

Foreword

In the prologue of this sinewy, interwoven story from Maori New Zealand we read of a master carver who, at the end of his life, is completing the last figure, the *poupou*, for his family's meeting house, the communal centre of Maori life where ideas are discussed, stories are told and histories of ancestors remembered.

The piece of carving is to adorn the end wall of that richly inhabited place, a room that is traditionally dark lit with the colours of Polynesian art – those deep ochre reds and polished browns – gleaming here and there with *paua* or abalone shell, and finished with flax matting and wall coverings that may be edged with patterns of feathers, or trims of bead and shell and bone.

Everything else that he has carved has been known to the artist. His way of working, the significance of his tropes and figures...these have been handed down from generation to generation, through the stories the family tells of their forebears and their land, their connection to the sea and the stars and the heavens. The last figure he is to make, however, goes against the traditional rules of the family for it is the figure of himself – ‘the one I long to do’. So he carves now, but in a different way, deciding ‘that he would leave himself hollow for this last work, that he would not bring out this final figure with his eyes or mind’. Instead ‘he covered the workshop window to darken the room, and his hands and his heart began their work’.

This is how he tells the story of himself: a childless man who has a head full of tales and myths and family legend but no one, no son or daughter, to continue the line of his life and to speak for him when he is gone. ‘I give him to you,’ the carver says, ‘so that he will not be forgotten. Let him live in our house.’ His family agree and when he dies his figure is there, carved in

wood - but with a space, too, at his loins for another *poupou*... Smaller, set in beneath him to show generation, and relationship one to the other: a child who will also be a storyteller, whose stories will make the family real.

Potiki, in the end, is the story of that storyteller. That empty space the carver leaves becomes the intricately imagined tale we have before us as Patricia Grace, a mastercarver herself in words and curving sentences and thickly packed and deep paragraphs studded with incident and emotion, reaches back into the timelessness of myth and forward to the political present to create something that's like nothing you've ever read before. Here is a novel that redefines the form, chiselled out into these sections of story with different characters and voices that are set together in this meeting place of a book where we readers are privileged to be invited in.

Patricia Grace's material, too has all the softness and pliancy of wood. It's a living thing from which she makes this book. For Grace, who describes herself as living in the ancestral land of Ngati Toa, Ngati Raukawa and Te Ati Awa, the lives of the Maori people in New Zealand, their status in that country, their changing role and sense of identity. These things are vividly present to her. And all the stories she makes, whether they are of myth or spirit or contemporary life, give her a sense of subject that is as though inevitable.

Potiki was something of a cult book when it was first published in New Zealand in 1986. It tells of the changes that occur in one family who, having realised that there seems no place for them where they can live with dignity, return to their home on the land to make a living there from the earth and sea. The book came out at the time of huge political turmoil in that country, where Maori land rights and historical claims to certain tracts of sea and river were energetically and often fiercely debated. So the story rings with that kind of truth, with that kind of political energy.

Yet at no time in her telling is Patricia Grace ever strident or didactic. These matters taken in hand have political resonance, yes, but because she creates such an intimate place in her story, because *Potiki* is first and foremost a literary, not an ideological, construction, the story is never ‘told’, rather, and more subtly, we come to understand it as we read in another’s voice.

This in itself is a triumph of her skill. So many books, stories, have us read them in our own way, with our own tones and inflections, and often, too, with our own sense of an imaginative landscape left in place – so that we come to colonise, if you like, the writer’s world with our personal ideas and preconceptions that may have little to do with the text in front of us.

Patricia Grace, though, creates such a strong impression of her own world, the Maori experience of her people in her country, that there is to be no fiddling with it. The sound of Maori voices is the telling of this tale, in that distinctive idiom that is both discursive and truncated, implying intimacy and formality all at once. For so many of us, for whom the *Haka* performed at rugby games has been our only glimpse of Maori dialogue and exchange, this gently inflected kind of language that carries in it both drama and a sort of child-like directness will be a revelation, running alongside, as it does, the urgency of the narrative and tempering it, so that moments of aggression and drama are also touched with quietness and sensitivity and feeling. At an incendiary part of the book, as the unauthorised bulldozers, themselves driven by Maori workers, come in to clear away the family land, Grace works this soft magic:

‘Some of them are our own relations,’ James said. ‘Driving the big machines,’ He said two names. ‘They said they didn’t want to give up their jobs because their jobs would only be given to others and the road will be made anyway.’

‘Of course they shouldn’t give up their jobs,’ said Hemi...

‘They spoke to us,’ James said. ‘Asked us if we lived here, and said who they were, they’re Rihanas.’

Hemi and I both knew who they were.

‘There was trouble,’ Hemi said.

‘Been inside, both of them,’ said James. ‘And not easy for them to get work.’

‘Go up there tomorrow and bring them home,’ Hemi said.

In this way, through her sheer use of language, this established dialogical base gives the book its own calling, Grace has Maori priorities and this vision comes to dominate the text in the most natural way. It *is* like magic, the way she simply writes over any other way of seeing, simply eclipsing western values as we come to join the characters in that dark, imaginative room.

I first heard Patricia Grace when I was a teenager in New Zealand, when she was invited by our university to come and talk about her short stories and writing. From the moment she began reading I remember feeling that I was in the presence of a great artist – possessed of all the calm, deep knowingness of her imagination, of the singularity of her vision.

I am honoured indeed to introduce her to Britain through the publication of this book.

Kirsty Gunn

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