

# If not me, then who?

PHOTOGRAPH BY SEBASTIÁN GALLARDO

Kapiti Coast author Tina Makereti has become something of an activist for Māori and Pacific literature. She takes the train to town for an interview with SARAH LANG.

**W**ho knew that Māori and Pacific literature make up only three per cent of the New Zealand canon? In May, award-winning author and creative-writing lecturer Tina Makereti gave an Auckland Writers Festival lecture about this under-representation. “I wanted to present how our house of literature does look, how it could look, and what radical renovations might turn it around.”

We’re chatting at Mojo Courtenay Place, as she jokes about her complicated coffee order and a bread roll brought from home. Makereti laughs a lot. She doesn’t take herself too seriously, but takes very seriously what she does – and what she believes needs doing. Rather than letting the door shut behind her, she’s all about holding it open and beckoning others through. “People need to see the problem first. Very few Māori and Pacific writers are publishing their work regularly, and I find it distressing that it’s so hard for people to tell their stories.”

She’s not blaming publishers. “It’s partly economic, social and cultural pressures that particularly affect Māori and Pasifika writers. So people often don’t get past the early stages of writing careers.” As a new writer, she didn’t meet any Māori writers for years. “I was like, ‘Where is everyone?’” Now she’s a committee rep for Toi Māori Te Hā Contemporary Māori Writers group, and organises the regional and national Māori Writers Hui.

Makereti reckons we need at least 20 Māori and Pacific writers publishing regularly, not just the current handful. “A strong body of work is often seen as a nice-to-have, but I believe it’s crucial for social reasons. If you want to understand where people are at and

where they want to go, they have to tell their stories. That’s how I ended up teaching, because we need to do something about this.”

Between 2014 and 2017, she ran a paper called the Māori and Pasifika Creative Writing Workshop at Victoria University’s International Institute of Modern Letters. She left this summer to lecture fulltime at Massey University, Palmerston North, teaching creative writing internally and extramurally from first-year to PhD levels. “This position is a big deal for me because it’s really hard to get those permanent full-time creative-writing jobs.” She thinks Māori and Pacific literature should be taught as a distinct paper at universities, and hopes this will happen at Massey.

It means an 80-minute commute to Palmerston North, but some days she works from the Kapiti home she shares with her 15-year-old daughter (another daughter has left home) and author husband Lawrence Patchett. They met as IIML students.

Her job allows some time for her own writing, but right now academia is her focus. During semester breaks and annual leave, she’ll revise the first complete draft of her second novel *The Imaginary Lives of James Pōneke*. Due out next year, it’s based on a true story of an orphaned Māori teenager exhibited as a “savage” in Britain during the 1840s. “I’m interested in things that aren’t well known but should be. Often literature grabs your imagination more than straight history.”

Between teaching, writing and family, she’s too busy for much else. “One full-time job has replaced all my part-time jobs.” She was Curator Māori for Museums Wellington for two years, and spent a year as Nga Taonga Sound & Vision’s curator-at-large. Is she still

# Sharing our Stories

can be like being lowered  
into a hāngi pit,  
baskets full with the weight of telling,  
mamae glowing with the heat of stories,  
earth heaped over us  
until I'm suffocating  
suffocating  
then more  
Can't they see I'm still alive?

But hāngi  
and there  
they are, still alive yet?



on the advisory group for the New Zealand Festival's Writers Week? "I don't know! I'm terrible at saying no, but right now I'm running just to keep up."

However, two projects were too important to turn down. One was curating the latest Courtenay Place lightboxes exhibition, on until 30 July. *The Magical Māori Mystery Tour of Wellington* came about courtesy of "a moment of synergy". Makereti, who had decided against pitching a lightbox exhibition with her IIML class, saw a portfolio by student Debbie Broughton that seemed a perfect fit for the space. Designed primarily by Johnson Witehera, the exhibition features Broughton's sometimes humorous but fundamentally serious pieces of writing by Rachel Buchanan and Alice Te Punga Somerville, which tell Wellington's hidden Māori histories and critique their usual representation. Archival photos add context. "How good is it to see photos of Parihaka and Te Aro Pa on Courtenay Place?" Makereti asks.

The other project is a book she co-edited with Witi Ihimaera, at his request. Out on 3 July, *Black Marks on the White Page* (Penguin Random House) is an anthology of Maori and Pasifika fiction written by 36 authors over the past decade. "This needed to happen. These stories show the diversity of our communities: where they're from, and how and what they write."

Makereti always wrote bits and pieces, but never imagined it could become her career. After focusing on motherhood, then spending three years as a kaitautoko Maori (academic support worker) at Massey, Palmerston North, she decided to give writing a crack. Between 2009 and 2013 she did a creative-writing MA then a PhD at the IIML, moving from Palmerston North to Kapiti to live as Wellington was too expensive. She had early success, winning short-story and creative science-writing prizes in 2009. "When I finished studying, that was the hardest time in my life. You need so much perseverance and stamina to write while earning a living in other ways."

But she made it happen. Both of her books – short-story collection *Once Upon a Time in Aotearoa* (2011) and novel *Where the Rēkohu Bone Sings* (2014) – won the Ngā Kupu Ora Aotearoa Māori Book Award for Fiction. Her novel – which cuts between different time periods and has Moriori, Māori and Pakeha characters – explores cultural culpability, and how descendants of different ethnic groups reconcile their identity with their history. Makereti has ancestors from all three groups, if stories about her Moriori forebears are true.

She and her sister moved around North Island towns with her Pakeha father, after he split from their Māori mother. As a teenager she discovered more about her Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Ati Awa, and Ngāti Rangatahi ancestry. She clams up about her childhood. "It'd make this interview two hours long. It's complicated." When she started writing, she took her middle name as her surname.

Does she describe herself as a Māori writer? "Initially I didn't want to be identified that way, just because people think they know what that means and they don't, or they think you represent everyone but you don't. But I quickly got over that and now I just say I'm both [Pakeha and Māori]. I'm comfortable with the dual identity, but I'm still interested in questions about how you manage to be both."

What's next? After two time-consuming novels, she'd like to put together a book of personal essays and another short-story collection. Last year her short story *Black Milk* won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize for the Pacific region. "I'm still disbelieving. It opened up my world a bit." Her prize included a trip to the Calabash International Literary Festival in Jamaica – an experience she wrote about in an essay published in non-fiction anthology *Home: New Writing* (Massey University Press) in July.

"Writing can be hard. But I persevere because I know how privileged I am to do this. Not everyone gets to tell their stories." ■