



E ngā Kaitiaki Pukapuka,

Dear Librarians, ka tuhi ahau i Aotearoa, i Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa ki te tonga, tēnā koutou. I write from New Zealand, from the Pacific Ocean in the south, greetings.

I come from an indigenous culture, Māori, whose literary tradition was oral rather than written and whose language was te reo rather than English. And I was born in the 1940s, a time when Māori were still being punished if we spoke te reo at school. Where I lived, my Māori village was rural and we only went to the city where the nearest library was, on the weekends if ever. The only English books in our house were the Bible and a medical almanac which our mother consulted when we were sick.

Although my experience of childhood was a long time ago, it's still not too far from the experiences of young children today of different non-English backgrounds who come from families where there are few books at home or for whom English is not a comfortable language: migrant families, indigenous and other ethnic communities, families that don't have money to buy books.

At school I could never find myself or my culture in a book. Today, boys and girls can find themselves in film, television and internet platforms and their elders like me hope that they will find models they can emulate who represent the very best values of their extended families - and avoid the dark worlds that lie waiting for them. We want them to obtain the tools that will enable them to negotiate the very complex communities they now live in as well as the best pathways. It isn't easy being a young adult today, to live fulfilling lives and hold on to your dreams and, if you can, make them come true. Especially when there are so many conflicting messages coming daily to their iPhones about what adults are doing in the world.

What is a young adult's place in a future that seems utterly bewildering?

In my case, at the age of 13, I decided that my place would be to become a Māori writer and to write what I called *The Māori Story*. By writing about this story, I could figure it out and my place in it. However, it wasn't until I was 26 that I wrote my first book, and I was 46 when I wrote *The Whale Rider*, the one that I am most well known for.

In *The Whale Rider* my heroine Kahu is a young Māori girl who wants her grandfather to look at the leadership qualities she has and recognize them. If he does and if he nurtures her - despite her gender and youth - she may become the young leader who can help to uplift the people and bring a new voice and energy to the community. The message The message of the book is that new leaders can come

from surprising non-traditional places. Their vigor can truly provide fresh answers to serious questions like climate change, environment remediation, and indigenous rights. Not only that, but they can provide political, cultural and social representation that will ensure equity, equality, justice, and inclusiveness in all the institutions that need it. The young girl I modelled Kahu on became, for instance, a high-ranking minister in the New Zealand Government! As for myself, I have had many careers including as a diplomat, and I served in New York where *The Whale Rider* was written. The book's whakapapa, genealogy, is as much American as Māori, and I hope you will be proud of that.

I wrote *The Whale Rider* almost forty years ago for the mokopuna - the grandchildren - the children of the future. I guess that that future is now, and you are them! This is the generation that matters.

In Maoridom we refer to this relationship between older generation and younger generation as the tuakana-teina relationship, the positive upbringing where the older generation provides the pathway for the mokopuna. E ngā Kaitiaki Pukapuka, your libraries are an important tuakana or elder institution. My own history with you has not exactly been exemplary. It wasn't until I was 17 that I actually walked into the public library of our nearest city - Gisborne - for the very first time to ask to join. Until then I had been angry at what you represented: a house of knowledge that denied my own. I was the boy whom you might have seen hanging around at the door gaining enough courage to come in. I finally got over myself.

I discovered, in reading in the library, that I was not alone. The library became one of those best pathways I mentioned earlier. In book after book, I found friends and beloved companions who have been with me all my life. Best of all, I learned the best principles to hold on to for the direction of my life.

Over all the years since, I am honored to say that together, in the writer-library partnership, you have assisted not only myself but many others in ensuring something very special. As writers, our stories may come from different cultures and speak specifically to our own mokopuna but they are also universal and speak to all grandchildren throughout the world. How grateful I am to you all for having made libraries into inclusive spaces where young people of all races and genders can not only discover all the world's written wisdoms and great and exemplary literature but also the repositories of reo, languages and cultures that include their own. Thank you for being vigilant in ensuring today that libraries uphold the widest representation of the human achievement for all peoples. You are, indeed, Whare Taonga, Treasure Houses, ensuring that our stories - even one about a young Māori girl written living in a place nobody ever heard of called Whāngārā - can transcend race, gender, location, and even Time, to speak to our common humanity and to the odyssey of all humankind.

I end my tuhinga to you, esteemed Kaitiaki Pukapuka, with this whakataukī about sharing food. But while it's about sharing food it's also about sharing knowledge, the breath of life, the embrace of aroha, the inspiration to fulfil impossible dreams, to find the best pathway. All those things were what I was seeking when I hovered as a young boy at the entrance to the library those many years ago, waiting for the courage to go in.

I am glad I found you.

Nā tō rourou,nā taku rourou ka ora ai te iwi

**With your food basket and my food basket
all the people will thrive**

**Aku mihi aroha,
Witi Ihimaera**