

Dialogue

An Interview with Patricia Grace

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*Conspiracy, Class, and Culture in Oceania: A View from the
Cook Islands*

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I first met Patricia Grace in the fall of 1994 during a Pacific Writers Forum that was cosponsored by the East-West Center and the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i. She was with her husband, Dick, and I became aware of a writer who was very much into family values and relationships. Later the same year, while attending the Oceania Playwrights Workshop in Auckland, I visited the home she shares with Dick in Plimmerton, near Wellington. Then in October 1995, I met Patricia and her husband again. Dick had been invited to the United States mainland on an educational tour, and Patricia was accompanying him. Again, I was reminded of how important being together is to this couple, and the effort they both put in to ensure marital happiness.

At three in the morning of 6 August 1997, three days before I was to marry, I awoke, went into the living room, and began editing this interview that had taken place almost two years earlier. I completed what I was doing later that morning and gave the edited manuscript to Vi Nakahara, our secretary. As soon as I was back in my office, there was a knock on the door. I opened it to find Naomi Losch, a professor and friend who had just returned from New Zealand, standing in the doorway with a present from Patricia Grace. While in New Zealand, Naomi had mentioned to Patricia that I was getting married, and she had given her two beautiful stones with paua-shell inlay as presents for me and my wife-to-be.

What was I to make of this? I hadn't been in contact with Patricia for nearly two years. What made me wake up early in the morning to work on this interview during what I consider to be the busiest period of my life? Not only was I getting married, I was also directing my latest play for performances on the beach, its world premiere only three days away. Did she understand all this? Was the timing more than coincidental?

Patricia Grace is the first Māori woman to publish a collection of short

stories, Waiariki (1975). Since then, she has published three other collections, four children's books, and three novels. Her work has appeared in more than twenty anthologies and journals, and has been translated into Russian, Swedish, Chinese, Japanese, German, Dutch, and Finnish. Today, she is regarded as one of New Zealand's finest writers. Her novels and short stories are a staple of Pacific Literature courses in the Pacific and beyond.

Despite her international reputation, Patricia is the humblest Pacific writer I have come across. She also appears to be the most connected to family and the community in which she lives, and the Pacific writer I feel most privileged and honored to know. I continue to teach her novels and short stories in my classes, and to recommend her work with great enthusiasm.

VH Do you keep a journal?

PG No, I don't. I don't keep notes. I like to keep ideas in mind and let them develop there until I'm ready. If it's something that I'm not going to use immediately there's a possibility I'll forget—but I just trust it will pop up when I want it.

VH Even if it pops up and it's not exactly the same experience, it doesn't really matter, because your mind has processed it and taken it to a slightly different level.

PG The unwritten thoughts are processed more freely. The written thoughts I find less easy to manipulate.

VH Do dreams play any part at all in your work?

PG I certainly pay attention to my dreams and sometimes I'll develop an idea from a dream, but not very often. I think that with writing, every experience is important; everything that happens around us or near us or inside us, or that is part of ourselves. When people ask me where ideas come from, I say they come from my own background and my own experience. That experience and background includes everything that happens—what people say and do, and how they say and do it. It includes dreams and imaginings, thoughts and hopes, and desires and disappointments. Sometimes I get young people saying to me, "I couldn't be a writer, because my life is too boring."

VH Then write about that boring life. Yes?

PG I say to them, “Well, I’ve led a very protected life too. I’ve never climbed mountains or swum rivers or even had an unhappy childhood. We don’t live in a vacuum, we don’t just stay in a little antiseptic spot with nothing happening; there is something happening around us and inside us all the time.”

VH The person who says, “I can’t be a writer because my life is too boring” seems to think that writing is just a reflection of reality. Yet we know as writers that quite often that isn’t the case; we use real life experience as a springboard for our imaginings.

PG That’s right. You bring creativity to bear on what you know and understand. You attempt to push out the edges of what you know and understand.

VH It seems to me a very curious process, because it’s almost as though when you imagine the experience and you move beyond the actual experience, and you create a work of fiction, what happens in the end—if the novel or work is any good—is the feeling that what you’ve written is true to life.

PG Yes.

VH Which is ironic, because through distortion you see the real thing. That’s hard to understand, isn’t it?

PG It’s as though the pushing outward allows understanding to drop down—as though you’ve given words, ideas, sometimes conventions, a really good shake. Then you look to see what’s happened.

VH How do you push the edges, as you put it? Do you do it through language?

PG Through using language in some different way, through trying different structures, through experimenting and trying to break the rules.

VH Do the language and style, used differently, challenge mainstream conventions?

PG I hope so.

VH What about characters?

PG Characters might be quite real to me, but I need to explore them and bend them, find ways for them to be seen in the way I want them seen.

VH You make them more fascinating, more interesting?

PG I want to make them understood and known. The things they do and say might seem exaggerated sometimes, but through that they might become real.

VH It's a curious process, isn't it?

PG In my book *Cousins* I have three women who are cousins, each having her own story. At first I told each one's story in the third person. And then I thought this rather dull—too uniform. So I changed the voices. One of them is written about in the third person and one of them is told in the first person (but it is the first person telling about the main character, really).

But the third one is told in the voice of the woman's twin that was never born. I liked writing it so much, because here was this narrator addressing the character and knowing that character so intimately that he could tell everything, the whole story of that person—the future, past, and present. It was interesting to be able to do that. There's a freedom in writing fiction that I don't think is there in other forms of writing.

VH That's what is so wonderful about fiction, there's a lot of room for self-expression and imagination. It's almost like anything goes.

PG Yes, that's right.

VH Do you worry sometimes, by challenging what is conventional, or telling a story from an unusual perspective, that what you write might be offensive to other people?

PG No. I don't worry. I try to put all constrictions or restrictions aside and not be affected by the opinions and demands of others. When I read reviews and critiques of my work, whether they're positive or otherwise, I always feel that I must just read through quickly, not take too much on board, and then put them aside and forget them. Even something that's flattering can be restrictive, because you could be tempted to say "That worked well for someone. Maybe I should try something like that again." Yet my aim is not to repeat. I always want to look for something new to attempt.

Not that I don't want people to have opinions about my work. I do. I want my work hacked up in the marketplace along with everyone else's. But I don't want my freedom to write affected by that.

VH I haven't come across a negative review of your work. Every review I've read seems very enthusiastic, and full of praise for your work. It's interesting to know that you don't give these reviews that much attention. Has there been any criticism, maybe in the earlier stages, that made you upset?

PG There were some sarcastic-sounding reviews of *Potiki*. Oh, I remember one of *Cousins* too—you know, complaints of it being too ethnic—"very corn row" I think were the words used. They must have had some effect on me, otherwise I wouldn't have remembered. But I work hard on my writing and I don't publish until I'm satisfied that what I've done is the best that I can do at that particular time. So I don't worry. Of course, I do like to get good reviews.

VH So do you have an audience in mind when you're writing?

PG No, because I think that is another restriction—like writing to order. I know that my kids' books are going to be read by children, of course.

VH Do you find writing for children satisfying?

PG I spend much more time on the adult novels and short stories; I find the children's stories very easy to write and very quick to write. The most difficult part is getting an idea. So I don't write a children's book unless an idea happens to me. I think that's why I've written only four.

VH Do you work closely with an illustrator?

PG Yes. The collaboration comes after I've written the story. Once a story is accepted by the publisher, then I can start work with the illustrator. The illustrator's work takes much longer.

VH Do you choose the illustrators?

PG Usually I'm introduced to them.

VH Have you written any poetry?

PG Not for publication.

VH So you do write poetry for yourself?

PG Now and again, yes.

VH Did you experiment with various genres before you settled on fiction, or did you just decide that is what you wanted to write and then get more or less stuck with that?

PG I always knew that the short story was the thing I could do. I wasn't sure whether I could write novels. I experimented with poetry, as well, but I felt comfortable with short stories right from the beginning. Some people write short stories and then go on to writing novels only. I always knew that I would keep on writing short stories no matter how many novels I wrote.

VH Let's think back to the very first short story of yours that got published. Do you remember your feelings about it? Did publication validate your suspicions that you could write?

PG Yes. I joined a writer's group but lived too far away to attend meetings. But I entered the writing competitions and that gave me a start.

I found that I did quite well in those competitions, and sometimes that was helpful, too, because our entries were returned with judges' comments. That gave me a little bit of confidence. Later, some of those stories were published in different journals and magazines. This was over a period of about ten years. Then I was approached by a publisher who contacted me and asked me if I had enough for a collection of short stories. Eventually *Waiariki* was published in 1975.

So I didn't have quite the struggle that some other people have had of sending work round to different publishers. I was actually approached by a publisher.

VH From the success of that you decided to work on a novel?

PG Yes, I thought a novel was my next challenge. I didn't quite know what I was doing. I approached the novel in the same way that I approached a short story—starting with a sentence or two and developing from that. My methods haven't changed.

VH Do you find that as a writer who is Māori that there is pressure for you to write about the racial tensions in New Zealand?

PG I feel some pressure to do it, but it's natural to do it anyway, because everything you experience is important. You write from your own background and experience and you build on that.

VH Do you have Pākehā (white New Zealanders) who are critical of some of your depictions of Pākehā characters, such as Mr Dollar Man in *Potiki*? Do these people question you and chastise you? I think certain readers find it hard to separate the work of fiction from the writer herself?

PG I don't think I've lost friends over it, and if I have, well, it doesn't really matter. Some of the reviewers felt that in *Potiki* all the Māori characters are the good people, while the Pākehā are the baddies. One reviewer called *Potiki* a minor "miracle," with its characters divided into angels and devils, you know. One of the schools tried to have it banned. I'm sorry, I shouldn't say the school did; it was a very small group of parents who tried to get it banned from the school that their children were attending. They said it was written to incite racial tension and create social disharmony. In one article I was called an "agipop." It was a word I'd never heard of.

VH What was your personal response to that kind of interpretation of your work?

PG Well, I knew it wasn't true of my intentions. I'm not at all uncomfortable with "agipop" now that I know what it means. They also thought the writing wasn't proper English and said that children should be studying Shakespeare, not books like *Potiki*. I couldn't take such criticism seriously. I was pleased with the way the school responded to the situation, how they stood up for the book, and how they went about explaining the reasons for choosing the literature the students were to study.

VH Sometimes there is a tendency to think that people who have been colonized don't quite have the tools: you and I know we have a lot of tools at our disposal. What do you think are some of these tools?

PG Tools and material, stories to tell. There are characters who haven't been written about, there's language that hasn't been used in writing, customs that haven't been exposed. We have our own communities to write about, our own interrelationships, our own view of the world, our own spirituality. We have our own ancestors, our own legacy of stories. We have our own particular culture to draw from, but we have our own "world culture" as well. We can take what we want from the colonizing culture too, because we're part of it.

VH One of those things is the way we use language. When you write a novel and you're expressing an idea in English, you don't seem to worry too much about whether you're using standard English or not. Is it because there is something else that is more important to you, such as communication?

PG It's more important to get the voices right, to make the people real. What interests me most in writing are the characters. I'm not so absorbed with plot or theme. My focus is on characters. The story happens because of what happens to the character. Everything belongs to that person. The environments and the circumstances all belong to the character. The voice belongs to the character. The dialogue belongs to the character.

Yet, when it comes to dialogue, there is a trick to it, because if you write the speech of a person exactly as they speak, it can come out quite unintelligible on the page. So then you have to work on that to give the impression of exact speech. This has to be done unobtrusively, so you're bringing the dialogue back to something that flows, rather than something disjointed.

VH I think your focus on characters is perhaps part of the reason why your work doesn't seem to have a very aggressive political side to it. If it's there, it's fine, but it's almost as if you don't set out to make a political statement.

PG I suppose sometimes I have been more deliberate. There is a story in *The Sky People* that is really about nuclear testing and nuclear weapons called "Sun's Marbles," and there's another called "Ngati Kangaru" that's a satirical work. I suppose they're more overtly political.

VH When you write with a theme in mind, how does that affect the writing process? Is there a shift from the characters to the plot?

PG That process is different, yes. "Sun's Marbles" has a parallel in mythology. Maui, Sun, and Sky are characters, but it's really about how people behave toward each other and toward the environment. "Ngati Kangaru" parallels the activities of "The New Zealand Company" set up in the 1800s for the purpose of obtaining Māori land.

VH Am I right in thinking that now you write full-time?

PG Yes. In 1985, I was given a fellowship at Victoria University. I left my teaching job to take up the fellowship. Then I decided not to go back to teaching, but to become a full-time writer instead.

VH How do you remain connected to the people you write about, because it's so easy for writers, I think, to cut themselves off. It's a very lonely business, and you have to do it on your own. How do you maintain that connectedness to the community?

PG I have a large family and I live in a place where everyone is related to me, so I haven't got the luxury of being very private. Sometimes I wish I had more privacy, but when I think about it, I know it wouldn't be good for me. I'm not very good at being an isolated person.

I've grown up with extended family. I'm part of that family. Writing isn't my life. My life is my life. Sometimes it's tempting to try and find a bit more time to myself, but I don't need it. I need family, people. I have a little bit less time for writing than I would like sometimes, but you can't have it every way.

VH So how do you find time to write then?

PG I just try to make sure that I do at least four hours of writing a day. I go walking for about an hour in the morning, and when I come home, I try to do at least four hours of solid work. Most days I achieve it.

VH What do your readers have to look forward to, those readers out there who expect you to churn out these books?

PG I'm very slow. It took me about four years to write *Cousins*. I always admire writers who say "I'm just finishing off such and such a book, and I've started on this book, and after that I will do this book." How do they do that? I'm working on a novel at the moment.

VH What would you say is the main motivating factor that keeps you writing?

PG I keep wanting to explore, that's probably my main motivation. I want to go where the writing leads me and find out how I'm going to be able to put across what I want to say. I'm looking for new things to do all the time, new ways of reaching out.

VH Do the works of other writers interest you? Do you try to read what other writers say, and learn from them, or do you try not to let others' work affect your own?

PG I do a lot of reading. I find that when I'm reading something that I really enjoy, something that's good, I feel stimulated. My writing gets a lift. But the last thing I want to do is copy someone else.

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