



***Awhina's People***  
 by Suzanne Clark.  
 Nelson: Suzanne  
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 Suzanne Clark at  
[suedes@clear.net.nz](mailto:suedes@clear.net.nz)).  
 Reviewed by Karen  
 Peterson Butterworth.

This novel, set in a Māori community before European contact, is not strictly a historical novel, as the accuracy of its setting can never be confirmed from written records. Scholars of this period have had to work backwards from post-contact European accounts and Māori oral tradition, filtering out as best as they can the biases inherent in these sources. Experts still debate the frequency and scale of pre-contact Māori cannibalism and inter-hapū warfare and cannibalism.<sup>1</sup> Not in doubt, however is the importance Clark assigns to *utu* and *mana* as prime motivators for action.

Let's examine both the novel and its setting therefore as works of fiction, albeit well-informed fiction. The first chapter, where we first meet Awhina, wife of a junior chief, and her whānau, invokes all the reader's senses. I formed a vivid picture of their appearance, surroundings and behaviour. Yet I only began to identify with Awhina and her kin by about one quarter of the way through the book. From that point I stayed engrossed until the book's end.

Clark might have hooked me sooner by starting with more drama, say the cave warfare scene, and then showing by flashbacks how she had reached that point. She chose instead a time-consecutive narrative with rather more telling than showing. Clark writes well, and it is well worth reading to the point where one's heart starts to ache and lift in turn as the characters' fortunes change.

A second factor in my slow involvement was Clark's desire to, according to her endnote, "inform as well as entertain." The informing is unobtrusive and relates mainly to methods of food-gathering, preparation and preservation. Perhaps some detail could have been left for the most interested readers to pick up from further reading. On the other hand this approach well illustrates the toil and tedium involved (mainly for women) in obtaining, transporting and preparing the necessities of life. My thighs ached in sympathy during the women's winter foraging in the sea,

and my back and leg muscles at the end of heavily-laden treks. I chuckled at the banter that spiced the tedium, as it does to this day in *mārae* kitchens.

Clark depicts her heroes as well as her villains as carrying out or condoning practices many modern readers, Māori and Pākehā alike, might find repulsive. In this she differs from perhaps a majority of historical novelists who tend to depict villains perpetrating brutal acts like flogging and witch-burning, while heroes conversely endure them. I applaud her choice of realism over romance, and before long felt immersed enough in the values of the culture to empathise with Awhina, her second son, Hapeta, her niece (and whāngai daughter), Tatai; and most of all (perhaps because of my own humble ancestry) the slave, Ngapaki, whose plight really wrenched at my heart.

The story is well and intricately plotted. The inter-hapū warfare is horrifying, but I felt more sadness in the end for the bondage of the people to their self-destructive customs, and the grief this brought to them. (There are parables applicable to today's warfare in these accounts). I doubt that most modern Māori regret having left cannibalism, *mākutu*, and inter-hapū warfare behind them, but this book may well enhance their nostalgia for the loss of some practices that once helped cement *whānau* and hapū solidarity.<sup>2</sup> As a Pākehā living today in a town with a strong Māori character, I am amazed at how much of that spirit has survived in a society where bought food, clothing and shelter prevail over goods obtained by communal effort.

Some minor quibbles. Explanatory footnotes were distracting, and could easily have been incorporated in the glossary at the back. Characters and their relationships were so numerous that a character chart at back or front would have assisted my knowledge of who was who. Raukauri Music Therapy Centre is misspelt in the bibliography.<sup>3</sup>

This is a promising first novel. It lacks the obvious flaws evident in most self-published books, since Clark employed a professional assessor, editor and book designer. The cover portrait is striking and the description on the back cover an accurate summary of the contents that ends with just enough of a teaser. The expense of professional advice is a wise investment for self-publishing writers and should yield good returns for Clark. I look forward to more from this writer as she hones her considerable skills through further practice.

<sup>1</sup> The reviewer consulted an expert adviser on *matauranga* Māori (Māori knowledge) who prefers to remain anonymous. He advised that Clark's bibliography is adequate for her genre of book (i.e. fiction). However Clark's principal source of information on early European-Māori contact is Ann Salmond's *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, based on records

from the ca 1770s voyages of Captain James Cook. Salmond has documented these meticulously, but readers seeking a more rounded view of pre-contact Māori culture should additionally read journals from early nineteenth century French and Russian expeditions to New Zealand waters. The adviser says, ‘These journals in their entirety can be taken as presenting a pretty accurate snapshot of Māori tribal life and customs. For one thing, the French and Russians interacted with Māori as genuine scientific observers during their larger topographic and hydrographic survey of the region. In other words, they did not have the intent or the capacity to colonise New Zealand at that time as the British certainly did.’

<sup>2</sup> Clark depicts human remains being brought back from battle and cooked and eaten with relish by members of the hapū in their kāinga. The adviser comments, ‘...there is negligible evidence of human remains being found in midden contexts around settlements, which suggests that cannibalism may have been the unholy companion of *Tu Matauenga*, the God of war and revenge, and therefore limited somewhat to the battlefield.’

<sup>3</sup> The previous publication of the cover image of a Māori woman is properly acknowledged, as is her iwi. No descendants are acknowledged as giving their consent to this use of the image.