

Waitapu

Helen Waaka

Notes for book groups

A Summary

Waitapu is a collection of interconnected short stories set in rural New Zealand. Its characters take us beneath the supposed tranquillity of small towns to reveal the heartbreak, kindness and survival of everyday lives. Sisters Ruby and Rowena reconnect, Mereata feels the breath of her tīpuna on the back of her neck and Harriet goes missing from the rest home. *Waitapu* is an intimate and moving portrait of rural New Zealand life for both Māori and Pākehā and addresses important life issues such as aging, deprivation and family violence.

The Author

Helen Waaka, (Ngāti Whātua, Ngā Puhī, Ngāti Torehina) completed a Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing with the Whitireia Creative Writing Programme in 2011. In the same year she had two stories, “Hineraumati” and “Obsession with Katherine” published in *Huia 9*, with “Hineraumati” winning the best English-language short story section of the Pikihuia awards. In 2012 she was awarded a New Zealand Society of Authors mentorship and in 2013 she had a further two stories, “Staying Alive” and “Eva” published in *Huia 10* with “Eva” receiving a ‘highly commended’ award in the Novel Extract category of the Pikihuia awards. Her novel extract *Eyes of God* was short-listed in the 2015 Pikihuia Awards and has since been published in *Huia Short Stories 11*. Helen holds a Bachelor of Nursing and a Post-Graduate Certificate in Women’s Health. She currently works part-time as a nurse in Hawke’s Bay.

Q and A with Helen Waaka

What inspired you to write *Waitapu*?

I started writing short stories in 2009 and two years later completed the Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing at Whitireia. Part of the requirement for this was to produce a manuscript by the end of the year. It was during this time I realised short story collections needed a point of difference to compete with novels. I decided to link the stories and set them in the same rural town.

One of the overall themes in *Waitapu* explores the impact of childhood family violence. As a nurse I’d worked for several years in Women’s Health, and it was in this environment

that women often disclosed family violence. None of their stories are in the book, but through the characters of Ruby and Rowena, I'd like to think their strength and courage is. I didn't want this particular theme to overwhelm though, and other themes such as belonging, community and connection, specific to small towns, feature.

Is *Waitapu* based on any particular town in New Zealand?

Waitapu could be any rural town in New Zealand with its river, its valleys, its ranges and its cast of familiar characters. 'We know them because we know and have known people like them...'; '...they are the neighbours we think we know...'

The theme of community and connection will be familiar too for some readers. The nurse who looks after you in hospital might well be your neighbour. The social worker visiting an elderly client might discover he is her old high school teacher. These sorts of connections occur in cities too but they are the essence of rural living.

Newcomers to small towns are often surprised at who belongs to who, and everyone knows everyone else's history. There's no hiding in small towns, but when trouble looms e.g in the story "Snapshot of a Woman", Harriet Yates goes missing from the rest home and the whole town rallies in the search to find her.

Do the stories with Māori points of view come from your own experience?

I wasn't brought up close to my own marae and had little to do with Te Āo Māori throughout most of my childhood, apart from learning basic te reo at college. As an adult I've had to look for ways to connect and I've found this through various courses in te reo and tikanga over the years, including Te Wananga o Raukawa's Poupou karanga course which was transforming. I've taken a break from learning over the last year or so to focus on *Waitapu* but intend taking up the challenge again in the near future.

Through circumstance, not all Māori are fully conversant in tikanga and te reo, but there are learning options available, such as Mereata experiences in "Hineraumati" after hearing the call of her tīpuna.

You've mentioned belonging as one of the themes in *Waitapu*. Why is this important ?

Belonging is different for everyone and I wanted to explore this in *Waitapu*. Some may feel a strong sense of belonging to the town they grew up in, or perhaps the town they bring their children up in.

And for many Māori, connection to the marae, whānau, hapu and iwi, is fundamental to belonging, but for others these connections are not as strong or may not even exist, as Rowena and her daughter Anna experience in "A Place to Stand".

The town of Waitapu too has its own sense of connection and belonging – to the surrounding landscape, the river and mountain ranges, which form the backdrop to many of the stories.

Rowena and Ruby feature in more than one story in the collection. What is their story?

One of the themes in *Waitapu* is the impact of historical family violence. But for its survivors, 'historical' is not always the best word to use because the impact of the violence is lived with every day. Rowena and Ruby get on with their lives in the best way they know how, despite their childhood, and I wanted to show the strength and courage it takes to do this. I hope for some readers, their story resonates. As CS Lewis is credited with saying. 'We read to know we are not alone'.

Something I wanted to move away from in *Waitapu* was the stereotype of groups affected by family violence. In the media there is often a strong association between family violence, lower income families and certain ethnicities, but recent statistics reveal that a significant percentage of family violence occurs in higher income and better-educated families.

Questions

1. In "Eva", Rowena and Eva get into a car with a driver who has been drinking. Did you think this was unusual?
2. In "Life's Too Short", Beryl thinks a lot but keeps her mouth shut. What events leading up to the final scene cause her to finally stand up to Doreen?
3. As mentioned in the notes the violence Rowena and Ruby experienced as children in "Eva" and "Katherine" is sometimes called 'historical' family violence. Discuss this term and the different ways the sisters have been affected by their childhoods. Do you think their experiences were similar?
4. In "King of the Castle" why do you think Fraser wants to harm Mr Yates? After all the old man seems to be the only person who has any time for him.
5. In "The Stroke" Rowena makes the decision to admit her father to a rest home rather than caring for him herself at home. But should she have made an effort and agreed to take him home with the support of home help until he could return home again, as the hospital staff suggested?
6. In "Hineraumati" Mereata feels something at the river. Aunty Lena says what she felt was her tīpuna. Discuss what you think Aunty Lena means and how does this experience affect Mereata?
7. In "A Sense of Belonging" why do you think Ruby has come home?
8. In "Snapshot of a Woman" what is your interpretation of what happens to Harry by the river?
9. The town of Waitapu could be seen as a character of its own. Discuss how this might have an impact on the stories.

