

It does not present itself as an exhaustive, comprehensive, authoritative resource on Polynesian dance (if such a thing could possibly exist). Rather, it is a “how to begin to appreciate the myriad and complex dance forms that pervade the dynamic Pacific region called Polynesia” book. In this regard, it can be greatly appreciated by all audiences.

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*Breadfruit*, by Célestine Hitiura Vaite. Sydney: Bantam, 2000. ISBN 1-86325-244-4; 324 pages. Paper, A\$19.95, NZ\$24.95, US\$22.50.

Célestine Hitiura Vaite’s first novel, *Breadfruit*, is an impressive debut for this Australia-based Tahitian writer. Vaite dedicates *Breadfruit* to her mother, “who taught me that love is the greatest motive of all,” and her godmother, “who taught me to believe in will power and to get up after each fall.” As a writer, Vaite illustrates in *Breadfruit* that their advice was not ignored. The reader is introduced to the challenges, complications, disappointments, and unbounded joy that love, romance, and day-to-day life in contemporary Tahiti presents for Materena and her extended family.

Told through the all-perceiving eye of the third person, this story unfolds, flows, and shifts through the weaving together of a series of anecdotes from an array of colorful unforgettable characters. The work is written with immense insight, warmth, and humor, her style and use of language refresh-

ingly simple and direct. This approach works well. It allows even serious social problems affecting contemporary Tahitian culture and life to be touched on without detracting from the story, diminishing the issues, or changing the relaxed tone of the novel.

The central themes in *Breadfruit* are universal: “Women who want romance, men who won’t commit, interfering in-laws, making ends meet.” Although the novel is set in Tahiti, I soon discovered that as a woman, and more particularly as a Pacific Islander, I could easily identify with, relate to, and laugh wholeheartedly at many aspects of the story. The work focuses on womanhood: the bonds between mothers and daughters, ancestral ties, independent women, absent fathers, and women who yearn for meaningful expressions of love from the men in their lives. We discover Tahitian families living on and under the breadline, and come to admire the ways in which the women characters strive to make ends meet. We find out how these women find value and satisfaction in the small treasures that come their way—treasures that are often other people’s throw-outs. Invariably readers are given a window through which to glimpse a different side of contemporary Tahiti that is not often enough exposed. Here, through light-hearted story, popular western notions and stereotypes of life in a “tropical paradise” are challenged. In addition, issues such as colonization, dislocation, migration, identity, class, gender, sexuality, and religion shape and inform the stories within the narrative.

In “The Proposal,” Materena reflects on the day she met her man, Pito. At sweet sixteen, she gains a job working at the local snack bar during the school holidays. While there, she first sets her eyes and heart on Pito. Materena’s girlish antics whenever Pito enters the snack bar lead her boss to observe that Pito’s presence “was making Materena soft in the head.”

Risking the wrath of her mother, Loana, a protective single parent, Materena begins sneaking out at night to rendezvous with Pito. Under the frangipani tree with Pito, Loana’s good Catholic girl first “discover[s] sexy loving.” A short time passes, then Pito tells Materena that he is off to France to serve in the military for two years. Heartbroken, Materena pledges to remain faithful and wait for him to return. When he does return to Tahiti he does not inform her, and if it were not for a chance sighting she would have been none the wiser. Whereas she is excited to see him around town, he seems indifferent toward her. Only after she plucks up the courage to ask him “Are you doing anything tonight?” do they begin to engage in sexy loving once again under the frangipani tree.

Materena becomes pregnant, and Loana immediately marches her off to confront Pito and his mother, Mama Roti, but again Pito seems indifferent, and marriage is certainly not on his mind. In time, Pito gradually accepts his responsibilities toward Materena. When baby Tamatoa is born, Pito moves in with Materena and Loana, but instead of making a happy household, Pito and Loana hold conflicting ideas about what is good for the baby.

Materena finds herself feeling “like the tomato between the lettuce and cucumber.”

Fourteen years and three children later, though still together, Materena and Pito are still not married. Materena “likes movies about love,” and increasingly dreams of her wedding day—to Pito. Pito, on the other hand, only expresses his interest in marrying her when he is drunk. Otherwise, he is quite content with their relationship and living arrangement. However, Materena does not waste time sitting around waiting for Pito to pop the big question. She is constantly busy doing things that she feels passionate about, like listening to and recording her mother’s life stories, building a swimming pool for her children, picking out a birthday present for Pito, laying new carpet, and catching up with or avoiding particular relatives.

Vaite skillfully depicts her characters’ idiosyncrasies in such a way that the reader cannot help but be charmed by them. From start to finish, Vaite does not give the reader the opportunity to pass judgment on her characters. Rather, she guides the reader to accept them just the way they are—unpredictable, but incredibly human, always lovable. As I turn the pages, I am reminded of the reality that people, their actions, and the world we live in, may not always be the way we perceive them. Sadly in “The Adoption,” as in “First Day Here,” cousin Tepua and cousin Teva learn this the hard way. Similarly, just as I am starting to think Pito is a bit of a deadbeat, a caring side of his nature is revealed that somehow redeems him. Again, in “A Little Drive with Mama Teta,”

when Mama Teta's son Johno finally gets a reluctant Mama Teta to pull over and face the gendarme who has been tailing them for some time, Johno is stunned by the outcome.

Commonly used Tahitian and French words moderately pepper some characters' dialogue. The inclusion of these words works, adding authenticity and flavor to the text. A glossary is provided at the front of the book

for readers to consult. *Breadfruit* is an enjoyable, uplifting read that entertains until the end. It is also an important contribution to Pacific literature, suitable for teenagers and adults everywhere.

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