

circumstances, home remains Aotearoa. It is a place Sullivan embraces despite the fact that there are no happy “Resolutions” (33), as Pākehā would have the world believe, and no idealistic colonial conclusions in this bicultural country. Nevertheless, the parties affected are bound by the child begotten by “mixed history and blood” (65)—not Aotearoa, the land, but New Zealand, the country, the ideological nation. Resolution then, is an ongoing process, one that is effectively reflected in the continual movement in the collection, and one that Sullivan seems to hope, will go onward, upward, and forward—by looking backward.

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*Sing-song*, by Anne Kennedy.  
Auckland: Auckland University  
Press, 2003. ISBN 1-86940-295-2;  
128 pages. US\$14.95.

Anne Kennedy’s *Sing-song* (2004 winner of the highly prestigious Montana New Zealand Book Award for Poetry) is an account of a Māori/Pākehā family’s experiences with a baby girl’s eczema. Through eighty-two riveting poems, divided into three sections, *Sing-song* realizes the overdetermined ways that “The skin is the first port of call for a reaction to the world” (23). In one of the first poems, the poet (who throughout represents the perspective of the “eczema-mother” in third person) describes how the mother (here, not yet a mother) and her lover (not yet a father) use words to construct for themselves “a map,

useful, intricate, to the point/showing the long forgotten arterial routes/instructions for the beating heart, leaping breath/and where to sleep, sleep in Grey Lynn” (5). This grounding metaphor for the relationships forged within and through language beautifully describes the work that *Sing-song* does for its readers. Set in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Sing-song* invites us into an intimate terrain as Kennedy maps with a poet’s precision and arresting imagery the particular places and domestic spaces that this family inhabits. The book’s power is in the layered ways that it attempts to make sense of an experience of illness; as the poet explains, “when all is not well with a child . . . you ravel the knitted/sleeve of how it all began” (51). Rather than arrive at singular answers for the causes of the daughter’s eczema, Kennedy seeks to understand how the abstractions of history, myth, race and racism, culture, karma, heredity, genealogy, colonialism, capitalism, gender roles, and medical institutions concretely converge and sometimes compete as explanations for why the daughter’s “itchy patch the size of two twenty-cent pieces” (34) transforms into an agonizing and “endless burning bush” (36).

Kennedy grounds the abstractions *Sing-song* explores through beautifully wrought domestic details that double as metaphors that are no less profound for the humor that often characterizes them. In “Newborn baby,” the older brother (at the time, age three) jokes about putting a stereo up his nose. Meeting with laughter from the adults, he ups the ante, inserting ever-larger objects up his nostrils, “until he got to the universe

of course” (24). The poem’s details disclose both the boy’s exuberant imagination and Kennedy’s strengths as a poet: as *Sing-song* traces the causes of the baby girl’s eczema, through its details, it conveys, with compassion and often humor, a universe of meanings. The “poetryless ‘performance art’” (13) of loveless, always-screaming neighbors; the move from Grey Lynn due to soaring property prices to a too-dark house with a too-big mortgage; proximity to a house that held a murder and a fatal fire; errant dust balls; the pregnant mother’s protective decision not to take fever medication; the inability to bury the girl’s “jelly whenua,” or placenta, Up North; the chance decision to see a disastrously incompetent homeopath; false faith in an almost-universally prescribed aqueous cream and other rites (oatmeal baths, Dragon Spleen, cortisone cream); the falling into and near splitting of a 1950s nuclear family formation—all of these become not only possible explanations for the baby girl’s eczema, but also comprise the family’s dreams and daily life as a weave of history and myth.

Kennedy brings out the mythic dimensions and the cultural complexity of bicultural family life in Aotearoa New Zealand in large part by drawing metaphors from a range of myths and reference points. She describes the medical interventions the mother undergoes during her second pregnancy by explaining that the process was “deliberate, postmodern, exposed like / coloured pipes on the Pompidou Centre / Madonna’s bra worn over her clothes” (7). The brilliant inventiveness and finely tuned intelligence of this image is

characteristic of the book; it indicates as well how Kennedy interweaves classical, contemporary “high,” and popular Western cultural references with Māori ones. The book moves effortlessly from the Greek poet Homer, the Pogues (a popular Anglo-Irish folk rock band of the 1980s and 1990s), Thor (the god of thunder in Norse mythology), the “wyfe of Bathe” (from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*), Thing One and Thing Two (characters from Dr Seuss’s popular children’s book *The Cat in the Hat*), “colour therapy,” and mothers’ magazines, to Maui (the Polynesian demigod), Matariki (the Pacific New Year), urban iwi (multitribal Māori organizations that claim recognition alongside traditional tribal groups), Ruapehu (a North Island volcano), and totara (a large native tree). The cultural mix reflects the richness and complexity that result when a Māori poet and literature lecturer marries a Pākehā musician/scientist/writer/feminist of Celtic ancestry. The epigraphs to *Sing-song* (one by Irish pop star Sinead O’Connor and the other by renowned New Zealand writer Janet Frame) set the stage for this intermingling; both announce: “These are dangerous days.” As presaged by these epigraphs, cultural convergences do not result in simple harmony; in particular, the poet warns her white readers regarding the coming together of Pākehā and Māori: “(most of you Pakeha, I can tell you / you don’t know this until you get close / you don’t know how different we are / what concessions are made on your behalf)” (18). As indicated by these cautionary words, *Sing-song*’s cultural mix does not level differences. Indeed, doctors’ and observers’ responses to

the daughter's eczema (an often accusatory insistence on its high incidence among "half-Polynesian children" [58]), and the resources available to address it (the eczema "magazine of white children" never once features a "waka blonde" (a part-Māori/part-Pākehā child with blonde hair [59]) render chronic—and often unmarked—forms of racism visible, even as the book's commentary about land evokes a larger history of dispossession in which to situate its everyday manifestations. When the skyrocketing housing market forces the couple to move from Grey Lynn, the poet reflects, "This is perhaps a good / place to take time out to think how the tangata [people] / whenua [of the land] felt, this land theirs and they couldn't / live on it" (8).

Despite Kennedy's use of the third-person to convey the perspective of the "eczema-mother," and despite her distinctive irony, the effect of the narrative that the poems construct is intimate and inviting. Throughout the book, the conversational second-person address to the audience draws us close. Moreover, by representing the mother's perspective in the third person, Kennedy communicates in an understated way the need for and the impossibility of achieving distance when helplessly watching a beloved child's unbearable chronic pain. She inscribes her alignment with the "eczema-mother" in the syntax of the poems. When, in the epilogue, the baby girl's eczema is resolved, the long lines and even longer sentences read like audible if ragged sighs of relief, like exhalations of gratitude for the end of the girl's suffering. Entitled "I tell you solemnly," the poem opens: "the whirr and the cold gust of the

departing ghost / as it fled into the street / in Arch Hill and disappeared out west over the / Waitakere ranges at sunset / and flickered like lightning its goodbye, left / a very fine nothingness / and it's almost worth it" (125).

*Sing-song* captures not only the profound relief but also the experience of grace that can result from witnessing one's own child's release from agony. As Kennedy tells the family's story, she vividly recreates a sense of the joy, wonder, and "gorgeous mysticism" (61) that a child can bring to her parents. An author already in possession of great range and distinction—in addition to publishing short fiction, novels, and poetry collections, Kennedy is a screenwriter, adapts books for Radio New Zealand, and is editor of *trout* (an online journal for Aotearoa New Zealand and Pacific Islands arts and literature)—she is one who surely will continue to find words for specifically located discoveries that cross cultures, providing "a new way to translate suffering / into another beautiful thing" (61).

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*Theatre and Political Process: Staging Identities in Tokelau and New Zealand*, by Ingrid Hoëm. New York: Berghahn Books, 2004. ISBN 1-57181-583-x; xii + 205 pages, tables, appendixes, linguistic terminology and abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$60.00.

Norwegian anthropologist Ingrid Hoëm, in her book *Theatre and Political Process: Staging Identities in Tokelau and New Zealand*, examines the

