

# Introduction

***Elizabeth Kirkby-McLeod***

For years I have carried around a small book simply titled *New Zealand Short Stories*. It has a blue linen hardcover and is about the size of my cellphone. Published in 1953 as part of something called “The World’s Classics” it was edited by Dan Davin and printed in Oxford. It includes authors who are otherwise a mystery to me – Lady Barker and A. P. Gaskell; some more familiar, like Janet Frame and Maurice Duggan; and it has two writers you’ll also find in this collection, Frank Sargeson and Katherine Mansfield (more on them soon). *New Zealand Short Stories* belonged to my father; I wouldn’t be surprised if he received it from his mother. It is a treasure, a capsule of the Aotearoa New Zealand short story of the time.

My children can look forward to receiving it in their turn, for I can't throw it out or discard it. As Dan Davin says in his introduction, a short story collection throws 'a sidelight on the history of New Zealand which historical documents more narrowly conceived could hardly give.' I believe short story collections tell us something of who we think we are at the time, or imagine ourselves to be – not always the same thing.

*Lit: stories from home*, does not claim to be definitive, it is not an encyclopaedia of Aotearoa New Zealand short stories or even a historical review. But I hope it passes on through generations, reaching out to readers just as we reached out to bring in those two early writers, Katherine Mansfield and Frank Sargeson; just as we reached forward to find newer voices. We looked for writers who express Aotearoa New Zealand as we find ourselves now, as we imagine and think ourselves to be. First-person narratives like the stories here by Rajorshi Chakraborti and Patricia Grace allow us to glimpse Aotearoa New Zealand through the eyes of someone whose experience might not mirror our own.

One thing that I kept finding as I read was the theme of political awareness. Aotearoa New Zealanders may live far from the rest of the world, but we have never turned our backs from the injustice we see there, even as we struggle for justice at home (Mandy Hager's books *Hindsight* and *Protest!* chart those same waters in non-fiction). In the

stories of Katherine Mansfield, Elsie Locke, Witi Ihimaera, Gina Cole, and Ting J. Yiu we have characters who, in unique voices, are troubled by the world as they find it; its unfairness, environmental degradation, its systems of valuing and the resulting casual degrading of life, human or otherwise. Today's students care passionately about such causes but can learn too from Tracey Slaughter's story about the impact sweeping judgment can have on individuals. Our society has much that needs to be forgiven, and much need of those who are shaped with the generosity to forgive.

Another theme I found in these stories is family. It is almost a cliché now that no person is an island, but we are all born on islands of home, siblings and caregivers, in various stages of disfunction. It is the struggles, losses and celebrations on these islands that, like for the characters in Russell Boey, Joshua Pomare and Nithya Narayanan's stories, we hold as our home-culture.

As we grow and visit different islands we begin to realise, like the characters in the stories by Anahera Gildea, David Hill, Lani Wendt Young, and Owen Marshall, that our home-culture limits, heals, defines, and forms us. At least for our beginnings. Like a good short story, the middle and ending are our own to read, our own to write.