

Waitapu by Helen Margaret Waaka

Kia ora koutou, it's a great pleasure to be here and talk about Waitapu by Helen Margaret Waaka.

Waitapu. A small town. Large stories.

Waitapu. Its characters sneak up on you. You remember that game where you had to stand at one end of the playground or if it was rainy at one end of the hall and behind you a line of kids tried to sneak up on you and tap you on the shoulder? From time to time you turned round very quickly but, although every time you turned round the line was closer, you never caught anyone in the act of moving up.

That's what Waitapu does. Its entices, moves, makes you smile, its funny and satisfying. Before you know it its tapped you on the shoulder and you're a prisoner, you're caught.

Like a tukutuku panel the pattern is not always clear at first, but that's part of its attraction. As the thread is pushed through by one lot of fingers and pulled back by another, as they push and pull, so the design emerges, sometimes a cross, sometimes a v, upright or upside down, a small dash here, a loop there. In the same way these stories take us to the difficult, the joyful, the painful and the pleasurable.

A host of characters appear, reappear, two sisters. Rowena and Ruby. Their lives are told through a series of stories. Harriet. Geroge Paku. Ngaire. Anna. Lots of others. Sometimes they're the main character, sometimes they're a minor character, or they're a mention or a memory in someone else's mind and someone else's story. Always there's the past legacies which haunt and weave their strands around the present.

There's some intriguing titles. The Paradigm Shift. A Sense of Beonging. Something Important. How can you help reading a story called Life's Too Short. Beryl has her eureka moment and we love it.

We meet these characters at different stages of their life. We know about them when they bully and mistreat their daughter and we know them when a stroke fells them, we know them as rebellious teenage girls and as grown women who drink too much. We recognise the moments when their life changes, we see them as strivers and we see them when they give up. It's like we've always known these people. We live among them and follow their stories like they're old friends. We recognise them because we are survivors too.

Their surroundings are our surroundings but with one big difference. We see inside the walls they've built up, we see them grow, we see them change, we see what they become. We see how the past wraps itself around them and we see them either throw off the shackles that parts of their past represents and we see them smile towards a past as it becomes part of their future.

Helen Waaka knows these people and in that sleight of hand good writers have, she takes us unto their lives, into their struggles, and into our hearts.

We know them because we know and have known people like them. What Helen does though is take us behind the façade of the social worker, the nurse, the old

woman with alzheimers, the old man going out with his hinaki to catch eels and at the same time catching his grandson in the net called whanau and bringing him back to something he'd forgotten or refused or was too heartbroken to remember. We have navigated some of these same roads, some of these same streams and we love those moments with the old man and the boy.

Waitapu has a number of such timely encounters. It reminds me that I began life in a small town, Greenmeadows, then I went to another one, Wairoa, then I lived in three cities and now I live in a small town, Otaki. I know small towns. Small towns are microcosms of a way of living, a way of surviving. I see the changes in the people who pass by my house, in the ones I know and they see the changes in me. They pass comments about the garden, about change, sometimes.

Writing is a risky business not simply because it's so hard to do well but because we have an inner bar we want to reach. Sometimes the words simply don't work for us, sometimes we have to revisit certain parts, a lot of it is just slog, slog, slog. But for those of us who are caught in its web the reworking and rethinking and (on rare occasions) the rejoicing, is a job we love and we don't care how many times we write a particular piece or reframe a particular story, we do it because we want to and because we have to.

Tonight is a night for rejoicing because after reading Waitapu I feel like someone has finally got what small towns in Aotearoa are about.

I congratulate Helen for capturing this essence and I congratulate Escalator Press for recognising hers.

It is now my great pleasure to declare Waitapu by Helen Margaret Waaka, well and truly launched. Congratulations Helen, congratulations Escalator Press.... Kia ora.