

## **An implied reader's reading? – A reception-oriented analysis of New Zealand identities**

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### **Abstract:**

Christina Stachurski is an award-winning playwright and theatre director teaching modern drama and creative writing at Canterbury University. *Reading Pakeha?* is based on her doctoral thesis and is her first book-length foray into the field of fictional analysis. By combining Iser's theory of implied readership with an author- and reception-centred approach, Stachurski studies the role of fictional representations in the shaping of New Zealand identities over various decades. More precisely, she tries to deduce through (con)textual analysis general reader responses to three canonical New Zealand novels published between 1939 and 1990. Stachurski successively analyses these works of fiction by comparing them with each other and with other New Zealand novels (and feature films) of the period as well as the settler/societal contexts of Australia and Canada. In so doing, she identifies the wide range of readerships these novels cater to while tracing changes to the understanding of the term 'Pakeha' over time.

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Stachurski's analysis of the diachronic dimension of Pakeha identity in New Zealand fiction is quite a personal undertaking. Being a sixth-generation New Zealander of solely European descent, she writes from an insider's perspective, pointing out the ways in which literature may offer orientation to the reader with respect to their own identity. Apart from uncovering why particular novels capture public interest at particular times, she aims to ascertain the general reader's responses to the selected texts. To this end, she works contextually, identifying Aotearoa New Zealand as a 'special case' for its straightforward binary model which involves rather strict separation of whites (Pakeha) from non-whites (mostly Maori). She understands the country's small population, homogeneous media coverage and official policy of biculturalism as the central historical and social forces shaping the country's larger national and cultural discourses.

In a 40-page introduction, Stachurski establishes her author- and reception-based approach by referring to Wolfgang Iser's reception theory, Judith Fetterley's concept of the 'resisting reader' and Catherine Belsey's theory of writers. She furthermore includes theoretical concepts from postcolonial and gender studies as well as the current state of literary discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand, arguing that novels may offer insights into writers' world-views. Unfortunately, her "analytical toolbox" (p. xxiv) remains somewhat disconnected from the textual analysis, as most of the described concepts underlie the analytical part rather implicitly. Other central terms (such as Judith Butler's ideas on gender as performative) and disputed ideas (such as that of a 'Pakeha identity') are introduced only briefly and are sometimes contestable, as they fail to consider major works on the topic by the likes of Avril Bell and Paul Spoonley (see, for example, p. xi).

The majority of the study is dedicated to three canonical, highly popular novels published over a period of roughly 50 years (which, unfortunately, does not coincide with the period of interest from the 1960s to 1990s; see p. x). Stachurski regards John Mulgan's *Man Alone* (1939), Keri Hulme's *the bone people* (1983) and Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* (1990) as characteristic of the zeitgeist at points of huge social and cultural change, and aligns them with lite-

rary movements (literary masculinity, feminist novels and Maori writing in English, respectively). In order to back up her argument, she intersperses the analysis with comparative references to other novels, feature films and settler contexts.

Situating John Mulgan's *Man Alone* in a time of threefold crisis – economic, settler-colonial and male – Stachurski sets out to apply the Freudian idea of the 'fetish', a concept not established in the introduction. She connects ideas about the New Zealand landscape with issues of explorer masculinity and national identity while at the same time disclosing the eurocentric composition of this late-colonial text. Men transforming nature into nation is interpreted both as a means of identification and escape for the implied male, heterosexual, Pakeha reader caught in a web of rigid gender roles. With its focus on 'homosociality' (a term coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describing "social bonds between persons of the same sex", 1985: 1) and frontier masculinity, *Man Alone* fosters an ideology of mateship while simultaneously dismissing sexuality and marginalising Maori and female characters.

Keri Hulme's seminal novel *The Bone People* caters to a more complex implied readership which – according to Stachurski – consists of the anti-imperialist reader, the liberal feminist, the New Age believer and the local-identity seeker. After placing the novel in its socio-historical context of second-wave feminism, the Maori Renaissance and the relevant spiritual and ecological issues, Stachurski traces the work's representation of various identities she understands as interrelated. Apart from the characters' cultural alienation from Maoritanga, she analyses issues of authenticity, ethnicity and whiteness as well as the themes of violence, paedophilia and sexual abuse. While the conception of female protagonist Kerewin Holmes initially seems to reverse gender roles, Stachurski identifies the character's conflation of sex with gender and sexuality. By putting mateship before biological and reproductive bonds and by having Kerewin resemble a man in habit and physique – she argues – the novel erases femininity while simultaneously reinforcing men as the norm. This she sees as proof of the text's binary hierarchical understanding and underlying essentialism.

Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* is treated as the cultural threshold in New Zealand history when identities formerly believed to be stable split apart, and the idea of a singular nation collapsed. Published at a time when the free market economy had led to a widening gap between rich and poor and resentment of Treaty settlements challenged the ostensibly egalitarian society, Duff's hard realist depiction of so-called 'Maori-problems', as well as the inextricable coupling of the author's biography with the novel, led to an easy conflation of fictional content and social reality. Stachurski's analysis concentrates on issues of authentic Maori identity and faux warriorhood, misogyny and sexism. The libertarian message she sees inherent in Duff's text emphasises ideas of self-help thus blaming the victim for its own unfavourable circumstances. This way, Pakeha responsibility for historical wrongs recedes behind individual choices about lifestyle and indigenous traditions as a way of re-channelling senseless violence into 'true' Maori warriorhood. Although various identities are investigated and the blurb of the monograph tells the reader that this study "explores how concepts of race

and ethnicity intersect with those of gender, sex and sexuality”, intersectionality is never explicated as a theoretical basis, and, furthermore, Stachurski uses a concept prevalent in the theoretical forerunners of intersectionality when analysing the female protagonist Beth as subject to a “double-marginalization” (p. 104).

Altogether, *Reading Pakeha?* is an ambitious project of detailed literary analysis which Stachurski has firmly contextualised in New Zealand’s cultural-historical development. Long works by sole authors are a rare find in New Zealand literary discourse, and this book marks an important contribution to the study of its fiction, in general, and to reception-based literary studies in Aotearoa, in particular. Tracing shifts in collective Pakeha identity from late-colonialism to the 1990s by analysing the reception of these three novels illustrates a literary development, and also discloses the interrelation of settler identity with other social categories. Moreover, Stachurski identifies more recent trends in New Zealand culture, arguing that 21st-century publications have been marked by an increasing diversity which signals the growth of variousness in Aotearoa New Zealand. It seems, though, that Stachurski leaves off at a tremendously interesting point, where identities become more complex than ever before, as New Zealand society perceptibly shifts away from dichotomies of ‘us’ and ‘them’.