**Context for *Whale Rider* in different categories**

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| **Biography of Witi Ihimaera** | **Myths & Legends** |
| \* Ihimaera was born and raised by farmers in a small rural community called Waituhi close to Whangara. He has said that one of his aims as an author is to represent the Maori people in literature.\* Although a first born patrilineal descendant, Ihimaera has two daughters from his marriage and came out as gay in the 1990s. This makes him sceptical of some of the masculine stereotypes of the Maori patriarchy.\* Ihimaera was working in New York and homesick when he saw a whale stranded on the Hudson river. His daughters had asked him to create a story with an indigenous female heroine, so his idea for *Whale Rider* was born.\* Ihimaera includes Maori phrases to connect with his people’s founding myths. He revealed that he failed his Maori language exam at university and has recommenced his studies at the age of 79 for his latest novel.\* Ihimaera has said that Kahu’s transcending of her limitations as a child and specifically a girl in the Maori community are what gives the story its special power. \* He is delighted that his small town story has also transcended its origins to become a worldwide cinematic hit celebrated by other indigenous peoples. | \* The myth of Kahutia Te Rangi / Paikea, the whale rider, references the historical journeys of Polynesian tribes in canoes to explore the Pacific, landing in Aotearoa around 1300.\* Ihimaera emphasises the plurality of Maori mythology mentioning other origin stories, such as Rangi and Papa. He notes variations, referencing a whale myth where the whale becomes an island and also stresses that there are other arrival myths.\* Koro’s teachings stress the contemporary loss of the primeval interconnection between the gods, human beings, and Nature that used to be enshrined by Maori myths.\* Nani Smith refers to the myth of Muriwai and the legend of Mini, a historical figure, to demonstrate to Koro women’s potential to wield power effectively.\* When Nani Smith offers to metaphorically change into a man to help to save the whales, she is invoking the power of the Muriwai myth.\* Porourangi refers to his grandfather’s search for a patrilineal leader in his community as akin to seeking the boy to pull a sword from the stone, referencing the British myth of Arthur.\* Kahu references the Bible when she describes Rawiri as the prodigal son on his return from Papua New Guinea. Rawiri refers to Jonah when seeking to save Kahu in the climax.\* Kahu’s encounter with near death echoes the messianic experience of a Biblical prophet. She willingly sacrifices herself, is found miraculously then recovers consciousness on the third day.\* Ihimaera writes in the magic realist tradition which paints a realistic view of the world while also adding magical elements, often blurring the lines between myth and reality.\* The story’s bull whale is simultaneously a real whale which has travelled across recognizable seas in the 1980s, as well as the whale ridden by Paikea, identified by its swirling moko. |

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| **Maori culture and identity**  | **History, change and modernity**  |
| \* The Whangara Kapa Haka group was founded in 1961 with the explicit purpose of preserving Maori traditions which were being lost.\* The haka are a variety of ceremonial dances. Haka are often performed en masse, to express the Maoris’ pride and shared identity such as the spontaneous one by Rawiri at Kahu’s prize giving.\* The phrase *hui e, haumi e, taiki e* means ‘join everything, bind it together, let it be done’ and is spoken in a call and response form with a leader, emphasising the oneness of the world.\* Ihimaera spent the decade before writing Whale Rider editing an anthology of Maori writing. He said that his culture acts as his ‘taonga’, “the treasure vault” for his inspiration.\* Rehua’s naming of her daughter after an ancestor, Kahutia, from her husband’s tribe can be seen as a way of keeping the unity of their Maori family even after her death. \* The traditional burial of the birth cord at the Whangara marea supports this idea and helps to suggest Kahu’s greater destiny in the reader’s mind. | \* British explorer James Cook did not name the country New Zealand until 1769, nearly 400 years after the Maori first landed, naming it Aotearoa (‘Land of the Long White Cloud’).\* The Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 founded the basis of New Zealand by giving Maori their land and full rights in a country governed by the British. In the 1980s, many Maori still felt second class citizens in society. \* Paikea’s final spear lands at the same time as the Treaty of Waitangi, emphasising its destiny and flowering with a renewed sense of purpose for the Maori people.\* Ihimaera has stated that one of his aims as an author is to maintain the social contract of his communities by showing cooperation between Maori and Pakeha characters.\* Rawiri’s visit to Australia enables him to see the freedom of identity allowed by a modern urban capital such as Sydney yet he still misses the small intimate community of Whangara.\* Many Maori agree with Porourangi’s comments in his letter to his brother Rawiri that it is difficult to maintain their connection to their iwi (tribe) in a Westernized society.\* The generational gap is illustrated by Nanny Flowers’ lack of familiarity with a telephone against Rawiri’s enthusiasm for motorbikes and his trip to the cinema, where he watches a film about whaling and its impact on the oceans. |

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| **Leadership qualities**  | **Gender & Race**  |
| \* Maori tribes were traditionally patriarchal with men acting as provider and defender. The role of leader was expected to pass to the first born son or the closest patrilineal descendant.\* The idea of destiny is invoked in the novel in place of inheritance. Kahu’s strong connection with Nature and sea creatures show her suitability to be a leader by both fitting Maori myth and the modern green movement.\* There were many historical wrongs committed against the Maori during the colonial era. The Waitangi Tribunal, established in 1975, has attempted to address some of these. Koro represents the Maori across both islands in these matters in the novel.\* Koro’s participation in the historical depiction of whaling he retells demonstrate his limitations as a leader by following the older generation despite his affinity for the beauty of the whales; Kahu is shocked.\* Female leadership has become a more expected feature of society since the novel’s publication. Jennifer Shipley becoming the first female PM of New Zealand in the 1990s. Meanwhile, teenager Greta Thunberg became an unexpected leader of the environmental movement. \* The alpha male bull whale releases Kahu after being persuaded by his female lover’s counsel. This prepares us for Koro’s final conversion to recognize the wisdom and potential of the women in his life. | \* Rehua’s naming of her daughter after the male ancestor Kahutia can be seen as provocative and aimed to incite unrest in Koro’s patriarchal world, as well as a sense of destiny in Kahu herself.\* New Zealand women were the first in the world to be granted the right to vote in 1893. It took until the 1980s for female MPs to reach double figures; by 2022, equal representation was achieved.\* See notes on female leadership in the column opposite: eg. Jennifer Shipley (first NZ PM) and Greta Thunberg (young female leader for environmental movement).\* The number of Maori MPs did not reach double figures until the late 1980s; about a third of MPs in New Zealand are now of Maori or Polynesian descent.\* Rawiri experiences racism when he travels there with a colonial descendant, whose mother immediately judges him to be too dark in skin tone to be acceptable.\* Rawiri tells the reader how his experience in Papua New Guinea shaped his consciousness of himself as a Maori as he was able to compare the contexts of the two countries.\* Awareness of historical abuses of colonialism and institutional racism has grown since the novel’s publication with campaigns such as Black Lives Matter. |

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| **Environment / Nature** | **Whales / Whaling**  |
| \* France undertook nuclear weapon tests between 1966 and 1996 at Moruroa in the South Pacific, causing widespread international protest. Radioactivity persists there to this day.\* Greenpeace’s flagship *Rainbow Warrior* used in protests against nuclear testing was sunk in Auckland harbour with a bomb planted by French secret agents in 1985. \* In the 1980s, an ozone hole was found above the Southern Arctic caused by the degradation of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in aerosols; the Montreal protocol of 1987 banning these helped to bring levels up again. \* The Environmental movement has been unexpectantly spearheaded over the last five years by a female teenager, Greta Thunberg, who has been named as one of the most influential leaders in the world.\* Westernization and estrangement from mythology has led to the treatment of land and sea as a resource, real estate, and as a dump, losing the sanctity imposed by the gods of old.\* Kahu is repeatedly associated with dolphins, both through description, her speech with them, and their guarding her on the kelp bed after her resurrection. This emphasises how she can restore the sacred link to Nature.  | \* European whaling stations were established in the 19th century and whaling became a major industry thereafter with 200 whaling ships operating from the coasts. \*In 1946 New Zealand joined the International Whaling Commission as whales became increasingly endangered; in the 1960s there were only 350 Blue whales left worldwide.\* Pressure groups such as Project Jonah (1974) and environmental groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth helped to lead to a worldwide moratorium on whaling in 1982.\* Rawiri’s trip to the cinema reminds the reader of the threats to Nature and the brutal reality of the whaling industry in the 20th century.\* In a 2003 introduction to the novel, Ihimaera refers to whales as the ‘Ulysses of the Pacific’, invoking Western mythology to express his admiration for their epic journeys and heroism.\* Whales are also associated with Christian ideas of sanctity by being described as moving through underwater “cathedrals” and leading each other in “holy procession”.\* Recent research, including the CETI project in the Caribbean suggests that the novel’s anthropomorphism of whales may be more accurate than previously realized. Whale speech is highly complex and shares affinities with human languages.\* The personalities of the bull whale and its mate echo the relationship between Koro and Nanny Flowers, emphasising the closeness between the natural and human worlds to those who are attentive. |