



# Striding Both Worlds: Witi Ihimaera and New Zealand's Literary Traditions. (Cross/Cultures)

*Melissa Kennedy*

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*Striding Both Worlds* illuminates European influences in the fiction of Witi Ihimaera, Aotearoa New Zealand's foremost Māori writer, in order to question the common interpretation of Māori writing as displaying a distinctive Māori world-view and literary style. Far from being discrete endogenous units, all cultures and literatures arise out of constant interaction, engagement, and even friction. Thus, Māori culture since the 1970s has been shaped by a long history of interaction with colonial British, Pakeha, and other postcolonial and indigenous cultures. Māori sovereignty and renaissance movements have harnessed the structures of European modernity, nation-building, and, more recently, Western global capitalism, transculturation, and diaspora - contexts which contest New Zealand bicultural identity, encouraging Māori to express their difference and self-sufficiency. Ihimaera's fiction has been largely viewed as embodying the specific values of Māori renaissance and biculturalism. However, Ihimaera, in his techniques, modes, and themes, is indebted to a wider range of literary influences than national literary critique accounts for. In taking an international literary perspective, this book draws critical attention to little-known or disregarded aspects such as Ihimaera's love of opera, the extravagance of his baroque lyricism, his exploration of fantasy, and his increasing interest in taking Māori into the global arena. In revealing a broad range of cultural and aesthetic influences and inter-references commonly seen as irrelevant to contemporary Māori literature, *Striding Both Worlds* argues for a hitherto frequently overlooked and undervalued depth and complexity to Ihimaera's imaginary. The present study argues that an emphasis on difference tends to lose sight of fiction's capacity to appreciate originality and individuality in the polyphony of its very form and function. In effect, literary negotiation of Māori sovereign space takes place in its forms rather than in its content: the uniqueness of Māori literature is found in the way it uses the common tools of literary fiction, including language, imagery, the text's relationship to reality, and the function of characterization. By interpreting aspects of Ihimaera's oeuvre for what they share with other literatures in English, *Striding Both Worlds* aims to present an additional, complementary approach to Māori, New Zealand, and postcolonial literary analysis.

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