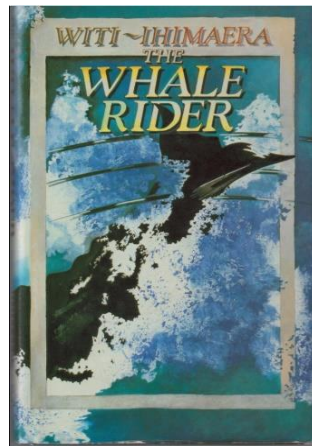


# PUKAPUKA TĀWHIRI

*The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera  
Published 1987



Pukapuka Tāwhiri refers to books that keep calling us back – books that we’ve connected with in the past and continue to emotionally resonate with us. What is it about these books that stick in our heads? Whether the fires of interest are stoked through connections with characters, through particularly vivid imagery, or through exciting themes of magic or mysticism, once burning they can energize us for a future of reading for pleasure. A lifetime of reading is a lifetime of placing ourselves in others’ shoes and a lifetime of learning about people whose lives are different to us. These emotional connections developed through reading occur at a neurological level, but the effects span to a societal one, as they teach us how to develop empathy and understand others.

When reading, think about how this book ignites your interest, or doesn’t. Why does it continue to sit on Aotearoa’s bookshelf decades after it was first published? *The Whale Rider* is about the young protagonist, Kahu, and her desire to please her great grandfather and show him she is worthy of being the next chief. It is a story of **family and love**, of **leadership**, of **nature** and, above all, **overcoming prejudice to succeed in your own destiny**. Also...whales!

### **Before Reading:**

This book features sexism as the protagonist, Kahu, is prevented from becoming the next chief by her great-grandfather due to her being a girl. This is something Kahu struggles with throughout the book as she desires her great-grandfather’s love, but he repeatedly dismisses her. A small part of the story also involves racist remarks made to a Māori character when they are overseas, at a time they are working out their own identity. Monitor the class discussion with this in mind.

**During or after reading:**

**Themes in *The Whale Rider*:**

**Theme one: Leadership and sexism**

- Leadership is a central theme in the book as Kahu is prevented from becoming the next chief by her great-grandfather. Traditionally this role is passed down through the male line, specifically to the first-born son.
- Two leaders that we see compared in the book are the old bull whale leading its pod and Koro, as both seek the best path for their people while navigating their own desires.

**Possible questions/discussion points:**

1. Koro and the bull whale are compared in the book. How are they similar, and how are they different? How are their fates dependent on each other?
2. When does Kahu exhibit her leadership potential in the book? Why is Kahu destined to be the next chief?
3. What do you think makes a good leader?
4. Why is it less common for women to be leaders? Do you think this is changing?

**Theme two: Tradition, modernity, and identity**

- Koro ignores Kahu's leadership potential and skills as he believes he must follow the traditional rules for the good of his people and his tribe's future. This push-and-pull between tradition and modernity is a repeated motif in the book as it is questioned whether some traditional rules should be adapted for a modern circumstance.
- Cultural identity is important, with the story of Paikea and the whale opening the book and Koro intent on conveying Tikanga Māori and Mātauranga Māori to the future generations. Multiple characters, including Kahu and Rawiri have to navigate their identity and how it relates to their culture and their home.

**Possible questions/discussion points:**

1. Rawiri leaves home for Australia and later Papua New Guinea in the book. What happens to him and what does he learn about himself as a result? What decision does he make in the end?
2. What is the connection between Paikea and Kahu? What did Paikea's spear he sent into the future represent?

3. Koro resists modernity, staying true to the ways of his ancestors. This includes excluding Kahu from leadership roles. What is granny Flower's attitude towards these rules – does she agree with Koro?
4. Do you think traditions can change and alter? Do you think culture is static, or can culture, and the traditions it holds, change while still maintaining its meaning and importance?
5. What does tradition and modernity mean to you? Do you think these concepts are incompatible?

### **Theme three: Family relationships and love**

- Kahu desperately wants the love of her great-grandfather Koro, who is cold to her. This conflict is the central one in the story as Kahu tries to prove her worth and leadership ability to her great-grandfather while he remains strict to the traditional rules and refuses to adapt.
- However, the story is largely motivated by love; Koro wants a male successor because he believes this is the best way of ensuring the future for his people and carrying forward Tikanga Māori. Nanny Flowers loves and nurtures Kahu, as does Kahu's uncle Rawiri who believes in her potential. It is the love of the old bull whale for its old rider, Paikea, that turns him back to Whangara.

### **Possible questions/discussion points:**

1. How does Koro treat Kahu, and how does this make you feel? How does Koro's attitude towards Kahu change in the end? Why is this?
2. Why does Rawiri return to his home and family in the end?
3. Is family important to you?
4. What stories make you feel hope? Wonder?
5. Animals are often important in stories – why is that?

### **Theme four: Humankind's relationship to nature**

- The book is divided into four parts, with each part named after a season.
- As the whales travel through the sea, they encounter inhospitable environments as a result of human pollution.
- In *The Whale Rider* the message is repeated that humankind and nature need to work together, that humans should be caretakers for the environment rather than exploit it. In this way the fate of the whales is tied to the fate of Koro and Kahu's hapu, if something is wrong with humankind then nature, too, will be thrown out of balance.

**Possible questions/discussion points:**

6. Paikea and the bull whale had a close bond and worked together. What does it mean that the bull whale beaches himself near the end of the book?
7. How is this disconnect between the people and the whales/nature resolved at the end of the book? How are the whales guided off the beach?
8. What places did the whales visit on their journey, and why didn't they remain there?
9. How do you feel towards nature? What are some ways we can protect it?

**After Reading: Beyond the Book:**

Create a broader discussion surrounding this book and readership.

**Possible questions/discussion points:**

1. This book was published over three decades ago, yet it remains in public knowledge as a classic New Zealand book. Why do you think this book has persisted, whereas others have not? Is this book unique?
2. Can you think of any more recent books that remind you of *The Whale Rider*? How do they differ?
3. How did you find the writing style of the book? Discuss a phrase or sentence that stuck out to you, and why it did so.
4. How did *The Whale Rider* make you feel? Did you relate to any of the characters?
5. Did you like the book? Were there any parts which you found particularly interesting?
6. What kind of books do you normally like? What is it about these books that call to you? For example, vivid imagery, or characters that you find relatable.
7. Do you think we should read this book over more modern ones? What is the continuing value of traditional books?

**Further reading:**

**Kaitangata Twitch** by Margaret Mahy

**Hine and the Tohunga Portal** by Ataria Sharman (coming out in 2021 with Huia)

**Singing Home the Whale** by Mandy Hager

**The Bone Tiki** by David Hair (older students)