



# **Stories from the Wild:**

## **Reading and Writing in the Digital Age**

*To my father Tuaopepe Dr Felix Wendt  
who smashed down walls so I didn't have to,  
believed in my writing long before I did  
and always encouraged the fire of my fiapoto.*

# **Lani Wendt Young**

## **Stories from the Wild: Reading and Writing in the Digital Age**

A NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL LECTURE



**NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL**

*Te Kaunihera Pukapuka o Aotearoa*

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## FOREWORD

Kia ora tātou. Talofa lava. Mālō e lelei. Bula Vinaka.  
Assalamu alaikum. Shalom Aleichem.

The recent book by the internationally acclaimed reading and language researcher, Maryanne Wolf, is a comprehensive and cogently argued case for the huge individual and societal benefits of reading, as well as an in-depth examination of what is happening to the human brain as it adapts to digital mediums.

Human beings, Professor Wolf states in *Reader, Come Home*, were never born to read: ‘In a span of only six millennia, reading became the transformative catalyst for intellectual development within individuals and within literate cultures. The quality of our reading is not only an index of the quality of our thought, it is

our best pathway to developing whole new pathways in the cerebral evolution of our species.’<sup>1</sup>

In summary, reading makes human beings, communities and the world we share better. Moreover, it future proofs us as we hurtle through a trajectory of constant change and disruption.

Witi Ihimaera, in his inspiring 2015 Book Council Lecture, discusses writing Aotearoa New Zealand into existence.<sup>2</sup> Maryanne Wolf outlines the necessity to *read* ourselves into existence.

As Aotearoa New Zealand’s only charity focused on promoting reading and its benefits, the New Zealand Book Council is more active than at any time in its 47-year history. However, at the same time, the Book Council is deeply conscious of the barriers we have to confront and overcome in order to fulfil our ambition ‘to build a nation of readers through more New Zealanders reading more, leading to transformed lives and enriched communities.’

While on average Kiwis devour over twenty books a year, including at least one book by a New Zealand author, almost half a million of us – in particular, boys and young men – are not reading. As well, there is growing concern, as expressed in a *Listener* article in November 2018, that our all-encompassing digital

culture and screen time are putting at risk ‘our aptitude for “deep reading” – the ability to discern truth, apply critical analysis, gauge inference, develop empathy, appreciate beauty and go beyond “our present glut of information” to reach the knowledge and wisdom necessary to sustain a good society.’<sup>3</sup>

So, it is very timely that the 2019 Book Council Lecture is about reading and writing in the digital age – and we are extraordinarily fortunate that it will be delivered by Lani Wendt Young, one of this country’s most outstanding and versatile writers, who has described herself as ‘a brown woman who writes – oftentimes from the margins ... smashing gates as I do so’. Lani, a journalist, blogger, fiction writer, publisher and editor, is a tireless advocate for, and champion of, ‘the transformative power wrought by stories written by us, about us, and for us ...’

The New Zealand Book Council Lecture has become a prominent part of the literary landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand for two reasons. Firstly, a number of our finest writers have graced us with their insights and talent to deliver a memorable reflection on an aspect of literature close to their hearts; and secondly, the Lecture seeks not only to enlighten but also to provoke.

Given Lani’s extraordinary mana and record of

achievement, her 2019 New Zealand Book Council Lecture will be a significant contribution to the kaupapa of the Lecture and the mahi of the New Zealand Book Council.

Ngā mihi nui

Peter Biggs CNZM

Chair

New Zealand Book Council

Te Kaunihera Pukapuka o Aotearoa

## STORIES FROM THE WILD

### READING & WRITING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

*There is a great and spacious building standing tall on a hill looking out to the distant ocean. A castle. Its white walls are built high and strong; they hold back the tangle of forest that threatens to encroach on its territory. Its looming gates are impenetrable. They open only for those with the right credentials. Sentries atop its walls trumpet the promise of accolades, influence and maybe even a fat royalties cheque for all who enter? It has a tower with a beacon that shines through night and day. Its light beckons, promising safety, security and success. It says: 'I know the way. I see what you can't. I know what you don't. Follow me and I will guide you.' It's an unregulated wilderness out there and nobody knows what they're doing, but those within the castle walls know the way. They see what you can't. They know what you don't.*

*Or do they?*



To begin, I bring you a story from the wild.

A few years ago, I was invited to go to Philadelphia, to help design the curriculum for a writing skills course, a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course, often interactive, aimed at unlimited participation and open access). The purpose of the course was to encourage more children's stories from writers in developing Commonwealth countries, a goal that I can certainly get behind. We were a diverse group of writers in that planning room, all from different parts of the world, and I was the representative from Oceania. We had all written multiple stories for young readers, but I was the only self-published author. As we started putting the outline together, I suggested that we have everyone doing the course start a blog to get them writing online, building an audience, engaging with other writers and readers worldwide. That could be one of their ongoing assignments – to blog regularly. The response to my suggestion was unexpected. The coordinator said: 'But Lani, perhaps you don't understand the scale of this online course. If it's a success, there will literally be thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands of people taking it.'

I said: ‘Yes, *and?*’ The rest of the group chimed in (with horror): ‘BUT WHAT IF THEY ALL DO THE ASSIGNMENT AND START A BLOG? THAT MEANS THERE WILL BE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF NEW BLOGS FROM MOSTLY NEW WRITERS. ALL FROM DEVELOPING COUNTRIES.’

I quickly realised that what was freaking them out the most was the idea of writers publishing writing that hadn’t first been quality controlled by some ‘certified expert’. This became even more apparent when I proposed that at the end of the course, we offer guidelines for how people could publish their own books online. It was as if I was proposing we usher in the zombie apocalypse. *Oh no, we can’t do that*, they said. *It’s too soon*. There was a consensus, among the English professors, editors and traditionally published authors (in other words, everyone but me) that by the end of the course, a person would know the basics of writing stories and have completed a portfolio of pieces to continue refining. But publish any of it? No.

I learnt a great deal from working on that project and I’m grateful to have had that opportunity.

To me, though, that experience illustrates some common reactions whenever the topic of literature in the digital era is raised. There’s often anxiety, fear,

distrust, even some confusion. And a *rush to reinforce the battlements, circle the wagons, protect the canon, strengthen the walls!*

Why is this? What are we afraid of?

Today we hear many troubling things about the impact of the digital era on reading. There are surveys that show young people aren't reading books anymore. Rather, they are online, via their phones. Let's be honest with ourselves, it isn't just the youth. It's a lot of us old folks too. Research is showing that online surfing and skim-reading is having lasting effects on our brains, resulting in a 'subtle atrophy of critical analysis and empathy'. As Maryanne Wolf (Director of the Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice at UCLA) explains, this: 'affects our ability to navigate a constant bombardment of information ... leaving us susceptible to false information and demagoguery.'<sup>4</sup> (Donald Trump, anyone?!)

There are also many people bemoaning the impact of the digital era on the business of traditional publishing. Amazon is squeezing out local bookshops, publishers are going bust, writers aren't getting the advances they used to. Ebook piracy is devastating the book industry. And most disturbing of all, according to some, is that there are now kazillions of people publishing their

crappy books online, books that haven't been edited. Indie authors are flooding the market with trash and making it impossible for good writing to get noticed. *It's not fair, some say. What about standards? Quality control? There's a reason why we have gatekeepers!* Listening to them, it would seem that the zombie apocalypse is well and truly upon us. The castle is under threat.



To delve into what it means to be a reader in the digital age, we must first talk about what it was like *before*. Something that the young people in the room won't know much about. When my children found out that I can remember a time before the smartphone, they were horrified: 'Mum, you grew up before the internet was invented?! Were there dinosaurs? Did you have flush toilets?' Yes, I grew up in the dark ages. During a time when the printed form was the only way you could read a book. These are bulky, expensive to print and to transport.

I grew up knowing what it means to hunger and thirst for books. The Samoa of my childhood only had one public library and one bookstore (which had a

preference for stocking Bibles, an exciting bloodthirsty book to be sure, but still not enough for a voracious reader like me). I was blessed to grow up in a home that valued reading, but still, there were never enough books. I spent most of my time begging, borrowing and sneak-reading wherever I could. What did I read? Anything I could get my hands on. Outdated encyclopedias. Dictionaries. The thesaurus. Dusty classics in the library. Everything from *Great Expectations* to *The Three Musketeers* to *Wuthering Heights*. I read *War and Peace* when I was eleven, not because I wanted to. I read it because that was all there was. Books were my escape; they were dreams made real. I wanted to drink ginger beer and eat treacle toast next to the fireplace with the Secret Seven and the Famous Five. I longed to be brave and daring like Trixie Belden and Nancy Drew. At age twelve, I discovered romance novels. I went straight from pixies in *The Faraway Tree*, to the heaving bosoms and throbbing manhood of Harlequin romance and Mills & Boon. Not quite age-appropriate, but there were no young adult novels to bridge the gap.

And, of course, everything I read was written by palagi authors and set in mainly palagi places. When I did come across characters who looked vaguely like me, they were the ‘dirty thieving gypsies’ in the

English countryside, ‘darkie’ Calormenes in the world of Narnia or exotic Arabian Sheikhs who romanced blushing virginal white women. Harper Lee said they needed a white saviour in segregated America. My #fangirl favourite author Laura Ingalls Wilder told me that: ‘The only good Indian is a dead Indian’ and the land her family moved into ‘had no people. Only Indians lived there.’ But I read all her books anyway, because what else was there? And besides, I was so used to stories where I didn’t exist that I’d accepted that people like me didn’t belong in novels anyway.

In secondary school, something amazing happened: I encountered the work of Oceania poets and storytellers for the first time. Only short fiction and poems though, because our school couldn’t afford to buy class sets of novels. My favourite was Witi Ihimaera; his stories had me laughing and enthralled. For the first time, I saw myself and my friends on the page – brown teenagers, our humour, angst and the messy warmth of our extended families. I wanted more. But I couldn’t find any.

I wondered: Where was our fantasy, magic and science fiction set in Oceania? Where were our romance stories? I asked: Well, if there are no stories like this from Oceania, what about other non-palagi

cultures and countries? By then, I was a student in America, attending a private school for girls. It had a good library, and the mall had so many bookstores it made my head spin. My constant hunger for books was somewhat appeased – but now I was back to searching for stories by and about people who looked like me. And I was often left wanting.

Being a voracious brown reader before the digital era meant you were often hungry, always searching, and even when you did get books, you were fed an insufficient diet of whiteness only. The famine was even worse if you were LGBTQI or Fa'afafine, Faatama, Takatāpui, Fakaleiti, Mahu, Vakasalewalewa, Fakafifine, Palopa or Akava'ine. Young adult novels with positive, authentic characters who were third gender did not exist when I was a teenager. This made no sense to me because I grew up in a community where gender fluidity was our reality.

That was then. How about now? Have things improved since I was a child scrabbling for books in Samoa?

Janis Freegard surveyed New Zealand fiction titles published in 2015 and found that 91 percent were written by Pākehā, 4 percent by Māori, 4 percent by Asian and Indian writers, and 1 percent by Pasifika writers. The year 2014 was equally dismal with only

7 percent of titles by Māori (even though Māori make up nearly 16 percent of the population), and 5 percent by Asian and Indian writers (even though Asian New Zealanders are 12 percent of the population). No Pasifika novelists were published in 2014, according to Freegard.<sup>5</sup> I doubt things have changed that much in the last few years.

If it's any comfort, New Zealand certainly isn't alone. In 2018 in the United Kingdom, figures showed that of the 9,115 children's books published over the previous 12 months, only 4 percent featured black and minority ethnic characters. Only 1 percent had a character of colour as lead. In many cases, the stories were about social justice issues or conflict rather than mystery, magic or fun.<sup>6</sup> According to a recent report from BookTrust Represents, covering 2007–2017, just 2 percent of published UK children's authors and illustrators are from a black and minority ethnic background.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, Black Americans wrote or illustrated just 3 percent of the books counted by the Co-operative Children's Book Center, which has been tracking representation in children's books since 1985. Only 7 percent were written by Asian and Pacific Americans, and 1 percent by Native Americans or First Nations writers.<sup>8</sup>

It's not just the authors and stories though. A 2016 Diversity Baseline Survey of publishing companies across North America provided a statistical snapshot of everyone else working in publishing, ranging from editors to shelf-stockers. It showed that, as an industry, publishing is white and female. At the executive level, publishing is 86 percent white, 59 percent female, 89 percent heterosexual and 96 percent normatively-abled.<sup>9</sup> It would be interesting to do a similar survey here in New Zealand.

Why is the castle of literature so white? Is it because the rest of us just aren't storytellers? (Even though our ancestors used oral storytelling to pass on our history and culture to their children?) Maybe we haven't quite mastered the intricacies of the written language of our colonisers enough to knock out a novel? (After all, we were punished in school for speaking our indigenous languages. Never mind that many of us had parents who made sure we spoke better English than the Queen, because they knew that English was the language that would get us into university and make us successful.) Or perhaps we don't write books because we actually don't like to read? That's why there are no books by brown people in your local bookstore! We're too busy playing rugby. Eating corned beef and KFC.

Being ‘dole bludgers’, ‘cheeky darkies’ and ‘leeches’.

Or is there another reason why the castle of literature is so white?

Indian author Arundhati Roy said in her 2004 Sydney Peace Prize lecture: ‘There’s really no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.’<sup>10</sup>

Are we being deliberately silenced? By whom? Are we preferably unheard? Why?



There are many reasons why a monocultural literature is a problem.

A lack of diversity not only influences how diverse peoples see themselves, but how we are seen (or not seen) by those of the dominant culture. The effect of this is far-reaching and insidious, manifesting in spheres beyond bookstores and libraries.

Another story from the wild.

In 2017, I attended the United Nations Climate Conference in Germany. I found myself sitting in a press conference given by a team of researchers about a report they had prepared on climate-change migration options for two Pacific Island countries. As you know,

our connections to land go beyond the physical – they are spiritual, and so the threat of forced migration is an issue of great importance to us and quite an emotional one.

A few minutes into the presentation, I was deeply uncomfortable. The panel of earnest white men spoke of Ni-Vanuatu family structure, village organisation, cultural values and practices. While the team had worked with local people when doing their research, there was not a single Ni-Vanuatu in the room. There were no Pasifika people in the audience, apart from me and a Fijian colleague – who were only there because of a first-ever, one-off Pacific journalist fellowship.

In that moment, I wondered: How many times has this happened in the past? How many times have international organisations paid experts from G7 countries to study us and write reports about us? And then gather in rooms like that one and talk about us while we aren't there?

And yet, we, the people of Oceania, are the ones most directly impacted by global warming and we will literally be the first ones to go underwater.

While I don't discount the accuracy of their research, I had questions: How can you sit here and talk about a people and a culture that isn't yours, and not feel

bad? How can you make recommendations about that country and community to the global body that decides on billion-dollar funding for climate issues, and not cringe inside? How can you not see the disconnect?

Look at the panel, look around this room, and ask yourself, who is missing from the conversation? Who should be here, and isn't? Whose voice should be leading this discussion?

To me, with my climate justice hat on, that room represented much of what is wrong with international climate change discourse and policy-making today. And I would argue that we can trace the origins of this back to the simple fact that we are surrounded every day by stories where entire groups of people are missing. Or are misrepresented. Or included only as a token stereotype. It's not just about making sure that brown kids get to see themselves on the page. No. It's about making sure that everybody else gets to see us too. If we are missing from the stories in the classroom, the library, the TV, the movie screen – then do we even exist? Will the powerful even notice when we are not in the room, not participating in the conversation, not invited to the table?

And so, when there is hand-wringing and wailing about cracks in the wall of the white castle of literature, I

find it difficult to sympathise. Why should I mourn the supposed decline of an industry that didn't make room for me anyway? A structure that either erases my existence or is directly hostile towards people like me and other marginalised people is not one I want to prop up.

But how is the digital era helping to change the status quo?

Firstly, by making books more accessible and affordable. Data from the United Nations shows that more than six billion of the world's population now have access to a working mobile phone. Phones are plentiful in places where books are scarce, making them a game changer for literacy. In 2014, UNESCO released the results of a year-long study that looked at the mobile phone reading habits of nearly five thousand people in seven developing countries. The study found that 62 percent of adults and children are reading more now that they can read on their phones. Reasons given by respondents for reading on mobiles were convenience, affordability and lack of access to print books. One in three said they read to children from their mobile phones. School teachers in remote areas talked about reading ebooks to their students. The study found that there's a demand for mobile reading platforms with

text in local languages and more books written by local authors. I was delighted to see that the most popular genre for readers in the survey was romance, and that books written by authors of colour were top of the list of most read.<sup>11</sup>

Sure, most of us, when we have a choice, *prefer* to read a real book rather than one on our phones. But the reality is that many people don't have that choice. I get messages from readers of all ages from around the Pacific who have thanked me for writing a story they could see themselves in – a story they were only able to access because they got it as an ebook download. Sometimes an illegal one. Remembering my childhood hunger for books, I can't even be upset in this instance about book piracy. When we fret about how phones are ruining the reading habits of our youth, let's be mindful of the privileged position we are speaking from.

Secondly, the digital era means more diverse stories are being written and published. In 2010, when I was finishing up my young adult novel, there were only three Samoan novelists in the whole wide world: Albert Wendt, Savea Sano Malifa and Sia Figiel. Wendt's first novel was published in 1973, Malifa's in 1993 and Figiel's first book in 1996.<sup>12</sup> These authors paved the

way. Wendt, in particular, the acknowledged ‘father of Pacific literature’, has produced an extensive, epic body of work. But for more than forty years, the industry only made room for three of us. In that time, how many others were rejected or had their voices stifled?

In 2011, I approached more than thirty different agents and publishers in New Zealand, Australia and America. They said my novel wouldn’t have enough of a market, so I published *TELESĀ*<sup>13</sup> myself, making me the fourth Samoan novelist in the whole wide world. But very much an unsanctioned one, doing unregulated things out in the wilderness. I went on to write and publish more novels including a contemporary romance series, all of which quickly found an international audience thanks to the reach of Amazon and to the power of social media.

Now, in 2019, in the space of only eight years, I’m excited to tell you that there are eight more Samoan novelists that I know of. There could be more. Seven of the eight are women. All are indie published, all are taking their multiple novels to audiences worldwide thanks to digital publishing.

What do we learn from this? When we abide by the castle’s rules, we are allowed three Samoan novelists in forty years. But when we don’t wait for permission or

approval – we get *more* books in a range of genres from *more* of us. Books that we can see ourselves in, where we are the centre and not the marginalised other.

This is, of course, not a phenomenon limited to Samoan writers. Thanks to indie publishing online, you can now read a multitude of novels written by authors from many different countries and cultures, and by many more LGBTQI writers. You can search book categories online for world mythology and folk tales, neuro-diverse characters, multicultural and interracial romance, LGBTQI science fiction and fantasy, and so much more.

Thirdly, the digital era is redefining what a text is and even expanding the parameters of the reading experience. And here's where I feel like I *am* a dinosaur because I need my children to explain the wonder of it all to me. It's not just about a downloadable book anymore. My teenagers are reading a range of web comics on Webtoon, Lezhin, online manga sites and more. Web comics have the beauty and artistry of graphic novels. There are multiple apps and websites where creators can publish story content, which is often multilingual. Most are free, others have 'fast pass' options where you can pay to have episodes released earlier. The most popular comics and graphic novels

feature a diverse representation of people of colour and LGBTQI characters.

Other kinds of ‘books’ that are wildly popular are gaming storytelling apps like *The Arcana* and *Mystic Messenger*. Remember the ‘choose your own adventure’ story-books of our youth? It’s exactly like that. You choose your character and motion art lets you decide how the story will unfold. Written text appears onscreen and, depending on the game, plot lines can be action-filled and immersive. Again, a key drawcard is that they feature diverse characters, which the reader can choose from, and they also enable LGBTQI romance storylines.

And of course, there’s the juggernaut of online storytelling – fanfiction sites. Arguably the greatest of these is Archive of Our Own (AO3 for short), which has about five million works archived, created by its near two million registered users. Its legend status was recognised by a Hugo Award nomination earlier this year.<sup>14</sup> Many like to sneer at fanfiction as being clumsy amateur work, but to spend time on the AO3 site is to be swept away by some excellent storytelling. As academic Casey Fiesler explains: ‘It’s about spending more time in the worlds you love and exploring characters beyond the page ... and it’s also about critiquing source texts, pushing back against

harmful narratives, adding and correcting certain types of representation (including the ways women and LGBTQI people are portrayed in these genres).<sup>15</sup> Love *Lord of the Rings* but annoyed that there are so few women in there? Frustrated by the racism and white saviour complex in *Game of Thrones*? Get on AO3 and read alternate versions. Or take it a step further, critique the original by writing your own and by engaging with other dedicated fans via the comments.

When I enter these storytelling worlds that give the reader so much power and choice, I'm amazed that anyone still buys a book off the shelf at all.

Finally, the digital era is challenging the status quo for what 'quality' literature is and who gets to define it. For so long it has been white cis het males' and then white females' standards of quality control. They decide who gets admitted to the castle and who is rejected. That paradigm is now threatened because anyone can publish. It terrifies those who, for so long, have been used to defining what GOOD means.

Today the real gatekeepers are readers. And for many, their standards of quality are a bit different from those in the castle. Recently I spoke to a young Tongan woman I know. She is an avid reader and writer of AO3 fanfiction, and she explained: 'Sure, some of my

favourite writers on AO3 might not have the same level of editing or proofreading as in a novel I could buy in a bookshop. But I can trust them to write stories that don't make me feel bad about myself as a lesbian woman of colour.'

When I was on a book tour in Hawaii, I was hosted for a day by a high school where the student body of 2000+ is 94 percent Asian or Pacific Islander. I was overwhelmed by the enthusiastic welcome I was given and the amount of preparation that had gone into my visit. Not only did the programme include student cultural performances and speeches, but they also put on a fashion show of their designs that had been inspired by characters and themes in my *TELESÁ* books – in particular the Fa'afafine character Simone and their friends. A teacher explained that *TELESÁ* was not only the first book the students had read about Pacific Islander teenagers, but it was also the first time they'd encountered a third-gender character in a young adult story. What I didn't know is that the school had recently won a national award for being the safest school in the USA for LGBTQI students, for taking a leading role in making sure that all students in their community feel safe and are treated with respect.<sup>16</sup> I met many gender-diverse students that day who

wanted to just sit next to me and chat about their experiences growing up and share their delight in seeing third-gender characters on the page. It was an incredibly humbling experience for me, especially because I'm certainly no expert on our Fa'afafine and Faatama community. I wrote third-gender characters into my books because they are the reality of life in Samoa and Oceania, the reality in our families. It makes me sad that doing so would be something so unusual and so eagerly embraced by youth, hungry for positive representations. I was reminded, in that visit, how important it is for all children to be able to read books that are safe spaces for them. And of my responsibility as a storyteller, to try harder and do even better in my future writing.

The reality is that too many of the castle-sanctioned 'great literary reads' are harmful with their representations of the 'marginalised other'. Ijeoma Oluo, author of *New York Times* bestseller *So You Want to Talk About Race*, writes: 'In the age of the internet, people have been able to find authentic and diverse voices beyond the reach of publishing gatekeepers. Once you read authenticity for yourself, you can no longer be fooled into accepting facsimiles. In the age of fake news, people are desperate for real voices.'<sup>17</sup>



What do all these changes mean for the young reader today?

Today I read *Little House on the Prairie* to my youngest child Bella, and she stops me with a frown: ‘Mum, where’s the Native American people? Isn’t that their land that Laura’s family keeps taking?’ We read a *Narnia* book together and she shakes her head in disapproval: ‘How come there’s no black people in this book? I know there’s lots of black people in England.’ At the close she says: ‘It’s a good story, but they left a lot out.’ She can see what’s missing. Who is not there. Today’s generation is far more discerning than we ever were. They are #woke and because of that, they are unwilling to accept tired tropes and stale stereotypes. What does Bella read by choice then? She loves books. Her earlier favourite is *The 26-Storey Treehouse*. Because it’s funny and has comic sketches as well as words. But, she adds: ‘It fails the DuVernay Test because all the people in it are white so that’s not so great.’

Her current read? Veronica Roth’s *Carve the Mark* series. She won’t read my *TELESÁ* books because she says, ‘I already know everything that’s going to happen. We had to listen to you talk about them when you were writing!’

She reads manga and Japanese anime comic strips online. She writes her own using an app she's downloaded to her iPad. She has another app for writing her own books, which she illustrates with sneak photos she takes of her siblings when they're not looking. She watches Korean dramas – and has to read all the English subtitles so I count that as reading a visual text. At school with her friends, they are writing an ongoing adventure drama where they are all superheroes in their own story. I listen to her talk excitedly about that day's instalment and I am in awe of the complex world-building that these eleven-year-olds are engaging in. It's world-building that includes discussions about racism, gender and even Donald Trump's latest! I am reminded that while they may not be reading a dusty copy of *War and Peace* like I did (and wondering what the heck is going on), these young people are not lacking in stories and creative thinking. They may not be reading what we did. Or even *how* we did. But they are reading. Critically. And writing stories, with fierce creativity.

The digital era does not mean print books are dead. It's not about one or the other. It's about both. Researcher Maryanne Wolf has said that we are in a 'hinge moment' between print and digital cultures,

and that: ‘We need to cultivate a new kind of brain: a “bi-literate” reading brain capable of the deepest forms of thought in either digital or traditional mediums.’<sup>18</sup> I am hopeful that Bella and her friends are a good example of what that bi-literate reading brain might look like in practice.

Parents and teachers have a key part to play in cultivating that new kind of brain in our youth. On my book tours to different countries, I am often hosted by Pasifika communities. I’ve had the opportunity to meet many parents who are passionate about making sure their children are reading good books, especially books where we are the centre. They buy them my ebooks, they drive two hours to bring their children to a book-signing event so they can meet a Samoan author in person and then they buy print copies for the entire family as well. I am grateful for dedicated teachers who read our stories with their students, organise author visits and are constantly seeking new ways to incorporate the digital world into their classroom learning.

Does the digital era spell death for all publishers? No, not all of them. There has never been a greater need for the support and guidance that a progressive and caring publisher can offer authors. But to thrive in this era,

publishers must be innovative. There was a time when publishers wouldn't go near a self-published author. And certainly wouldn't think of doing limited-rights book deals. Last year I signed a hybrid contract with an amazing New Zealand publishing company – OneTree House – where I retain all my digital/audio/film book rights. They have opened doors I couldn't on my own and are taking my books to new audiences. It was nerve-wracking for me to sign over any control of my books at all after being in charge of them for so long, but so far, it's felt like we're working in a partnership. We have a shared vision for my books and that's how it should feel when you're working with a publisher.

I am in awe of publishers like Huia and Little Island Press that do so much to nurture and develop diverse writers in New Zealand. I know there are others like them. The Māori Literature Trust aren't a publisher, of course, but their work is so vital to the growth of New Zealand literature and we have many more novels and stories because of them.

To others in the New Zealand book world? Publishers, reviewers, literary organisations and award trusts. A few words of advice: Adapt or die. If your staff hiring practices aren't diverse – then change them. When your staff are a blur of white-bread homogeneity,

then most likely your book list, your reviews and your award winners will be too. If you don't publish any Māori, Pacific Islander, or Asian and Indian writers (or review any), then you're participating in their deliberate silencing. Ask yourself, why is that? Take concrete steps to fix that. Not only because it's the right thing to do. (Although it is.) But because your business, your organisation, won't survive otherwise. As author Ambelin Kwaymullina put it: 'There is a limit to how long literature can peddle the fantasy of a non-diverse world to readers who are living in a diverse reality.'<sup>19</sup>

Readers are waking up. If you don't change, you will become obsolete. It may not happen overnight, but it will happen.

A few words for writers in the digital era, particularly we of the preferably unheard variety. Albert Wendt has said: 'We need to write, paint, sculpt, weave, dance, sing and think ourselves into existence. For too long, other people have done it for us ... we have to write our own stories.'<sup>20</sup> Very true, but I don't think just writing our own stories is enough. Because there are still so many castle-keepers who tell us what's good enough to publish and what isn't, what's literature, what's marketable and what isn't. Yes, we must write our own stories, but we must also be strong enough

and fiercely creative enough to ensure that those stories are not deliberately silenced.

How do we do this? Remember, the internet is your friend. Yes, submit your book to agents if that's your vision, but don't sit around moping while you wait for publishers to see how amazing your work is. Start a blog. Join online writers' groups. Work on your craft. Write fanfiction and build a following. Connect with others writing like you. There's strength and fire in numbers. Form a collective, cross-promote each other's work. Publish an anthology together. Take a multi-media approach to your writing and then you can engage with a wider audience. Publish short stories for free download on Amazon, start growing your readership. By the time your novel is published, you will already have a dedicated circle of readers who love what you write and are eager to snap up your book. Be entrepreneurial. Set up a Patreon account. Learn about indie publishing. Recognise that it's not either/or. If you self-publish a book, it doesn't mean you're forever put into a box stamped UNTOUCHABLE. ONLY LOSERS LIVE HERE.

The digital era means more choice. More power and control in our hands to write whatever we want to, breaking any or all of the literary rules, if that's what our story requires. It means the power to publish

and distribute those stories, to have an impact on the conversation. To critique the structures that systematically smother us.

In saying that, my appeal to all of us is to be mindful of the ways that we can gate-keep each other, of how we can internalise white-castle thinking and become complicit in our own silencing. When we say – *oh she's not a real Tongan because she grew up in New Zealand*, or *his book isn't Samoan enough*, or *their poetry is too graphic and rude to be Pasifika* – what do we even mean by that? Where are we getting these arbitrary standards from? Who appointed us the cultural identity police?

Or when we buy into the 'single story', the categorisation of Māori or Pacific literature as being only one kind of generic genre, and there being only one type of Māori or Pacific writer. When we adopt the sneer of castle-keepers towards indie authors and their ebooks. I've been asked by brown academics, 'When are you going to write a *real* novel?' Because YA and romance don't count as novels? I've sat in the front row at conferences and listened to brown experts talk about how sad it is that there's nobody else writing Pacific literature novels. (Hello, I'm right here and I can give you a list of names of my Samoan indie author friends.)

Just because the white castle-keepers believe only

three of us should exist at any one time – that doesn't mean we should think that also. We need to support and raise each other up. Whether we are writing literary novels or genre fiction. Whether we have gained #goldenticket admission to the castle or we are navigating the vast ocean beyond its walls.



To conclude, if the dream is for a New Zealand canon of literature that is intersectional, that's truly representative of all, then the answer, for many of us, is not found in the castle. It's out there, in the lush foliage of the unregulated rainforest that teems with life. Or, even further, to the beckoning blue. Just as our ancestors left the safety of familiar shores and voyaged across thousands of miles of the Moana, we too can look beyond the horizon of what we are accustomed to and venture out into the unknown. Digital indie publishing is the fastest, most affordable way to take the stories of our Blue Continent to the world. But, perhaps even more important, it is on our own terms. No walls, no gatekeepers.

Will it be overwhelming at times? Even a bit scary? Probably. Will it be hard work and require that you

learn lots of new skills? Definitely. Will you make millions of dollars? No. Will you put food on the table with your writing? Yes. (Maybe not steak and lobster every night, no. But a can of tuna and some rice, yes.) Will you feel, sometimes, like you're sinking under the load of doing marketing and promotions, as well as writing fabulous new stories at the same time? Like, this is too much, it's too hard? Yes, there will be those days.

But after ten years of writing in the wild, I promise you that it can also be glorious. Out there, away from the castle lights?

You can see the stars.

Faafetai lava.

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