Selina Tusitala Marsh

Tala Tusi: The Teller is the Tale

Dedicated to Mum, Lina Tuisitala Crosbie

Selina Tusitala Marsh

Tala Tusi: The Teller is the Tale

A NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL LECTURE

NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL

First published in 2016 by the New Zealand Book Council
156/158 Victoria Street, Te Aro, Wellington 6011

© Selena Tusitala Marsh, 2016

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
National Library of New Zealand.
ISBN 978-0-473-37600-0

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the
purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as
permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced
by any process without the permission of the publisher.

Cover photo © Emma Hughes Photography
Typeset by Mary Egan Publishing
Edited by Jane Parkin

Printed in New Zealand

FOREWORD

Kia ora tātou. Talofa lava. Mālō e lelei. Bula vinaka.

The New Zealand Book Council is proud to present the 2016 New Zealand Book Council Lecture, *Tala Tusi: The Teller is the Tale* by Selina Tusitala Marsh.

This is the third recent Book Council lecture. Eleanor Catton gave the 2014 Lecture and Witi Ihimaera delivered the 2015 Lecture.

The New Zealand Book Council Lecture has become a prominent part of the literary landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand. It provides an opportunity for one of our country's leading writers to discuss an aspect of literature close to their heart.

The Lecture seeks to enlighten – and also provoke. As James K. Baxter said: 'It is reasonable and necessary that…every poet should be a prophet.'

This year's prophet is the Pasifika poet and scholar, Selina Tusitala Marsh. Not only is she an accomplished

writer and teacher on the national and international stage, Selina is a feisty, restless, generous, collegial and unique contributor to Aotearoa New Zealand's sense of itself – as a culture and as a country.

In his 2015 New Zealand Book Council Lecture Witi confronted us with the question: What *new* New Zealand will our writers write into existence? Selina, in her 2016 Lecture, gives us the beginning of an insightful and original answer.

Strap yourself in for an exciting reading adventure.

Ngā mihi nui

Peter Biggs CNZM
Chair
New Zealand Book Council

TALE ONE: WHY TALA TUSI

Tusitala, my maternal Tuvaluan grandfather's name, commonly means 'story teller' or 'teller of tales'. Tusi means to write or scribe, or refers to a book; tala means to tell. My grandfather moved from Tuvalu to Sāmoa to attend Malua Theological College, and there met my grandmother. They married, and remained in Sāmoa.

Tusitala is also one of the most familiar Sāmoan words to non-Sāmoan ears. That's because the canonical Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson was known as "Tusitala, "the teller of tales"", as evidenced in my 1956 hardcover Golden Picture Classic copy of *Treasure Island*.[1] Having penned such unforgettable tales as *Treasure Island* (1883), *Kidnapped* (1886) and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Stevenson had, to the shock of the literary world, moved to Sāmoa in 1889. Its tropical climate eased the symptoms of his tuberculosis.

Tusitala was a title bestowed by Sāmoan chiefs upon Stevenson for his support of Sāmoan independence. The name became a celebrated part of his identity. A mere four years later, after writing such notable literary tales as *Island Nights' Entertainment* (1893) and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), Stevenson died in Sāmoa in 1894. He was widely mourned by many, including Sāmoans who, according to his wishes, buried him 472 metres above sea level on the summit of Mount Vaea, overlooking Apia. Who isn't familiar with Stevenson's beloved, breath-taking poem, 'Requiem', engraved on his tomb and still memorised in Sāmoan schools today:[2]

Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie:
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

The *Paris Review* points out the inconsistencies and ironies in the famous epitaph, how its consistent

undulating rhythms and lulling internal rhymes were no reflection of Stevenson's own blood-splattered, cough-ridden breath-taking. Of how, unlike the sailor and the hunter, Stevenson was himself far from home.[3] But on this point I disagree. Stevenson was 'home'. He learned to speak and write in Sāmoan, even signing his letters as 'Tusitala'. Though far from one home, he found another, one in which he is now immortalised. Every time someone makes that fifty-minute climb through heat and wrangling root, bush song and the throng of bird ballad up Mount Vaea's forty-five-degree slope; each time someone begins to recite 'Under the wide and starry sky', they bring him home once more.

I am another Tusitala. But I tell different tales from the ones I read growing up. Born in New Zealand, part of the Pacific diaspora, I teach migrant tales, tales of political resistance to British and American colonialism, neo-colonialism and the effects of globalisation; tales of cultural reassertions and re-imaginings; tales from 'our sea of islands', as Tongan satirist Epeli Hau'ofa called it;[4] tales of the indigenous peoples of the space Pacific writers have reclaimed as 'Oceania'.[5] These tales are embedded in Pacific cultural mores, histories, mythic memories and genealogical meanderings. They help people remember home. They help

people bring their old home and new homes together.
I am

Tusitala
Teller of tales
That I never heard
Till yesterday
Born away
For another life

Today
The tale I tell
Is theirs
Is yours
A way of seeking
Some more of
Sāmoa
Of my
Sacred centre

Today
The tale I tell
Will book its way
Through tongued histories
Sanctioned mysteries

Spaces of silence
Timeless lives

Tala tusi
Tell the book
Word the spirit of brown
In theory
In creativity
We make our sound
Renowned.[6]

Like Stevenson, I too was far from 'home' when I penned this poem. And it too enabled me to be home when I was away from home.

I wrote this poem in 1996 on the way to my first international conference at the University of Hawai'i. 'Inside Out' was not only the first major conference to focus on Pacific literature, but it also had more Pacific Islanders participating in it than any previous academic gathering. Islanders weren't just the subject; they were the ones doing the investigating. The Pacific 'heavyweights' were in full attendance: Haunani-Kay Trask (Hawai'i), Nora Vagi Brash (Papua New Guinea), Albert Wendt (Sāmoa), Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace (Aotearoa New Zealand), Epeli Hau'ofa and

Sitiveni Halapua (Tonga), Vilsoni Hereniko (Rotuma), Satendra Nandan and Subramani (Fiji). It was there that I first met Sia Figiel. She had just (nervously) published a novel that would explode not just Sāmoan conservatism around public disclosure of the world of Sāmoan girlhood but also scholarly Eurocentric lenses. Specifically, Figiel confronted Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman and their anthropological tales about Sāmoan adolescence, sexuality and violence head on. *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) would win the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Asia/Pacific Region the following year.

I wrote 'Tusitala' on the plane. I was growing increasingly anxious about presenting my research in front of these first-wave Pacific writers and scholars. Who the *hell* did I think I was? Indeed, *who* the hell did *I* think I was? The poem, 'Tusitala', answered that question. It articulated a legacy that, as a Pasifika poet-scholar, I have grown into. It paved the way for me to speak into the space.

'Tusitala' has lived with me for two decades. It is my living and active poetic mantra. It establishes my literary tūrangawaewae, my standing place, wherever in the world I go. It tells my tale – where I've come from, where I am, and where I'm going.

Tala tusi, the title of this lecture, is an inversion of 'tusitala'. In the poem, I translate 'tala tusi' in the fourth and final stanza as to 'tell the book'. This is what I do creatively and critically. I tell tales often ignored, marginalised and footnoted in critical canons. I have to tell these tales in books to ensure that erasure is not an option; to ensure that engagement with these kinds of cultural conversations continues to happen in the context of New Zealand, Pacific and global literatures. As a teacher of creative writing, it's also my job to enable others to tell their tales, and in the most effective ways possible.

In his epic poem-novel *The Adventures of Vela* (2009), the culmination of sixteen years' work, Albert Wendt writes: 'the teller is the tale'.[7] This is a 'home truth' that the phrase tala tusi evokes for me – that is, a truth that can bring you home, wherever you are. This is what I tell my creative writing students. When we recognise that the teller *is* the tale, it centres our own stories. Even when we tell other kinds of tales about other places and spaces, we tell them from our cultural, social and historical perspective. We need to acknowledge the uniqueness of our own particular lens because – sorry to break it to you – all the great themes in the world have already been written about. Love, death, loss,

lust, hope, despair. You name it and someone's already written about it. But, no one can write of love or death, loss or lust, hope or despair quite like you. That's why *the teller is the tale*. You must let you in.

Embracing the idea of tala tusi, or the teller as the tale, wouldn't be required if everything around us didn't conspire against the validation of our own stories, our own voices. Why, for example, did New Zealand fiction make up only 3.4% of the total volume of sales in 2015?[28] Why do my creative writing students stubbornly set their post-apocalyptic stories in New York and Los Angeles instead of New Lynn and Lower Hutt? What would happen if aliens were discovered cerebrally feasting on brains not in the White House, but in the Beehive? See the storying possibilities already?

As an eleven-year-old, when I read Maurice Gee's *Under the Mountain* (1979), the Wilberforces personified the core of all my fears. Even now Mount Eden gives me the heebie-jeebies and I still refuse to visit Rangitoto, despite sailing past her almost every work day. But why aren't my students writing these stories now? How can tala tusi – *the teller as tale* – help us tell better stories? And if we, as readers, don't value our *own* tales, why should we, as writers, tell them? That's

my first tale: how tala tusi came to be an argument put forward in a New Zealand Book Council Lecture.

I have four more tales to share. Tale Two takes place in a second-hand store where I explore why we need tala tusi. Tales Three and Four take place in a university setting where *the teller as tale* helped me find my tale and write better ones. Lastly, in Tale Five, I'll tell you how tala tusi brought me home on the Sacrarium Steps at Westminster Abbey when I wrote and performed a poem for the Queen.

TALE TWO: OTHER TELLERS, OTHER TALES

How many of us grew up reading and learning that all the 'real' stories lie somewhere out there, beyond us? My mother moved to New Zealand in the heyday of Pacific immigration during the 1960s. In the land of milk and honey we made our home in superbly suburbly 'Avondale'. Mum knew the importance of stories. To her the 'real' stories were never written down; the 'real' stories were the ones worthy of being passed on through word of mouth. The measure of their value? Their unforgettability, their stubborn presence in family history and gossip.

As a girl my mum got into a lot of fights at school. Some thought it was the main reason she *went* to school. One day her parents told her that she had to leave upper primary to work at the ice-cream store in

Apia. Mum was the eldest girl and had thirteen siblings, so this was somewhat expected. The family needed the money for her younger siblings' school fees. She told me she didn't care, didn't like school anyway, and only went to beat up the faikakala girls who gossiped about her family. Except one day she added an epilogue to her tale. The day her parents told her she had to leave school, she ran off through the bush and to the river. By the rushing water, she spread her uniform over a large boulder and threw rocks at it until it was just shredded rivulets of yellow and red material.

Later, Mum revelled in the life-long debt her siblings owed her. That tale would be resurrected during many a family dispute over the next fifty years. After marrying my Palagi father, Mum moved to New Zealand. She kept that spirit of ferocity about schooling by instinctively knowing the value of books. This 'I know for sure',[9] because after school on Wednesdays we went to the Avondale Salvation Army and the Avondale Spiders second-hand dealers to restock on clothes, pans and three-foot plastic pink flamingoes. This last item was a favourite. We had about seven of them – Alice Walker had nothing on my mother's garden![10]

I had free rein in the book corner and I'd often stagger out with an armload. The Sallies had their

books proudly displayed on shelves. Unfortunately for an eight-year-old girl, the shelves were opposite the bra and undies racks. In retrospect, the location of the books seems quite fitting: both tales and lingerie work to conceal whilst revealing; both tales and undies come in a variety of styles, shapes and sizes; and a good tale never goes out of fashion, while tales full of holes should definitely not be re-sold.

Avondale Spiders was my own Steptoe & Son. Junk occupied every dark and dusty corner. Books were a haphazard find as I tripped and scraped myself between broken electric curl rollers, rusty iron pokers, jagged Samurai swords and steel-blade hand-mowers. But when you unburied a good box of books – aaaah! I loved the thematic boxes the best. Annuals, circa 1958: *The Magic Roundabout Annual*, *Our Own School Boys Annual* (I adapted), *Daktari Annual*, *Blackie's Children's Annual* (I adapted). It's heartwarming to see Gecko Press resurrecting the *Annual* in 2016.[11] I remember the first time

I wandered lonely through the shelves
Junk crammed in corners and nooks
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of Little Golden Books
Beside the flamingos, beneath the eaves
Packed and stacked upon their sheaves . . .

Over the years *The Saggy Baggy Elephant* and *The Poky Little Puppy* made way for *The Complete Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales*, Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart, The Secret Seven Collection Vol. 3*, *Watership Down*, *Betty Crocker's New Picture Cook Book*, *Alice in Wonderland*, Pam Ayres' *Some More of Me Poetry*. And what bookshelf could be complete without Spike Milligan's *Badjelly the Witch?*

Mum fostered a rich, eclectic reading habit. I ate up everything – except for my own stories. There was one book, though. I remember that first moment of character identification in the '70s. The title escapes me, but it was a hard-cover book about Sarah, a blonde pig-tailed British girl, and her family and their new neighbours. The new family was Indian. I remember how the girl was described as having brown eyes, brown skin and black wavy hair. Finally, someone I

didn't have to genetically modify to pretend was me! She was a bit on the reserved side but she'd do. She was brown, and that meant she could be me, or I could be her, until Chapter 3, when the Indian character stole Sarah's coveted sequined slippers (never mind that the two girls were physically different in height and, in all likelihood, shoe size). Then I had to switch both my allegiances and literary identification to freckled and fair-skinned Sarah who, after all, was a lot grittier in demeanour. She pushed over Jimmy, her other neighbour, when he teased the Indian girl. Turns out that Jimmy stole the slippers, but the damage was done. For a whole chapter, though, the possibility of being reflected in that literary mirror held the sheen of those delicate starry slippers.

As I got older, I got used to reading *other tellers and other tales*. Stevenson was a favourite. His stories were among the first to imbue Pacific Island characters with agency. The 1892 short story, *The Beach of Falesā*, featured Uma, a Polynesian woman who knew her own mind and was much smarter than the colonial buffoons and dimwitted beachcombers.

But Stevenson was an exception among his peers[12] – the men who form the western white literary canon. This canon still forms the core of an overwhelmingly

Eurocentric education curriculum taught throughout the Pacific. Of course there's a place for the memorisation of Wordsworth's 'Daffodils'.[13] Of course the tales of Melville and Defoe are fantastic – who hasn't been enthralled by *Typee* or *Robinson Crusoe*? But, when white male tales are taught to the *exclusion* of indigenous tales; when the passively alluring Fayaway or the gladly servile Man Friday are your *only* literary mirrors (representations of your kind beyond the stereotype); when you're in Tonga or Sāmoa memorising Wordsworth and don't even know what a daffodil looks like, then, Houston – or rather Ha'apai – we have a problem.

TALE THREE: OUR TELLERS OF OUR TALES

Tale: noun: A lie.

I didn't have to wait too long to see myself in that literary mirror. Albert Wendt's *Sons for the Return Home* was published in 1979, but I wouldn't come across it until I was twenty-three years old and doing an MA in English at Auckland. In retrospect, to not have come across *any* Pacific literature at school or undergraduate level in a place often hailed as the world's largest Polynesian city seems ironic, to say the least. In this tale, for literary identification, all I had to change was the protagonist's gender: Sione was a Sāmoan man living in diaspora in New Zealand. Seventeen years later, Figiel would write Alofa, a Sāmoan girl, born and bred in Sāmoa, into Pacific literary history. Fifteen years after that,

Lani Wendt Young's YA paranormal romance series, *Telesa*, placed an afakasi (part-Sāmoan) woman raised in the American Pacific diaspora centre stage. Over the course of my university years, I discovered *our tellers of our tales*, while many new ones slowly began to be published. As a young brown female reader, parts of me were being reflected in that literary mirror. Parts of me were always seeking 'to be told'.

Of course, a tale and its teller are always about other tales.[14] Parts of me are also told through the pain-inflicted, frustrating, yet absolutely enthralling character of New York abuse survivor, the suicidal, gay, manic-depressive Jude in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015). There are many ways to be told. I'm not arguing that we limit the kinds of tales read by an indigenous readership. There are also myriad reasons for reading, including escapism, when we certainly *don't* want to identify with the characters and we welcome its lies. But my contention is that literary mirrors need to be reflective devices capturing the complexities and nuances of a people *in addition* to serving as crazy Fun House mirrors of the human imagination – warping, distorting and pulling our character identification and our reading experiences up, down, sideways and round the corner. If I needed tales told from tellers like me as

a reader, how much more do I need writers like me to believe them? To cast the net wider, how much more do we need budding New Zealand writers to tell their own tales?

TALE FOUR: TEACHING THE TELLING OF OUR OWN TALES

Tail: to follow and observe (someone) closely, especially in secret.

Paula Morris has produced an instructive piece on what not to do as a fiction writer. She titled it 'Bad Story', and in it displays her trademark nuance and subtlety, along with her demure instructive approach. For those of you who don't know Paula, I'm being affectionately, sub-textually ironic. Here's an excerpt:

> Bad Story (so you don't have to write it)
>
> As I walked down the street, thinking to myself, it was sunny. Looking back on that day now, I remember that it was sunny all day, not only when I was walking down the street. It's only now that I realize, looking back, that I am no

longer the person I once was then, in the past.

I won't tell you where this street is, or when this walking took place, because let's face it: all streets are more or less the same everywhere in the world. I walked past generic bars, houses, petrol stations, schools and airports. I rode around for a while on a bus, thinking meaningful and symbolic thoughts, and looking out the window. I looked at my reflection in the window and noticed that I was 26 with brown hair and a chiselled jaw. I decided to call petrol stations 'gas stations' because that's what they are in the US, where I may or may not live. I began every sentence with an 'I.'[15]

I've also noticed a couple of things from teaching a large introductory course on creative writing at the University of Auckland. The number one writing bogey is often articulated thus:

'Dr Marsh, I'm too busy writing to read . . . like anything.'

Or,

'Selina, I don't want to be unduly influenced by other writers.'

Or, one of my favourites from last year:

'Sel, if I read other writers, then someone might've already done what I'm doing, then mine won't be original'.

The other thing I've noticed is ably demonstrated in Paula's piece. Sometimes we don't know where we are. Often, we don't care. But in this era of globalisation and Google-isation, it might be timely to remember Curnow's 'trick'. In his sonnet, 'The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch', Curnow's alienated kind of belonging (but belong we must) is memorialised in his final two lines:

> Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year,
> Will learn the trick of standing upright here.

Or at least we would do well to keep in mind Glenn Colquhoun's less nationalist, more diversity-inclusive reframing of Curnow's clarion call for a specific, unique, environmentally reflective and embedded identity.[16] If our story is set here, then we go to the supermarket, not the grocery store; we wear jandals on our feet and thongs in private; we have rivers running through the bush, not brooks cascading near the woods; we play in forests rather than in meadows, although, as Witi Ihimaera noted in his 2015 New Zealand Book Council Lecture, even beloved New Zealand classics like Margaret Mahy's *A Lion in the Meadow* (1969) show signs of our stubborn British aesthetics.

Teaching the telling of our own tales means enabling students to see and write the value of our own homegrown stories. It means attempting to reverse the cultural cringe that has crept back into our society, if our book-buying habits are any indication.[17]

The conundrum about teaching creative writing as a university course is that it is inherently unfair. Giving a student an A does not a writer make. Nor does a C make a writer not a writer. For some reason, I grew up watching *Country Calendar*. I became fixated by the dogs, sheep, fingerless whistles, 'get in behinds', gates, pens and acts of competitive herding. Somewhere there's a connection between that and what I do as a teacher of creative writing. I'm the farmer (or the Border Collie) who herds sheep through gates of exercises, steering the mob towards structure and style, the holding pens where they try different techniques and peer critique. Most of them manage to go through the gates in time. But nobody can predict what happens afterwards. Perhaps the metaphor has run its course, as being carted off to the meat works seems a little … sad. But perhaps I might extend it and say: Go through the gates, make it to the pens and then, run! Don't follow the mob. Shake off the (woollen) blanket destiny of the herd! Be a Shrek! Grow your tail and all your other fluffy bits!

In *Black Rainbow*, an allegorical thriller set in Ponsonby, Albert Wendt writes: 'A tale is about . . . the teller and her telling . . .'[18] I constantly bring attention to my telling, and make space for tales, by putting local places and spaces at their centre. The rise and rise of Creative Non-fiction as a genre seems to be helping here with its emphasis on 'true stories well told'.[19] To draw on the homonym, I tell students: You've got to 'tail' yourself. You've got to be a PI – not a fast-talking PI (that is, Pacific Islander), but PI as in Magnum PI, a private investigator. You've got to book and pay yourself to tail yourself, to spy on your own life.

To this end, my students are required to keep a Writer's Workbook for a semester. In it they observe and record their daily happenings. They write down overheard conversations, curious language, interesting images, snippets of readings, inspirational excerpts from sources as varied as graffiti philosophy to what their tantrumming two-year-old cousin might have screamed while throwing his Cruskit. The aim is to cultivate skills of observation, to hone the skill of valuing the everyday occurrences of language and image. In the process, students become literary archivists, storing up daily experiences, mixing up the familiar modes of the scrapbook and the journal in

order to push it towards storying possibilities – plot ideas and development, characterisation and scene setting. The workbook aims to show the workings of any given piece of writing. Why? Because the students' lives are interesting. Because they've got the inside scoop. Because there's no teller quite like them. There's no tale to be told quite like how they can tell it.

But how do I know 'for sure' that the teller is the tale and often it's the best one you've got? Because the Queen told me so.

Her Consort, however, had other ideas. When I met the Duke at a royal reception at Marlborough House earlier this year, the following exchange took place:

> Me: Greetings, Your Royal Highness.
>
> Duke: And what do you do? [This after I had performed the poem]
>
> Me: I'm a poet.
>
> Duke: Yes, yes, but what do you *do*?
>
> Me: I'm a university lecturer in New Zealand and teach creative writing and postcolonial literature.
>
> Duke: [squinting at me] Post?

After which he carried on down the line.

Aotearoa New Zealand, if we aren't telling our own tales, be assured, someone else is.

TALE FIVE: THE TELLER IS THE TALE

Several years ago I was encouraged to take my Muay Thai kickboxing training to the next level and compete in a fight. I could just hear the ring announcer calling me forth: 'Iiinnnntroducing … the "Sāmoan Slayer"'! Complete with crowd noises: Haaaaaaaaaa. Instead, my trainer, who possesses Zen insight, suggested the nickname 'The Smiling Assassin'.

I was reminded of this nickname more recently when, over three days on three separate occasions, I was accused of being 'too nice'. The first was in the context of marking a creative writing assessment; the second in a disagreement about whether a colleague was 'ditzy' and 'selfish'; the third in a publicly disparaging manner (in front of students) about my agreement to do something for a competing institution in an

effort to raise Pasifika student enrolments.

In all three instances, I smiled and laughed – and then did what I wanted.

This response might not rate very high in the conventional assertiveness ranks, but my pearly-whites reply conveys two things: one, your opinion is about you, not me; and two, understanding and relationship are more important to me than disparagement and disconnection. Who am I to tell a budding writer that they'd be better to stick with computer science? What good to the whole (the English Department) does it do to partake in character assassination? What good to the whole (the Pacific writing and reading community) does it do to restrict student access along narrow institutional allegiances? The Va, the con-social philosophy underpinning Sāmoan concepts of relationship and obligation, are much bigger than that.

To address the budding-writer-better-stick-with-computer-science issue, I know I work in a university. I know students pay for a course which they understand is graded and subject to passing or failing according to whether they 'meet the standard'. The thing is, most students don't actually take my course to get a grade in creative writing. Most students want validation as a writer. Yet they equate this validation with an A grade.

If they don't get an A, they are crushed, as if their future writing life depended on it. As if an A is a passport to the land of publication. I try to disabuse students of this notion – nicely.

I am nice when marking creative writing pieces. It doesn't mean I don't fail students or don't red pen their work until it looks like a bloody *Charlotte's Web*. But if someone has made the effort to produce 5,000 words, I put in the effort to identify the strengths of their unique voice and contribution, as well as where and how their writing can be made stronger. Often, my comments include things like: Where is *your* voice? Do you know this place? Who might you draw on to flesh out this character (real and fictional)? How might x, y, or z riff off your own experience or that of someone you know? I encourage my students by 'nicely' challenging them to think about their own voices and experiences, and the way this frames their writing. Equally as if not more important than the value ascribed a particular grade is the value of recognising that *the teller is the tale*.

How do I know the teller is often the (best) tale? Because that truth has been refined in the 926-year-old historical and cultural pressure cooker that is Westminster Abbey in front of the longest-reigning British monarch in history.

In November 2015 I was commissioned by the Commonwealth Education Foundation to write and perform a poem for Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II for Commonwealth Observance Day, March 2016. There were a few 'rules' about the composition:

- The poem had to be called 'Unity'.
- The poem had to address the theme of unity among the fifty-three member countries of the Commonwealth.
- The poem had to be less than three minutes, as the BBC was filming it live.
- The poem could not be political.
- The poem had to appeal to over 1,000 school children in attendance from across the United Kingdom, as well as dignitaries, heads of state, prime ministers and, of course, the royal family.
- Finally, the poem would be subject to royal censorship.

I'd accepted commissioned work before. I'd produced within tight parameters. I'd written and performed for nine-year-olds and ninety-nine-year-olds. My poetry has been performed in sixteen countries, and hit the mark across cultures, classes and creeds. Of course this

Commonwealth commission was do-able! It had to be. As a Pasifika poet with access to a global stage for three minutes, I had the opportunity to represent two issues important to me. The first was global climate change: Grandad's island of Tuvalu will disappear under rising waters within my lifetime, and my relatives are fast becoming known as 'environmental refugees'; the second was a stubbornly Eurocentric educational curriculum in our 'postcolonial' era – an era precipitated by British colonisation and, at least symbolically, led by the Queen herself!

In true tusitala mode, I had a chance here to tell tales on behalf of others. But could I do this without being 'political'? Could I find a way to include everyone in the conversation? The multiple and conflicting demands on this poem, as well as the magnitude of the occasion, made for a formidable opponent in the ring. I felt pressured to tell a certain kind of story in a certain kind of way.

I had a couple of false starts. I had climbed into the ring and been sucked into my opponent's rhythm, adopting his breathing rate, his body tempo. I was allowing him to set the pace for the bout.

Round One went to writer's block – eight weeks' worth.

This didn't mean I sat on my royalist hands. No, no. It meant I did a lot of research on Her Majesty and the Duke, Westminster Abbey, the Commonwealth as a concept and as an organisation, global climate change and significant environmental degradation in the Pacific. But I needed to go back to my corner and remember my own game plan. I needed to remember who the teller of this tale was.

Twenty days before the poem was to be submitted to the royal censors, and thirty-six days before its debut in London, I went back to the drawing board – my kitchen bench. Here, food and poetry prep take place, experimentations and on-site ruminations are the norm. I spread out an A3 sheet of paper. With a thick black Vivid (Vivids help me be vivid) I wrote the word 'Unity' in the middle of the page. I stared at the thick black letters for several minutes, then I saw it. I saw the lines around which the whole poem would gather:

> There's a 'U' and an 'I' in Unity
> Costs the earth and yet it's free.

Here it is in full:

Unity

Maluna a'e o nā lāhui apau ke ola ke kanaka
'Above all nations is humanity'
(Hawai'ian proverb)

Let's talk about unity
Here, in London's Westminster Abbey

did you know there's a London in Kiribati?
Ocean Island: South Pacific Sea.

We're connected by currents of humanity
alliances, allegiances, histories

for the salt in the sea, like the salt in our blood
like the dust of our bones, our final return to mud

means while 53 flags fly for our countries
they're stitched from the fabric of our unity

it's called the Va in Sāmoan philosophy
what you do, affects me

what we do, affects the sea
land, wildlife – take the honeybee

nature's model of unity
pollinating from flower to seed

bees thrive in hives keeping their queen
unity keeps them alive, keeps them buzzing

they're key to our fruit and vege supplies
but parasitic attacks and pesticides

threaten the bee, then you, then me
it's all connected – that's unity.

There's a 'U' and an 'I' in unity
cuts the earth and yet it's free.

My grandad's from Tuvalu and to be specific
it's plop bang in the middle of the South Pacific

the smallest of our 53 Commonwealth nations
the largest in terms of reading vast constellations

my ancestors navigated by sky and sea trails
way before Columbus even hoisted his sails!

What we leave behind, matters to those who go before
we face the future with our backs, sailing shore to shore

for we're earning and saving for our common wealth
a common strong body, a common good health

for the salt in the sea, like the salt in our blood
like the dust of our bones, our final return to mud

means saving the ocean, saving the bee
means London's UK seeing London in the South Seas
and sharing our thoughts over a cup of tea.

There's a 'U' and an 'I' in unity
cuts the earth and yet it's free.

After asking me how I managed to remember it all, the Queen commented that the poem was 'very good'.[20]

Round Two was the knock-out round to the poem.

My trainer says, 'Finding your own rhythm in the ring is one thing, making people fall into yours, is

another.'[21] Being nice, being inclusive, is one way of allowing people to fall into your rhythm. When there were a few murmurings about my acceptance of the commission, possibly construed as pandering to the whims of the British Empire, I responded that I'm a path, not a wall. People will walk over me and if they do so ungraciously, that's their karma; but people *will* walk over and that's about connection. This role of connection is seeded in my name. Within Tusitala sits the word 'ala', the proto-Polynesian word for path.

'Unity' ticked the boxes for the Commonwealth Foundation, the royal censors and my Pacific community. People I respected in the global indigenous community wrote saying they stood with me on that stage. Because TV One had run it as a news item, because a former student had somehow recorded the BBC footage and posted it up on Facebook, upon my return to New Zealand I received an avalanche of heart-felt congratulations and expressions of pride from students and academics, women and men, Pākehā, Māori, Pasifika, Sudanese, Indian, Irish, poets and politicians, from the mechanic down the road in Ostend to an opera singer in London. People felt represented – I suspect because, in telling my tale, I managed to tell a little bit of theirs.

EPILOGUE

There's a proverb I've come across in every country I've ever visited (about twenty-three now). Whilst inflected with local variations, the heart of it remains the same: 'Never piss off a poet.'

The Smiling Assassin leaves you with one last tale.

It is twenty minutes before the biggest performance of my career. I am seated in the front row of the transept, next to the row seating the British prime minister, the prime minister of Malta, Kofi Annan and other notables. I am seated directly opposite other dignitaries, high commissioners of various Commonwealth nations, and diagonally opposite from where the members of the royal family will be seated after the trumpet fanfare in front of an audience of 2,000. There are two spare seats next to me. One of the vergers (church officials in official church garb whose duties include escorting people in and out of the transept

area) shows in an elderly couple who have arrived late. I allow them to settle before turning to them and introducing myself.

'Hello, I'm Selina Tusitala Marsh, the poet from New Zealand.' I hold my hand out to shake in greeting.

Baron What's-his-face looks at me, looks down at my hand, then averts his gaze, staring straight ahead. 'Yes,' he replies.

Maybe no one can see my outstretched hand, maybe I could morph it into a yoga stretch or turn it into a Sāmoan dance move. I look across to where Baron What's-his-face is staring. I look straight into the outraged eyes of Lady Alexandra Smith, wife of our New Zealand High Commissioner in London, Sir Lockwood Smith, my London family when I visit. She mouths: 'What the —!'

Smiling, I lower my hand and focus on bigger things.

When I get home, I write, record and on YouTube post this, set to a ukulele version of 'God Save The Queen':

Pussy Cat

Pussy cat, pussy cat
Where have you been?
I've been to London
to visit the Queen.

Pussy cat, pussy cat
What did you there?
I frightened the Western World
With my big hair.

My moana blue mena
My Plantation House shawl
My paua orb
My Niu Ziland drawl
My siva Sāmoa hands
My blood-red lips
My Va philosophising
My poetic brown hips
And before Her Majesty
And the princely Duke
Spoke of Tuvalu navigation
As no native fluke
Messed up a timeline

Inverting West is Best
Instead drawing a spiral
Encompassing all the rest.[22]

I have discovered for myself that the teller truly is the tale. Mine keeps telling me, and others, not only where I come from and where I am, but also where I am going. Yours can too.

ENDNOTES

1 Blurb, Anne Terry White (ed.), *Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island, especially edited for The Golden Picture Classics*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956.

2 As I was informed in 2015 by the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum guide who was, himself, in his late teens.

3 Daniel Bosh, 'On Epitaphic Fictions: Robert Louis Stevenson, Philip Larkin', 29 April 2014, theparisreview.org/blog/2014/04/ (accessed 2 Feb 2016).

4 See Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6.1, Spring 1994, pp.147–61.

5 Albert Wendt, 'Towards a New Oceania', *Mana Review*, 1.1, 1976.

6 Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson (eds), *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, *c.*1999.

7 Albert Wendt, *The Adventures of Vela*, Honolulu: UH Press, 2009, p.85.

8 See Nielsen BookScan, 2015, where findings suggest that New Zealand fiction comprises only 3.4% of the total volume of sales in 2015.

9 See Oprah Winfrey, *What I Know For Sure*, New York: Flatiron Books, 2014.

10 See Alice Walker, *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, London: Women's Press, 1984.

11 See Kate DeGoldi and Susan Paris (eds), *Annual*, Wellington: Gecko Press, 2016.

12 In a letter to Sidney Colvin, Stevenson acknowledges this: 'It is the first realistic South Seas story; I mean with real South Sea character and details of life. Everybody else that has tried, that I have seen, got carried away by the romance, and ended in a kind of sugar candy sham epic, and the whole effect was lost – there

was no etching, no human grin, consequently no conviction. Now I have got the smell and look of the thing a good deal. You will know more about the South Seas after you have read my little tale than if you had read a library.' Introduction to Roslyn Jolly (ed.), *Robert Louis Stevenson: South Sea Tales: The World's Classics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

13 See Konai Helu Thaman's 1997 conference address, 'Of Daffodils and Heilala: Understanding Pacific Cultural Contexts', www.directions.usp.ac.fj/collect/direct/index/assoc/D770128.dir/doc.pdf (accessed 15 Mar 2015). See also smart, decolonising responses to Wordsworth from Sia Figiel in *Girl in the Moon Circle*, Suva, Fiji: Mana Publications, 1996. Also the poem, 'Daffodils: From a Native's Perspective', in *To A Young Artist in Contemplation*, Suva, Fiji: Pacific Writing Forum, USP, 1998.

14 Wendt, *Black Rainbow*, Honolulu: UH Press, 1992, p.105.

15 Paula Morris, 'Bad Story (so you don't have to write it)', unpublished educational material, personal copy.

16 See Glenn Colquhoun's *The Art of Walking Upright*, Wellington: Steele Roberts, 1999, a multicultural response to the well-known lines in Allen Curnow's poem, 'The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch': 'Not

I, some child born in a marvellous year, / Will learn the trick of standing upright here', in Allen Curnow, *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems 1941–1997*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1997, p.220.

17 Jim Traue, 'Standing Upright', Public Address: Great New Zealand, http://publicaddress.net/great-new-zealand-argument/standing-upright/ (accessed 8 June 2016).

18 Wendt, *Black Rainbow*, p.105.

19 See Lee Gutkind and Hattie Fletchers (eds), *True Stories Well Told: From the First 20 years of Creative Non Fiction Magazine*, Pittsburgh: InFact Books, 2014.

20 For a full account of the event, see *Booknotes Unbound*, 'NZ poet Selina Tusitala Marsh visits (and sasses) the Queen', booknotes-unbound.org.nz/selina-tusitala-marsh-visits-the-queen/ (accessed 1 Aug 2016).

21 Personal communication with Duan Marshall, 8 Sept 2016.

22 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=fz1tx7pTB-8 (accessed 9 May 2016).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS FROM THE BOOK COUNCIL

We would like to express our warmest gratitude to the patrons of the 2016 New Zealand Book Council Lecture: Paul McArthur, John Allen and Peter Biggs CNZM. Paul McArthur's support is offered in memory of his late father, John G. McArthur QSO.

Selina Tusitala Marsh delivered the 2016 New Zealand Book Council Lecture at the National Library of New Zealand in Wellington. We would like to acknowledge our partnership with the National Library and express our gratitude to the library for hosting a wonderful event.

We would also like to thank our wine sponsor for the 2016 New Zealand Book Council Lecture, Gladstone

Vineyard. More details on Gladstone Vineyard can be found at www.gladstonevineyard.co.nz.

Final thanks and appreciation go to the team at Mary Egan Publishing for helping to produce this lecture in print form.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS FROM THE AUTHOR

An early version of this lecture was road-tested at the Ahi Kā: Building the Fire Creative Writing Colloquium (ACRWN) – thanks for the invite Thom Conroy! Thanks also to Jane Parkin for your editorial care, Anna Hodge for your quick-yet-strangely-perceptive eye, Paula Morris for allowing me to cut and paste from her teaching resource (it's all over Sāmoa now – fa'afetai tele lava), Duan Marshall for his Muay Thai wisdom, and Albert Wendt for a lifetime of wisdom. Thanks to Professor Geoff Davis who piped up with my name at a Commonwealth Education Trust tête-à-tête after hearing me perform at a crowded family restaurant in Saint Lucia; to Judy Curry for commissioning me to write a poem for the Queen; to Andrew Baines, Sir Lockwood and Lady Alexandra Smith who hosted me

so beautifully in London. Finally, thanks to Mum and her tala tusi ways that continue to inspire beyond the grave.

BIOGRAPHY

Selina Tusitala Marsh is a poet of Sāmoan, Tuvaluan, English and French descent. Her poetry is published in numerous anthologies, academic texts, print and online literary journals, and translated into Ukranian, Spanish and Italian. She was the first person of Pacific descent to graduate with a PhD in English from the University of Auckland, where she now lectures in both creative writing and Māori and Pacific literary studies. The *New Zealand Listener* has described her as the 'vanguard of contemporary Pacific literature' and 'one of the most important poetic voices of her generation'. Selina's first poetry collection, *Fast Talking PI* (Auckland University Press, 2009) won the NZSA Jessie Mackay Best First Book Award for Poetry and her second poetry collection, *Dark Sparring* (Auckland University Press, 2013) received wide critical acclaim. Selina is the 2016 Commonwealth Poet.