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Iti te kupu, nui te kōrero (Few words have huge meaning): Writing (in) Māori Shorts

Prolific Māori screenwriter Hanelle Harris, whose list of exploits include *Ahikāroa* (2018 – 2020), *Baby Mama's Club* (2017 – 2018) and *Sis* (2020), said in a number of interviews particularly over the last year that we need more Māori and Pasifika writers. She is one of many to have said this over the last forty years especially. The latter of her most recent productions, *Sis* – now on the hugely successful *Comedy Central* – is an unabashed Polynesian comedy that centres in and around a group of Māori and Pasifika informants employed by a Pākehā screenwriter's room to proffer the much-needed Polynesian elements. Utilising comedy, *Sis* is a comment on, and challenge to, the systemic racism that occurs in the New Zealand screen industry. Still, Harris encourages our people to write our own stories, rather than watch stories told on our behalf or about us as parodied in *Sis*. Ultimately, for the shift of the lens to occur, Māori and Pasifika screenwriters must be developed. We have the stories; none of us have to look too far for them. For most of us, the stories live in our house, our marae (mostly in the kitchen), our sports clubs, in our kapa haka teams, in groups of our friends and acquaintances; stories happen to us all the time, *and* we tell them relentlessly. Writing stories should be easy?

Writing (in) Māori Shorts is a Year 1 creative writing paper developed for the only Māori Media degree in the world,

based in Te Ara Poutama, the Faculty for Māori and Indigenous Development at AUT. Affectionately known as WiMS, it is an introductory course in creative thinking, and writing fictional 'shorts' (stories and films) specifically for Māori – and due to the South Auckland catchment of these classes, Pasifika - audiences. Perhaps in the future, a Pasifika creative writing teacher might produce a similar (or better) course; but we can't in all good humour acronymise a paper known as WiMPS. I leave the potential of a WiPS equivalent writing course to our Pasifika cousins. WiMS encourages taura to develop their contribution to contemporary Māori/Pasifika storytelling through their distinctive voice and turn-of-phrase, to understand the short story publication process, and thematic creative expression. By the end of the course, the story is near publishable, the script is developable for screen production, and there is a creative output directly related to – and one step beyond – the script.

One of the first things taura are asked in WiMS is, "what was the last short story you read from start to finish?" Very few have read one in years. Some taura are whakamā about it; but many confess to reading a small portion of a short story before discarding it. Because the course is aimed at writing for Māori and Pasifika audiences, it is incredibly useful to understand *why* they, as Māori and Pasifika readers, didn't finish the story. Eloquently, most reply it was boring; it was stink; it was dumb, but as this is a first year University course, these aren't academically appropriate responses. Unpacking this through discussion, the three most prominent feedforwards are: 1) they couldn't relate to the characters, 2) they didn't go to the emotions fast enough for them to care about the main character, and – my favourite – 3) the author hasn't spent any time 'in my shoes.' The quest of WiMS then, is for these taura to write stories for people like themselves, and in direct response and providing solutions to what was lacking in the stories they didn't

finish. Hence, in the course's acronym, the 'i' represents that our tauira are writing inward, for their own communities to see and read themselves, which as will be shown in a number of the published stories this year, can mean challenging some longstanding ideals.

The first WiMS assessment is a critical comparative analysis essay, designed to ensure tauira are cognisant of the technical aspects of short stories from the perspective of the Māori/Pasifika reader. It is devoted to unpacking the central aspects (structure, characters, plot/narrative, theme) of two Māori/Pasifika authored short stories of their choosing, and to consider what in their view works and what doesn't, rather than rely on opinionating whether a piece is liked or not, and to understand the necessary differences between criticism and critique. Short stories, some written by WiMS tauira from previous years, are read as a class, and tauira are asked to openly reflect on them and encouraged to use their voice, and to support their views with their own cultural context and, of course, the text itself.

Assessment 2 is an original 2,000-word kaupapa Māori/Pasifika themed short story. Leading to this assessment, one of the favourite class exercises is where tauira build a character from a random photo of a person 'unknown' to the class. (For the last couple of years, we've looked at a fetching black and white photo of a trenchcoated, sunglasses clad Donna Awatere from the 1980s. All but two WiMS students have known who she is. Others are too young. Every year so far – without knowing a single thing about previous classes - her name has been 'Jo', with the exception of one stream this year who called her 'Lana'). From here, tauira compose a psychological profile, and a backstory, most of which have been, incredibly complex. (Among a range of other profiles, 'Jo' has been the wife of an Italian drug-lord living in Auckland; a deranged killer of a minister who molested her in her private high-school years; and Jo

went away to become 'Joe' to ensure there was at least one reo Māori speaker on their marae who could speak on the pae). Readers meet 'Jo' or whoever the character is on a particular day in their life, where our classroom story commences.

Key to this assessment is learning to master Aristotle's ancient Three Act Structure, and the various threads woven into it over the centuries. Taura learn to create a narrative arc worth reading to the end; taura set the story up, identify an inciting incident, position the various plot-points and a mid-point, create a crisis, climax and a wrap-up. But all must be done at a particular point on the timeline to meet the limitations of 'shorts.'

The class practice narrating compelling stories by playing games of *Tika/Teka*, where narrative and character arcs collide, and in our class always resides somewhere between fiction and truth. Among other things, *tika* can mean truth, and *teka*, lies. Put simply, taura must:

- 1) Give a one-liner.
- 2) Pause for the class to discuss whether the one-liner is *tika* or *teka*.
- 3) Tell the 'full' story.
- 4) Pause again for the class to discuss if their views have changed.
- 5) Reveal if their story was *tika* or *teka*.

This is a fun, multilayered exercise for the kaiako; an opportunity to assess class member's moral compasses, to get to know taura, and – most significant to the course – to explore the important element of truth, even in fiction. *Tika/Teka* addresses the aspects earlier identified as impediments to these readers continuing to a short story's conclusion. While *Tika/Teka* is fun, and has on occasion reaped food rewards for the best story, it is one of a number of classroom exercises that are at the surface

simply games. The game aspect of these activities are indeed necessary for *jouissance*, but many activities also invite, permit and enable taura to tell remembered stories – to put on the character's *and* the reader's shoes - and to make times in our 'ordinary' lives extraordinary.

Assessment 3 is the transition of the original short story into a developable short film script. As many taura will attest following my feedforward on Assessment 3, the transitional phase from short story to script is complex and isn't a matter of simply pasting the various sections into scriptwriting software. One of my pet-hates. For the story to take full advantage of the visual platform, and to show the story rather than tell it, takes much finessing. Lastly, Assessment 4 goes one step beyond the script; taura choose a creative expression which directly correlates to their developable potential film. Some taura compose waiata and sing/record it, design posters, compose potential sound design, do spoken word poetry, make comic strips, and one year someone - unforgettably - made a lemon cream pie, the layers of which represented her father conveyed in a most moving of poems. This assessment at times has the class in stitches, in tears, and quite frankly in awe of the skills and talents that have been sitting in the adjacent desks all semester. The stories, the distinctive voice and style, and the exploration of important Māori and Pasifika issues are the crucial elements WiMS pursues.

In 2019, *Te Kaharoa* very generously published five stories written by previous WiMS taura (2016 – 2019) in a special edition. One of them, *The Retrieval* written by Matilda Poasa, is now in screen production. Like all of the other WiMS shorts published in 2019, Poasa's soon to be screened short is an important resource for our current taura to read, analyse, perhaps enjoy, but mainly to aspire to. Reading them, our current cohort believes they can, too.

I am incredibly privileged to have co-ordinated twelve shorts in this special edition, evidence that the read, aspire, write method is operating well. Although 2,000 words isn't many, the words published by our tauira have much meaning. *Iti te kupu, nui te kōrero*.

Briar Pomana's witty, observational - and very Ngāti Porou - *A Cup of Tea* is about the narrator's most recent visit to her Koro following a recent transition from the freedom of a life on the farm to a small retirement unit in town; from endless energy to slow, and from strong to weak. With the sound design of in-whānau jokes and teaspoons on crockery in the background, the narrator takes difficult mental notes of the unstoppable transformation of her pāpā. *A New Way of Life* by Kimberley Peacock is a drama about Bene, an adolescent girl who accompanies her part-Māori father to their marae for the first time to attend an event. Bene is extremely anxious by thoughts of exclusion from the pā kids who she's very related to but has never met. Ma'ulote Piutau's drama *Hidden* follows Lina, a teenage Tongan village girl who is secretly in love with the minister's daughter, Seini. The day her own father is welcomed onto the church leadership team, Lina decides is also the day she will disclose her true feelings, in spite of the potential risks.

Te Utu is Zayne Collier's mau rākau centric pre-colonial action piece, set in 1500s Whangape. It follows warrior Taiao, whose sanity spirals downward following the murder of his chiefly father, and he commits to stop at nothing to exact revenge on his killer, Te Pō. Wiremu Ruru wrote *The Lady in White*, a taiohi-based comedy-adventure about a group of Kaikohe Primary school children, two of whom dare each other ten-bucks to enter the haunted house on Tui Street. Cheyenne Thomas authored *Seeker*, a drama that tracks the nameless narrator who senses the various atua Māori who encircle, bade and guide him through deep depressive experiences.

Drama, *Moko Taura* by Tirakahurangi Takuira-Leaf is based on a true whānau story. Tau, a fair-skinned Māori girl, who without warning is snatched from her life with her Koro and Kuia by her Pākehā biological father and moved to the South Island. Deprived of her language and culture, Tau finds the transition to her new life outside te ao Māori difficult, and vows to return home. A topical drama written by Larissa Murphy is *Wuhan*, a story centring on Mārama whose passion to fight the evils of animal cruelty sends her to Wuhan's wet markets, only to learn of her beloved Koro, Nanny Pā's passing back in Aotearoa. On return, an aggrieved Mārama battles the land court who want to snatch Nanny Pā's land, and the symptoms of a virus she unknowingly bought home, and worse, to the marae. Tiana Trego-Hall's *Wairangi* is a piece set in a 1970s holiday park in the Far North, a kind of mystical summer Māori romance (with a horror twist). It follows Haks who falls for the daughter of a family visiting from Ireland, and as he is drawn closer and closer to Aisling, his mute, wheelchair-bound nana grows increasingly concerned.

16.5% is a coming-of-age story by Natasha Hill, about Gabriella, a fair-skinned Māori Year 9 scholarship student at an urban, private, predominantly Pākehā secondary school, who negotiates her way to a sense of tūrangawaewae amidst some of her toughest, yet most rewarding of years. Muriwai Hei wrote *The Hidden Scar* a multi-genre story about Te Miringa, who as a child playing hide'n'seek with her cousin, interfaces an 'entity' who leaves her eyelid scarred. On her eighteenth birthday, it mysteriously disappears, but why? And lastly, Kararaina Melbourne-Gibson presents *Pohutukawa*, a tragic story of a talented young Ngāti Porou wordsmith who grows up in a home with no mother and a drugged-up father, but the love of Kamaea, the girl of his dreams, is the rhythm to his blues.