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# What do New Zealand picturebooks tell us about New Zealand national identity?

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## **Abstract**

Jeffries (2004, p. 4) defines national identity as '...a shared sense of belonging of a group of people that depends on a common area of named place, a common set of beliefs and values, and positive feelings for a specific named geographical area'. In her examination of how New Zealand culture is portrayed in picturebooks published between 2000 and 2005, McNeur (2006) suggests that the visual and textual messages in children's picturebooks are an important contributor

to the development of children's national identity. This paper describes the process of choosing a collection of 22 New Zealand children's picturebooks (known as the New Zealand PictureBook Collection) to reflect and represent diversity in New Zealand national identity, and analyses what these books tell us about the New Zealand national identity.

## **Introduction**

In her discussion of the ways in which New Zealand culture is portrayed in

New Zealand picturebooks published between 2000 and 2005, McNeur (2006, p. 74) comments that “picture books are one of the first ways that young children experience a secondary representation of the world. The combination of text and illustrations...[means that]... messages are being sent visually and linguistically”. McNeur argues that cultural identity is [partially] constructed through exposure to such ideas and images. Many writers agree about the power of children’s books to increase the cultural awareness of children being read to, although in fact it is difficult to find specific research studies of this area. Galda and Cullinan comment on the power of children’s books to create a society in which people from diverse backgrounds are able to embrace commonly held values and to celebrate differences. In her discussion of the effect of children’s literature on readers’ identities, McVeagh (2003, p. 89) says that “what we read opens up other people’s worlds to us”, and “[books] are helping to shape our cultural consciousness in positive ways” (McVeagh, 2003, p. 94).

Research from several areas of the world has examined how children’s picturebooks reflect the national identity of a nation (Bainbridge, 2002; Bainbridge & Wolodko, 2002; Desai, 2006; Johnston, Bainbridge, Mangat, & Skogen, 2006; MacKintosh, 2006; Williams, 2001). Desai (2006) discusses how the images used in English language children’s literature in Malaysia reflect the national identity of Malaysia. Williams has examined the role of a Czech story (*Brouci*) in the development of the Czech national identity, and how a Nepali story of a frog relates to the national identity

of the Nepali people. MacKintosh (2006) examined how Australian picturebooks published in 2005 refer to aspects of Australian national identity. Bainbridge (2002) reported an action research study consisting of monthly meetings between a group of nine elementary and middle school teachers over a one-year period, in which the teachers discussed their use of Canadian literature in the classroom and the importance of including Canadian books in their classroom teaching. Amongst the findings reported by Bainbridge (2002, p. 70) was that the use of these texts had an impact on the “the development of Canadian children’s identities and ways of thinking”.

There have been several studies of national identity in New Zealand children’s literature (Jeffries, 2004; Hebley, 1998; McNeur, 2006; Moore, 2007; Stiven, 2005). Jeffries (2004) analysed 15 New Zealand books nominated for the New Zealand Post Book Awards, and 18 nominated for the Australian Children’s Book Council Awards, and found that in terms of inclusion of reference to national identity picturebooks were the poorest format (the other two categories included junior fiction and senior fiction). Hebley’s (1998) doctoral research examined the place of landscape in New Zealand children’s fiction published between 1970 and 1989. She surmises that New Zealand’s geography has two implications for New Zealand writers of children’s fiction: seascapes are ever-present (as no New Zealander lives more than 130km from the sea), and volcanic or tectonic activity is a part of the national conscious (as New Zealand lies on a fault line). Stiven (2005) surveyed 47 books in the New Zealand junior fiction category

written between 1999 and 2003 to see if authors made reference to aspects of New Zealand national identity. Her findings showed that “New Zealand writers, rather than delocating their stories, include aspects of national identity, both through settings and characters, and intrinsically through characters actions, attitudes and idiom” (p. 49).

Moore (2007) explored national identity through the visual imagery used in the New Zealand School Journal. She argues that while the role of art in New Zealand has been discussed with relation to national identity, illustrations have not been included in such analysis, and yet as an ongoing publication, the School Journal “has offered us many ways to imagine ourselves as a kind of community of possibilities – always becoming” (p. 23). Moore established that there were two ways in which School Journal illustrations established a New Zealand setting, and these were reference to flora and fauna, and reference to Maori visual culture.

McNeur (2006) analysed a random sample of 50 books from the 310 books published in New Zealand between 2000 and 2005, with the primary aim of gaining an understanding of how New Zealand culture was represented in New Zealand children’s literature published in that five year frame. This analysis of text and illustration also showed that flora and fauna and Maori images and language were the most frequent elements found in the picturebooks contributing to “the communication of a unique culture and setting” (p. 75). McNeur also commented that the books in her sample gave an overall impression of a conservative lifestyle in that family structures were limited to

nuclear families with some reference to grandparents, and that ethnic minorities including migrant communities and refugee groups were vastly under-represented.

The use of picturebooks in a collection as a resource for raising cultural and linguistic awareness related to national identity in the European context has been described by Cotton (1999) who, with a group of colleagues, established the European Picture Book Collection (EPBC), a set of 20 picturebooks representing 15 European member states. These books were selected by children’s book specialists from each of the countries in order to create a resource which “implements a European dimension in primary education” (p. 146). It was this collection which inspired the development of the New Zealand Picture Book Collection (NZPBC), He Kohinga Pukapuka Pikitia (Daly & McKoy, 2013), a set of 22 New Zealand picturebooks, chosen by a group of six teachers, authors and librarians to reflect diversity in the New Zealand identity. In this article I wish to explore the ways in which books nominated to be included in the NZPBC reflect the New Zealand identity. What do they tell us about what being a New Zealander is?

## **Methodology**

As has been reported elsewhere (Daly & McKoy, 2013), after ethical approval was obtained, a regular meeting of a local children’s literature group was approached, the purpose of the project described, and volunteer participants requested. Six members of the group subsequently agreed to be part of the project. The six were all

female, ranging from 40 to 69 years in age, and were either primary school teachers or school librarians who belonged to the regional children's literature association. A series of five evening meetings lasting between 90 and 120 minutes were held over a 3 month period, the prime purpose being to identify books to be included in the collection. At each of the first four meetings participants brought along a New Zealand picturebook which they believed deserved to belong to a collection of picturebooks reflecting diversity in New Zealand national identity, and these books were read aloud and then discussed. Before the fifth and final meeting the participants were sent a list of the 35 books nominated and the final meeting was spent discussing the set of books nominated. Based on votes from all participants, the final 22 picturebooks of the New Zealand Picture Book Collection were finalized (see Appendix for list).

A research assistant was also present at all meetings taking field notes of the books nominated and summarising the discussion. These field notes were sent out to all participants by e-mail within a few days of each meeting and participants were invited to make any amendments and add any further comments before they were analysed for themes concerning why books were chosen to reflect identity in New Zealand identity which will be described in the next section.

## Findings

Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), seven themes were identified in the field notes taken about discussions relating to why certain picturebooks should be nominated. They included: 1)

2) caring for others; 2) diversity in the range of ethnicities of characters and in family types represented; 3) the New Zealand environment including urban and rural landscapes and flora and fauna; 4) the use of New Zealand English phrases and words; 5) Maori culture; 6) the importance of New Zealand history; and 7) contemporary New Zealand lifestyle. These themes will now be discussed in turn, and links made to the existing literature concerning New Zealand national identity and children's literature.

### *Caring for others*

The theme of caring for others was evident in many of the books nominated: Aunt Mary in *A Present from the Past* cares about her ancestors and wants to give Emily the same feeling (Beck & Fisher, 2005); the young couple in *Coming Home* (McMillan & Gunson, 2004) care about the house and the wife cares about the creatures displaced in the renovations; everyone cares about Tane in *Tane Steals the Show* (Nelisi & Hunter, 1997); Nick and Sally care for Rachel's happiness in *The House that Grew* (Strathdee & Wallace, 1979); Pukeko cares for Kakapo, in *Booming in the Night* (Brown, 2005). This theme is not one identified by previous research in the area of New Zealand national identity and children's literature.

### *Diversity*

Given that participants were specifically asked to nominate books which reflected diversity in New Zealand identity, it is not surprising that diversity was a theme in discussions. This theme came in three different areas: ethnicity, family type and range of perspectives.



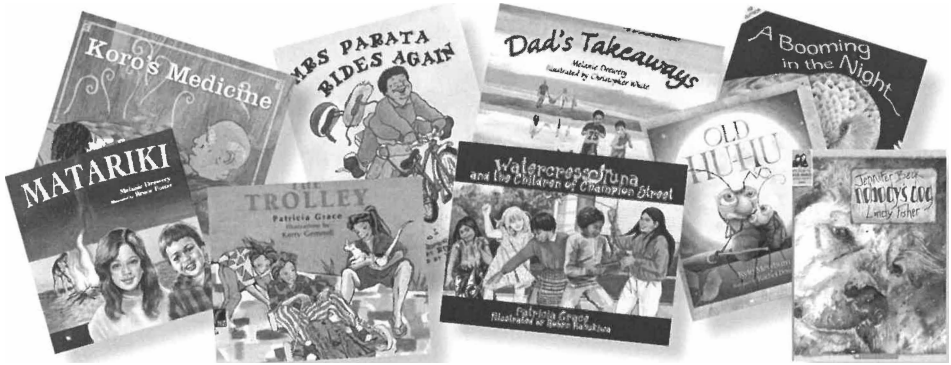
In nominating *Watercress Tuna and the Children of Champion Street* (Grace & Kahukiwa, 1984), *Uncle Hone's Cloak* (Holt & Simpson, 2003), and *The Terrible Taniwha of Timberditch* (Cowley & McRae, 1982) participants noted the range of cultures represented among the characters in the book. The importance of the Pasifika population in New Zealand is foregrounded by the illustrations in *Tane Steals the Show* (Nelisi & Hunter 1997), which represents a Pasifika celebration and gives a great deal of detail with regard to hair style and clothing.

Diversity in family types was also evident in the picturebooks nominated (see Daly, 2016 for a fuller analysis). For example *Matatuhi* (Kahukiwa, 2006) showed the experience of being an adopted child, and that of two cultures coming together. *Selafina* (Hannken & Bowles, 2003) features a Palagi mother in a Samoan family, evident only in the illustrations. In discussions it was noted that the mixed-cultural family is a reality for many New Zealand children. The blended second family which is obvious in the illustrations of *Dad's Takeaways* (Drewery & White, 2007), the

representation of a split family in *Every Second Friday* (Lightfoot & Galbraith, 2008), and the single mothers in Patricia Grace's *The Trolley* and Drewery's *Matariki* were also discussed in light of the experience of many New Zealand children.

Diversity was also evident in the way in which some books nominated represented a range of perspectives on a subject. For example, Drewery's *Matariki* gives a range of ways of understanding the Pleiades star cluster. *Old Huhu* (Mewburn & Driscoll, 2009) was likewise nominated as the main character in this story searches for an explanation of death amongst his friends and hears many different perspectives. *Koro's Medicine* (Drewery & Malcolm, 2004) also offers contrasting perspectives, this time about medicine, when a young boy visits his koro and learns about *rongoā* or Maori medicine.

By the second to last meeting it was evident that books featuring new New Zealanders (recent migrants and refugees) had not yet been nominated, and so a special request was made for such books to be sought out if possible. However, it appears that there is a large gap in this



area. Two books were suggested, but ensuing group discussion based on the participants' considerable experience of reading books to and buying books for children concluded that they were either unappealing to children or used stereotyped images in their illustrations which made them unsuitable for inclusion in the collection.

The lack of cultural representation in the children's picturebooks published in New Zealand was also noted by McNeur: "Asian people were vastly under-represented as were prominent migrant or refugee groups such as Somali and Iraqis" (2006, p. 69). If, as Jobe (2003, p. 80) notes in his discussion of the representation of cultural identity in Canadian picturebooks, "all children should have the right to see themselves reflected in the books they read, such imaging is crucial for developing a positive self concept and a sense of who we are..." this invisibility of certain groups in New Zealand picturebooks has implications both for the self concept of new New Zealand children and their feeling of belonging to their new country. It also has implications for the lack of opportunity provided for other children in

the class to learn more about new arrivals, and the stories they bring. Both of these are missed opportunities to authentically reflect the changing nature of what it means to be a New Zealander.

The diversity of family types represented in the books being chosen, and the participants' awareness of this, contrasts with the dominant representation of family groups as nuclear families, as found by McNeur, 2006. However, it must be noted that no books representing same-sex parents were nominated or included in the collection (Kelly, 2012). It is important that the diversity of family make up and culture is represented in the books being read to children, for the reasons outlined by Jobe above.

### *The New Zealand environment*

The importance of seeing the urban places of New Zealand, including urban elements such as the state housing and the telephone poles, was noted during the nomination of the *Watercress Tuna and the Children of Champion Street* (Grace & Kahukiwa, 1984), and, conversely, illustrations featuring New Zealand countryside as in *Kimi and the*

*Watermelon* (Smith & Armitage, 1983). *Dad's Takeaways* (Drewery & White, 2007) was nominated because shellfish can be collected at beaches all around New Zealand. That many New Zealand houses are wooden was discussed with respect to the nomination of *Coming Home* (MacMillan & Gunson, 2004), and the reference to finials in the nomination of *The House that Grew* (Strathdee & Wallace, 1979). The importance of the authentic little beach side community (including dairy, roads, garage and community activities such as walking, fishing, cleaning the roof) was an important reason for the nomination of *Mrs. Parata Rides Again* (Darroch & Darroch, 2004). The New Zealand character of the environment illustrated in *Nobody's Dog* (Beck & Fisher, 2005) including the landscapes, barbed-wire fences, the rugby shirt worn, and South Island beach scenes was also discussed.

*Booming in the Night* (Brown & Taylor, 2005) was nominated to ensure that books reflecting New Zealand flora and fauna were represented. *Tabi, One Lucky Kiwi* (Drewery, O'Reilly & Teo, 2005) was nominated partly because it involved a Kiwi, a well-known icon of New Zealand. Similarly, New Zealand flora and fauna were mentioned in discussions of *Every Second Friday, The Terrible Taniwha of Timberditch* (Cowley & McRae, 2009), and *Coming Home* (MacMillan & Gunson, 2004).

The prominence of the New Zealand environment and especially the importance of the seaside has been noted in the other literature about the reflection of New Zealand national identity in children's literature. McNeur notes that landscape "is a key aspect in conveying a sense of

place to readers" (2006, p. 58). Both Hebley (1998) and Stiven (2005) point to the special place of seascapes in the New Zealand consciousness. What is perhaps unique about the findings from the present study is the importance of the New Zealand urban landscape, commented on by several participants, in terms of certain types of buildings, and power lines.

### ***Use of New Zealand English phrases and words***

The use of distinctively New Zealand words and phrases was evidenced in the discussions of several books. The use of the word 'cuzzies' to mean 'cousins' in *Haere. Farewell, Jack, Farewell* (Tipene & Smith, 2006) was noted and participants commented that the language use in this book was very authentic. In *Selafina* (Hannken & Bowles, 2003) several Samoan words were included in the text, and in *The Video Shop Sparrow* (Cowley & Bishop, 1999), the phrase 'up north' was identified as one often used in New Zealand English. Conversely in several books very non-New Zealand words were used, for example, the use of 'forest' in *Booming in the Night* (Brown & Taylor, 2005) when one would have expected 'bush'. There was discussion amongst participants about whether this was a deliberate use to make the book more acceptable to a wider (non-New Zealand) audience. In *Tabi, One Lucky Kiwi* (Drewery & Malcolm, 2004), it was noted that the plural *kiwi* is used, reflecting Maori convention rather than the 's' of English which is common in contemporary New Zealand English.

Stiven and McNeur examined the use of New Zealand idiom as part of the exploration of how New Zealand culture

or identity was represented in New Zealand books. In previous studies I have examined the use of Maori loanwords in New Zealand English children's picturebooks published between 1995 and 2005 and the link made by readers of these books between the use of such loanwords and New Zealand national identity. At 45 per thousand, the use of Maori loanwords in the NZPBC was at a much higher level than that found in many other contexts such as New Zealand School Journals, New Zealand newspapers and Hansard records (6-8.8 per thousand, Macalister, 2006) and 497 books published between 1995 and 2005 in New Zealand (13 words per thousand, Macdonald & Daly, 2013).

### Maori culture

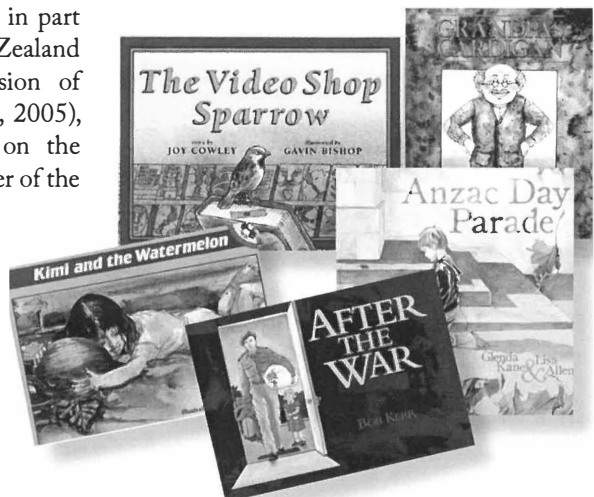
Several previous studies have noted the importance within the broader New Zealand identity of reference to Maori culture both visually (Moore, 2007; McNeur, 2006) and textually (McNeur, 2006), and this is also found in the discussions of the participants in the present study. Thus *The Terrible Taniwha of Timberditch* (Cowley & McRae, 2009) was nominated in part because the taniwha is a New Zealand character. In the group discussion of *Battle of the Mountains* (Gossage, 2005), several discussants commented on the particularly New Zealand character of the illustrations, and the importance of New Zealand readers knowing Maori legends. *Matariki* (Drewery & Potter, 2004), for example, reflects an important day celebrated in schools and homes throughout New Zealand which is uniquely

Maori in origin.

*Counting the Stars* (Bishop, 2009), a collection of four illustrated Maori legends, portrays the Maori perspective through powerful illustrations which work well with a text which is both poetic and colloquial. Participants commented on the importance of this Maori knowledge for all New Zealanders. The same was said of the knowledge about *rongōā* ('Maori medicine') in *Koro's Medicine* (Drewery & Malcolm, 2004) and the juxtaposition of European and Maori perspectives on early New Zealand colonial history in *The House that Jack Built* (Bishop, 1999).

### New Zealand history

*Kimi and the Watermelon* (Smith & Armitage, 1983) and *After the War* (Kerr, 1999) provide the opportunity to talk about domestic history such as home baked bread, tea in a tea pot and home-based 'chooks'. *The House that Jack Built* (Bishop, 1999) offers the opportunity to discuss colonial New Zealand history as the illustrations show the story of an English



settler coming to New Zealand. At first the Maori motif in illustrations is strong, and then as time goes by and New Zealand is colonised, it fades. The importance of New Zealand history to the construct of New Zealand national identity has not been mentioned in previous work examining how national identity is reflected in New Zealand children's literature.

### **Contemporary New Zealand lifestyle**

The idea of 'kiwiana' came up during discussions of nominated books also. In *After the War* (Kerr, 1999), the illustrations showing a well known brand of soap powder, 'Rinso' boxes, 'Rua' potatoes, and an Edmonds Cookbook were noted, as was the New Zealand character of the clothes worn in *Selafina* (Hannken & Bowles, 2003), and also in *Grandpa's Cardigan* (Watson & Hodson, 1994). The illustrations in *The Video Shop Sparrow* (Cowley & Bishop, 1999) show the New Zealand summer Christmas, and the fact that businesses close down at that time of year. This story also shows New Zealand children standing up for the underdog, another New Zealand trait. As previously noted, the practice of digging pipi (a shellfish) with your toes and collecting shellfish from rocks was described as a very New Zealand activity depicted in *Dad's Takeaways* (Drewery & White, 2007). In *Present from the Past* (Beck & Fisher, 2006) Aunt Mary had to take a long trip to get to England, and this was discussed as being a part of the reality of being a New Zealander too. New Zealanders often have to travel a long way when travelling overseas. *Anzac Day* (Kane & Allen, 2010) was nominated because of the importance of this day in the New

Zealand character and identity.

*Nobody's Dog* (Beck & Fisher, 2005) presents a contrast between a tough farming temperament which includes a certain functional attitude to farming dogs, and the artistic temperament of the young boy who is the main character. *The Whale Rider* (Ihimaera & Potter, 2005) was nominated partly because it shows that girls can be leaders, and in *Tabi, One Lucky Kiwi* (Drewery & Malcolm, 2004), the main character stood up and spoke in front of the class each morning, as is the tradition in New Zealand classrooms, and there was a discussion of the skill involved. The importance of humour in *The Kuia and the Spider* (Grace & Kahukiwa, 1984), and in *Every Second Friday* (Lightfoot & Galbraith, 2008) was noted by participants. In the conversation about the nomination of *Coming Home* (MacMillan & Gunson, 2004), the prevalent expectation that New Zealanders will 'buy a house' and probably make improvements (or 'do one up') was identified.

McNeur (2006) explores the representation of 'national characteristics' in the books she analyses, and refers to hunting and fishing, the laconic attitude and the stereotypical 'Kiwi bloke'. Dialogue among participants in the present study touched on a broader range of aspects of contemporary New Zealand life including kiwiana, New Zealand dress, gender and power relations, national days (ANZAC day), humour, travel requirements and attitudes to house buying and renovation.

### **Conclusion**

In answer to the question posed at the start of this article, what do picturebooks nominated to be included in the NZPBC

tell us about the New Zealand national identity?, analysis of the field notes from five 2 hour discussions revealed seven themes. These themes included many of the factors discussed in previous literature examining how New Zealand identity/culture is reflected in children's literature: diversity of ethnicity and family types represented, New Zealand environment including both landscape and flora and fauna, use of New Zealand idiom, Maori culture, and links to contemporary New Zealand life (Hebley, 1998; Jeffries, 2004; Stiven, 2005; McNeur, 2006). Areas unique to the present study were caring for others, the importance of history to the New Zealand identity, and the representation of urban landscapes. The considerable diversity represented in the books in terms of family structures, and ethnicity in the picturebooks, was encouraging, but there were limitations. However, that the picturebooks nominated for inclusion in the New Zealand Picture Book Collection, He Kohinga Pukapuka Pikitia are such rich reflections of what participants consider to be New Zealand national identity, reinforces the oft quoted definition of a picturebook by Bader (1976, p. 1): "A picturebook is a text, illustrations, total design, an item of manufacture and a commercial product, **a social, cultural, historical document**; and foremost an experience for a child" [bold added].

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### Picturebooks

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- Holt, S. & Simpson, M. (2003). *Uncle Hone's cloak*. Wellington, N.Z., Learning Media.
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## Appendix:

Twenty two books nominated for New Zealand Picture Book Collection (NZPBC)

- Beck, Jennifer. *Nobody's Dog*. Auckland: Scholastic. Illustrator: Lindy Fisher, 2005.
- Bishop, Gavin. *Counting the stars*. Auckland: Random House. Illustrator: Gavin Bishop, 2009.
- Bishop, Gavin. *The house that Jack built*. Auckland: Scholastic. Illustrator: Gavin Bishop, 1999.
- Brown, Ben. *A booming in the night*. Auckland: Reed. Illustrator: Helen Taylor, 2005.
- Cowley, Joy. *The terrible taniwha of Timberditch* [1982]. Auckland: Puffin. Illustrator: Rodney McRae, 2009.
- Dodd, Lynley. *Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy* [1983]. Wellington: Mallinson Rendel, 2005.
- Drewery, Melanie. *Dad's takeaways*. Wellington: Mallinson Rendel. Illustrator: Christopher White, 2007.
- Drewery, Melanie. *Tabi, one lucky kiwi*. Auckland: Random. Illustrators: John O'Reilly and Ali Teo, 2007.
- Gossage, Peter. *Battle of the mountains*. Auckland: Reed Publishing. Illustrator: author, 2005.
- Grace, Patricia. *Watercress Tuna and the children of Champion Street*. Auckland: Puffin. Illustrator: Robyn Kahukiwa, 1984.
- Grace, Patricia. *The kuia and the spider*. Auckland: Puffin. Illustrator: Robyn Kahukiwa, 1983.
- Grace, Patricia. *The trolley*. Auckland: Viking. Illustrator: K. Gemmill, 1993.
- Ihimaera, Witi. *The whale rider*. Auckland: Reed. Illustrator: Bruce Potter, 2005.
- Kerr, Bob. *After the war*. Wellington: Mallinson Rendel. Illustrator: author, 2000.
- Lightfoot, Kiri. *Every second Friday*. London: Hodder. Illustrator: Ben Galbraith, 2008.
- Mahy, Margaret. *A Summery Saturday Morning*. Auckland: Puffin Books. Illustrator: Selina Young, 1999.
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- Smith, Miriam. *Kimi and the watermelon*. Auckland: Puffin. Illustrator: David Armitage, 1983.
- Strathdee, Jean. *The house that grew*. Wellington: Oxford University Press. Illustrator: Jessica Wallace, 1979.
- Tipene, Tim. *Haere: Farewell, Jack, farewell*. Wellington: Huia. Illustrator: Huhana Smith, 2006.
- Tipene, Tim. *Taming the taniwha*. Wellington: Huia. Illustrator: Henry Campbell, 2005.

