

compromising Stella's originality and impeccable style. Stella is astute in suggesting that literary culture defines an imagined community, builds a nation state, and assaults threats and any forms of oppression. Without seeing its uniqueness in Papua New Guinean literary history, we are likely to miss the deep concerns alluded to by Stella or any Papua New Guinean writer, for that matter, on keeping the literary flame in Papua New Guinea alive.

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Baby No-Eyes, by Patricia Grace.
 Auckland: Penguin Books, ISBN
 0-14-027993-8, and Honolulu:
 University of Hawai'i Press, ISBN
 0-8248-2161-0, 1998. 294 pages.
 Paper, US\$19.95.

This novel may bewilder, confuse, and perhaps even irritate some readers. Those familiar with Patricia Grace's previous two novels *Potiki* and *Cousins* will find *Baby No-Eyes* a very different and challenging work. On a first reading it is difficult to follow the narrative shifts, although the chapter headings are reliable guides. But, as one narrator reminds us, there are different ways of telling stories: "There's a way the older people have of telling a story, a way where the beginning is not the beginning, the end is not the end. It starts from a centre and moves away from there in such widening circles that you don't know how you will finally arrive at the point of understanding, which becomes itself another core, a new centre" (28). On a second

reading however, the reader, at least this reader, becomes a member of the *whanau*, extended family; the characters are familiar, their relationships, problems, secrets, idiosyncrasies, part of everyday life. It is like being welcomed onto a marae; we arrive as *manuhiri*, visitors, but after the *powhiri*, official welcome, and *bongi*, the mingling of breath, strangers become *tangatawhenua*, people of the land.

The prologue introduces the major characters through Tawera, talking from inside the womb. We experience Te Paania his mother, described as "the frog"; we hear of Glen, Tawera's absent and inconsequential father; meet Dave and Mahaki, the gay couple who protect and nurture the family; and welcome Kura the *kuia*, woman elder, who arrives to assist an impatient Tawera into the world. There are also hints of a presence, unnamed and unknown, the one character not so easily pinned down. *Baby No-Eyes* is deceased but highly animated and, as her name suggests, she has no eyes. (How she comes to be eyeless is a chilling account of an actual event.) The relationship between Tawera and his sister *Baby No-Eyes*, known as *Baby*, is the core of the novel and the most perverse in a story brimming with seven generations of relationships.

Of the thirty-seven chapters, nine are given to Kura, the *kuia* who recounts the terrible and wondrous past. Eight chapters give voice to Tawera, *teima*, younger sibling of *Baby No-Eyes*, gifted artist and future historian. He has the last word, talking to us from the end of the story looking backward into the future. Thir-

teen chapters are Te Paania's, Tawera and Baby's mother, embodiment of the strength, wisdom, humor, and tenacity of Maori women who straddle that deep and terrifying chasm between past and future—the present. Seven chapters are for Mahaki, a new breed of warrior, trained in law and fiercely committed to regaining and protecting the land—our *mokopunas*'s, grandchildren's, birthright.

The story begins with Kura, who tells of one of the most distressing and heart-wrenching times in Aotearoa's colonial history, when schools were pressed into obliterating the Maori language and culture. For me, this section is painfully hard to read. Every Maori *whanau* will have stories similar to that described, and the memories remain, ever sharp and painful. Being killed by school, literally and metaphorically, may sound fantastic but it was, and to some extent still is, true enough.

According to Maori custom it is appropriate that the oldest goes first, the youngest last, and *Baby No-Eyes* follows this structure. As with *Potiki* and *Cousins*, Patricia Grace allows the characters to speak for themselves, each giving their own perspective on events that span nigh on two hundred years. It is also common practice for everyone, young, old, women and men of all ranks, to stand and speak for themselves in the *wharenuī*, community hall, and Grace affords even the least likeable character, Baby's father, Shane, the opportunity to say his piece.

The idea at the heart of this novel reminds me of the title of Albert Wendt's first collection of poetry *Inside Us the Dead*. Tawera carries

his sister inside him. Dead she may be, but far from lifeless, she is rather highly animated and vociferous. Being older, she dominates her brother, making demands and giving orders, at times physically attacking and bullying him. Nothing makes her angrier than being ignored, and if Tawera forgets: "She complains that I forget her, that I won't move over in the bed or make room on my chair for her. She doesn't like me to play with other kids, or talk to others. She gets me into trouble" (133). She demands explanations of "seeing," and Tawera must find ways of describing colours: "Dark blue is when you pull down your bottom eyelids and let hard, cold wind blow on your soft eye meat" (139). Although often asked by outsiders who he is talking to, Tawera is unable or reluctant to tell, which is why he is so relieved and excited when he discovers he can communicate without talking but merely by thinking. The *whanau*, however, accepts Baby without question; a place is always laid for her at the table, and she is included in everything they do.

Like Patricia Grace's other work, *Baby No-Eyes* presents a detailed and intimate history of Maori life prior to and including contact with Pakeha, with the struggle for land and survival the central issues. What makes this story different is the relationship between Tawera and his sister, a relationship that links the dead with the living, the past with the present, the whole with the damaged. Family skeletons also tumble out of the cupboard at unexpected moments, and the whole gamut of human frailties, foibles, and strengths are exposed and examined. Maori ways of doing things

and of seeing are treated as normal, while Pakeha ways are often confusing, unaccountably complex, and unfriendly. In her usual quiet and deceptively simple way of telling, Patricia Grace punches the facts home, sometimes shocking, sometimes funny, but always honestly and sincerely told. The reader cannot deny this history—it is all recorded—but literature in the form of a novel presents a living, breathing, conscious world that explores its effects on individuals and communities.

The pleasure in reading *Baby No-Eyes* is working through the many stories in this *hapu's whakapapa*, family genealogy, for in them

we find ourselves. As we journey back and forth through time we meet all the wonderful, fantastic, and complex characters at different stages in their lives, growing, learning, and sharing with them. Perhaps most important, we cannot help but be drawn into the eternal and desperate struggle to regain and retain the land and, keep *tapu*, sacred, places safe.

E koa koe aianeī, a, maku hoki te ra apopo. You rejoice today, but my turn will come tomorrow.

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