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Abstract

Célestine Hitiura Vaite is, to quote from her novel, *Frangipani*, a woman ‘who knows what she wants and makes it happen’ (83). Born in Tahiti, she moved to Australia with her surfer husband in her early twenties, and began writing when pregnant with her third child. Célestine has just completed the third novel of a Tahitian family saga that follows the life of Materena, a woman in part modelled on her own mother. In her ‘welcome to womanhood’ speech Materena counsels her daughter, Leilani:

ANNE COLLETT

‘Why not a Woman!’: An Interview with Tahitian writer, Célestine Hitiura Vaite

Célestine Hitiura Vaite is, to quote from her novel, *Frangipani*, a woman ‘who knows what she wants and makes it happen’ (83). Born in Tahiti, she moved to Australia with her surfer husband in her early twenties, and began writing when pregnant with her third child. Célestine has just completed the third novel of a Tahitian family saga that follows the life of Materena, a woman in part modelled on her own mother. In her ‘welcome to womanhood’ speech Materena counsels her daughter, Leilani:



‘Be proud to have been born a woman,’...

‘*Oui*,’ Leilani sighs.

‘Don’t you sigh on me!’ Materena talks about how it’s important for mothers to tell their daughters to be proud to have been born a woman. Being born a woman doesn’t mean you have to be the one stuck with the cooking and the cleaning and looking after the children for the rest of your life. Women can do anything. Being a woman also means you add something magical and special to this world. ‘You know that book you were reading last week,’ Materena says. ‘About that Chinese woman who prayed to her God not to make her come back as a woman.’

‘*Oui*. She preferred to be reincarnated as a dog than a woman.’

‘Well, I don’t think it’s awful to be a woman anymore.’

‘Oh,’ Leilani shakes her head, ‘women do have a harder life. You can’t deny that.’

‘I don’t deny that,’ Materena says. ‘But why do you think God gave us all these hardships eh? It’s not because he knows we’re capable? We’re strong? We’re tough.’
‘Mamie, I don’t want to talk about God today please.’

(*Frangipani* [Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2004] 82)

The humorous warmth of this dialogue between mother and daughter is signature of Célestine Vaite’s vigorous and vernacular translation of life into art, and it is surely also reason for the steadily growing popularity of her writing. She is an accomplished storyteller. Her first novel, *Breadfruit* (2003) won the 2004 *Littéraire des étudiants* and *Frangipani* (2004) was short-listed for the 2005

NSW Premiers Literary Awards and has been long-listed for the Orange Prize (UK) as this issue of *Kunapipi* goes to press. The first two novels of the trilogy have been published in Australia, the UK, the US, Canada, Italy, Spain, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Brazil, France, Germany and French Polynesia; and *Tiare* (long-titled *Tiare: The husband who didn't deserve his wife and everything that happened next*), will be published in Australia in May 2006.

This interview took place in January 2006 at Célestine Vaite's home in Mollmook (a small town on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia).

* * * * *

AC: *Why don't we begin with Tahiti — the place that formed both you and your novels.*

CHV: I grew up in Faa'a exactly where the book is situated, that's why my mum said, 'I can't believe you put our fibro shacks in your books!'. I grew up behind a petrol station next to the international airport and not far from the Chinese cemetery. I'm of the family Mai. It's quite a big family; my ancestor was Chief of Faa'a — one of the people to sign the French Protectorate. I'm writing an article on it at the moment. But when people say, 'Oh, you must miss the majestique — the mountains, the rivers ... it's not that I miss — it's that little stretch of place in Tahiti — it's Faa'a that I miss ... the children, the roosters, the church with the clock that chimes the hours ... I miss that — that's where I'm from.

AC: *So it's the really personal stuff — ties to family and childhood — that you miss?*

CHV: Yes ... so many places hold sweet memories of my childhood ... selling mangoes by the side of the road with my cousins, and every time an auntie would walk past we would put on a pitiful air ... and suddenly she'd decide to cross the road ... because you don't sell things to each other! — 'Come on, what's going on!' — but I think we wanted brand new thongs or something like that so....

AC: *What language did you speak as a child?*

CHV: Most of my cousins (mum has two sisters and I had heaps and heaps of cousins) spoke Tahitian but of course there was television — and she wanted us to do well — so she forced us, almost forced us, to speak French. She speaks very good French. She reads it, you know, but she taught herself because she's from a little island in Rangiroa. Her mother is from Rangiroa. Her father is Tahitian from the Mai family and she moved from Rangiroa to Tahiti at fourteen. She didn't speak much French, but taught herself ... dated a French guy, had a few kids in between, and believed in books ... so I spoke more French than Tahitian.

- AC:** *So when you write in the book with that mixture of Tahitian and French, is that how most Tahitians speak?*
- CHV:** Yes, yes — *Oui, oui* — exactly, and because I want to keep my dialogues the way they would be spoken, I act them out — in French first — in a loud voice — all the time I will act them out first and then I translate so it comes out....
- AC:** *I think your dialogue works really well ... it feels natural and alive....*
- CHV:** Well that's what I do — that's my ritual.
- AC:** *And so when you came to Australia, you were how old?*
- CHV:** I was twenty-two with two children....
- AC:** *You were twenty-two; you said earlier that you had to learn English?*
- CHV:** Well yes — I spoke conversational English because you learn at school. When I was at school English was compulsory before Tahitian ... actually Tahitian isn't even compulsory yet ... but Tahitian became part of the curriculum when I was in year twelve ... but until then French and English were compulsory and then Spanish....
- AC:** *Spanish?*
- CHV:** Yes Spanish —
- AC:** *Was this at a Catholic school?*
- CHV:** Yes, I won a scholarship to the Anne Marie Javouhey — a prestigious private school, behind big fences.... Apparently you go in and get out like somebody....
- AC:** *Like somebody special?*
- CHV:** Like somebody with culture ... now where was I?
- AC:** *We were talking about languages.*
- CHV:** Oh, yes ... but when I arrived in Australia for about two weeks I was crying ... you know, because I couldn't understand anything — I thought I wouldn't survive. But then I thought about my mother and my aunties because they said, 'Even if you're far away we'll give you our strength,' and I thought, 'To survive in this country I've got to speak the language'; and mum is very big on a woman having her own job — she said — 'Don't rely on your husband for a job, you know you've got to do all sorts of things ... scratch his back, give him sex ... all those things ... get your own money!' So I thought, 'I've got to get a job,' and to get a job I taught myself English. I read endless magazines you know, women's

magazines like *New Idea* and *Woman's Weekly*, and then I moved on to books. I mainly re-read books that I used to read in French ... Maupassant, Balzac....

AC: *So you were familiar with the story [of the French novels]?*

CHV: Yes, I read it in English and compared notes. Little by little my English got more confident and then I got a job at a bank — I was a bank teller at the National Bank of Australia, Maroubra (NSW). Actually I was a Customer Service Officer of the year ... ‘Yes Please!’ [she says with great alacrity] People were freaking out — they’d come in grumpy ... and be greeted with this happy ‘Hello! Good Morning!’ ... ‘Yes, Please!’ I was there for quite a few years and then I moved on to working for a publishing company as a sales rep — selling to high schools. So I read the curriculum and everything. When I look back on my life I think this was one of the important turning points because although I was just a sales rep I met authors and I thought ‘Wow! This is great! This is good!’

AC: *I can do this....*

CHV: Yeh — I can do this ... although I don’t think back then I thought like that — I thought ‘Wow!’ — you know, I was in awe of the authors ... and then getting pregnant, was what made me start writing really....

AC: *Tell me about that again — what was it about getting pregnant? You went back to Tahiti?*

CHV: I was pregnant with my third child and I’d had the first two back home with my big extended family, you know, and I was all alone in Tabourie Lake [a very small town on the south coast of NSW] and feeling very nostalgic so it just came out one day. I was sitting at the kitchen table and thought, ‘I’m going to write about the electricity man!’ because it happened so often in my family that the electricity man would come and disconnect the electricity ... but you know in real life mum used to hide behind her colourful curtains and I wanted her to go out. I said (in my head), ‘Mum, go and tell him you’re a single mother!’ (We are a French colony but there’s not much assistance from the government, so you’re really on your own). So I wanted to say, ‘Go on mum, go and explain the situation, don’t just stand there like a victim!’ I wanted to go out and argue and she would say, ‘No I have my pride. Stay where you are! We will get out the candles’. Her silence used to frustrate me, so in my story that’s why Materena goes and stands there and nearly punches him in the face as they are arguing about the electricity. It was my redemption. And I think when my story came out in Tahiti not many people wanted to be an electricity man!

AC: *You write from your personal experience, and of course your characters get changed a bit from the originals they might be based on — just the way you are describing here — but do people get upset when they see themselves reflected in the stories?*

CHV: Oh they laugh! Since the book came out in French a lot of my aunties came to the launch in Tahiti of *L'Arbre à pain* [Breadfruit] which is now on the best-seller list in Tahiti and into its fourth reprint. A few of my aunties read it and recognized bits and pieces of themselves ... but I don't write mean, and I haven't been exposed to meanness in my family — so it's much more something to laugh about because it's all so ridiculous....

AC: *It seems very warm — so they don't feel they are being made fun of....*

CHV: Exactly, and you know Lily — the sexy character — they all think, 'It's me, it's me for sure!' ... So, yes I was writing ... and I felt better, because before I started writing I was about five months pregnant and I felt so down — and I felt so — you know when you're pregnant you want more love — and my husband was always surfing ... I wanted love from my mother and sisters — it was the lowest point of my life — the lowest point — and that's why I started writing — it made me laugh and gave me spirit. When I was seven months pregnant I went for my check-up and cried and the doctor says, 'Let's see if the baby is all right,' and I cry, and he says, 'Ok, let's see if mum is all right,' and I thought he was going to tell me 'Listen I'm just a doctor, I'm not a psychiatrist' — and I said 'I want to go home,' and he just said, 'You've got to go home,' and so I went home. I never demanded things from my husband and I should have, so I said 'I've got to go home'.... Anyway I went home — me and my big belly — and something magical happened — I saw my people with different eyes. I always knew that we were funny, but just the bits and pieces that happened in everyday life became wonderful events to learn from for me, and so....

AC: *So you started writing before you went?*

CHV: Yes....

AC: *You said you were feeling sad?*

CHV: Yes — sad —

AC: *And nostalgic maybe?*

CHV: Yes very nostalgic. .. and then my husband read my stories — I must credit him for that — and loved them (and he's an avid reader). He loved the stories and said 'You should send them away,' and I said, 'Oh are you sure?' I got the list from the library and I sent them away and

when I was in Tahiti he was calling me every day telling me, ‘Victoria University want to buy your stories, and Queensland University...’. So when I came back that’s when I thought, ‘I’m going to write about my family and the lives and loves of an extended Tahitian family with all the obstacles...’. Every time I’d go home I just saw so many stories — things seem to be happening there all the time for some reason, always things happening....

AC: *Yes that’s one of the things that comes across ... your books are very lively....*

CHV: Even in *Tiare* (my third book) — I was home just finishing it off — editing — and my cousin said, ‘You gotta write about our war wounds too cousin, our war wounds,’ and I said, ‘War wounds?’ ‘You know — our stretch marks!’ And I thought, ‘Wow!’ I got my notebook out and started writing on war wounds. I’m constantly writing. At the beginning everyone was curious and a bit, you know, suspicious — ‘What are you writing about?’ But now they tell me a story and if I don’t take it down straight away they want to know, ‘How come you’re not writing it?’ ... isn’t that interesting?

AC: *Yes ... so when you said the book was translated into French, is it not in Tahitian?*

CHV: No it’s in French.

AC: *Is it possible to get it translated into Tahitian?*

CHV: Well I met with the Minister of Culture Tauhiti Nena, in August, and because of the new government he said there would be an interest in having it translated into Tahitian and maybe turning it into plays in Tahitian, so yes. But most people can read it because it is simple French — not long descriptive paragraphs about trees or whatever — it’s more compact.

AC: *Is most of the reading in French? Tahitian is not written very much?*

CHV: Yes and it’s very hard to read Tahitian — it’s more an oral language.

AC: *Do you think the way you write and the things you focus on have been influenced by a strong oral culture — a culture in which stories are important?*

CHV: Of course. I give a lot of writing workshops — and free to the kids — and most of the comment I get is ‘Oh, I might not be good enough,’ or they feel intimidated; but when I started writing I didn’t feel intimidated at all because I thought, ‘It’s just like telling a story!’ A lot of people feel overwhelmed or think ‘I’ve got to be clever,’ but I thought it was just a story, and I come from a strong story-telling culture. All my childhood, mum would tell stories, my auntie would tell stories ... we’d go and weed graves ... which is so boring.... There are so many because we are

Painting by Australian Indigenous artist Tom Avery (commissioned by the Department of Health, NSW, Australia)
The big turtle represents Célestine with her two small children, Genji and Turia (born in Tahiti from an Australian father), following right behind. The three are on their way to Australia where Michael (the lizard) is eagerly waiting. Two more children, boys, Heimamu and Toriki, will be born into this family — (symbols below Australia). The border depicts important elements of Célestine's childhood: books, a church, a heart symbolising love and family ties, trees and flowers and bottles of beer (for Tahitians are known for not being allergic to alcohol). In the background are prints taken from Célestine's burial quilt.



all buried on top of each other in the same cemetery, and there was always one auntie who would tell us a story. For example, there is one grave we have always been weeding since I was a child and we don't know who's in that grave, except for one ancestor ... and then I found a story from the first world war: there was the Spanish flu back home and thousands of people were dying and they were getting buried everywhere, anywhere — and two people got buried by mistake in our plot and still today there are family meetings to decide what should be done. Half of the family wants to get rid of them but half thinks, 'We can't disturb them, and where are we going to put them?' So it's a dilemma that will go on for centuries. We always have stories like that ... or stories about legends ... all the time so we don't whinge while we're weeding ... 'Pull those weeds!' ... 'And then what happened?' 'Pull those weeds first!'

AC: *So who would you say was the greatest influence on you?*

CHV: For my writing?

AC: *Yes.*

CHV: Well I would say two women — my mother for the storytelling and my godmother for introducing me to books. My godmother gave me my first book when I was eight, *Les Aventures d'Oliver Twist* [*Oliver Twist*]. And when I got it I thought 'Great!' [sarcastic] — I wanted a Barbie doll. Every time she came to visit me my mum would say 'Get your book out,' because you've got to show ... [the present was appreciated]. So in the beginning I was forcing myself to read for her and then I got hooked ... I realised that reading is like being told a story except I was in control — I could close the book when I liked. If an Aunt told me a story there is no way I could walk out, I'd have to listen, but with a book I could just close it and go and play. Mum never thought of giving me a book, it was me ... I was eight when I got a book and then I wanted another book and another book and then she got the encyclopaedia set. I would have my torch when the electricity was disconnected.... But because I used to share a bedroom with my sisters and my brother (we were all in the same room — mum in a small bed, and 3 girls in a bed and my brother in his) even then [with the torch] they would whinge but mum would say, 'Another 10 minutes — leave her, leave her' ... and my sister would grumble ... it was a nightmare — but I was so engrossed ... and that's why now I let my kids read when we're having dinner. When someone says, 'I wouldn't let my kids read at the table,' I say 'My mum let me.' So when my kids ask, 'Can I read, can I read?' I say, 'Well it's not polite, but ok — yes, you can read.'

AC: *Anything to encourage it....*

CHV: Yes ... and she had a system for homework and I'm doing exactly the same with my kids now — every time we had to do our homework, a little plate of goodies would appear, and I do the same — no homework no chocolate biscuits! We'd sit down and say, 'Mum we've got to do our homework,' and the SAOs with jam or whatever would appear. But she was better than me at hiding, because I hide mine but my kids all discover them ... and she had a smaller house! I don't know where she hid them.... She had a vision for sure....

AC: *Why did she think it was important to study and do well at school?*

CHV: Well mum was an excellent student. Just like in the book, she was the one chosen to recite the 'Welcome to our Island speech' when the governor came; and she was raised by her mother because her father deserted (with another woman who couldn't cook!). Mum wanted to have a job that included a desk for some reason but at fourteen, just months before the Year 10 Certificate, she had to go to Tahiti because her stepfather was sick, and he ended up dying in Tahiti. It's sad that it took her twenty years to go home. At fourteen she lived with an auntie and became a cleaner, and then had a child at eighteen or nineteen — and that's it — she just stayed cleaning. So she saw study as a way out of poverty — definitely — and every time she had a bit to drink she'd say, 'Just look at your mother — four kids from different fathers, we live in poverty — is this what you want?' She definitely saw the way out of poverty, and the vicious circle. My sister is a top teacher in Tahiti — very respected — and my other sister is into the arts — a dancer — and my brother builds canoes ... and none of us have been to prison. Which is like — an honour — you have to be Tahitian to understand this!

AC: *So it was about poverty, but was it also about wanting to better yourself as a person?*

CHV: Better yourself?

AC: *To extend yourself or to have a different kind of understanding of the world....*

CHV: No, I don't think she saw that far ... no, I know she didn't ... she didn't think about 'widening your horizon'. She saw education as a way out — a way to a better job — that's all — 'You'll get a better job with papers' (which means degrees). Then when I got my HSC — how old was I? — about fifteen — she decided to change her life too. She was around about forty to forty-two and she decided not to clean anymore. She got a job behind a desk.

AC: *She really did it!*

CHV: Yes, and she retired last year and got a medal because she's never been sick.

AC: *Was the job what she thought it would be? Was she really happy with it?*

CHV: She loved it — yes! I think that's why you've got to keep positive ... you just never know.... When I won a scholarship I had to go to school in Papeete so I had to catch the truck every day and I had to pay \$1.20 there and \$1.20 back — and it was a hassle because mum went into Papeete every day too, which was \$5 transport every day. I would always panic because we had to have money for the ride for the next day and towards the end of the month — before payday — we'd be looking everywhere for something. But no matter how hard things were, my mum would always say, 'Don't worry, we'll find something, God will find something,' — and we'd always find something. Her positivism was just amazing and I think I'm used to that in my life too — so if things go wrong I think, well if it's meant to be you've just got to accept it.

AC: *And, I guess, go with the opportunities that are given and make the most of them.*

CHV: My brother lost the plot for a while, but my mother never lost faith in him and she'd always say to him, 'Well I know one day you're going to do something good! And do what God put you on this earth for?'. She's really big on God. I grew up with a glowing Virgin Mary and the beating heart — the beating red heart! And when I go home with my kids (she now has a bigger house because her old house was destroyed by the cyclone — we've got a government house now — so there's more religious posters) they'll say 'Mum, that man freaks me!' and she'll ask 'What did he say?' and I'll explain and she'll say 'That Man! That Man's Jesus Christ!' I think when I started writing, her greatest fear was ... well you know there are so many books that rubbish something that is important to a lot of people — just because they can, and probably because that's how they feel ... and she said, 'I hope there's no blasphemy in your book — that's all I'm asking — I hope you don't take the name of the Lord in vain'. I saw in her life her Faith....

AC: *It was her strength.*

CHV: Yes, her Faith gave her strength — so it's something....

AC: *The way you talk about your mother and your grandmother and your aunts, it seems to me that the women are what hold everything together ... the culture....*

CHV: Yes, absolutely yes ... if we had to leave it to the men ... Phewt! ... like, when the baby's born it's the women who get the tree and decide where it's going to be planted, and we think about the names.... It's the women

who tell the stories of the past ... men hardly ever ... I'm writing about this in my third book [*Tiare*] ... men don't seem to be talking — you know — if they talk it's just 'wind talk' — 'Oh, did you see Rosalee! Oh ... I remember Rosalee ...'. Sometimes they talk a little bit about themselves but it's so rare — so hard for them ... like my uncle was sharing a little of himself with me and then he freaked out ... 'Too much! Too much! Too much!' and then he stopped talking, he didn't want to go on.

AC: *They don't want to talk about intimate personal things?*

CHV: That's right — personal things ... whereas women — they'll tell you everything and I'm sure with most women it's a visiting thing. Women get the kids together and they do the cooking and the talking, and even when they talk amongst themselves we're listening — we hear things, we pick up things ... sometimes they'd forget us kids and just tell stories.

AC: *Was that something you found different in Australia? When you moved what were the things that you found hardest about living in Australia?*

CHV: Well, actually it was living in Sydney because ... of the lack of emotions — I found it hard.... When I first arrived I was kissing everyone and then I realised it's not really a normal thing to do here ... so lack of emotions and people keeping a distance.... Well, fair enough, you've got to earn their trust — not like Tahiti where some stranger will walk past and 'Haere mai tama'a' — 'Come eat!' and next, 'Come sleep!' — it could be an axe-murderer for all we know — we're too friendly some times. So I appreciate that we can't meet and expect to be instant friends — you've got to earn it — I accepted that. But now where I live in Ulladulla there's a community spirit which is why I feel I can handle being so far away from my family. I've been here for twelve years and it's the women I love — the women. Well it's the same thing ... the women get together. We have a women's group where we get our flock of children together and go to the pool or the beach and we share stories.

AC: *So that's actually very similar to Tahiti — it's about small communities.*

CHV: Yes — it's the small community. I think it's a universal thing where women in a small community draw on each other's strength to survive. It's about women and the caring we have — we are such caring creatures — and I'm not saying that men aren't but just that we're different. I'm teaching my oldest son to cook and he's changed his bed sheets since he was fourteen.

AC: *I like the part in the book about the son who cooks and wants to be a chef ... I guess there's something about the macho culture everywhere — at least it is in Australia — there's a lot of pressure on boys to behave*

in a particular — a macho — way.

CHV: Exactly, exactly....

AC: *And it's very hard for them to break away from that and be a bit different because they're seen to be feminine in some way ... it's a problem ... it's the same kind of culture in Australia — it's no different....*

CHV: In Tahiti men make pretty poor fathers, but they make brilliant grandfathers — Brilliant! — and that's what I wanted to explore in my third novel [the final book of the trilogy of which *Breadfruit* and *Frangipani* are the first and second]. They come to an age where it's acceptable — it's expected to behave differently as a grandfather. A few of my cousins I thought of as such coconut heads! But they're brilliant grandfathers. My cousin George is always with his granddaughter, and he was telling me last time I was there 'God, the women are always checking me out!' and I said 'Yeh, because you're a man with a baby, you know — it's sexy'; but a twenty-year old holding a baby — it's always, 'Oh, she's wearing the pants ... why don't you come for a beer...'. But of the man who is a grandfather, it's expected. The kids have them wrapped around their little fingers.... And because they have kids so early they become grandfathers at forty.

AC: *So it's actually quite a freeing thing for them then isn't it?*

CHV: Someone was saying this to me earlier and I hadn't really thought about that, but yes, it's like, 'Now I'm allowed ... I'm allowed to be soft'. It's about relationship between grandchild and grandfather — it's expected he will go gaga — 'Oh he's gone gaga!'

AC: *What does 'gone gaga' mean?*

CHV: 'Gaga' means he's lost it ... plenty of rocks in there ... he's gone a bit silly ... but it's expected....

AC: *So you say he's gone a bit silly now he's relating to his grandchildren in a way he didn't relate to his own children, but it's a positive thing?*

CHV: Oh yes — it's a positive thing — everybody laughs and we think he's cute ... sexy. A lot of women might have thought, 'As soon as the kids are grown up, I'm out of here,' but a lot of the time they fall in love again with their men — it's amazing! In their twenties it's all about showing their muscles ... alright it's lovely but for women — for me — I don't think it does anything.... 'Yeh, great muscles, but can you help me here?' But the softness — there is something about the softness that turns us on — the thought of them being thoughtful — that's what gets us into bed — not the triple abdominals! You've got to melt the heart

first — you know — it goes from the heart down, it doesn't go the other way. So a lot of the women just fall in love madly ... and the grandchildren, well a lot of the grandchildren spend time with their grandparents because their parents are working — so it's a very lucky child who has that relationship with a grandparent — it brings a lot of happiness. And when the grandparents die the grandchildren are really touched. You will meet grown men now who will talk a lot about their grandparents — a lot — more about their grandparents than their parents.

AC: *Is this what your next book is about? More about the men?*

CHV: Yes. It's written from Pito's point of view [Pito is Materena's partner and father of her children]. I had a lot of fun. It's about a redemption that comes in the form of his granddaughter. I haven't turned him into a Mr Goody Two-Shoes, but he's obviously showing a bit more affection (and getting much more sex!).

AC: *That's interesting, because the first two books are so much about women — strong women — I wondered what you would do next as you can't keep writing on the same topic....*

CHV: No, exactly ... and I'm closing that story — I've said goodbye — it's a trilogy and that's the last one of the family. You've got to know when to stop. In the third book I close everything — close lots of issues that come from *Breadfruit* and *Frangipani* and it's the end — Ciao! — but I did cry when it was finished.

* * * * *

AC: *One of the things that interested me that I think is different in Tahiti to Australia, is the strong sense of the dead still being with you — still being part of the family....*

CHV: Absolutely.

AC: *Weeding the graves....*

CHV: I think the worst thing that can happen to a person back home is to be forgotten. My grandmother died when my mum was fourteen but I know her inside out. I know all about her because my mum talked about her a lot and I think from weeding the grave....

AC: *Because you are keeping the person alive, keeping their memory alive....*

CHV: Yes ... because it's so embarrassing if the grave is choking in weeds. On The Day of the Dead it's a competition for who has the most flowers or the most beautiful flowers — we paint the graves, agonise about the flowers — 'No, no, yellow on the right.... No don't move that....' It

takes hours! And then carrying the bouquets of flowers up the hill. We have candles — it's magic — I love The Day of the Dead! The priests come to bless and make sure no graves are missed and you have to make sure not to step on the graves — everyone is squeezed into little alleys between the graves. But we don't go as far as putting up pictures of the dead the way the Chinese do.

AC: *Why do you think that is? What's different about putting up a picture to telling stories?*

CHV: Maybe it's a respect thing. We have family pictures in an album — but that's private — you don't go through someone's family album. It's a protection of privacy. The community is very open but there are still things that are private.

AC: *Some things are private to the smaller family.*

CHV: Yes.

AC: *Is there anything different about living in a very small island community? Does it make a difference to the way you live your life? What kind of influences does it have on you? Obviously Australia is also an island — but a very big one — so it doesn't feel like one — but do you think about being on this little island in the middle of a huge expanse of water?*

CHV: No you don't — it's only when you get out! It's only then that you realise — 'Oh this is a small island!' but once you've left, people ask, 'Why do you want to go *there*? This is Paradise. We've got everything here.' No, you don't even think, 'Over there is France or Europe of whatever' — no, it's just about us. But once you get out — often to France to study — and you come back — a lot of people want to get out more often because they find it suffocating. When you live in a bigger place like I am, you learn to be more assertive maybe.

AC: *Do you think that living in a different culture frees you from certain cultural expectations and obligations?*

CHV: Oh yes. If I was still living in Tahiti I don't think I would have written the books because I'd be thinking, 'No I can't do that, no I can't say that, oh that's a bit much!' I probably would have written a book with no sex scenes or ... I would have been fairly restricted, but because I wrote it overseas I felt a freedom ... so sometimes when I come back the first day it's 'Oh I love it here!' but by the tenth day I'm like 'Hmmm I don't think I could live here again'.

AC: *You know how you were saying earlier that a lot of Tahitian men end up in prison? In your book you are quite generous in your attitude toward*

the French and French colonialism, so I wondered how you feel about the colonial history of Tahiti and what your politics are in relation to that, because I can imagine you might have been quite a bit harsher about what might be seen as the divide between the French and the Tahitians and what happens to Tahitians — poverty, crime and violence — and so although you touch on it I thought you were quite generous and I wondered how you felt about it and why that generosity was there.

CHV: Maybe because my father was French and maybe because my mother's boss was French and he was really nice. I think that we are touched a lot by personal events. Let's say for example I saw a French woman being rude to my mother, I would probably be a French-hater now, but I feel differently because I have a lot of good moments with French in them. My mum's boss used to give me clothes and she was very kind to my mum — advance her money or whatever — and my mum had a couple of French boyfriends and they were really nice. So I think it's a personal thing. It's because she loved the French and she's not a racist, she never talks badly about the French because they are French. She says some people are good and some people are bad and that's the way it is. Whereas my auntie, her sister, is such a racist ... she's really into politics and every French is a dickhead — 'Get out French!' So I guess it's because I didn't grow up in that environment of resentment — 'Oh, we're in this position because of the French'. Although my mum was very poor and we lived in a fibro house, it was beautiful, it was clean, the garden was absolutely gorgeous — raked everyday, and there were beautiful curtains; whereas her sister also lives in a fibro shack, but it's dirty — and it's all because of the French — whereas I didn't have that — I didn't grow up in that environment with my mum and it freaks me out a bit when I go back — my cousin will say, 'Oh, you're getting white!' and I'll say 'That's because it's winter up there you coconut-head!' ... you know, 'How's your heart? Is it white?' So I think it's all individual ... and I've realised that my mum is just an amazing, amazing person. I think, looking back, mum is something of a visionary.... When she met people, she made sure she introduced us to them — like the boss — so when I was on holidays I always got a job — I was the only employee's kid there.

AC: She's a good net-worker....

CHV: She's a very good net-worker. My mum raised me to make the French my allies....

AC: *Maybe to work within what you've got? Make the most of the situation you're in, whereas some people look towards.... I guess there's a certain amount of resentment and a casting of blame, whereas some people*

recognise that maybe it's not as easy as that, not as cut and dried as that — more complex. Relationships are so connected or entangled it's really difficult just to go chop? like that — to sever colonised from coloniser — you're bad, we're good....

CHV: And honestly, you know it tires me now.... I went to the Brisbane Writers' Festival and we had to do something on bloodlines, and I was with two Indigenous people who were fabulous, but their talk was very negative, just like 'We are sick of being the Dog!' and I felt bad because mine was about my aunties — funny and exuberant! I felt I should have been a bit more serious in my speech, so I was panicking. My speech was funny and I was the last speaker and they were all so serious — and everybody was nodding....

AC: *Everybody was probably relieved....*

CHV: So I think it's my mum....

AC: *And do you think too — it's too easy to blame somebody else? I'm thinking of some of the scenes in the book and some of the attitudes of the men ... that it's easy to cast the blame somewhere else and say it's all to do with colonialism and not something within ourselves or something to do with our own culture. Clearly poverty has an impact, and the lack of opportunity ... it's important — but sometimes it seems there's a lot of blame happening and not much attempt to change in other ways. I was thinking about the way you talk about Tahiti, and you know you said it was quite nostalgic — a lot of it is very warm and painted in optimistic happy colours — I wondered if there was something you thought needed to be changed in Tahiti or the way Tahiti works at the moment. What would it be and how would it be accomplished? If you think about the number of Tahitian men who end up in prison or poverty or lack of opportunity....*

CHV: I really believe in reading ... so my mission is to increase the literacy rate because at the moment, still only people from the middle-class read, poor people don't read — the literacy rate among Tahitians is very low. At the book fairs the people you see are French or half-French and you don't really see the Tahitians who need it, because I believe ... my mum believed that reading led to better jobs. After meeting Alan Duff — he explained to me about his program — I really believe, like him, that literacy fights crime because you expand your horizons — not that it makes you feel less bitter — but, like you said before, it gives you another vision of the world.

AC: *So is your family unusual?*

CHV: Yes, I think it's my mum who is unusual....

AC: *I'm thinking even in terms of literacy — the fact that your mum could read — could your grandma?*

CHV: No —

AC: *It was just your mum?*

CHV: Mostly the bible though.... The government has introduced programs now in Tahiti — they're sending people to France to train them as librarians, and they have mobile libraries to go into poor areas — so the kids can go into the bus and read ... because I think once you're hooked you're hooked for life. And also, it increases your vocabulary and teaches you to write better so you do better at school. It's a chain of events ... and it can only make your life better. So I really believe in that and that's why *L'Arbre à pain* [*Breadfruit*] has been voted the best selling book in French Polynesia. It's been on the best-seller list for two years now. More Tahitians are reading now because the book's not intimidating and it's about their lives....

AC: *It's about them....*

CHV: And they love it.... Last time I was there Tahitians would start reading and laughing. 'Oh I can see my mum there...' and for once it's not about 'Tanyia was an exotic beauty ... with long hair down her back...'. So it's about all the silly superstitions we have — the good and the bad — and the stories of our everyday lives. I work very closely with the translator, Henri Theaureau. He came to Australia and we worked together in the finalisation of the translation, because the first translation I got he made the characters speak in very simple language — like 'me go there' or whatever — and I was furious, so he flew here and we worked together. Because although a lot of Tahitians speak bad French I thought a lot of them speak good French too ... and why not use those who speak well ... and Materena is an exceptional woman — so let's show the way.

AC: *And you don't want to talk down to people....*

CHV: No, exactly and I think that's why *Breadfruit* has had a big impact in Tahiti — because women feel proud — and also Materena is a very inspiring as a heroine — more women are proud because of her.

AC: *So the whole idea of women telling inspiring stories ... do you see that as part of what you do as well? In terms of your writing?*

CHV: Yes — do you mean telling stories to make each other feel better?

Absolutely. You feel down, you tell it to your cousin, you feel better ... because she'll tell you something that happened to her that has to be worse ... of course.

AC: *Your books are about traditions, but it doesn't seem to be a static tradition, but something that is accommodating change as well, although some of the things you talk about are things you want to preserve....*

CHV: Like what?

AC: *Well I was thinking of The Day of the Dead and the weeding of the graves — that is something that is important to the culture and you want to see ongoing, but in other ways, maybe attitudes towards women, you do want to see change happen. So it doesn't seem to me that you're presenting a culture that has somehow stopped in the past. You know how we were talking about nostalgia before, and sometimes nostalgia can be thinking about a culture as though it had stopped in the past somewhere?*

CHV: Yes I see what you mean. It's like having a woman on the radio, why not have a woman on the radio, but if I lived there I would think 'No, we can't have a woman on the radio', but because I live here [in Australia] I think, 'Yeh, why not, I'll put a bloody woman on the radio, and I'll make her a superstar!' So you're right in that because I don't live there I'm not restricted so I feel free to go ahead ... planting ideas.

AC: *Change starts to happen because of those ideas?*

CHV: Well that's what one would hope for I guess — yes — to inspire and unlock something....

AC: *If people can imagine something.... Sometimes the problem is they can't even imagine the possibility and if you can just get them to think about this other possibility ... things happen....*

CHV: Exactly. Even the translator of *Frangipani* was saying 'No one will relate to a woman on the radio ... women talk at home not in public.' But I guarantee it's going to happen — a woman on the radio. There are women on TV all the time — Miss Tahiti, or they tell the weather — very sexy weather.... But the idea came when I was in Tahiti and I had a radio interview ... they were all men and all French. The assistants were women — the one's behind the glass ... and that's when I thought 'Why not a woman!'

AC: *Are there any women in Tahiti in positions of power?*

CHV: Yes ... I had lunch with the then-Minister of Women — Beatrice Vernaudon. She took me to dinner and she wanted to acknowledge the

impact of my stories — she said thanks so much for writing about that — because our women need to know. There's a lot of domestic violence.... I think because I was raised by a single mother I am so pro-woman, but maybe if she had been married, you know, bending to her husband, I would have been different. A lot of women for reasons of security give up their strength to accommodate a man in their lives....

AC: *And isn't that related to your saying that your mum thought it was really important to have a job and your own money?*

CHV: Yes I think that's what it is.

AC: *Because you can feel that much more confident?*

CHV: Yes, if you're financially independent ... because if he pisses you off you can piss off! You don't have to put up with his shit. I think my mum was a hard core feminist in disguise!

AC: *You spend a lot of time in the novels talking about women's strength, and I wondered if partly that was because women needed to be strong because they were living in circumstances which made them vulnerable or in which there was violence. You don't really talk about that in the books.*

CHV: It's true, you learn to be very accommodating....

AC: *So I guess you're giving an example of how women might behave differently.*

CHV: That's right but don't get me wrong, I've got all kinds of colours in my family — I've got one's who are accommodating or one's who are having a fight and my brother will go in to help and be told — no, leave them alone — my mum knows how to fight. There are women out there who will not take shit! There are all kinds of examples but I like the example of the strong woman without going into the physical thing.

AC: *I suppose too it's because in part you're writing out of your own life and your own life history. So you know how in the story it's the daughter who ends up wanting to do medicine — become a doctor — where did that come from?*

CHV: Me ... I don't know why ... but I thought I kind of wanted to see a woman doctor in Tahiti — a Tahitian one. You remember the kid who has a skin disease and then the older one has the skin disease? ... that was me, asking my cousin, 'Didn't you ask the doctor if it was contagious?' and that was her response, 'It's up to him to tell me, not me to have to ask'. And I thought ... 'That's men!' I thought if there was a woman Tahitian doctor she could talk about contraception and

talk about... In my next book I want to explore women not needing men to find sexual fulfilment, which is a taboo back home. I think a lot of girls are getting pregnant at a young age — fifteen or sixteen — because they're in the mood and they don't know about this ... you know, I would say to them 'Do it when you're sure, not just because you're in the mood for sex!' I really want to explore this because I think if women become financially independent and sexually empowered there would be more women in a situation where they want to be — now. Look at Materna — sex under a tree — and she still goes back ... I think you can change history if you get rid of the taboos. It's going to be a big thing in Tahiti if I write about this. I mean it won't be full on ... I won't go on and on and on ... but it's definitely going to be there....

AC: *I think it's the same kind of thing you were talking about before — it's giving people knowledge.*

CHV: Yes.

* * * * *

AC: *What's the name of your new book again?*

CHV: 'Tiare' — it's a flower and the emblem of Tahiti, and also the name of the grandchild.

AC: *Doesn't one of the books come with a photo of you — the exotic Tahitian — with a flower behind your ear....*

CHV: Yes, but I think that's only part of the appeal of my books because they're also international — they cover universal themes.... I think that's why they have been translated into so many languages — the Chinese and Russians are considering translating at the moment. You're going to laugh about this ... I received the copy from the Netherlands ... see the cover? ... the 'Dutch girl' ... two weeks later I'm flipping through one of my daughter's *Cosmopolitan* magazines — and here she is doing an ad for tampons — 'Tampons! You won't even feel them!' You have to laugh ... my heroine is 'Carefree Tampons!' Did you see the French copy ... the girl on the cover? I went to a nightclub with my sister and saw her dancing ... she's becoming very popular ... everybody wants to dance with her ... nobody knows about me.... They say to her 'Hey, you're that girl on the book, right?' ... and my mum said to me, 'Go and tell them you're the one who wrote the book!' and I said, 'Oh, it's all right, it's ok'. She nearly went to tell the people, 'Yeh — but the writer is there ... and she'd like to dance!'