

Of one kind and another

Simon Hay

The Pounamu Prophecy

Cindy Williams
Rhiza Press, \$28.50 ISBN 9781925139457

The Seer's Wolf

Barbara Petrie
Bridgidada Press, \$33.00 ISBN 9780473318154

Waitapu

Helen Margaret Waaka
Escalator Press, \$30.00 ISBN 9780994118615

Cindy Williams's romance *The Pounamu Prophecy* is the story of Helene and James finding their way back to each other after the spark has gone from their marriage.

As a romance, it's not a book which asks readers to do much work. The characters are largely stereotypes, events require minimal interpretation, and life has clearly visible meaning. (Plot spoilers follow.) The book's gender politics are likewise a product of the genre: it is Helene rather than James who needs to learn and change, and what she needs to learn is not to put her career ahead of his.

The most interesting, though problematic, part of the book is the mechanism by which, eventually, they work things out: Mere, an old friend of James's mother, arrives from New Zealand to live with them in Brisbane. At a crucial point in the story, Mere sits down with Helene, and says: "Let me tell you a little of my story. It might help." Mere is, in this sense, the narrative's fairy godmother figure, who arrives to set things right, and the wisdom she offers them to save their marriage is Māori history. Mere grew up Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei; she was present as a child when their houses were demolished and their

meeting house burned; her brother died of typhoid due to swimming in Ōkahu Bay where untreated sewage was being dumped; she was arrested at Bastion Point in 1978; and, in later life, has become a Land Court judge and works with the Waitangi Tribunal.

Mere's story is undoubtedly the best part of the book. However, there are no macrons for any te reo Māori: not Māori but Maori, and so on. Maybe that's a consequence of having an Australian publisher, but it's indicative of the role of Te Ao Māori in the book, where Māori history is presented as the mechanism by which the white, middle-class marriage is to be saved.

The overall frame of the book is its Christian narrative, which is where the book's message becomes even more troubling. What Mere comes to teach Helene is "forgiveness"; more, that forgiveness is what you need "to learn how to move forward". Mere, dying of lung cancer, comes to Australia and gives to Helene a pounamu pendant, because God tells her this is what she must do. Later, Helene goes to Mere's funeral wearing the pendant, and it turns out that Helene is "The one in the prophecy" who will come to help Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei – in her case, by moving to Auckland to be with James and to work as a doctor. Mere's son explains to Helene that "In times of great need when we cannot provide for ourselves the prophecy, or whoever inspired the prophecy, sends the right person to help us." Thank God, it turns out, for white people, who come to save the brown people.

The first thing to say about Barbara Petrie's *The Seer's Wolf*, given the description on its cover – "A mysterious and intriguing story about a werewolf in rural 1950s New Zealand" – is that it is not, in fact, about a werewolf. The book's "werewolf" is Ralph Randal, master tailor, a recent immigrant with his family from England to Loam, on the Canterbury plains. Ralph suffers from variegate porphyria, and his symptoms make him seem wolf-like. Indeed, in the book's concluding pages, Ralph's hallucinations have him believing he is a wolf. But a werewolf he is not, and the project of sending us looking for one, only to disappoint, is a central part of the book's project.

Though the book treads the boundaries of the supernatural – one of the characters is young Clover, who seems to be able to perceive the thoughts of others, and sees things happening before they do – it is, in fact, much more interested in the amazing strangeness of the mundane. We look for werewolves, where really there are fascinating medical intrigues, social drama, complex psychologies and relationships. We wonder about people's bodies changing into wolves, whereas just as strange are bodies that do (and don't) bleed on a monthly cycle, or develop illnesses and respond (or not) to herbal and physical remedies.

There are many secrets, locks and mysteries in the book, and many of them remain undiscovered, unopened, or unsolved. The book's focus is on oddities, irregularities and outliers, such as Ralph and his daughter Satina's porphyria, as well as their semi-incestuous relationship. The book is littered with odd characters who remain undeveloped – Tweed Simpson, the old man obsessed with Princess Margaret, is a good example. Many of these are introduced through Clover's misguided hunt for a werewolf, and the scenes are generally quite good ones, though there is a kind of frustration that builds up, reading such scenes one after another, once it becomes clear that they are not helping advance the narrative at all.

The book even eschews ordinary ideas of "narrative", as if they, too, are an artificial imposition on what, if we just paid attention to it, is the incredible ordinary. The book gets so focused on details, and the details are themselves so interesting to the characters, that they function not to further, but to distract from, the story. And this, I think, is the book's project – to offer us a generically exciting story ("look! A werewolf!"), and then teach us that what's really interesting, what we should really pay attention to, is not such narrative at all, but rather the details of everyday life.

There's a lot of "wondering" by the book's characters, especially wondering what will happen. In a sense, the book is getting its characters to do the work of the reader – after all, the question "what will happen next?" is the question that keeps us reading. Foregrounding characters wondering like this makes visible for readers the way that our focus on and desire for "narrative" artificially limits what we will find interesting and/or wonder-ful.

The book's closing prose reaches for a kind of poignancy or transcendence, but misses. "Going to the mountains" is, throughout the book, Ralph's fantasy for him and his daughter, the ever-postponed perfect moment he longs for. (Spoiler alert.) So, after he kills her, in the depths of his hallucinations, he of course sets off for the mountains where, increasingly exhausted, starving, and sleep-deprived, as well as still suffering hallucinations, he is eventually killed when he falls into the Crow river and is carried along the Waimakariri, all the way to the beach, where Clover finds him:

Ralph Randal, late of Great Britain, was in the jaws of that treacherous animal, the flooding Waimakariri River, its long throat rather Now she [the river] danced him about in a series of bobbing movements, she cut, she bruised, battered him to the accompaniment of her swollen choir.

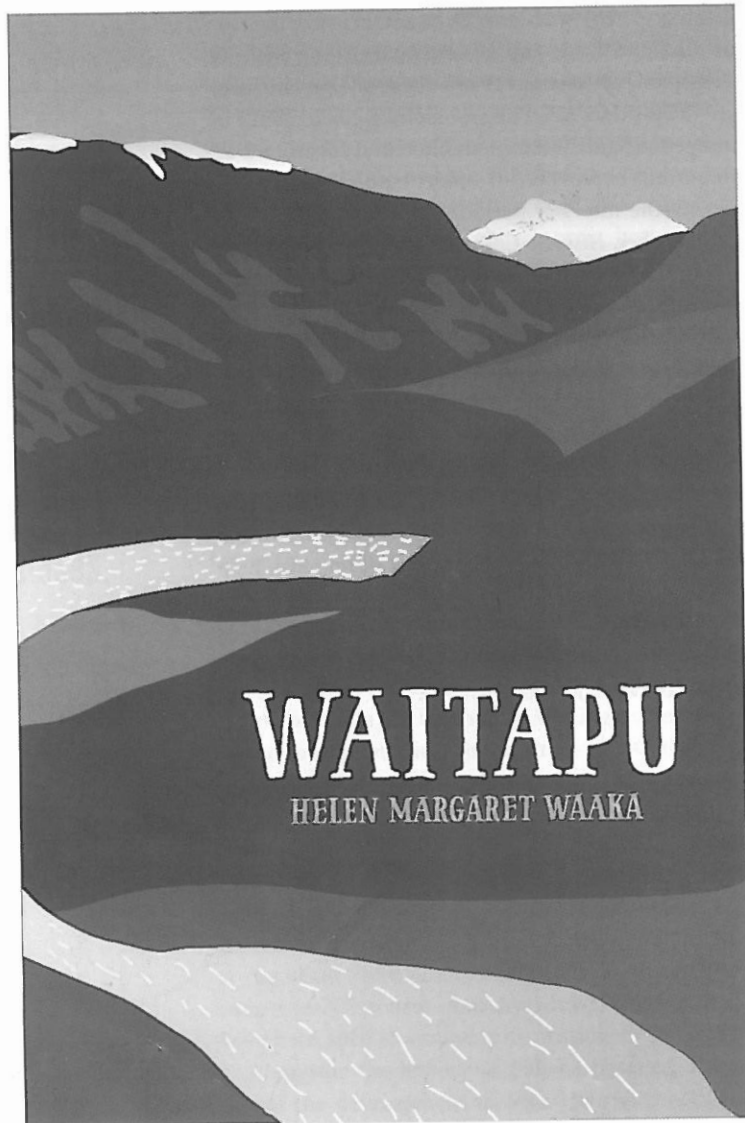
All in all, it's an intriguing novel, full of wonderful scenes and characters, compellingly making its case against narrative – but, for that reason, perhaps deliberately, quite unsatisfying to read.

Helen Margaret Waaka's short-story collection *Waitapu* is about the people of the made-up titular small town, not too far from Palmerston North. Its structure – distinct stories, each in the voice of a particular character, but with overlapping characters, places, and moments – is especially deft at representing the web of interconnected lives in a small town, and the social labour that goes into producing small-town life. These characters are workers, in an important sense: people whose affective labour builds and sustains community. Nurses, cleaners, social workers. The book traces the lived experiences of the people of the town, their relationships with each other, giving us a sense of being let into their lives.

The book is particularly good at representing teen psychologies and language – "Eva" is probably my favourite – but also does well with older people, such as Frank's self-disgust at his own advancing decrepitude in "Stranger's Smile."

A lot of the book's emotive work is done by pathetic fallacy. For instance, the "sun bursting through low, black clouds" is about Beryl's state of mind as she views it, more than it is about the actual weather and landscape. This works very well to support the book's implicit argument for the co-dependency between people and their environment.

Some of the book's distinctions between "city-people" and "town-folk" are too blunt, and the transformations that some of the characters go



through seem forced. Brian's sudden preference for his mother's home town over his soul-crushing life in the city, brought about when he hears that his wife is pregnant, for instance; or Hilary overcoming her racism when she first holds her granddaughter. But these transformational moments are at the centre of the book: Beryl giving up her hospital cleaning job in disgust at the poor treatment of workers, and taking Rowena with her; Rowena's sudden desire to recover her Māori identity when she returns to her marae for an auntie's funeral.

What these transformations are moving towards, and what the book is most interested in, is the idea of belonging. In the book's conclusion, it suggests

that this kind of belonging is a virtue still available – barely, perhaps only occasionally, and definitely under threat – in the small town rather than the big one. It is a wonderful book of its kind, nuanced and deft. But “of its kind” is crucial here, because the book falls too easily into the trap of thinking that the “truth” of a small town (indeed, of any social constellation) can be captured in the psychology of its characters, without giving us a sense of the institutional and ideological organization of the society that provides the framework and sets the parameters for those characters. Without offering us, as a counterpoint to the characters' feelings, that knowledge of the structures and histories of

the society these characters are embedded in, both structures that enable as well as those that disable the possibilities of belonging, all the book can really do is mourn the idea of belonging in this moment of its supposed disappearance. At the book's centre is the idea of belonging; to put it there, it puts to one side the history of how Waitapu came to be the way it is, how belonging came to be endangered like this, and how new modes of belonging are emerging as well.

Simon Hay lives in Wellington, and is the author of A History of the Modern British Ghost Story, and other writings about literature.

Biography

Hero worship

Gyles Beckford

A Few Hares to Chase: The Life and Economics of Bill Phillips

Alan Bollard

Auckland University Press, \$40.00
ISBN 9781869408299

The sages have long counselled that you should never meet your heroes. Should that be extended to writing about them? Alan Bollard has indulged his hero worship in this hagiography of the largely unknown, outside of economic circles, Bill Phillips. “You don't meet geniuses many times in your life,” Bollard said in a recent RNZ National interview.

Born in the backblocks near Dannevirke to inventive and dedicated parents, he went from being an electrician at a power station near the Ureweras in 1935 to being a professor of economics at the London School of Economics (LSE) a little over 20 years later. In between, he travelled through outback Australia, a China torn by civil strife and Japanese invasion, a Soviet Union suspicious of Westerners, and a Europe witnessing and feeling the rise of Nazism, before landing in London. And there the story might have ended as that of another adventurous, slightly eccentric Kiwi, who went on to have war adventures and privations, in which he displayed courage and ingenuity, and earned a footnote in the memoirs of an international celebrity – Laurens van der Post.

It's the post-war journey that earns Phillips a still largely overlooked spot in history. Because that's when Phillips moves from electrical engineering to sociology at no less an institution than the LSE, and scrapes through with an indifferent performance before jumping to a completely alien subject, economics. Even then it comes down to applying an engineering solution to economic riddles – a water-driven machine of pipes, pumps and tanks to simulate economic relationships.

The unorthodox Monetary National Income Automatic Computer (Moniac) replicated the British economy, and demonstrated the Keynesian economic model with various tanks made of perspex, representing savings and investments, surplus-balances, pipes to shift investment flows, and to show the effect of imports, taxes, investment and the like. It leaked, was probably an electrical death trap, but the chain-smoking Phillips astounded the British economic establishment when he nervously demonstrated it in late 1949. The resulting paper and further refined machines cemented Phillips's future as an economist. Within a decade he was a professor.

The story of the building of the Moniac (an early model of which is in the Reserve Bank of New Zealand's museum in Wellington) from surplus WWII warplanes in a garage in a London suburb is engaging, as is the unorthodox manner of selling the

idea to the LSE's economics department leaders and getting funds to build it. The myth of an eccentric can-do Kiwi surmounting the odds with a piece of number 8 wire gets another polishing.

Bollard said he wrote the book for the intelligent, well-informed man and woman in the street. It's at this point that they make the judgement as a reader either to plough on into the intricacies of economic plumbing, the celebrated eponymous “Curve”, and into the nether world of econometrics and the search for economic stabilisation, or to skim through to the denouement.

To take the former course sets a reader off on hare spotting and chasing. The latter course is less complicated and perhaps only slightly less illuminating and satisfying. For those who forego the chase, the highlights include a foray into the relationship between inflation and unemployment from which the renowned Phillips Curve emerges.

It proposed an inverse relationship between inflation and employment, and it's what Phillips is enduringly remembered for, even if he called it a “wet weekend's work” which he never regarded as his best work, nor all his own. It was largely superseded even in Phillips's own academic lifetime, although it was also copping some of the blame for the economic turmoil that hit western economies in the 1970s. And it lives in a form in the United States Federal Reserve's monetary policy, which includes a specific employment condition.

Phillips's legacy, according to Bollard, is the work on economic stabilisation of the late 1950s, much of which still permeates the policy approach of economists and central banks to this day. This is also some of the more challenging content for those with less than a passing interest in economics. Almost as an anti-climax, Phillips quietly disappeared to Australia to work in Canberra and pursue the study of the Chinese economy.

The Economist magazine's Tim Harford has dubbed Phillips the Indiana Jones of economics, and has enthusiastically and colourfully spoken about him. And shorter articles have sung Phillips's praises.

Phillips was shy, retiring, self-effacing, a poor record keeper, whose main personality trait was an ability to fly under the radar. You could never imagine him saying – Hillary-like – “we knocked the bastard off” for any of his accomplishments. Which is all the more reason I'd have hoped this book would have burrowed deeper into who he was. The personal anecdotes are thin and often vague, and sometimes read like hand-me-down family folklore. The professional observations and comments, while revealing in the context of economics and academia, offer only some insight into the person.

One grating stylistic device is that of supposing,

presuming, imagining what Phillips felt, saw, thought, might have done. Biographers invariably resort to guesswork to get readers to jump to the conclusions needed for the narrative, but it would have been preferable if it had been used less. The illustrations are scant, and a battle between the Russians and Japanese in 1939 is shown in all sources I checked as Nomonhan/Khalkhin Gol and not Nominatan as stated. Bollard has done as much justice to his hero as might be possible, even if a little dourly. I fear he's the only one likely to make the effort.

Gyles Beckford is RNZ business editor.

