

TE KAIKAUKAU ✦
THE SWIMMER
I TE AO ○ TE REO

✦ WITI IHIMAERA SMILER

TE KAIKAUKAU + THE SWIMMER

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AUCKLAND
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

First published 2026
Auckland University Press
Waipapa Taumata Rau
University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland 1142
New Zealand
www.aucklanduniversitypress.co.nz

© Witi Ihimaera Smiler, 2026

ISBN 978 1 77671 238 0

Published with the assistance of Creative New Zealand



A catalogue record for this book is available from the
National Library of New Zealand

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Design by Duncan Munro

This book was printed on FSC® certified paper

Printed in China by Everbest Printing Investment Ltd

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*Ngā rangatira, arā, ko Tawhiri rāua ko Kaa Williams,
ki a rāua te tuatahi o ngā mihi.*

*Ko te pouako, ko Sharmain Hancy, ā, ko te akomanga
ko Te Iti Pounamu, ki a rātou te tuarua o ngā mihi.*

*I muri mai, ki ngā pouako o Takiura,
otirā, ki ngā ākongā katoa,
ki a rātou te tuatoru
o ngā mihi.*

Te Kaikaukau

California, November 2023

1.

Sometimes, I see myself as a swimmer in a sea of mounting waves.

The waves are the colour of dark pounamu. The ever-heaving surges of my sea of dreams shunt me forward, the pressure of the tilting waters pushing me skyward. They are glassy, shimmering with sun-stars, and often I can see to the very bottom, where schools of sharks hunt. There are moments when the sea is filled with whalesong and, afar off, cetacean pods are swimming home to Hawaiki. Glistening jellyfish, though, turn out to be plastic waste that trails tentacles as lethal as any medusae.

The waves lift me out of danger. The accelerating current propels me up the glassy walls. I gasp with exhilaration because, if I judge the moment right, I can surf from the uppermost curves into the sky itself. In those moments of poise, those one or two seconds of free fall before gravity pulls me down to the sea, I can take my bearings.

Tihei mauri ora! Where am I? From the top I can see all the way back to the past.

And forward to the future.

2.

These were the thoughts that filled my mind as I waited to take the stage of the Carsey-Wolf Center, Santa Barbara, California, in November 2023.

In my fiftieth anniversary year as a writer, I had been invited by the International Research Society for Children's Literature to speak at their biennial congress. Children's book scholars from around the world had assembled at the University of California to discuss the many ecologies of childhood, the worlds of children as represented in books. My own contribution to this world had begun with *Pounamu, Pounamu*, published in 1972 when I was twenty-eight.

At Santa Barbara, I was also commemorating my first novel, *Tangi*, which was published in 1973 when I was twenty-nine. At that time, I had been looking for something to do with my life that wasn't flashy or front-row kapa haka. My favourite whakatauki was 'He pai te mahi ahakoa hū', which I took to mean 'You can do good work without making a noise.' Writing sounded like it fit the bill.

I had been shy in those days, and waiting to take the stage in Santa Barbara, any stage actually, still took a lot of personal effort. Always, I remembered my mother Julia's advice, 'Son, it's only ten minutes out of the rest of your life.' Thanks Mum.

As for my dad, Tom, who was a farmer, he would say, 'Beats digging in fenceposts.'

Writing, in fact, had turned out to be incredibly noisy! When it came to public gigs, like the appearance at the Carsey-Wolf Center, I was involved in a lot of preparation and rehearsal. The day before had been the technical rehearsal with a sound, lighting and video check, as the event was to be televised. My interviewer, New Zealander Nicola Daly, and I were given run sheets and shown where our marks were, to ensure we would not stray off-camera, leaving the viewer suddenly looking at our feet.

The Center had a capacity of 6000, no pressure. It was known as the Thunderdome and was the main indoor events centre of the university. Not that my event would reach that capacity but, still, the thought of ensuring I had enough energy to pull it off, right at the end of my anniversary tour, made me nervous.

To be honest, I've always enjoyed travelling the world to ensure Māori are *present*.

Prior to the United States visit I had been in Europe at the invitation of the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Germany. The university had asked me to close their year-long and worldwide *Eine Uni – ein Buch* hybrid lecture series, *The Whale Rider: An Exploration of New Zealand through Witi Ihimaera's Novel*. From May to July, the University shared with other academic institutions – like the University of Otago, Obama Institute and Mid Sweden University – lectures on postcolonialism, decolonisation and climate change. *The Whale Rider* was read in its entirety in the German reo.

Among other things I signed the University's prestigious Gold Book. You will find my distinguishing tohu, the sketch of a whale and a young girl riding it, among the signatures of heads of state, important philosophers and famous international personalities. I gave an hour-long televised lecture from the middle of a forest of flowerpots in the Atrium Maximum.

The most affecting visit was to the Gutenberg Museum, named after the inventor of printing from movable metal type. As I looked at the Gutenberg Bible, I couldn't help but remember the story told to me by Paraone Gloyne of his tīpuna Te Hemara Rerehau and Wiremu Toetoe who, in the 1860s, had travelled to Germany with the express aim of returning with a printing press – and they learnt German to be able to access the mātauranga to use it.

'Māori took up Pākehā literacy very quickly,' Paraone told me, 'but realised that they needed a printing press to publish their views to the iwi. One was gifted to them by Emperor Franz Joseph, a magnanimous koha. On my tīpuna's return to Aotearoa, they printed *Te Hokioi*, which was the newspaper of the Kingitanga, to disseminate information to those who were part of the resistance.'

After Gutenberg University, the tom-tom drums of literature had sent me two further birthday anniversary invitations. The first was from academic Ian Conrich, inviting me to his conference on *The Transnational and Transcultural Pacific* at Stockholm University, Sweden, and the University of Turku, Finland. The second was an invitation to Montreal, Canada, to be the guest of honour at the thirty-third International First People's Film Festival. A mini-festival of Ihimaera films was shown kei roto, within the festival – *Whale Rider*, *Mahana*, *White Lies*, *Kawa* and a couple of smaller features I had forgotten about. I was interviewed at the McCord Stewart Museum, where extracts from my work were read in French by French-Canadian actors. I got to fan-boy Alanis Obomsawin, pioneering documentary filmmaker and Indigenous rights activist.

After a day-long flight from Montreal, I arrived in Santa Barbara for the appearance at the Carsey-Wolf Center.

3.

I have worked hard at this career. These trips energise me, they don't deplete me. Even so, being a guest of honour is never easy. There are always expectations and assumptions, and you sometimes wonder whether you will be able to fulfil them.

Wherever I go, I always connect with the local Indigenous community. Representing Māori among Indigenous peoples I meet has become the kaupapa.

In Santa Barbara, exchanging experiences with the Chumash Indian iwi was a huge emotional moment. We shared stories of devastation and occupation in the otherwise glorious and sun-drenched Spanish-infused Santa Barbara setting.

And then came the final evening event.

There I was with Nicola on the bright stage of the Carsey-Wolf Center. I made my rehearsed whaikōrero, speech, to the audience. The television cameras were front, centre and side.

Nicola and I took our chairs.

In every way, I could consider that I had reached the height of my career. Since 1972 I had published eighteen creative works. Four had been adapted into feature films for international distribution. Many had been translated into other languages, including *White Lies* in Amharic, an Ethiopian Semitic language. I had written two memoirs, *Māori Boy* and *Native Son*, and a book attempting the impossible – reconsidering pūrākau and seeking to decolonise traditional tendencies – in *Navigating the Stars*.

My books were taught around the world. I travelled the world.

I was at the top of my profession as a Māori writer, an Indigenous writer, a world writer.

My nerve had *held*.

The crowd began to applaud as Nicola concluded her introduction.

They settled down in rapt attention, waiting for me to answer her first question. ‘Can you tell us a little about your career as a Māori writer?’

And suddenly I saw myself as that swimmer in a sea of mounting, boundless waves.

The waves were the colour of dark pounamu. The ever-heaving surges of that ocean of dreams propelled me forward, the pressure of the tilting waters pushed me skyward.

I was shunted up those curving walls into the sky itself. I leapt, poised perfectly between past, present and future and, in that moment, took my bearings.

Where was I?

In the blinding lights, in that moment of free fall, I heard my father Tom’s voice:

E taku tama aroha, ko ēnei whakatutukitanga katoa i te reo Pākehā, nē ra?

All those accomplishments in the English language, eh son?

A few days following, I was on my way back to Aotearoa.

I should have felt fantastic, I know, but I didn't. My father was always a loving man, and his spoken words had often praised my career – but it was the gentle unspoken criticism in his question that was deeply devastating to me. Even at this age I am not immune to chastisement, and I shed a few tears for myself in the dark when everyone on the plane was either asleep or watching their flickering screens.

I realised I owed at least one book written in te reo to Dad, Nani Mini and my ancestors.

But how could I *do* that! To even think of writing in another language I would have to put the brakes on the entire forward momentum of my life and, especially, call a halt on an ascendant career as an international writer. I would have to go back to the beginning of my craft and learn te reo, not only to talk it but to write it – craft a different discipline and develop an entirely different writing process. Let's see . . . how long would that take? One year, two years, three? Did I have the savings to support me for that long?

I was seventy-eight, that was another concern. The median age for Māori men to die was seventy-three (for Pākehā it was eighty), and I had beaten those odds by five years so far. I had planned, next, to write my third English-language memoir, 'Indigenous Envoy', and seventeenth novel, 'The Prisoner of the Glittering Tower', set in New York. Would those books still be around three years from now? Would I?

Young people have the luxury of not having to think this way.

All these thoughts spiralled through my brain. And then they came back to the centre in a huge rush and *pounced* on me with their wero:

Get real, Witi. Focus.

You are Māori by blood and ancestry, your identity is authentic, tūturu. Your one constant is that you were born a Māori, you will die a Māori and, when you do, your people will come and get you, wherever you are, and take you home to be buried.

Recognise the loss of language and culture through generations of colonisation. Confess that ever since you were born, you have been living your life, and writing it, in the wrong culture and wrong language. Acknowledge, therefore, that while you have asserted you are a Māori writer, you have never been truly and sufficiently *present* in that culture, let alone the reo.

How the *hell* have you survived so long?

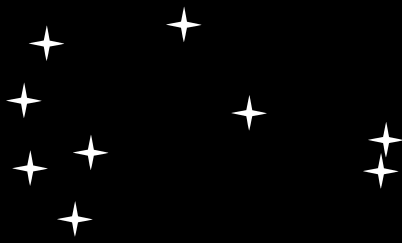
On my arrival back to Auckland, I telephoned Te Wānanga Takiura o Ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori o Aotearoa to apply for entry to their rumaki reo course.

If I was to adequately respond to my father's challenge, I'd better learn how to write in te reo.

Little was I to know that I would also begin a process of reclamation of a self that had always resided inside me. Māori call this noho puku, sitting silent inside one's stomach.

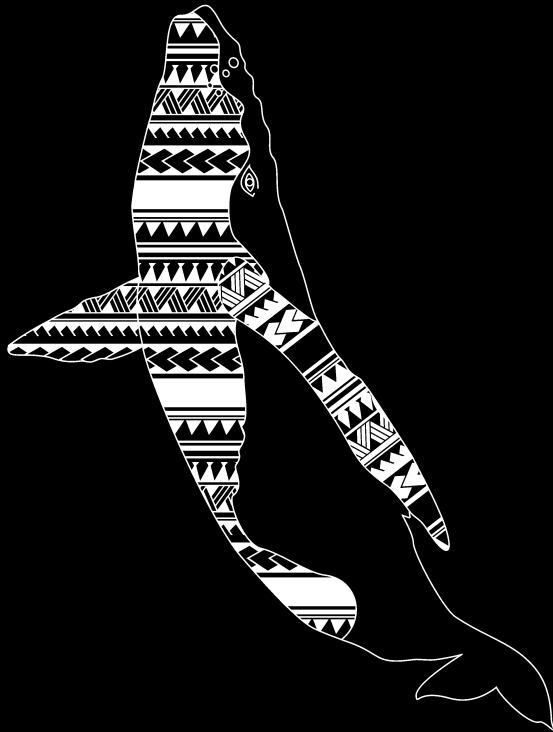
In that year I began not only to write in my mother tongue.

I stood in my stomach and began to speak it.



PART ONE

KO AHAU TĒNEI –
THIS IS ME



First whaikōrero
Rāmere, 23 February

*Ihia te rangi, ihia te mana,
ko Ranginui kei runga, ko Papatūānuku kei raro.
Ko te paepae o Takiura e tū mai nei, tihei mauri ora.
Koropiko taku upoko ki te Kīngitanga, ki te Arikinui
Kīngi Tūheitia Pōtatau Te Wherowhero, rire, rire,
hau, pai mārīre.*

*Taku mihi ki a rātou, haere ki te Pō,
ki Hawaiki-nui, Hawaiki-roa,
Hawaiki-pāmamao.
Nā reira, haere rā ngā mate, haere, haere, haere.
Āpiti hono, tātai hono, rātou ki a rātou, tātou ki a tātou.*

*Ka huri au ki te mihi ki ō mātou Whatukura,
ko Te Tawhiri, kōrua ko Te Māreikura putiputi, ko Nan,
ki ngā Kaiako Kura Takiura kua ūhia te kākahu korowai
o te aroha
ki runga ki a mātou.*

*Te whenua e takoto nei, e Ngāti Whātua,
Wai-o-Hua, Ngāti Pāoa, ngā mihi.
Ko te manu tīoriori i te tīmatanga
o te hīkoi o tēnei rā, he whakatau,
ngā mihi mō tō karakia ki a mātou.
Tēnā tātou katoa.*

Te Wānanga Takiura

1.

It was young writer Shilo Kino who had suggested that Te Wānanga Takiura o Ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori o Aotearoa was my best bet.

The wānanga is held up frequently as the *ne plus ultra* of Māori language acquisition, and I immediately saw that it would give me what I required: the best available one-year crash course, by way of total immersion, not only in te reo but also in the Māori worldview and Māori cultural contexts. This acquired knowledge would set me up, in the following two years, to write my first novel in te reo. Arrogant, that, eh, but I have never been one to muck around.

At this age I was running against the clock.

I have therefore begun with the first whaikōrero I gave to Takiura. It was the first time I stood to speak on the wānanga's marae, ka tū ki te kōrero. To achieve it I used bits and pieces of the knowledge of traditional speech making – which is an art in itself – I had acquired. None of us came to Takiura with zero reo competency; we brought our personal histories with us.

As the year progressed, and I learnt more, my whaikōrero became more complex – more my own. I began to add embellishments and sophisticated decoration to the whare reo, language house, I was building for myself.

It's interesting to mark my progress! Te reo speakers might consider that all my whaikōrero (formal oral greetings), whakapuaki (oral essay presentations) and tuhinga (written essays) are so skilled in terms of rhythm, intonation and dramatic thrust that I was matatau – accomplished – from the

get-go. Aroha mai, this is the problem when an oral presentation becomes written to be published.

The written Māori work in this book comprises final drafts of oral presentations. I laboured on them over six, seven or more times for *written* perfection before I stood to speak them; their substance was in response to Pāpā Tawhiri's expectations of high-quality content. They therefore don't truly represent the taura, student, in physical performance with my training wheels on. If I had been filmed you would have seen me stumbling over my sentences or having memory lapses or dying mid-flight – and there were moments when my pauses in presentation were so long, I must have looked like a possum caught in the headlight glare of an oncoming truck.

Believe me, there was a great difference between writing my whakapuaki and speaking them.

2.

The course also stated that it was designed to accelerate one's journey to speaking in te reo Māori. And this might be the best place to address the main question that people ask me:

'But why *you*, Witi? You've written all those books about Māori and surely you must have known a lot of te reo before you went to Takiura?'

Well, yes and no.

The Townie Māori Boy

I was born the eldest child of beloved Māori parents Te Haa o Ruhia (Tom) Ihimaera Smiler Jnr and Julia Keelan in 1944. I spent my early years in a rural kāinga, Waituhi, surrounded by Māoritanga and te reo – and I probably spoke it. That is, until Mum and Dad sought better economic opportunities and became part of the phenomenon known as the rural-to-urban migration drift. They shifted my three sisters and brother and me into Gisborne when I was six; another sister and brother were born some ten years later.

Educationalists will tell you that the early years, from birth to the age of five, are the best for learning your first language and culture. While I can't remember if my first language *was* te reo, which was the language of the kāinga, I believe I carried the facsimile of it for the rest of my life, the emotional quality of it colouring my subsequent writings, albeit in English.

I lost the physical linguistic connection when my family left Waituhi and, with it, the reo of Te Whānau-a-Kai and our distinctive mita (the words we used and way we spoke). I became instead that well-known trope, the townie child growing up within an English world. I started school in the louder echo chamber of another language where, every day, we sat like cats on a mat with Pākehā children and spelt out our words on our fingers. We got marked down if we spelt the English words wrong.

Don't get me started on what happened if we were found unconsciously yelling, 'Homai te whutupōro' in the playground instead of 'Give the ball to me.' Or if, as happened to my cousin Polly Ngaira, she hummed, unconsciously, a simple waiata while sitting on the school lav:

*Me he manu rere au, ē
Kua rere ki tō moenga . . .*

Off to the principal with us both to get a couple of strokes of the cane across the backs of our legs. No use telling our parents either. By that stage they were already on the way to believing that knowing English was better and, therefore, they knew we were in the wrong.

I was already lost by the time I was ten and had become that 'I-know-more-than-you-do' boy when among my reo-speaking whānau. I shuttled between Gisborne and my rural rellos in Waituhi for weekends – or longer if Mum found part-time work in a canning factory while Dad was shearing. I was the favoured eldest son, no matter my whakahīhi ways, so my rural babysitter was my paternal grandmother, Teria, until she died, and then my grandaunt Mini. My sisters and brothers were farmed out to other whānau.

Even as a young boy I had a questing curiosity. When I was in town, I wanted to know everything about what I saw of Pākehā life. Acquisitiveness was my saving grace because when I was in Waituhi, I also wanted to know about Māori life. My two patient kuia tried their best to answer all my questions: 'What are you doing? Why are they [my whānau] doing that? What's happening on the marae now? Can I help?'

Teria and Mini became the two main conduits for the experiences of village life I would eventually write about. They were joined by other kuia, which is why I have written that I was brought up by many grandmothers. They were the best!

On the other hand, I wasn't taken up by my paternal grandfather, Pera, into his life as an orator, genealogist and carver. By the time I was twelve, my Pākehā education had made me an up-myself mokopuna – Pera growled

me and told me so. I was already living within European frames of reference and did not make myself malleable for him. I constantly argued with him when he tried to tell me about Te Pō and Te Ao and the origin of a universe I had been educated to consider wrong.

Over time, the distance between Gisborne and Waituhi became wider between us.

The consequence was that the male education into whaikōrero, haka, karakia or whakapapa that Pera gave to my peers into the kawa, protocol, of the marae – enacted mainly by men – was not, tragically, my inheritance. I cannot remember any time in my childhood of being invited to stand up and speak in a wānanga on the marae. I gate-crashed haka and taiaha practices ('You're smiling too much, you're holding the taiaha the wrong way,') but when I tried whaikōrero, I was already way behind my village cousins in gaining the required classical competencies of the marae. I never had training, in my boyhood or later.

As for keeping up conversational Māori, you could kiss that sweet bye and bye. In Gisborne I attended three different primary schools and most of the time was trying to catch up to my (predominantly) Pākehā peers. It was hard enough keeping abreast in the English language without talking, however minimally, in a language that was dying – so it was said – so why bother.

Even so, I wish I *had* been educated on the marae. I have always envied those of my male peers who had such an upbringing from their tribal mentors. It's always been a paradise lost.