

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, 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 Short Stories 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 Short Stories 10*. 'Eva' also received a highly commended in the novel extract category of the Pikihuia Awards. A second novel extract 'Eyes of God' was short-listed in the 2015 Pikihuia Awards and has since been published in *Huia Short Stories 11*.

Helen's debut collection of short stories, *Waitapu*, was published in October 2015 and was one of two finalists in the Te Tuhinga Auaha section of Ngā Kupu Ora Māori Book Awards a year later. She has since had another story 'The Apology' published in *Huia's Stories on the Four Winds-Ngā Hau e Wha*. 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 & A with Helen Waaka

What inspired you to write *Waitapu*?

I started writing short stories in 2009 and two years later completed my Graduate Diploma at Whitireia. Part of the course requirement was to produce a manuscript

by the end of the year. I realised short story collections needed a point of difference to compete with novels and 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. I'd worked for several years as a nurse in women's health and 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 specific to small towns such as belonging, community and connection, also feature.

Is Waitapu based on any particular town in New Zealand?

Waitapu could be any rural town in New Zealand with its river, valleys, 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...'

Newcomers to small towns are often surprised at who belongs to who and how everyone knows everyone's history. The nurse who looks after you in hospital might well be your neighbour. The social worker who visits an elderly client might discover he's her old high school teacher. These sorts of connections occur in cities too, but they are the essence of rural living. While there are downsides to not being able to hide, there are also benefits. When Harriet Yates goes missing from the rest home in the story 'Snapshot of a Woman' the whole town rallies 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 we had a fairly mainstream upbringing, which wasn't unusual during the 1970s. As an adult I've had to find ways to reconnect and respond to an inner calling to find out more. I've completed several courses in te reo and tikanga over the years, including Te Wananga o Raukawa's Poupou karanga course, a transforming experience. I'm grateful there are an increasing number of learning options now available similar to the one 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. 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 and 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 survivors, 'historical' is not always a good choice of word because the impact of the violence is not historical. It 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 research and statistics reveal that a significant percentage of family violence occurs in higher income and better-educated families.

Questions for discussion

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 this experience affects 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.



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