

2000

Interview with Patricia Grace

Michelle Keown

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Keown, Michelle, Interview with Patricia Grace, *Kunapipi*, 22(2), 2000.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol22/iss2/10>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Interview with Patricia Grace

Abstract

Patricia Grace, one of New Zealand's most prolific and influential Maori writers, was born in Wellington (New Zealand) in 1937, of Ngati Raukawa, Ngati Toa and Te Ati Awa tribal descent. Grace began to write while working as a primary school teacher, and her first collection of short stories, *Waiariki*, was published in 1975, making her the first Maori woman creative writer to publish a book in English. Her first novel, *Mutuwhenua*, was published in 1978, followed by a second collection of short stories, *The Dream Sleepers*, in 1980. Other publications include four short story collections: *The Electric City and Other Stories* (1987), *Selected Stories* (1991), *Collected Stories* (1994) and *The Sky People* (1994); three novels: *Potiki* (1986), *Cousins* (1992) and *Baby No-Eyes* (1998); and a variety of children's books. She has received several grants and awards for her writing, and has been involved in a number of workshops for Maori writers.

MICHELLE KEOWN

Interview with Patricia Grace

Patricia Grace, one of New Zealand's most prolific and influential Maori writers, was born in Wellington (New Zealand) in 1937, of Ngati Raukawa, Ngati Toa and Te Ati Awa tribal descent. Grace began to write while working as a primary school teacher, and her first collection of short stories, *Waiariki*, was published in 1975, making her the first Maori woman creative writer to publish a book in English. Her first novel, *Mutuwhenua*, was published in 1978, followed by a second collection of short stories, *The Dream Sleepers*, in 1980. Other publications include four short story collections: *The Electric City and Other Stories* (1987), *Selected Stories* (1991), *Collected Stories* (1994) and *The Sky People* (1994); three novels: *Potiki* (1986), *Cousins* (1992) and *Baby No-Eyes* (1998); and a variety of children's books. She has received several grants and awards for her writing, and has been involved in a number of workshops for Maori writers.

While Grace's early writing is characterised by a nostalgic affection for a rapidly-disappearing rural communalism, as well as an intention to instil in non-Maori readers a greater understanding of Maori cultural concepts, from the mid-1980s a more overtly polemical tone is evident in her writing. This new focus is due, at least in part, to the ideological shift triggered by the 'Maori Renaissance', a movement which developed in response to widespread concern about the effects of post-war developments in Maori society, as well as the inimical socio-economic effects of more than a century of Pakeha (European) hegemony. In the 1950s and 1960s, increasing numbers of Maori began to leave their rural tribal communities in order to integrate into Pakeha society, and by the 1970s, concern over the attendant loss of traditional values and cultural practices, documented evidence of a huge reduction in the numbers of indigenes speaking Maori as a first language, and general dissatisfaction regarding political and socio-economic disparities between Maori and Pakeha, precipitated a pan-Maori objective mounted in order to address these issues.

In her writing, Grace has responded in particular to Pakeha (mis)appropriation of Maori land, a key focus of debate during (and since) the early years of the Maori Renaissance. Widespread dissatisfaction regarding past and present land grievances culminated in the great Maori Land March of 1975, a protest march which covered 700 miles in 30 days, ending at the Parliament buildings in Wellington where a petition protesting against the sale of Maori land was presented

to the New Zealand Government. In her novels *Potiki* and *Baby No-Eyes* in particular, Grace responds to this and other well-publicised land disputes between Maori and Pakeha, and she also allegorises various incidents involving ancestral land at Plimmerton, near Wellington, where Grace now lives with her family.

In spite of the topical influences on Grace's work, consistent throughout her writing is an interest in family and community inter-relationships, Maori mythology and oral tradition, and a skilful use of a variety of language registers as a means of individual characterisation.

The following interview took place at the National Library, Wellington, on 24th June 1999.

MK: *I would like to start by talking about points of intersection between your latest novel, Baby No-Eyes, and your two previous novels, Cousins and Potiki. All three novels incorporate or allegorise landmark events in recent Maori social and political history: in Cousins, for example, the 1975 Maori land march features prominently in the narrative, while in Potiki, as you've pointed out in previous interviews, the land dispute in the novel is based on several factual events including the Bastion Point dispute² and the Raglan Golf Course incident.³*

PG: Yes, I think what I've said is that the Raglan Golf Course and Bastion Point incidents legitimised *Potiki*. People have sometimes told me that they think the events in the novel are farfetched, but while the book takes things a bit further than the Bastion Point and Raglan incidents did, with the fire and flooding and so on, it was nevertheless legitimised by those events. And there have been *marae* buildings and a Maori church deliberately burned. My own community has, throughout several decades, been under threat of development of one kind or another and we have had to be vigilant.

MK: *And in Baby No-Eyes you've again responded to recent land issues which have featured prominently in the media. There's a land dispute in the novel which involves a protest occupation of a municipal garden; this appears to be modelled on the 1995 Moutoa gardens incident.⁴*

PG: Yes, the land occupation was modelled on the Moutoa Gardens land occupation, but the reason for the occupation was different in the novel. It was a fictional construction put together from a number of different sources and from my own knowledge base. For example, I know what goes on when we have to cater for large groups under difficult circumstances. It's something that we're used to doing. There's a group dynamic that is very efficient.

MK: *For me, the central and most striking fact-based event in Baby No-Eyes is not the land dispute but rather the incident which inspires the novel's title. Your fictional representation of the story goes as follows: A pregnant woman named Te Paania is involved in a car accident and suffers a miscarriage as a result, and while she is still unconscious, her baby is thrown into a disposal bin by hospital staff and subsequently retrieved after relatives request the*

body for burial. In the meantime, however, hospital staff perform an autopsy without the family's permission and remove the child's eyes, eventually returning them — unceremoniously stored inside a supermarket bag — to the family. Now in your author's note at the beginning of the book, you point out that this story is based on a real event which occurred in a New Zealand hospital in 1991. So all of this actually happened?

PG: Yes, it actually happened. It didn't happen after a motor accident, but that was about the only thing I added to the story in the novel. With the rest of the details I kept pretty close to the actual events. I interviewed a lawyer who was present at the hospital at the time it happened, and I couldn't get the story out of my mind, and so I wanted to write about it. I felt deeply for that family, and wanted the opportunity to give that baby a life, so that was my main motivation for writing the book.

MK: *The most horrifying elements of the story are firstly the moment when the anxious family receives the baby's body only to discover that the eyes are missing, and secondly when the eyes themselves are returned separately inside a food jar which is itself placed inside a supermarket bag. The distraught family talk of their disfigured baby being turned 'into food', and this aspect of the story seems to become a focus for an examination of different attitudes to the body and social ritual in Maori and Pakeha society.*

PG: When I heard about the supermarket bag I was horrified, because in Maori culture we don't associate food with parts of the body. For example, we don't put teatowels and tablecloths in the washing machine with clothing or bed linen. Nor do we sit on tables. So when I heard about the supermarket bag I had an immediate feeling of unease. And I felt really sorry for the people that it happened to. It seemed to me that it was adding insult to injury. I should point out that in the original occurrence, the baby's eyes were not placed inside a jar (and perhaps I could have used the word 'container', except that it was Gran Kura's point of view and I think she would have interpreted it as 'jar'), but directly into the bag which was meant for groceries. This is all described from Gran Kura's point of view. I wrote it the way I did to make it more credible. It seemed too incredible (to me) that a baby's eyes, or any body parts, would be put directly into a plastic bag.

MK: *This particular element of the narrative also seems to lead into other issues to do with bodily mutilation or desecration. For example, Mahaki — the lawyer who was present at the hospital — has a box full of files on the ethical implications of scientific research into the genetic makeup of non-European cultures, and his grandfather becomes involved in a dispute over the desecration of an ancient Maori burial site. These issues are interpreted as analogues for the disfigurement of the child's body, and they're similarly represented as symbolic violations of the Maori 'body', both in a physical*

and collective sense. Over the last couple of years, there has been an increasing degree of media attention focused upon genetic modification, animal-to-human organ transplants, genetic research in isolated tribal communities and so on, and your novel seems very topical in its focus on these issues.

PG: The more I look into these matters the more I think that what happened to the baby happened for the same reason that land is taken, or cultural items, or indigenous knowledge. It's a new area of colonisation. Researchers of the US based Human Genome Diversity Project, for example, have mapped indigenous communities living in remote places, whose genes they are targeting for research. The aim is to immortalise seven hundred endangered indigenous societies by collecting DNA and eventually patenting (thereby 'owning') rare cell types. These communities may not survive, so the researchers want to capture the genetic material and patent it before they disappear, or before the communities radically change. The research will not benefit these dying communities, but will benefit researchers, pharmaceutical companies and people of wealthy nations.

MK: *So the novel is structured around a collection of narrative threads which are linked by this common theme of bodily invasion.*

PG: Once you start on a theme, you try to stay true to that theme. I'm sure some people will think I've gone off on all sorts of tangents, but I myself know that I have not swerved off that path at all.

MK: *Your strategy of interweaving multiple and related narrative strands is also reflected in your use of narrative perspective. Baby No-Eyes is similar to Potiki and Cousins in its multiplex narrative structure; this time you have four narrators: Te Paania, her son Tawera and her mother Kura, plus the family friend and lawyer (Mahaki) who is present at the hospital at the beginning of the novel. Each narrator tells his or her individual version of the same community story, as is the case in Potiki. Do you find the use of multiple narrators to be the best way of representing the kinds of community or familial networks which you explore in your novels?*

PG: Yes, something like that. It just seems to me to be a good clear way of doing it, because it's quite difficult to write about a lot of people. Picking them out to tell their various stories is one way of doing it. But even then, you can only highlight a certain number of people in the community, otherwise it could become quite confusing.

MK: *In Baby No-Eyes, it seems that in order to differentiate these various characters, you have chosen different language registers for each narrator: Tawera, for example, uses colourful images and associations which you'd associate with a child's point of view, while Mahaki the lawyer uses a considerable amount of legal jargon, and so on.*

PG: Yes, I've told each person's story in a different way: with Gran Kura, for example, she would speak in fairly standard Maori, but I'm writing in English. So in the novel I've given her standard English. Her language is more in the storytelling vein, without too much of the pronoun 'I'. It's just her telling stories. Every character needs to sound different.

MK: *The choice of different language registers for different generational groups has been a feature of your writing throughout your career. In most cases, the style of language your fictional characters use can be read as an index to the linguistic changes which have taken place since the post-war period, when rapid urbanisation led to a steady decline in the use of the Maori language. So the elderly characters in your narratives — as representatives of the pre-war generation — tend to use a large number of Maori words or phrases, or grammatical structures which approximate Maori grammar rather than 'Standard' English. In your short stories in particular there are a number of elderly characters who use what you might call a 'Maori English', where Maori grammatical patterns are carried over into the English language. You've also used this strategy with the grandmother in Potiki, and with Mahaki's grandfather in Baby No-Eyes. The language of the older generation is therefore contrasted with the speech of younger people, whose first language increasingly tends to be English.*

PG: Yes, the language must always be right for the character.

MK: *It's surprising that there hasn't been more critical attention paid to the distinctive and complex narrative strategies which feature in your work, particularly in your novels. In Potiki, for example, you use post-death narration: one of the central narrators, a handicapped child named Toko, is burned to death as a result of an arson attack, but he continues to tell his share of the story as he takes his place amongst the honoured dead of the community. In this way, he provides a bridge between material and spiritual worlds. In Baby No-Eyes, a similar thing happens with the miscarried and disfigured baby, who also has a posthumous life within the structure of the narrative. She communicates with her brother Tawera and her grandmother, who are able to detect her presence as a kind of spiritual force, and throughout his childhood, Tawera acts as a kind of caretaker for Baby's spirit. This reminded me a little of Toni Morrison's Beloved, where a dead child is reincarnated and comes back to live with her family. She is represented as a predominantly malevolent and vengeful figure, whereas in your novel, Baby seems to be a more multifaceted and multivalent presence. On one level it seems that her spirit, her wairua, has come back to keep the family company, while on another level she becomes an imaginary childhood friend for her brother Tawera. At times she seems to be an actual physical presence: at one point, for example, Tawera sustains bruising along his arms, apparently inflicted by Baby, and yet his mother thinks his wounds*

may be self-inflicted. Did you intend Baby's character to be a kind of shifting persona in the text?

PG: Yes, she could be any and all of those things: often children do have imaginary friends, companions, and Baby is also a spiritual presence in the story. Yet in other ways, her presence is very real. I left the bruising issue ambiguous: it could have been Baby who caused it, or Tawera could have done it himself. But there was also a sense of normal sibling rivalry there, a sense that Tawera was frustrated at being dominated by his sister. On the other hand, other experiences tell him that rivalry is normal in families.

MK: *Child psychologists have documented a common strategy whereby bereaved children recreate the deceased sibling as a kind of phantasy figure, partly in order to alleviate their own grief, but also to help the parents by becoming the 'caretaker' of the child's memory. This occurs even in cases where the deceased child passes away before the grieving child is born, as is the case with Tawera and Baby in your novel. Bereaved parents also report 'seeing' or seeking their deceased children constantly, as Te Paania does in the novel: she speaks of being able to touch the child, to smell her, to hear her breathing*

...

PG: I'm interested to hear that, because I've certainly gained that impression from what I've heard about child grief, and I've also met parents who've lost children and say they think about them and feel their presence every day.

MK: *So on one level Baby's role in the narrative can be interpreted from a psychoanalytic perspective, but equally important is the spiritual level of the narrative: towards the end of the novel, for example, Baby decides to leave Tawera and complete her journey to the spirit world, Te Po, to which all Maori souls travel after death. The Maori afterlife or mythical world features prominently in your other work, too: in Potiki, for example, you make frequent references to the well-known myth where Maui the mischievous demi-god tries to defeat death by crawling into the womb of Hine-nui-te-po, the death-goddess. The novel also interweaves Christian and Maori myths and icons: Toko's mother Mary, for example, is impregnated by a man named Joseph, and yet the circumstances of his birth associate him not only with Christ but also with Maui, who was thrown into the sea by his mother at birth.*

PG: Yes, that was something I started on at the beginning of the novel, but I lost interest in it as other aspects became important. I had been thinking about it at the time, and was asking myself: 'Why is it that one set of stories is called "mythology", and another set of stories is called "the truth"?' Toko's father could have been Joe Billy, or could have been an ancestral spirit, a *poupou*, a post on the wall.

MK: *Your use of Maori mythology in Baby No-Eyes takes the reader right back to the beginning of time, even before creation itself, when according to Maori*

mythology there was only te kore or 'the void', a kind of vacuum or empty space. There are frequent references to te kore in the novel, and in the final chapter, for example, Tawera uses the concept of te kore or empty space as a source of inspiration for the development of his talents as an aspiring artist. He, too, becomes a kind of creator, shaping his art out of the void of emptiness.

PG: Sometimes I do these things almost subconsciously at first, and then as I write I become more aware that there is something I can latch on to. That final chapter of *Baby No-Eyes* kind of describes the way I write. When I get really stuck I want to get back to nothing, to nothing at all, so that I can allow 'something' to come. It's a clearing. Before I began the writing of *Cousins* I had this idea that I was going to write about cousins, two originally, who had been brought up under very different circumstances from each other. I had no idea how I would start the novel, only that I would begin with the cousin who had nothing. Where would I put her? I put her on a street somewhere, with absolutely nothing (but later I had to go back and put a photograph in her pocket). I let her be as lonely and bereft as possible, and built her story around that. I walked her into the story. For me *te kore* is part of the process of writing, of searching, of starting out with nothing and making something of it. In *Baby No-Eyes* Tawera was an artist. His story shows that he'd been an artist all through his life. No matter what else he did in life, painting and drawing were always going to be a large part of it, and I built on this aspect of his character at the end. His sister, who had been real to him, and whose story was also part of his story, was going to be shown to the world through his art.

MK: *So Tawera in a way becomes a figure for you as a writer, as a creator who shapes a narrative from the linguistic void. Further, as the first Maori woman writer to publish a novel and short story collection in New Zealand, you have played a crucial role in fostering a new literary tradition, giving voice to a people previously silenced or marginalised. This places your writing in alignment with the work of other indigenous writers throughout the world, who have similarly carved out new literary traditions in recent years. Do you follow literary developments in other colonised or formerly colonised countries such as Africa, India or the Caribbean, and do you keep up-to-date with the work of other indigenous writers of the South Pacific?*

PG: I would love to be able to: I read what I can, and I pick up what I can from going to literary conferences and talking to various indigenous people. I've read some books by Caribbean writers recently — some women writers, including Olive Senior. I've read the work of a number of African writers, including Bessie Head, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ama Ata Aidoo, as well as work by native American and Canadian writers such as Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexi, and Jeanette Armstrong. I've also read some work by

Aboriginal writer Archie Weller. I keep up with as much as I can of the novels and short stories of the Pacific. I read these books because they're by indigenous writers, but I also particularly enjoy books about communities. This is what I like about Toni Morrison too — she writes about groups of people who may live in cities or small towns. Ben Okri, Grace Paley and Eudora Welty are other examples. I'm really interested in inter-relationships: young people, old people, different age groups, people who've lived in a similar way to the way that I live. I live on family land in a community where everyone is related to me. I'm interested in writing about community relationships more so than partnerships, triangles, and so on.

MK: *So given that you share certain preoccupations with these writers, have you ever thought of yourself as a member of a corpus of post-colonial writers?*

PG: No, I don't. I try to keep away from that sort of vocabulary and theorising. I'm aware of my work being classified, but don't want to be influenced in any way by those classifications — or by reviews or analyses. I need to keep myself as free as I can from commentary. I have to judge my own work for myself, do things my own way, make my own choices and decisions. I must own what I do. Once a work has been published it's been given. It's gone.

MK: *You certainly have a wide audience of readers, not just within New Zealand and other English-speaking countries throughout the world, but also in places like Russia, Japan, China, and European countries such as Germany, France and Switzerland, where there's a strong interest in Maori and Pacific Island writing. Baby No-Eyes and Potiki, I understand, have just come out in the New Women's Press, so that should make it easier for overseas readers to get hold of your work.*

PG: I don't always identify with what's said about my work, but what does it matter! I'm pleased my work is being read so much by a wide variety of people, and that so many educational institutions, here and overseas, have taken it up. I appreciate the support of readers, who may have been introduced to my work through 'post-colonial' studies, but who have come to a much wider understanding and appreciation of it, and of the society that my work attempts to describe. I can ask myself questions about whether or not research based on one's work is itself a type of colonisation. Is it, once again, a form of domination? You know I'm not against research of any sort. I fully understand the importance of research. But I'm against theft. I'm against appropriation — where those who are powerful use their power to take from those who have less power, and then rationalise this by saying that what they are doing is for the greater good; or that those less powerful people will benefit. They never do. It's about sovereignty. There is nothing wrong with one group *giving* to another because they have absolute understanding of all aspects of what is going on and want it equally as much

for the same reasons. It needs to be a giving, not a taking. And research needs to be done primarily to benefit those about whom research is being done — who need to have the say, the power, the knowledge, the ‘sovereignty’ regarding the project.

To go back to what I was saying about my books and the question of scholarship: my books are a *giving* — the first act in communication. Once the book is out there I’ve done my bit. It’s gone. Anything that happens to the book after that is out of my hands, and I’ve consented to that. Whatever way the book is taken up afterwards is all to do with the next stage of the communication. Reading, reviewing, study, dissection, and commentary are all the business and work of other people — they’re all part of discussion. It may all be part of promotion and distribution as well. In other words, if the book is well received then that is encouraging to me. I benefit. I put the book out there to be read and discussed — but if I put it out there and it heads for oblivion, so be it.

MK: *And do you read critical commentaries about your work?*

PG: Those that come my way. I also, from time to time, read theses that focus on my work. They’re really interesting and I’m always impressed by the scholarship even though I don’t always see eye to eye with some of the things they say, or with the definitions they use in order to put theories into frameworks. Take the words ‘sovereignty’ and ‘decolonisation’, for example. To me, ‘sovereignty’ means having authority over one’s own life and culture. It is a right and something that should not have to be fought for. Terms such as ‘self-determination’ are not high enough, not good enough terms for this.

MK: *So decolonisation for you is a similarly metaphysical phenomenon — to do with ideologies and attitudes rather than depopulation.*

PG: ‘Decolonisation’ is what needs to happen in the minds and understandings of everyone, including Maori, so that issues can be properly addressed and equity brought about. There can’t be equality, no matter how many catch-up policies are instigated, until the issues of racism and decolonisation are addressed.

MK: *Having completed Baby No-Eyes, what are your plans for your next literary project?*

PG: I usually start writing short stories again after I’ve finished a novel, but this time I’ve actually started on a novel. It’s just at the stage now where I don’t know if I’ll write it or not — but I’ve been there before with all my other novels, and I just keep going with it!

NOTES

¹ This involved a dispute over land, sold to the government in 1840, which in 1873 was placed into trusteeship with the express instructions that it could not be resold. In 1967

however, the government announced plans to build high-rise apartments on the land. There was immediate protest from Ngati Whatua, the original owners and inhabitants, and in 1977 a 506-day occupation was mounted. The 218 protestors were eventually removed, but in 1988 the government agreed to return the land, with compensation, to the Ngati Whatua.

² The Raglan Golf Course was established on Tainui Awhiro land which was used as an emergency landing strip by government during World War II with the understanding that it would be returned to Tainui once the war ended. It was not returned however, and the golf course was established under a lease agreement with the local council. In 1978, prominent Maori activist Eva Rickard led a protest occupation of the land, which was eventually returned, with compensation, to the Tainui Awhiro.

³ Moutoa Gardens, in Wanganui, is situated on an area of disputed territory within a block of land purchased from local Maori by the settler government in 1848. Maori hold that Pakaitore, the area in which the Gardens is situated, was excluded from the original purchase. In 1995, a 79-day occupation of Moutoa Gardens took place in protest against a scheme introduced by the conservative National Party government, who proposed to buy off all Maori land grievances for a maximum one billion NZ dollars. An enquiry was mounted and the court ruled that Moutoa Gardens stood on council land and was therefore not a government responsibility. Anniversary commemorations of the occupation have taken place each year since the end of the occupation.