



***The Parihaka Woman***  
**by Witi Ihimaera.**  
**Auckland: Vintage**  
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**Kornfeld.**

Martin Amis introduced a recent *The New Yorker* book review by commenting that “When we say that we love a

writer’s work ... what we really mean is that we love about half of it.” By way of example, Amis asserts that “[t]he vast presence of Joyce relies pretty well entirely on “Ulysses,” with a little help from ‘Dubliners,’” that “... Milton consists of *Paradise Lost*” and that even “William Shakespeare, who usually eludes all mortal limitations, succumbs to this law.”<sup>1</sup> And so does **Witi Ihimaera**. His most recent book, *The Parihaka Woman*, lives up to its publisher’s claims that it is “inventive, moving, surprising and slightly mischievous.” Unfortunately, it is neither mischievous enough nor moving enough. One impulse undermines the other to the detriment of both.

That is not to say I didn’t find it an engrossing book with much to offer. Parihaka offers a resonant, heartbreaking setting; and protagonist Erenora experiences as much, struggles as much, and overcomes as much as any Romantic action hero from Dumas or Beethoven – which is not surprising as Ihimaera incorporates plot, names, and very cool devices from each.

In the first half of the book (Acts One and Two) we follow Erenora and the rise and fall of Parihaka. In the second half (Acts Three and Four), we follow as she travels Aotearoa to find her imprisoned husband, Horitana. Many readers will want to lose themselves in the drama and romanticism of this story (this is the “moving” part), but Ihimaera complicates this by imposing layers of distance between the reader and the narrative (this is the “mischievous” part).

The first such layer involves a “found manuscript” device – which has been used to good effect in such works as *Don Quixote* and *Candide*. In *The Parihaka Woman*, the manuscript is Erenora’s journal, written in te reo Māori and presented in translation by her “amateur historian” descendent.

The novel begins with this narrator introducing himself and declaring that “I am not important.” Yet in his ongoing interjections, direct asides to readers, and interpolations of imagined scenes and dialogue, he makes himself important indeed – a lesson about translators and interpreters that I think Ihimaera intends. As if to emphasise this point, about three quarters of the way through the book the historian and his wife argue about the translator’s role – whether it should be to simply record, as the wife contends, or to “*imagine* how [Erenora] really was emotionally” as the historian argues.

A pervasive intertextuality also competes with Erenora’s story for the reader’s attention. The narrator frequently adds to Erenora’s account by adding excerpts from historical accounts, newspapers, and descriptions of photographs. These function rather transparently as a way to flesh out the Parihaka story to a greater degree than more conventional back-story techniques might allow – and to a greater degree than often seems warranted. Clever and pervasive references to other cultural works also jostle their way into the readers’ consciousness. The most significant (and fun) homage begins in Act Four as the Erenora / Horitana plot converges with that of Lenore and Florestan in Beethoven’s opera *Fidelio*. In case the reader’s cultural capital is not up to snuff, Ihimaera spells everything out in the chapter notes.

Such intertextuality and manuscript translation issues create emotional distance between the reader and the twin stories of Erenora and Parihaka. This serves the purpose of preventing Pākehā from reading the book as a romantic tragedy of the simple and idealised Other. That’s all to the good (although I must confess wishing the story were told simply from Erenora’s point of view – it would have been a thumping good read). Even the buttinsky historian narrator has his endearing moments. But what may keep this new book teetering on the wrong side of the “loved” half of the Ihimaera *oeuvre* is the additional distance Ihimaera creates by calling attention to his *Trowenna Sea* plagiarism scandal through three pages of acknowledgements and sixteen pages of chapter notes – on top of the inclusions of footnoted historical excerpts throughout the book. Perhaps the over-documentation is meant to be droll and perhaps it is part of the mischievousness mentioned in the publisher’s media release, but it becomes distracting in an almost morbid way and does not serve the new novel well.

*The Parihaka Woman* contains a grand story and explores the way history is written: “You think it’s one narrative but most often it’s three or four or more,” the historian narrator tells the reader,

all like a twisted rope, tangled and knotted. But Maori have always known this about history anyway. Look at the way we korero in the meeting house. The talk goes all over the place – backwards, forwards, sideways and circling on itself.

Ihimaera achieves this web-like construction in the book, weaving as he did with classic European, Pākehā, and Māori threads. Ultimately, however, the parodic approach to attribution on top of the other distancing techniques leave an emotional hollowness at the core of this otherwise very readable book.

<sup>1</sup>. From: [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2011/11/21/111121crbo\\_books\\_amis#ixzz1eOH61K2t](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2011/11/21/111121crbo_books_amis#ixzz1eOH61K2t), accessed 23.11.11.