Alistair Fox, *The Ship of Dreams: Masculinity in Contemporary New Zealand Fiction*

Peter Marsden

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/8470>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.8470

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2010

Number of pages: 125-126

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Peter Marsden, "Alistair Fox, *The Ship of Dreams: Masculinity in Contemporary New Zealand Fiction*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 32.2 | 2010, Online since 18 December 2021, connection on 31 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/8470> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8470>

This text was automatically generated on 31 January 2022.

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Alistair Fox, *The Ship of Dreams: Masculinity in Contemporary New Zealand Fiction*

Peter Marsden

REFERENCES

Alistair Fox. *The Ship of Dreams: Masculinity in Contemporary New Zealand Fiction*. Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2008. 230 pp. ISBN 978 1 877372 54 4. \$45.00

- 1 Drawing on a total of two dozen novels by four male novelists, Alistair Fox's study analyses the way in which masculinity is presented in those works of fiction. Fox's thesis is that fiction has mirrored and often foreshadowed the sea-changes in the self-image and self-perception of men that have been taking place in the last few decades in many western, especially Anglophone, societies – and perhaps nowhere quite so markedly as in New Zealand. It is no secret that *homo kiwensis* has (had) a fair claim to be the archetypal macho male. At the same time, Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural society offers a not so common parallel paradigm in the form of the Maori male, whose gender-specific *mana* differs in kind, though not in intensity, from that of the Pakeha. Fox charts the gradual but inexorable unstiffening of the Antipodean masculine upper lip.
- 2 The author identifies "a rapidly growing interest in masculinity in New Zealand" since the mid-1980s, "triggered by the notorious tour of the racially segregated South African national rugby team in 1981, combined with an increasing recognition that pressure to meet expectations of the traditional stereotype was causing problems for many New Zealand men." The "Kiwi bloke", "strong and tough, self-sufficient because of his pioneer heritage, a boozier loyal to his mates, a rugby player in peace, a fearless soldier in war, decent, stoical, and a good provider for his wife and family," was heavily influenced in his attitude to sexuality by puritan repression and guilt. Few would take

issue with Fox's assertion that "the impact of puritanism on the national psyche cannot be overestimated." The many "terrible puritan mums" (in Lawrence Jones's phrase) that people New Zealand fiction, coupled (as it were) with "the negative emotional influence of remote fathers who are unable to show the interest in, or display the affection towards, their sons that the latter crave" lead to the malaise and bad faith that torment, for instance, Stevan Eldred-Grigg's male protagonists as they struggle in vain to be convincing husbands, and end almost as unsatisfactorily in their self-conscious embrace of homosexuality. Fox traces the emergence of this central theme, adducing Frank Sargeson as the principal precursor.

- 3 Whether the authors be Pakeha or Maori, their protagonists suffer abuse or emotional deprivation at the hands of their mothers, fathers, or grandparents. In the case of the Māori authors and their characters, however, there is the additional strain of feeling pulled between the contradictory pressures exerted by two cultures, the shame at their membership of what they perceive as the defeated, inferior culture of the indigenous minority, within which they "find themselves needing to square the values and imperatives of traditional Māori culture with those of a hegemonic post-imperial culture that is as powerful as it is alien." This reinforcing of the personal inner conflict via an external ethnic component is particularly evident in Witi Ihimaera's coming-out novel *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* (1995). The protagonist's 'respectable' middle-class married life is a lived lie: his alter ego is a cruiser seeking out anonymous homosexual sex, irresistibly lured to the steam parlours alluded to by the title. Bad faith and malaise devour the soul here too.
- 4 Thus Fox demonstrates how similar themes have emerged and continue to emerge in various works of fiction by various authors of various backgrounds. The only problem is that the corpus of novels Fox has assembled is not as representative as it seems. The symmetrical outward structure of the book seems to betoken a conscious even-handedness of approach. That's fine. Two of the novelists are Pākehā, two Māori; their work is dealt with respectively in two Parts explicitly so designated, of roughly equal length. That's fine too. Justice is not only done, but *seen* to be done, to both strands of the bicultural society. Within those two Parts there is, however, considerable internal imbalance: Part One is almost exclusively concerned with *one* author, namely Maurice Gee, doubtless – to the tune of almost eighty pages out of a total one hundred. A similar imbalance obtains in Part Two, with discussion of Ihimaera taking up around seventy pages out of ninety, whilst the other Māori writer, Alan Duff, is given distinctly shorter shrift. Even a corpus of *four* authors might seem a somewhat slender basis for a typology with ensuing generalizations. In actual fact, Fox's book is principally concerned with just two authors. This imbalance unfortunately mars what is otherwise a serviceable account – comprehensive and cogent, and well illustrated from those works the author has selected for the purpose of his study – and makes it less convincing than it could have been.

AUTHORS

PETER MARSDEN

Peter H. MARSDEN recently retired from the Department of English Studies at RWTH Aachen University, Germany. His research interests embrace both linguistics (e.g. varieties of English and translation studies) and literature, with a particular focus on Australian and New Zealand poetry. His publications include essays on the oral tradition in Aboriginal and Maori writing.