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Keisha Castle-Hughes in "Whale Rider" (©2002 Newmarket Films)



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The film "Whale Rider" (directed by Niki Caro, New Zealand, 2002) opens with an unusual birthing scene. Underwater cinematography virtually plunges us into the depths of the ocean where the looming figure of a great whale inundates the frame. The gentle voice of a young girl narrates an ancient Maori cultural myth, the story of a long-awaited great leader who is coming to bring new life to a dying tribe.

This anticipated leader traces his lineage to the ancestor "Paikea," a revered hero whom tribal lore describes as having arrived from the legendary island Hawaiiki, miraculously, on the back of a whale.

"But now we were waiting for the firstborn of the new generation, for the descendant of the whale rider," she discloses, "for the boy who would be chief."

No sooner had she spoken these words when we see a woman in labor giving birth to twins, a boy and a girl. Neither the mother, nor her newborn son survives. But her daughter does. "Paikea," the mother whispers, before she breathes her last, indicating her chosen name for the infant.

We learn that the narrator is Paikea (Keisha Castle-Hughes) herself, the surviving twin who is now a young girl. Because she is not "the boy who would be chief," not to mention being given a name earmarked for the male heir, Paikea is initially rejected by her own grandfather Koro (Rawiri Paratene), who happens to be the tribe's chief elder.

But in the absence of his eldest son, Porourangi (Cliff Curtis), Paikea's grief-stricken father who had moved to Germany, Koro would come to assume the role of parental figure to the girl alongside his wise and nurturing wife, Nanny Flowers (Vicky Haughton).

The glass ceiling of male leadership succession has not been cracked, however, and Paikea's gradual blossoming into the long-prophesied chief faces serious opposition, primarily from the uncompromising Koro, who is the custodian of tribal traditions and identity.

The first quarter of the film may seem tense if not harsh, but "Whale Rider" defies expectations and unfolds into a good-natured, universally appealing story. Avoiding

heavy-handed directing, filmmaker-writer Caro orchestrates scenes with a lyrical touch, infusing the film with doses of humor, and an effortless, mythic quality consistent with its source material, the eponymous cultural novel by Maori author Witi Ihimaera.

The critically acclaimed film boasts a sterling lead cast of both new and established names, and an ensemble of Maori non-actors who essentially play reel equivalents of their real identities.

Paretene's Koro is stern and bull-headed but never cruel; he is not a villain but a leader "who has a lot of rules to live by." Haughton's Nanny Flowers is Koro's foil, letting out subversive witty jabs at her husband's patriarchal ways while always lovingly protective of Paikea.

And of course, the newly discovered Castle-Hughes, all of 11 years old back then, is an astonishing Paikea, the girl who is at once headstrong and fragile, and possessing an uncanny mystical depth that belies her youth and innocence.

Bent on finding a male successor, Koro widens the net and decides to put up a school of learning to test and train teenage boys from the village on how to be a Maori chief. In an amusing sequence, we see Koro teaching the clueless boys the basics of "haka," the Maori war dance, which involves assuming a fierce "game face" and sticking out one's tongue to intimidate the enemy.

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True to his principles, Koro bans his granddaughter from the school and upbraids her when he catches her practicing on her own, but with the prodding of her grandmother, Paikea also begins training in secret under the tutelage of her Uncle Rawiri (Grant Roa).

There are several signs that point to Paikea as the chosen chief. In one key scene, she beats all the boys in retrieving a whale tooth necklace, the symbol of power and leadership, that Koro had tossed into the sea. But Koro's undying commitment to tradition leaves no room for the spirit of change and renewal; the letter of the law had formed blinders in his eyes. He fails to recognize that Paikea is the one.

It would take nothing less than a mystical event, one that would leave no room for doubt, for Koro to finally concede to the truth that Paikea, a woman, is the anointed leader grafted onto the lineage of the original Paikea, the whale rider. Although the film was released back in 2002, I resist wading too far into spoiler territory for the sake of those who have yet to see it.

"Whale Rider" recently marked its 15th anniversary with a special DVD release. I've watched the film countless times, both by myself and with students; without fail, I've always come out of the experience with a sense of renewed hope for the human family and its ongoing quest for a fuller humanity.

In another place, I've explored how the character of Paikea invites reflections on the Christ-figure, the ways by which a cinematic character mirrors Jesus Christ's paschal mystery by being a prophetic voice, a force for good who becomes a bridge to profound communitarian transformation. I can't reprise that project here but there is carryout value from that reflection that holds special relevance for the Christmas season.

In the story, Paikea does not conform to the expectations of what a messiah-figure ought to be. From the very start, she is a messianic anomaly.

"And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger," notes the Gospel of Luke. From the very start, Jesus, the Christ-child himself, was a messianic anomaly.

"Whale Rider" is a hope-inspiring reminder that the Christ-figures in our lives may come in a form we least expect, and under the most anomalous of circumstances.

Like a young Maori girl rising to breathe new life to her dying tribe.

Borne on the back of a whale, no less.

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