

TEENA BROWN

Book Review

Free Love by Sia Figiel

Figiel, S. (2015). *Free Love: A Novel*. United States: Manava Ola Media, First Edition, 280 Pages.

What has Sia Figiel been doing for the past sixteen years? This is the Samoan woman who burst on the Pacific literature scene in the 1990s publishing three novels, *Where We Once Belonged*, *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, and *They Who Do Not Grieve*. Figiel's first novel, *Where We Once Belonged*, won her the 1997 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the best first book in the South East Asia and South Pacific regions. At the tail end of the twentieth century she was a shining star, not the mention the first Pacific Islander woman novelist to set the bar high with three novels under her belt.

It is therefore a welcomed sight that in 2015, Figiel has emerged from a writer gone underground to self-publish at Manava Ola Media in the United States her latest novel, *Free Love*. Figiel is Polish American by her father, and Samoan on her mother's side. Naming her multiple ethnicity, it is understandable that she has been living in the United States with her two sons, Tampa, South Florida to be precise, contemplating her fourth novel.

Free Love has been a long time in the making, and in over a decade, closer to two, it is interesting to note that Pacific Islander women have not taken up the challenge in numbers to produce a flock of novelists. The amount of Pacific Islander

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women publishing poetry collections has flourished, but novelists, by comparison, have not bloomed. Why the disparity between Pacific Islander women poets and novelists?

Some utter that finding publishers for manuscripts, especially in Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific, is difficult and off putting. Others claim poets are a dime-a-dozen for a down-to-earth reason: it is simpler and less taxing to produce poetry, rather than labour intensively like a gully-slave over a novel. Whatever the reason, Sia Figiel and her Samoan counterpart Lani Wendt, novelist of the *Telesia* series, are priceless.

The protagonist of *Free Love* is Sia Afatasi. Her surname is a transliteration of half-cast. Set in 1985 when the homeland state was called Western Samoa, and Madonna's *Like a Virgin* ruled the airwaves, Sia is seventeen and a half years old.

A brilliant science student at Nuuolemanusa High School, and a *Star Trek* enthusiast, the Saturday afternoon before White Sunday she put on skinny jeans under a *lavalava*, and a Madonna tee-shirt her sister won at bingo. That was the very day she had sex for the first time with Ioage Viliamu, her science teacher who graduated from the University of Papua New Guinea.

Sia looks to have a bright future ahead of her. She is a young Samoan woman on the verge of turning eighteen. She graduates secondary school, first in class for science, and goes on to resettle in the United States as a university student. Embarking on an undergraduate degree in physics at the University of California, Los Angeles, the plot emerges.

Sia is in the first trimester of her first pregnancy. Ioage is the father of her unborn child. Ioage is her village pastor's eldest son. According to Sia, this "technically makes him my brother." Will she make it on her own so far away from home?

In the United States, white Americans do not expect a young Samoan woman to fly through her SATS with top marks, and gain entry into UCLA. Sia does. America is a land of opportunity and contradiction.

Figiel's *Free Love* speaks earnestly to tangled, twisted topics. In developed countries – the United States, Australia, and New Zealand – racism is produced from having low expectations of non-white students who are migrants from small island developing states. Among Pacific Islander women, low expectations are compounded by increasing rates of unprotected sex, unplanned pregnancy, and solo parenting.

Figiel's penmanship roots for the underdog, the main character Sia. *Free Love* conveys an optimism that she will succeed at gaining a physics degree, and that other Pacific Islander women before Sia have achieved against the odds too. I am predicting as a solo parent and a working mother that Figiel, who is also a single mother raising her sons, is saying that young Pacific Islander women can, no doubt, complete university degrees with a child.

This novel is a treat for Figiel fans who have enjoyed her previous work. For bookworms looking for a sexy, seductive, and sensuous text on love and life, *Free Love* will not disappoint. Figiel's writing has developed a maturity. She confidently converses with readers about the first sexual experience of a young Samoan woman and its consequences, thus, pushing the boundaries of what a Pacific Islander woman novelist can write, and say, on the page.

Figiel will receive accolades from fellow Pacific Islander women who write fiction and non-fiction. Her bravery in speaking up to adolescent sex, a topic that can be hushed and shushed in Pacific Islands' countries, is praiseworthy. Will Figiel's *Free Love* get on the bestseller list, or win an award? It ought to. Here is hoping it does.

For inquiries about purchasing *Free Love*, contact the publisher, Sia Figiel. Email: invictus9902@outlook.com