

ENDNOTES:

1. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (Cambridge, USA: Harvard UP, 1993).
2. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).
3. Emile Durkheim, *Primitive Classification*, (London: Cohen and West, 1963).
4. I.T. Smith, "Ko Taku Ko Ta Te Maori: The Dilemma of a Maori Academic", paper presented at Deakin University NZARE/AARE Conference, 1992.
5. Isabelle Allende, *House of the Spirits*, (Toronto: Bantam, 1986).
6. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1968).
7. Toni Morrison (1993).
8. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

*Submissions*

The Editors of *Te Pua* welcome contributions from Maori women writers and artists. Submissions should be sent direct to:

The Editor, *Te Pua*

C/- Education Department

University of Auckland, Private Bag, Auckland

All submissions are subject to a refereeing process.

Work should be submitted as a clean, double spaced hard copy,

and if possible a computer disc

(almost all formats are acceptable).

Return of copy cannot be guaranteed.

Authors should retain a copy of their work.

The next Issue of *Te Pua* will be published in 1994.

*Order Information*

To order further copies of *Te Pua* 1, or future copies, write to

The Business Manager

*Te Pua*

C/- Education Department

University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland

Copies of the first Volume are available at \$25.00

Further copies of this double issue

(Volume 2, No 1 and 2, 1993) are available at \$30.00

Bulk purchase and education discounts are available

on application.

## Between the Roses and the Taupata

J. C. Sturm has been writing for more than fifty years. Since 1947, when one of her poems was accepted by a student newspaper, her stories, articles, reviews and poetry have appeared in various periodicals and anthologies. A collection of short stories *The House of the Talking Cat* was published in 1983; some of these stories have been broadcast in Germany and translated into Swedish, Japanese and Braille. She completed a collection of poems at the beginning of 1994 and is currently working on another collection of stories.

She is half Maori and considers herself to be a Maori writer. She worked as a librarian for twenty three years, and retired two years ago in a small seaside village just north of Wellington. A widow and great grandmother, she counts herself lucky in having most of her family living close by. Briar Wood conducted this interview in July 1994.

*Can we begin by talking about how you started writing?*

I used to write about what I could see from the windows. We had a wonderful view of Kapiti Island and the sea and the coast and everything. It was all very juvenile. I wasn't very well at the time and in the end I had to be taken inland. The doctor described me as being waterlogged, which is a curious phrase. It wasn't really until my third year at varsity that I remember sitting down and consciously writing something again. And in those days most of it was verse of a kind. I had one or two things published in the student rag and then I entered one of the student competitions and I was highly commended in the annual competition which was won by a man called James K. Baxter.

I didn't actually meet him then, but I met him through a friend of a friend who I suspect thought it would be fun to bring the two of us together. The next thing I knew, I was seeing quite a bit of this young man who was regarded as an up and coming writer. He had just had *Beyond the Pailsade*, his first book, published. I came to learn how a real writer wrote; I learnt a lot in those early days from the man whom I eventually married about writing and that it wasn't all this romantic airy fairy stuff at all. It was sheer hard work, right? And that there was a business side to it like anything else. And also,

which I hadn't realized, that it was pretty competitive. I was a bit disillusioned by all this. I didn't actually write again seriously after I was a student. I left varsity and we got married and I still wanted to do an MA, which I did and at the same time I learned what it was like to live with an artist. They're the hardest working people I know.

After I'd finished my degree and had my second child—I can't quite remember through whom it was or how come—but at this late date (I was now in my middle to late twenties) I 'discovered' Katherine Mansfield. I was completely bowled over. In the meantime I'd learnt quite a bit about various New Zealand writers and about poets. I thought: I think I could write a story, and I did. And another one. And so on. There was a group of writers in Wellington, young married with families, struggling with jobs they didn't particularly like, still writing, trying to find their niche in the literary world. Exciting place to be in, if you didn't lose your head.

I think *Numbers*<sup>1</sup> published my very first story and before I knew where I was I was writing very happily. I found that with two young children, when they were having their middle of the day nap I'd write a bit and I found I could think about things while I was scrubbing the nappies and so on. And so from the early nineteen fifties up until 1986 I wrote stories and I had them published. I was turned down consistently and quite firmly by several magazines and especially *Landfall*. But in the end I had enough—length-wise, for a book and I looked at it and I rearranged it so that it hung together—I dropped out one or two of them—and I had a collection. No-one was interested so I thought right, OK, into the bottom drawer.

By this time our lives had changed somewhat and, in 1968, my husband decided to go up the Whanganui River, which as a Maori is not my stamping ground. By now we were in our middle forties and suddenly I had chosen to look after a new baby, my granddaughter and I certainly wasn't going to go and rough it on the banks of the Whanganui River. That's part of the story. So he went north and did that, and I returned to Wellington (we'd been living in Dunedin for three years, where he'd been the Burns scholar) and I concentrated on looking after my granddaughter. I suddenly had to join the work force. I didn't write another thing for eighteen years.

Some time after my husband died I was asked to give a reading or to take part in a reading at the Women's Gallery in Wellington. Keri Hulme was there. She read that night. I read. Jean Watson did. Roma Potiki. I read one of the stories, and people were very moved. In fact some of them were in tears. Then afterwards, out of the blue,

I was asked if I had any stories for publication and of course I had this whole book, so I gave it to this person who turned out to be one of the chief editors at Spiral Collective. They approached Keri Hulme at the same time; she'd done the rounds, like me—and no-one wanted to know. Well, Spiral took us both on, in the same year. And that put me on the map as a short story writer. But I'd left it behind. For practical reasons. I wasn't made of such stern stuff that I could do a full day's work and then get up and write at five o'clock in the morning and then again at nine o'clock at night. With verse you can write it and learn it and carry it in your head until you've got a private moment. But it was too much for me; I was getting a bit split.

I've been writing -verse since my granddaughter's twenty-first birthday, until this year I ended up with a collection of poems. I've been turned down by three publishers. So it's not quite as painful as the short stories because I've been there, done that.

So now I've got this collection of verse and some of it's been published. Before I sent the collection away I had some published in *Landfall*,<sup>2</sup> a group of three, then another one in *Landfall*.<sup>3</sup> There's a small anthology called *Kapiti Poems*<sup>4</sup> and I've been in the last two annual editions of that. And also a couple in *Te Ao Marama*.<sup>5</sup> I went to Scandinavia and read in Oslo of all places. Seems like a dream now. There was a gap of twenty years when I didn't do anything, it's a funny thing writing, in the end it has to be visible, but there's an awful lot of it which is invisible. When I did start writing again it was as though I'd been writing all that time and I suppose, in a sense, I had, inside myself. About three weeks ago, I actually finished my first short story since 1968. I've got one more I want to do. Being older, I find it more tiring, and what I want to say now is harder to say.

*Were the earlier stories, like "The Too Good Membership" easy to write?*

I wrote "The Too Good Membership" in the same way as I wrote another story "For All the Saints" and "Jerusalem" which actually preceded the famous Jerusalem that my husband put on the map later on. Each of these stories has got a local colour, a context, but what I'm writing about is relationships. Of people. Attitudes of people to one another.

*And to place?*

To place. And how they react within their cultural limitations. I hate to use the word cultural clashing but, if you like, cultural meeting. So that given these basic matters of relationship between adults and

children, men and women, women and women, men and men; this basic structure, is the complexity of where you're coming from culturally, where you find yourself, how you react to it.

*How do some of the poems deal with cultural negotiations? Some aspects of being Maori, for example?*

Being Maori—even that is itself terribly difficult to talk about. To my way of thinking you can't talk about a Maori, you can't talk about Maori or Maoridom because there are so many different kinds of Maori. You've got the biological differences of age and gender and things like health, education, religion, economics. There are as many different kinds of Maori as there are Maori.

*So, say, the poems "Splitting the Stone" or "At the Museum"—do those poems negotiate aspects of Maori identity?*

In "Splitting the Stone" you've got a fairly straight forward surface description of a particular incident.

*Why was the stone being split?*

It was being split by someone who had to do it as an assignment. He had to make a pounder.

*What would the pounder have been used for?*

In the old days it would have been used for pounding roots or fibrous material. And something went awry. The stone split. And in the end, he did something quite different. He actually carved. It split, and there was no way he could make a pounder. As an artist, then, it was the splitting—this is where you get onto the metaphorical part of it—it's then that you become creative. It's then that you stop doing what you set out to do, expected to do, what you've been told to do. Something beyond your control splits that wide open and then you start working creatively. At the end of it, the Maori artist stood back and looked in wonder at what he'd done, nursing a bruised hand. It was when he gave up trying to impose his will on the stone that he was then able actually to be creative with it.

*What about "In the Museum"?*

Well, the only way I can cope with the museum is as a metaphor—because what is it? It's the leftovers of people's lives. I find them very disturbing places, yet as a student I spent a lot of time in them. But to go back to "Splitting the Stone", it's come to me really in the last year or two that this is the process of writing—that as an artist you start off with an idea, you start off with an incident, you may even start off with a theory and you write something about any one of these things or all of them as the case may be, but the end product is still something which you haven't counted on. There is a

change involved. Things won't be worked out right from the beginning. You'll let the thing take it's own course. And I did that and believe me it was really hard work. Because I wanted to straighten it, tidy it, bring it into line.

*The poems you're working on at present—how would you describe those in relation to that process?*

In the beginning of the writing of verse again was this verse for the twenty-first birthday. In the end, I suddenly realized what I was doing. In a way, I was writing about my relationship to people and things I cared about. And so each poem is dedicated to a person or to something I feel really strongly about. In some cases I'm communicating with a person, writing about the relationship between the two of us, some shared experience or some shared feeling.

In "Letter To Jean"—I'm writing to Jean Watson who works at an orphanage in India. I wrote two poems for her. The poem just published in *Kapiti Poems* is about the orphans she cares for, but I've dedicated the poem to her. "Splitting the Stone" is dedicated to my son. One or two to friends.

*The relationship to India is interesting.*

"The Too Good Mensahib" and the letter to my friend in India—they're different Indias.

*Historically, do people from that generation have a particular relation to India, do you think? What's involved in the ideas of India you're writing about?*

Well, you're talking about a controlled situation. In actual fact hardly anything, looking back on it, in my life as a writer, has been controlled. It's been sparked off by accidentals. Being ill pre-puberty, meeting and marrying a writer, the fact that my husband was approached by UNESCO to go to India and he was given a UNESCO grant; and he took me and the two children. I'm now talking about 1958. The place was still shaky, the dust hadn't settled from independence. I went purely as a wife and housewife. My son was only five. My daughter was only eight. We went on a single research grant. In other words, we weren't in the moneyed class at all, and we weren't living as wealthy Europeans in the diplomatic corps. We got to know those sort of people. We were living with middle class Indians in a middle class house in a middle class suburb, with a middle class landlord living above us. And we lived there for five months. So Jean's India, where she works in an orphanage in the 1980s is different from what I knew in the 1950s with my husband. There's no causal connection except that it happened to me and to her

and we're still friends. It could well be that she'll go back to India. I said, half jokingly: next time you go back to India, I'd like to go with you.

*So your work is about the desire to cross over cultural boundaries and the difficulties of that?*

And also about the limitations of planning—the planning of one's life, one's work, the conceit that you know what you're doing, where you're at and what you're going to do next. And looking back and saying, ah yes, I know why I did that—I don't believe in those things any more. I'm not saying I'm right, all I'm saying is that for me now as a writer I've had to throw a lot overboard.

*How does that connect to ideas of crossing cultural boundaries?*

It is hard to talk about myself as a Maori writer without talking about myself as a Maori—and the kind of Maori I am. In some ways I've got a leg in both cultures but I find it more comfortable not to be on either side completely; I find it more comfortable, I was even going to say, more profitable, to stand between. To hark back to "Splitting the Stone," when the stone is split, the artist stands in the small place between the roses and the taupata; it is there that the creative process takes place. And I am here talking quite simply and obviously metaphorically. The roses refer to his Pakeha side and the taupata refers to his Maori side and the small green space between is where the artist works. If you're free in that space you are free to write about both or neither. If you want to write about India you can, if you want to write about the moon you can, you don't have to write about one or the other or even the interaction between the two of them, let alone the clash. So long as your being as a writer is in that small space between—that's where I try and stay. As a person, that's where I found myself as a child and that's where I've lived my life, in that small space between.

*In terms of the poems you've written, could you say that there was any relationship between specific Maori cultural ideas or form or structures that have influenced your work, or is that an unconscious thing?*

Again, to put it into words is to make it slightly superficial, but words are all we've got. I consider myself a Maori writer, whether my work has any Maori content or not because we're talking about a way of looking, a way of feeling and a way of being. I'd even go so far as to say it's got nothing to do with deep knowledge of anything specifically Maori. I used to feel guilty that I wasn't fluent in the language. Then I felt that I'd lost almost anything that I did have of it. I don't feel

like that any more—because I know what I am inside and I know that I have got ways of looking at things, of coming at things, of feeling about things which I know are Maori. How do I know this? Because I see them in other Maori who never have written, never will write, but it's part of their being. To give you a specific instance, in a whaikorero, in Maori, we come at things always obliquely. In the old days, I don't necessarily mean pre-European, but older than now, a widow would say: I am a broken canoe on the beach, no good for anything. She wouldn't say: look, I'm a widow, I love my husband, I don't want to love any other man, I don't want to go to bed with any other man, I don't want to be any other man's woman—leave me alone. She wouldn't say that, but they'd know what she meant. At one stage when I was writing short stories, I thought: if the time comes when I can say what I want to say but not once refer to it, I'll have done what I want to do. Is there such a word as obliquity? Probably not—obliqueness?

*Well I guess you can invent it. Obliquity seems like a good word to me.*

Well, if there's iniquity, why not obliquity? But you know what I'm talking about. In other words, don't ever barge straight on. I think this is one of the reasons Maori as well as Pakeha find Alan Duff difficult to handle. Now in a sense, Duff is not a Maori writer because he's confrontational, and Maori don't like that, it's not their way. Especially the old people. It's more this crab-like motion. It's a bit like passing a savage dog that's barking at you; you look the other way.

*And is the savage dog a metaphor for Pakeha culture?*

Maybe. Maori is a metaphorical language and a way of thinking and coping with the environment. Some people will not concede that I'm a Maori writer because I haven't written about the pa, I haven't written about my grandmother, I haven't written about a koro, I haven't written about my mokopuna—though I'm looking after one of them this afternoon in true *kutia* fashion.

*So you're writing about those experiences that are contemporary?*

Put it this way. I know it's difficult; when I was at school I was a good basketball player, I was a good swimmer, I was a good speech maker. I just happen to be Maori, but people would pin it on me. Ah, she's following in the footsteps of her forebears, she's good at sport, good at music, good at oratory, and good at dancing. When I joined the work force after my granddaughter was born—oh, now we've got a Maori librarian. But I don't do things because I'm Maori,

or write about Maori things because I'm a Maori writer; I write about the things that have meaning and significance to me, no matter what they are, where they happen, what the context is. And this last thing I've done is almost completely devoid of any cultural context at all, because that's not what it's on about.

**ENDNOTES:**

1. *Numbers 1* (July 1954).
2. *Lanefall 183* (September 1992), Christchurch: Caxton Press.
3. *Lanefall 184* (Spring 1993), Auckland: Oxford University Press.
4. *Kapiti Poems 6* (1992), Pakerna Bay: Rawhiti Press and 7 (1994), Porirua: Rawhiti Press, Whiteroa Publishing and daphne Brasel Associates Press.
5. *Te Ao Mararama Vol 1*, ed. Witi Ihimera (Auckland: Reed Books, 1992).
6. J. C. Sturm, *The House of the Talking Car* (Wellington: Spiral, 1983).
7. Both poems in *Te Ao Mararama Vol 1*.

# W

## omen's studies association (NZ)

P.O. BOX 5067, AUCKLAND 1  
NEW ZEALAND

NOW AVAILABLE!! CONFERENCE PAPERS  
1990, 1991, 1993 IN ONE VOLUME

NOW AVAILABLE!!! CONFERENCES PAPERS AUCKLAND 1993

YES PLEASE! SEND CONFERENCE PAPERS TO:

Name: ..... Tick  1993  
 Address: .....  1990, 1991, 1992  
 Cost per volume:  
 \$50 members; \$35 non-members

## Splitting the Stone

(for John)

You brought back  
 carefully, nervously  
 A heavy grey boulder  
 From that other beach  
 Up north—  
 The place I call home  
 When I feel inclined—  
 A narrow iron strip  
 Between land and sea  
 With several old battlefields  
 Close by  
 And a guardian mountain.

On a clear day  
 If you are lucky  
 And really quick  
 You may see him  
 Even from here,  
 A small opal cone  
 On a blue horizon  
 Northwest of Kāpiti.

And then  
 As I had dreamed  
 The night before,  
 You started to make  
 According to instructions  
 A flax pounder  
 Like the Old Ones  
 Used to use—  
 (Some can still be found  
 With other missing things  
 In various museums)