

Witi Ihimaera's New Zealand Dreams

Esteemed New Zealand author Professor Witi Ihimaera, alongside fellow Fulbright alumni filmmaker Sima Urale, addressed an audience at National Library's Auditorium on 2 November 2005. In a speech entitled New Zealand Dreams, Pacific Destinies, Professor Ihimaera addressed issues of New Zealand identity, taking the opportunity also to celebrate the launch of two new books - The Whale Rider (Children's Picture Book edition) and The Rope of Man.

A transcript of Professor Ihimaera's speech follows.

Hello everyone. My name is Witi Ihimaera. Thank you for coming to spend this evening with Sima Urale and myself.



Professor Witi Ihimaera

Over a thousand years ago our ancestor, Paiekea made an extraordinary voyage from Raiatea. He came on a whale, setting his course eastward of the

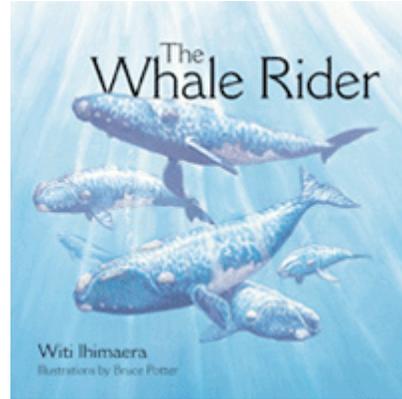
rising sun, and he landed at dawn at a place called Whangara, on the East Coast of the North Island. His journey was just one of many of others that subsequent voyagers made to Aotearoa New Zealand across the great South Pacific Ocean. Only a Kiwi knows how huge that ocean is and, therefore, only a Kiwi knows of the courage of our ancestors in travelling across it. Our Polynesian forebears made the voyage by sea-going waka, navigating by stars and by following the long-tailed cuckoo or the godwits as they made their annual migrations from the Arctic Circle to Aotearoa. Our Pakeha ancestors made *their* epic journeys from England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland; some died on the way, others were born aboard those vessels. They found haven in New Zealand, taking their first shaky steps when they made landfall. The immensity of their courage - of the courage of all our further migrants from the Americas, Indias, Asia and Africa - beggars description.

In *all* their voyages lies the beginning of our own - because their voyages are carried on by us. What were their New Zealand dreams? And what were their visions of our destiny in the Pacific? Although the joint entanglement of all us in the making of New Zealand history continues to be problematic, we must never forget that we have an obligation to our past to carry on those dreams

not just for ourselves or the Pacific or the Pacific Rim - but for the planet itself. It's not over.

Uia mai koia whakahuatia ake ko wai te whare nei e, ko Te Kani, ko wai te tekoteko kei runga, ko Paikea, ko Paikea!

Rangatira ma, koutou katoa, thank you also for coming to help me personally celebrate the launch of two books: *The Whale Rider Picture Book*, which has been written primarily for children and young adults and my new novel *The Rope of Man* which is, in fact, very much about our dreams and our destinies. As far as *The Whale Rider* is concerned, it offers an illustration of how New Zealand dreams can in fact transcend nationality, can transcend race, can transcend even location and go beyond even the Pacific. Who would



The Whale Rider - Children's Picture Book edition

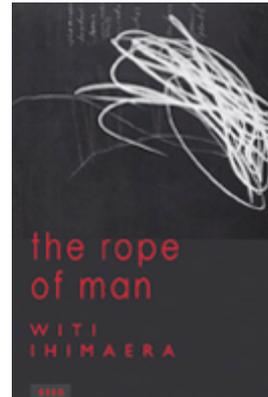
have known that a book that was written not in New Zealand but in New York, way back in 1986, would some sixteen years later in 2002 premiere as a film made by Niki Caro and starring a young girl called Keisha Castle-Hughes, who would become the youngest actress ever to be nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Actress category? When Keisha rode that whale all the way to Hollywood she became Moby Chick. I didn't do so badly myself: whenever I go overseas, people refer to me as the Prince of Whales. And among my many public roles today, I am a trustee of the South Pacific Whaling Research Consortium - don't tell the consortium, but I actually know nothing about whales. Ah well, as American columnist Ann Landers has famously said, "Things are always darkest before they become totally black."

The Whale Rider therefore offers us a Cinderella story or, in my case, a Cinderella story. And it's mirrored in an incident that happened to me and my New York Jewish friend, Betsy, when we attended the New York premiere of the film in 2002. We were running late for the premiere and Betsy was looking beautiful and I wasn't looking so bad myself in my rented tux and bowtie. Anyhow, I hailed a taxi and, as we were crossing Fifth Avenue to catch it, Betsy slipped and one of her high heels went sailing through the air into the middle of the street. An old homeless street person saw what had happened, looked at Betsy, looked at the shoe and ran out to rescue the shoe. Traffic slammed to a halt and car horns began to hoot at him as he joined us on the pavement. Holding the shoe by the toe, he looked sternly at Betsy and admonished her, "And don't forget to be home before midnight."

You know, after the premiere, Betsy and her Jewish women friends were so proud of themselves. They said to me, "That gal Pai isn't a Maori! She's a New Yorker and she has real New York street smarts." For New Yorkers, *The Whale Rider* is as much their story as it is ours because it was written on the 33rd floor, in Apartment 33G of a tower block at West 67th and Broadway.

Te torino haere whakamua, whakamuri. At the same time as the spiral is going out, it is also going in.

As far as *The Rope of Man* is concerned, the irony is that this book too was also written from overseas: first of all, from London, in 1970, when Jane and I were on our honeymoon and staying in a small bedsitting room just off the Old Brompton Road - thank you Jane, and you too Jessica and Olivia, for being my family. Second, I began it all again 35 years later in Washington DC where I was a Senior Fulbright Fellow at George Washington University at the beginning of this year; Suzanne, I want to thank Fulbright New Zealand for the opportunity and Mele Wendt for supporting this evening's event, as well as my publishers, Peter Dowling and the Reed New Zealand crew for allowing me the opportunity to take the long detour back 35 years and the long return forward to 2005 to finish the book.



The Rope of Man

As I have said, the novel is very much about our New Zealand dreams and Pacific destinies, and both are reflected in the central image - that great Rope of Man, te taura tangata, stretching from the beginning of the universe to the universe's end. Everchanging, the Rope is a magnificent icon spiralling from one aeon to the next, charting the history of humankind. At the beginning of its life, it was strong, tightly bound by Maori strands. During the Land Wars it became frayed and almost snapped. Perhaps there were only a few strands holding it together. But the songs of the people can still be sung through one or two strands as they are through many. When we see the Rope again, after the wars, it is a different Rope. It is different because Pakeha heritage becomes added to it, the strands of Pakeha culture entwining with ours, adding different textures and colours. It's also fiercely twisted and soldered together by many different histories as Maori, Pakeha, Polynesian, Asian, American began to fall in love, marry and have children together. The Rope continues its journey, spinning, singing, weaving, sparkling, charting its way through Time. It charts the changing nature of the human odyssey. All our successes and failures as a people are woven into it, all our lapses from divinity and our triumphs over our inhumanity.

In this century, in the year 2005, it is our responsibility as the people who are entrusted the Rope's wellbeing, to make sure that we weave within it our strength, our passion, our dreams, our desires, our moral compass, our sense of excellence, equity and justice so that the Rope can continue in strength into the future, ever spinning, ever singing, ever glowing, onward, ever, ever, forever.

Po! Po! E tangi ana tama ki te kai mana, waiho me tiki ake ki te Pou, a hou kai hei a mai te pakake ki uta ra, hei waiho mo tama kia homai e to tipuna e Eunuku ko te kumara, ko Parinui te ra e!

What are our dreams? What are our destinies? What of ourselves can we weave into the Rope? Can we do this?

Of course we can. After all, we are New Zealanders and we can do anything. We

ride whales, climb mountains, stomp on the Australians at netball 61-36. We go backwards and forwards between hemispheres, we think outside the circle and sometimes we come up with extraordinary solutions to great world problems. Together we're formidable, fighting back to back against all odds. Some of you will know the poet RAK Mason who wrote of New Zealanders back to back like that against the rest of the world:

"Such men - and women - as these, not quarrel and divide but friend and foe are friends in their hard sort... here is this far-pitched perilous hostile place, this solitary hard-assaulted spot, fixed at the friendless outer-edge of space."

Mason saw us as garrisons pent up in a little fort. Whenever I travel backward and forward between the hemispheres, I often think of us in a similar vein - as an island fortress from which we venture as Polynesian vikings to plunder the foolish countries of the North before retreating back with our booty.

But, today, we're also taking New Zealand talent, ingenuity, creativity out into the world. Just as people call the English a nation of shopkeepers and the French a nation of greengrocers, New Zealand can truly lay claim to the title of being a nation of entrepreneurs. And although *The Rope of Man* was begun in Washington, it also takes side trips to London, Hong Kong, Australia and other cities and countries to investigate just where that entrepreneurial spirit has taken us and how our entrepreneurial dreams have revealed themselves.

For instance, do you know that in London, at any one time, there will be 75,000 New Zealanders? They are youthful, they comprise a New Zealand mafia doing their OE and a brilliant New Zealand diaspora. I met some of them in a pub just off the Charing Cross Road when I was in London earlier this year. The irony was that although we were all in London, guess what we talked about? Yup, and yup: Aotearoa New Zealand: Jonah Lomu, marmite, the All Blacks, chocolate fish, Michael King's *History of New Zealand*, Peter Jackson and *Lord of the Rings*, Molenberg bread. And this is one of the huge passionate elemental characteristics about New Zealanders: wherever we meet we're like a tribe sharing stories of the tribe over a camp fire.

At that pub gathering I had a French friend, Jacques, with me. He saw us sobbing into our beer and wine and said, "Helas, etre neo-zelandais, c'est un dilemme exquis." - Alas, being a New Zealander is such an exquisite dilemma.

Te torino haere whakamua, whakamuri. At the same time as we are going forward, we are returning.

No matter where we are, there's a peculiar tension between our country and the world so that no matter where we are in the world, we still regard New Zealand as our home. Mark Twain wrote about us (he was referring to Dunedin) as follows: "The people are Scotch. They stopped off here on their way to Heaven thinking they had arrived." And I have a particular affection for the way in which an early children's writer, Esther Glen, described this country. To her, it looked like a piece of cheese which had been nibbled around by mice.

Being a New Zealander, however, is not only an exquisite dilemma; it's also a proud one. As we travel back and forth, we add to the international inventory and, again, *The Rope of Man* tries to show the practical accomplishments of all our dreams. In film alone, this year we have five huge international films

directed by New Zealanders: Niki Caro's *North Country*, Roger Donaldson's *The World's Fastest Invercargillian*, oops, *Indian*, Vincent Ward's *River Queen*, Andrew Adamson's *The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe* and Peter Jackson's *King Kong*. Does it get any better than that?

In my case, I am a literary entrepreneur, not quite up there with Janet Frame, Katherine Mansfield, Frank Sargeson, James K. Baxter but, hey, it's not for want of trying. I'm like that ram that keeps on trying to punch a hole in that dam because he's got high hopes. A friend of mine, the writer Philip Temple was once asked to name the literary equivalent of an All Black First Fifteen. He made Maurice Gee the captain, I think he put Vincent O'Sullivan in as fullback, and somewhere in the line up are Owen Marshall, Lloyd Jones and Bill Manhire. Phillip put me in as halfback. He said I was opportunistic, fast on my feet, slippery behind the scrum and I sold the perfect dummy. I think those are meant to be compliments.

So what are New Zealand's dreams and what are our Pacific destinies? Well, the poet Denis Glover way back in the 1960s wrote: "I do not dream of Sussex Downs or quaint old England's quaint old towns; I think of what may yet be seen in Johnsonville or Geraldine."

Don't you just love that? *What may yet be seen*. And what I have tried to do in my own work is to write about this through a Maori family, my own, which is also a New Zealand family, and offer some solutions; I want to thank Jane, Jessica, Olivia, Mum and Dad and the family because without them I would not exist because I would have nobody to write about.

In my opinion, our New Zealand dreams today are the dreams of the Rope of Man. They are no longer just Maori dreams or Pakeha dreams. They are also the dreams of our other migrants, Polynesian, Asian, American and African in Aotearoa New Zealand. They have become blended, laminated. And the answer to "what may yet be seen" surely lies in the quality of the ideas that have been woven into the Rope. They are in the hope, the optimism, the leadership and integrity of a younger generation who should not be constrained by race, nation and location but, instead be energised by them. I see these qualities of leadership and integrity already there in the Rope - in the quality of the young men and women who are here tonight. I see them also in the quality of their mentors, my peers, all of you in the audience tonight: my tuakana, Ken Piddington, who worked for the World Bank, Ian Prior, my fearless novelist friend Fiona Kidman, Suzanne Sniveley herself and Mele and Sima.

We should not try to fetter the younger generation in the provincial and divisive thinking that keeps some of us focussed too much on our internal relationships as a bicultural or multicultural nation. We should not bring them up to accept the status quo but always to question it and improve upon it. We must encourage them to claim a role for themselves in shaping their lives and our society. We should say to them, "Go, Kiwi." We should tell them to go into orbit. To achieve freefall. And we should tell them that the voyaging spirit of all our ancestors, all those ancestors I earlier spoke of, is in all of them and will not rest until they reach the stars.

When those ancestors landed here, from all their many countries, this was not the end of the journey. It was the beginning.

What do young New Zealanders dream about? More importantly, what *should* they dream about?

In the epilogue to *The Rope of Man*, in which a Maori New Zealander, Tom Mahana, is being interviewed by Bob Blakeney on BBC television, I try to answer this question. Tom Mahana has become a famous international television anchorman and he has just returned to London, which is now his home. This is what happens at the end of the interview:

Then Bob takes me between his teeth and gives a quick, violent shake. 'So what, Tom Mahana, can Maori bring to the world?'

Ah well, shit happens. All my usual skills of charm and sidestepping are not going to get me out of this one. My mind is whirling as I search for an answer. I stall for time.

'That's a question to stop a charging rhinoceros in its tracks.'

My whole life flashes before me.

I think of Dad who, after my interview with the headmaster at Gisborne Boys High School, said to me, 'We are of the Maori race, a race who had the indomitable courage of the undefeated.' I think of my mother, who told me, just before I left New Zealand to come back to London, 'We always knew you would never come back to Waituhi, son. You belong to the iwi, but your destiny has always been out in the world.'

Crowding into my head come all those young New Zealanders whose paths I have crossed during the past two weeks. I remember David Carruthers and his friends whom I met in the pub off Charing Cross just before I left London. Gabriella had made the observation, 'No matter what you New Zealanders start talking about, you all end up conversing about your own country. The longing is so palpable. But it's more than homesickness, it's *mal du pays* - love of country.'

I think of Henrik Kruger and that beautiful group of young boys I met at my arrival at Auckland International Airport. 'Hey boys, it's Tom Mahana, one of the old boys of our school,' Henrik said. Spontaneously, he gave the command, 'Kia mau.' *Kia mau? From a blond South African boy?* Next minute, the crowd cleared as the boys hunkered down into a raucous, ringing haka.

'Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora, ka ora! Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora, ka ora! Tenei te tangata puhuruhuru nana nei I tiki mai, whakawhiti te ra.' The ground shook, the earth roared.

I think of my old school mate, Michael Kavanagh, who showed me his great-great-great-great-grandmother's bill of passage from Tilbury Docks to Port Nicholson. When we were growing up, Gisborne was like a frontier town. The population was half-Maori, half-Pakeha. Now it was blended, laminated. The lives of two peoples had become inextricably entangled so that it was predicted that within two generations every New Zealander would have some Maori blood or at least a Maori

relative within the new New Zealand family.

I remember my old schoolteacher, Mr Grundy, reciting Allen Curnow: 'Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year, will learn the trick of standing upright here.'

Had we done that? Learnt the trick of standing upright at long last? Yes, oh, yes. And no matter how wide out we went, an invisible umbilical cord would always connect us to Aotearoa. We would never be lost.

And I realise - with a terrible certainty - that Bob Blakeney's question is limited. I think of that Rope of Man, te taura tangata. Not only Maori but also Pakeha are now entwined in the rope, bringing hopefully new strengths, not weaknesses, new possibilities.

What can I say to Bob Blakeney's question?

'So what, Tom Mahana, can Maori bring to the world?' he asks again.

The moment is getting longer and longer. Later, I find out that it is the longest pause in the history of the BBC.

Dad, where are you?

Suddenly, I feel giddy, disoriented by my cold, the painkillers, the lights. I feel as if I am on a swingbridge strung above a raging, swollen river. I am standing in the middle, and Dad is at one end. The swingbridge is suspended in space, swaying in the wind gusting down the valley. The rain dripping from the wireframe transforms the bridge into a shivering, jewelled cobweb spun in the air. Dad waves his hand, farewell.

No, son, this is your watch.

Yes, this is my watch.

New Zealanders are taking their place in their own land and throughout the world. Wherever we meet, we cry, sing and chant our songs through a hostile universe and, when we gather together, it is like a tribe around a campfire telling our stories of the iwi to each other. We are a great diaspora of brilliant innovative young minds whom New Zealand has educated and raised. To what purpose, if not for us to go back out into the world with all our entrepreneurial skills, the same skills that brought our forebears to New Zealand in the first place? Go, Kiwi.

I realise I have become an emissary of Aotearoa. I must speak for all of us from our fortress far to the south. What do young Kiwis dream about? What dreams are there ahead?

When they come, the words of my reply to Bob Blakeney are oracular, filled with inner meaning and power.

'All Maori and all New Zealanders jointly bring an example of what can be achieved in terms of excellence, equity and justice to mankind. In our own country we are showing that it is possible to resolve issues of blood, race, ancestry and identity. Internationally, we bring a certain grit, determination, moral compass and integrity to the world's future.'

Yes, that's it. But more is required of me. In my ears, my

father's voice rings across the years.

Yes, son, yes. Whaia te iti kahurangi. Me te tuohu koe, me me te tuho ki te maunga teitei. Tell them. Tell them all. Give them their blessing.

My nerves hold. New Zealanders are still in the process of becoming. The next great transformation is about to begin. Dreamers, awake.

I smile at Bob Blakeney and say to him:
'We bow only to the highest mountain.'

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues, thank you so much for making me the New Zealander I have become and for the privilege of your company over the last thirty five years.

E hara i te mea no inaianei e te iwi e
No na tupuna tuku iho tuku iho e.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Witi Ihimaera', followed by a large, stylized circular flourish.

Witi Ihimaera

[view photographs of this event](#)