive and most popular of all New Zealand writers, effortlessly turning out at regular intervals readable works in a wide range of genres including drama and film.

In Kennedy’s view it is precisely the mix of indigenous Māori, Pakeha and international ingredients that accounts for the extraordinary appeal and success of Ihimaera’s extensive and impressive oeuvre. Māori storytelling, rhetoric, allegory and myth merge and meld with Pakeha traditions and international elements (transmitted via the English-language tradition) in the unique individual imaginary of the author. The prevalent tendency to pigeonhole Ihimaera as an exclusively Māori writer is, Kennedy feels, misleading in its failure to do justice to the complexity of Ihimaera’s work.

Melissa Kennedy has produced the comprehensive, in-depth, state-of-the-art study that Ihimaera’s prolific and varied output richly deserves. Masses of material are magisterially marshalled. Erudition is mediated with eloquence; the book is eminently readable; the argument, often complex and nuanced, remains fluent throughout.

Nearly two decades have elapsed since the second book-length study of Ihimaera appeared. The subtitle of Umelo Ojinmah’s 1993 monograph *Witi Ihimaera: A Changing Vision* adumbrates what this scholar saw as the author’s transition from a “pastoral phase,” in which he appeared as a proponent of “bicultural integration” or biculturalism, via a “transitional phase” to a “political phase.” From being an enthusiastic but relatively neutral recorder of Māori life and mores, Ihimaera underwent a process of radicalization to emerge as an activist, using literature as a vehicle with which to “fight the Pakeha”

and thereby placing his foot firmly in only one of the two possible camps. What had originally been heard by many, especially Pakeha, as the voice of the Māori Renaissance now seemed to be megaphoning a Māori Revolution.

Melissa Kennedy's perspective is quite different from Ojinmah's but can nevertheless be related to the earlier study. She, for her part, sees Ihimaera's work, of which there was simply much more bulk and variety by her own time of writing, as characterized by its multiple changing visions. He consequently has his foot in several camps at the same time. The twenty years that have elapsed since Ojinmah's study have seen as much social and political change in Aotearoa New Zealand as those preceding it, and during the latter period, Ihimaera has continued to be both expectedly productive and predictably unpredictable in the new directions he constantly takes. Thus when in the case of *Waituhi: The Life of the Village* (1984) or of *The Matriarch* (1986) he turns to opera or when in the case of *Sky Dancer* (2003) he invokes fantasy and sci-fi, he is drawing on significant European as well as Māori influences and traditions; and when in the case of *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* (1995) and *The Uncle's Story* (2000) he is writing about gay identity, he *has to* draw on non-Māori models, gayness having traditionally been, to put it mildly, a no-no in Māori culture and society. Kennedy cites Ihimaera's well-known 1985 diagnosis of his own evolution from "a person who is writing on behalf of a culture and believes he has a role in articulating their concerns and not his own" into "a writer who is articulating selfish concerns" (46). Kennedy herself comments as follows: "The over-emphasis on the Māori aspects of Ihimaera's work at the expense of literary or operatic influences and similarities disallows fiction its inherent ambiguities" (58). In other words, such a narrow focus may blind the reader to the wide range of Ihimaera's preoccupations and his eclectic choice of strategies for dealing with them. Kennedy prefers to see Ihimaera as making use of multiple sources and techniques in order to express the range and complexity and multi-facetedness of his individual—as opposed to his (merely) Māori—identity.

By Kennedy's own account, her study of Ihimaera is text-based rather than culture-, issue- or ethnicity-based. She draws attention to the multiple ways in which Ihimaera "throughout his fiction [...] employs Western cultural references and literary traditions." "Similarly," she goes on, "while some of his fiction is thinly disguised political activism, his love of opera, the fantasy of baroque excess, and a curiosity for other peoples and cultures also inform writing that experiments with integrating positively other idioms into his Māori world-view" (xv). All these diverse sources may well pass through the filter and funnel of Ihimaera's Māori consciousness, but they make for a much richer mixture and more diverse spectrum of styles, techniques and concerns than the received view of him as *the* Māori writer par excellence may suggest, conditioned as it often is by the author's real-life activities, stances and pronouncements rather than taking close account of the fictionality of his literary production. To put it bluntly, there is no reason why a Māori writer should write (let alone *have to*

write) about Māori issues, even though especially for a Māori writer of Ihimaera's stature and profile there is considerable pressure to do so, arising out of his perceived position as spearheading a new *social* movement—be it renaissance or revolution. And in resisting confinement within such a classificatory straitjacket, Ihimaera's work is generalisable as being representative of a wider development, mirroring as it does “a parallel debate over the direction that New Zealand literature (both Māori and Pakeha) is taking, as the international orientation of some new writing challenges a perceived obligation to map the local in a distinct New Zealand idiom” (xv).

Kennedy highlights what she feels has been distinctly underexposed in previous studies: namely the international influences in and on Ihimaera's work. She sees in his “striding” or straddling of two cultures not so much the affirmation of a binary opposition as a *cross-cultural* impetus. Ihimaera, her well-reasoned argument runs, draws on *both* traditions and he does so separately *and* jointly. So far, Kennedy argues, the focus has too often lain fair and square on the importance of the national New Zealand context and on the Māoriness of Māori writing (including Ihimaera's own work) rather than on its literariness. She sees as problematic the tendency—common to analyses of post-colonial indigenous writing in general—for publishers, readers and critics to emphasise or concentrate on the socio-political dimension of individual works at the expense of a considered and detailed study of the aesthetic implementation of their putative ‘message.’ Melissa Kennedy's book seems well set to restore the necessary balance.