

THE ENVIRONMENT BETWEEN IDYLL AND TERROR

The Landscape of Fear in Children's Literature

Trish Brooking

In my role as a teacher educator, I recognize that a pathway to later success relies on a vibrant, relevant classroom education programme, situated within an environment that offers a safe harbor for children. Does children's literature offer 'safe harbour', when critics such as Gurdon in the *Wall Street Journal* argue that some current literature's explicitness, and confronting content, normalize violence rather than validate children's experience? I suggest that in a classroom context, children's literature constitutes a space for intellectual and emotional growth via skilled educator mediation. Entanglement with issues of fear and safety emerge within a school culture and reflect wider societal exposure. I would argue that immersion in a media-saturated environment, which takes few prisoners when it comes to graphic film footage, underscores the need to be critically literate. As children are becoming consumers of an exponential

array of texts from film to facebook, the fact that they confront landscapes of fear in some of their literature, provides scope for enhanced learning opportunities. Through exposure to a raft of challenging children's literature texts, our classrooms become the incubators for building expertise in critical analysis. Students of the future will be operating within local, national and global communities; they require opportunities to imagine alternatives, and take increased responsibility for problem-solving and decision-making. I suggest that those readers who have experienced exploration of the "dark side" in their literature will be more attuned to negotiating ethical boundaries, exploring ecological responsibilities, interrogating issues of power, and manifest a more developed sense of personal vision. The positioning of fear and safety in children's literature provides opportunities to expand our thinking about a range of child-oriented

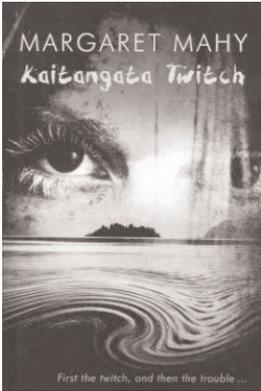
cultural forms and practices, and to consider how perceived threat is mediated through literature.

The popularity of Phillip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, along with a recent spate of vampire fiction, heralds an overt interest in landscapes of danger. These texts are a bookseller's delight, especially when repackaged covers signal the film version. And publishers too, often market texts in more aggressive ways, in an attempt to sell more books as movie tie-ins. Wider media adaptations of a range of children's literature texts extend ideas of threat and safety which are explored in the written narratives, for example, the gothic elements in Sellick's movie of *Coraline* provide heightened awareness of how the comic infiltrates the dangerous. The comedic motif will be foregrounded in this paper, as my reading of the narratives indicates that humour is a powerful means of mediating perceived threat and providing a counterpoint to the elements of danger in stories located in seismic terrain. The narratives in question are *Kaitangata*¹ *Twitch* by Margaret Mahy and *When the Kehua*² *Calls* by Kingi McKinnon. Both these New Zealand novels explore idyllic yet haunted landscapes which invite engagement with themes of environmental guardianship and

historical and contemporary land issues. A haunted island in *Kaitangata Twitch* and a haunted house in *When the Kehua Calls* signal unease and dislocation for the child protagonists. The ghostly settings are confronting, with both Mahy and McKinnon traversing shifting terrain that encompasses challenges to cultural and environmental values, alongside notions of trespass.

Place and Displacement in Children's Literature

A Postcolonial lens focuses on the plurality of stories emerging from the experience of colonization, in itself a harbinger of ecological disturbance. The landscapes in both the Mahy and McKinnon novels are places where violent events and encounters from the past and present intersect and form a conduit for the protagonists Meredith and Rewi to gain power over themselves and their world as they navigate physical and metaphorical faultlines. Mahy, well known for her supernatural thrillers, has located her 2005 novel on a peninsula closely resembling Banks Peninsula on Lyttelton Harbour, Christchurch, and in a prescient way the 'twitch' of the title refers to seismic activity. Kaitangata, the volcanic island, embodies an ancient mythology which the ensuing series produced by Maori television



ill. 1: Margaret Mahy's *Kaitangata Twitch*

develops. The specifics of place are regional and familial and they provide a microcosm where issues related to land occupation and unequal power relations are foregrounded.

Land ownership and occupation have been contested since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, a treaty between New Zealand's indigenous Maori population and the British crown. The Maori Renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s led to more mainstream visibility of land issues and associated legislative (re)interpretation. Conceptualisations of land, and inherent economic tensions, are developed in each of the two narratives explored in this article. In Mahy's *Kaitangata Twitch* Meredith's sister, Kate, is highly politicized in her attempts to thwart Carswell's property development. Her statement that she is a 'warrior', when explaining why she

shaved her head, asserts her independence. While her father questions the wisdom of this course of action, and suggests she remember her Ngai Tahu³ ancestors with their long hair, she stubbornly confirms her commitment to the present conflict with the statement,

I'm not them, and I'm not a historic warrior ... I'm me, Kate, now. At that meeting last week you said we would battle and this is me battling. Cutting my hair is just the outside sign of it. (Mahy, 109)

Place and displacement surface in Kingi McKinnon's *When the Kehua Calls*, which was published in 2002, and reverses the rural to urban trajectory, prevalent in New Zealand since the 1940s. The return from the city to their childhood landscape offers the parents security within their whanau, i.e. their family, as economic circumstances have dictated this move. Rewi's dad was made redundant from sixteen years employment with the railways, and the family's constrained means are glimpsed in mum's car, a 'beat-up old falcon' (McKinnon, 1). Rewi greets the return to his parents' land, replete with its broken-down dwelling, as a retrograde step, but worse still, a chilling foretaste of unnerving events. He depicts the property as an eerie presence,

its blank, glassless windows stared right back. Like a pair of haunted eyes ... and between them wide and cavernous its gaping portal yawned like a toothless mouth. (McKinnon, 10)

Similarly, Mahy's nuanced prose indicates a sense of foreboding which emanates from the island:

Shredded plastic bags punctuated the clumps of seaweed with harsh commas of blue and scarlet, and a black sandal made an exclamation mark at the end of whatever sentence the tide had written on the sand. (5)

Throughout both novels the intersection between land and ownership and historical relationships with the environment underpin the encroaching danger of entrapment and potential ridicule. Notions of guardianship as opposed to ownership infuse each of the texts, with specific inclusion of Maori mythology as a means of connecting old stories to current perspectives. The island of Kaitangata itself symbolizes guardianship, overlaid by Maori spiritual connection to the land, also called 'Papatuanuku', the earth mother in Maori mythology. The perceived violation of the land is brought into sharp focus on the huge sign advertising the proposed new exclusive residential development, Wittwood Village.

Above the name Wittwood was a big picture of the bay, taken from the air, with Kaitangata like a tear low on its cheek. At the bottom of the notice was a little head-and-shoulders picture of Marriott Carswell, wearing a collar and tie so that he looked businesslike and reliable. His lopsided smile mocked the people of the bay, and, perhaps the Skerritts in particular, for now he was looking over their fence and down into their back yard – almost, thought Meredith, as if he were prying into their very lives, laughing to himself as he did so. (Mahy, 104)

Language in environmental discourse

Stephens (1992) asserts that an awareness of how language constructs meaning leads to developing understandings about the ideological practices and assumptions that determine a society's sense of value. Award-winning Maori writer Witi Ihimaera (1994) noted that the reclamation of Maori language in the 1970s, assumed a profile which suggested a wind of decolonization blowing through New Zealand children's literature with a "commitment to culture, land and the legacy of our ancestors" (20). The use of Maori language overtly challenges the hegemony of English in McKinnon's text where in the first sentence of the Prologue, the Maori word

for house, 'whare', is introduced. Each ensuing chapter uses Maori numbers as headings, and there is a forty-two word glossary of Maori terms which have been integrated throughout the text.

Rewi's initial glimpse of the 'whare' is unsettling. He sees it as a place of decay with a vivid description of its rotting, crumbling exterior. More sinister even than that, however, are the unwelcoming vibes associated with the 'whare'. As a metaphor for Rewi's distaste in sampling rural reality, having recently moved there from the city, and his unwillingness to live in the countryside, the 'whare' assumes its own character in the narrative, just as the island Kaitangata has.

Foreshadowed in the Prologue are Rewi's special powers. Like his tohunga grandfather, Rewi can see into the future and connect with the past in his dreams. McKinnon's text with its reclamation of Maori language assumes the profile Ihimaera signaled eight years prior to its publication. Interestingly, Kingi McKinnon addresses the reader in the foreword to explain that he has written the book "with the intention of giving non-Maori an insight into various aspects of our culture" (PG), especially 'whakapapa', or ancestry, and the integral link between language, land and culture.

Both texts offer postcolonial readings in their linkage of past histories of land use and epistemologies to connections with current environmental and cultural practices. Mahy's novel and the subsequent television series add to the growing visibility of minority values, albeit not from the mainstream media. It is not coincidental that Maori television (itself only operational since 2005) commissioned screening the series *Kaitangata Twitch*. While Mahy herself is experienced in writing screenplay, scriptwriters Michael Bennett and Briar Grace-Smith have developed the Maori themes in the visual narrative. In a recent interview, Mahy explains,

the production they've done has emphasized Maori elements in a way I felt rather shy about doing ... I felt I might get something wrong or unconsciously impinge on some area of Maori imagination or belief. (Sunday Times, 25.4.10 C3)

While it is noted in *The Empire Writes Back* that writers such as Ihimaera and Grace can 'influence the discourse of New Zealand literature' more effectively than Pakeha (non-Maori) attempts to incorporate Maori concepts, Mahy does not believe that Maori storytellers should have a monopoly on Maori themes, insisting

that people should be allowed to write what they want, provided that if they get it wrong they don't mind being told ... (as quoted by Duder, 291)

Film adaptation serves to extend Maori content and cultural representations of the landscape as a living entity. Commissioned by an independent agency, *Kaitangata Twitch* sits within a paradigm of independent film production, usually low-budget. To date, the drama has received international acclaim, winning at the World-Fest Houston International Film Festival and shortlisted as a finalist in the *Prix Jeunesse*, a leading international award for children's television.

Contemporary resonance?

In the same way that dreaming is wedded to the visual, the filmic quality of both *When the Kehua Calls* and *Kaitangata Twitch* brings the element of danger into close relief. Mythological references and intertextuality provide links to the past, while using a spotlight to explore further, the socio-political and ecological dimensions located within the texts. Marina Warner comments that

[l]ike a stand-up comedian, the tale must sense the aspirations and prejudices, the fears and hunger of

its audience [...] an effective tale offers a way of putting questions, of testing the structure as well as guaranteeing its safety, of thinking up alternatives as well as living daily reality in an examined way. (411)

Each of the narratives draws on storytelling motifs from the historical 'contact zones' of mythology and fairy-tale. This hybridity functions as a multi-layered scaffold to interrogate notions of contemporary relevance. The re-combinations foster the development of different ways of seeing and the growth of new message forms. McKinnon's use of mythology, with references to 'Hine-nui-te-po', the goddess of death, and 'Hawaiki', where the spirits of the dead return to, locates the narrative securely in its cultural dynamic. In *Kaitangata Twitch*, references to other texts encode meanings and Mahy makes direct reference to a variety of traditional Western tales with an over-representation of those which focus on being eaten, for example "The Three Billy Goats Gruff", "The Three Little Pigs", and "The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids". Fragments of lyrics - *I've just come back from a cannibal isle called Hi-tiddly-hi-ti-ti Isle! Tum tum tum tum ...* - form a musical motif which provides a reassurance of normality.

At the sound of this old, cheerful song, Meredith felt all strangeness

and threat flow out of the day, and fun flow back into it. When ten minutes later she stole a passing, almost accidental glance at Kaitangata through her bedroom window, it looked altogether ordinary, just a lump of land with shallow water around it. Which was what it was, no doubt about it. (Mahy 54)

'Kaitangata' literally means 'kai', i.e. food, and 'tangata', i.e. people. Ideas about the environment and nourishment, culture and economic sustainability permeate both texts and add to the suspense. The tension between idyll and terror are foregrounded in each of the narratives, yet emit contemporary resonance through the deft interplay of relationships.

Koelling notes that fantasy is a current predominant trend, and that

its fantastical nature can highlight and make more profound any issue by removing it from reality and casting it into a unique setting. (65)

Both fantasies under discussion are firmly located in reality but inhabit the European time and Maori space referred to by Winters in "Aliens in the Landscape" in that they avoid binary simplicity but implicitly address the experiences of colonization. Significantly, each of the texts locates a complex socio-political and ecological dynamic that resonates within a contemporary

New Zealand context. In *Kaitangata Twitch*, property developer Marriott Carswell's 'vision' offers insights into environmental and cultural viewpoints. In one of Carswell's less confrontational encounters he muses how he would like to plant "some nice English trees", which is countered by Meredith's curt reply "I like it wild" (156). The taming of the landscape, and in New Zealand's case, transforming it into a little England, resonates with an earlier colonial settler approach. The conflictual nature of the colonized/colonizer dichotomy is one that Pratt has reconstructed in terms of contact zones, which foreground both the complexity of relationships as a legacy of colonization and the possibilities for a wider range of interactive relationships (144). As the environment is the meeting place of cultures, attitudes to land (which form the thematic content of both texts) convey a conduit for future conversations and healing.

The haunted landscapes themselves illuminate relationship complexities. Each of the novels charts metaphysical features which employ silence, doubt, waiting, and dreaming. McKinnon and Mahy weave their own brand of playful and linguistic magic in devising a complex and compelling 'other' reality, which strengthens the

protagonists' individual resolve and identity, through the suspenseful and confusing situations they confront. Rancid memory stalks the landscapes, which contain their own identity. Kaitangata's personality is aligned to the island's explosive seismic origins, as the following examples show:

"that island lying like a secret, strange tear on the moonlit cheek of the harbour." (22)

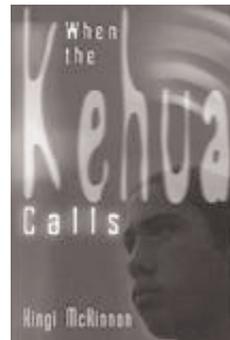
"Directly ahead of her, the island, half dream, half sea animal, basked and waited." (35)

"But then she knew, as no-one else did, that Kaitangata was never as restful as it pretended to be. It was always listening in." (61)

Character interactions chart the turbulent landscape for signs which will explain and alleviate fear. Stallcup refers to fear-alleviating books which articulate a variety of models, both empowering and controlling for the child and adult relationship. In the television series, as in Mahy's text, Meredith's adult confidant is her great-uncle Lee Kaa who, along with being her musical mentor, warns her about Kaitangata's entrapment: "Don't let it catch you in its dreams. You'll be caught between two worlds" (Bennett, Grace-Smith). Meredith is viewed as an 'ahi kaa', which literally translated means "the one who keeps the home

fires burning". Just as Meredith has inherited musical talent (as a flutist), she displays inherent knowledge about the powers of the island through her recurring dreams. Lee Kaa recognizes that she is chosen, and teaching her to play the saxophone works as a metaphor for her learning about place and selfhood: "her dreaming and her music melted into each other, one making the other stronger" (Mahy, 17).

The bond between Meredith and her great uncle is echoed in McKinnon's text in the relationship between the urban Rewi and his rural cousin Pauly – his cultural mentor. This relationship asserts Rewi's reliance on his peer group rather than his parents for education into rural cultural practices. Despite early reservations about Pauly, Rewi's developed sense of independence and desire to control his fear, coupled with his undeveloped knowledge of cultural practices, direct him into Pauly's sphere of influence.



ill. 2: *When the Kehua Calls* by Kingi McKinnon

When Rewi realizes that the danger may be overcome through the Tohunga's knowledge, only then does he unwillingly, and at his cousin's insistence, seek adult help. Certain cultural knowledge has a sacred and specified ownership, and Rewi is about to gain more intimate awareness of cultural protocols related to the land and the spirits. Throughout the narrative, Rewi's quest is to uncover the answer to the elusive question, "how do you tell someone that something's wrong when you don't even know what it is yourself?" (McKinnon, 65).

At the centre of the adult/ child relationship in this novel is a belief that interactions with children form a continuum involving potential equals, thereby achieving a degree of ownership in the solution. The children are part of the lifting of the tapu⁴ and the tramping of the house. When Rewi and Pauly are directed to the river for water, Rewi wonders why they can't use the tank water. Pauly explains how the river is alive and full of healing power – wai⁵ ora, the spring of life.

How does humour mediate fear in the texts?

While the haunted landscapes pose threat, yet also healing, another aspect of fear mediation is through the use of situational humor and dialogue which

captures the vernacular in ways that express personality and disquiet. Humour, in its many guises, inhabits even the most suspenseful texts; I would like to illustrate this using some examples. Meredith's rebuke to her brother's interest in the imminent arrival of McDonalds is sharp. Having been told this fast-food development will be years away, Rufus switches interest to the present:

'And why don't we get a dishwasher?' he went on. 'A lot of really *good* people have them. Even forest and bird people who recycle stuff, and grow herbs, and [...] eat wholemeal bread. (Mahy, 24)

Rufus's slyly calibrated humour springs to life when he scorns his older sister Kate's outburst that the property developer, Marriott Carswell, will sell bits of Kaitangata to millionaires: "'He was just bullshitting' cried Rufus, 'Millionaires don't want islands you can almost *paddle to*'" (Mahy, 50). Similar derision greets Rewi's question asking what a kehua is. Pauly responds with disbelief, "Jeez don't tell me you haven't heard of them" (McKinnon, 19). Now it is Rewi's turn to feel unconfident in his assessment of his cousin:

I'd never met anyone like him. He didn't even speak proper English half the time and was thick as, but

because I didn't know much about Maori things, he treated me like I was the dumbbo. (McKinnon, 19)

The sense of alienation is fully realized in Rewi's school experiences, where there were "heaps more Maori ... it was like I'd gone to another planet". Pauly's introduction offers a tongue-in-cheek greeting "welcome to the reservation bro" (McKinnon, 41). This welcome, which resonates with other first nation experiences, sharpens the cultural perspectives embodied in the two individuals, who are both Maori and both shaped by their respective backgrounds and experiences, and endorses the discourse of difference within culture. The planet analogy, with its alien subtext, further reinforces intra-cultural diversity. McKinnon and Mahy use multilayered comic detail to intensify the serious and suspenseful, the real and the ideal.

Terroir Tales

Texts which harbor landscapes of hauntings and environmental disquiet offer opportunities to play with fears in a non-threatening context. Confronting content poses questions and challenges readers' assumptions. Finding safe harbor when immersed in landscapes of fear affirms the challenges mapped out in the text. When Meredith returns

to the island, she experiences a fear different from the fear of her dream visit, because she has deliberately chosen to confront it. In McKinnon's text, Rewi turns his fear into action when he throws the cricket ball at old ruru the morepork, Hine-nui-te-Po, the Goddess of Death's messenger. As Warner asserts, the narrative needs to sense the fears and hunger of its readers and offer a way of putting questions which energise connection and relevance with their world and its environmental complexities (409). Rather than being caught between worlds, readers are enticed to navigate between them. As a means of providing exploration of fragile social constructs and cultural practices, 'haunted territory' narratives can impart fresh ways of seeing.

*Trish Brooking (*1952) is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Otago College of Education in Dunedin, New Zealand. She teaches primarily in the pre-service area of teacher education. Areas of research interest include text selection and the national curriculum, postcolonial theory and multicultural literature, and specialist archival research on the experiences of child evacuees to New Zealand in the Second World War.*



NOTES

¹ Kaitangata = ka - food, tangata - people

² Kehua = ghost

³ South Island tribe

⁴ tapu = sacred, forbidden

⁵ wai = water

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