

WHALE RIDER



A Teacher Resource for Class Cinema Viewing

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Whale Rider New Zealand 2002

Directed by: Niki Caro

Cast: Keisha Castle-Hughes, Rawiri Paratene, Vicky Haughton, Cliff Curtis

Based on: The book *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera

Suitability: Year 5 to 8

Classification: PG

Awards:

Toronto Film Festival 2002 - People's Choice Award
Sundance Film festival 2003 - World Cinema Audience Award
Rotterdam Film Festival 2003 - Canal and Audience Award

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Whale Rider: Suggestions for Teachers

If you take your class to see *'Whale Rider'* you will probably want to do some study of it after the viewing. The film is not available on video or DVD yet so we thought it would be helpful to give some ideas that will provide 'memory support' for your viewing and which will be useful to support or guide children's discussion.

The film's story is rather different from the original text by Witi Ihimaera, so start with the viewing of the film, and let the film stand on its own. When your class sees the film they will just want to enjoy it and so will you. Reading these notes before your viewing might be helpful or you might prefer to come to them afterwards when you begin discussion to deepen pupils' understanding of themes, characters and the way the images on screen enrich the narrative.

Resources/Recommendations

Make use of the Whale Rider website:
<http://www.whaleriderthemovie.com>
Still images, the poster and the trailer are available here, along with actor profiles and production notes.

Reed have published a book of the film.

Heinemann Education have produced a Teaching Resource Kit for *The Whale Rider* but the major focus of this is on the original novel.

Both of these resources are available from Kanuka Grove Educational Resource Centre, Massey University College of Education

Synopsis

Setting

Whangara, New Zealand. It is the present day, but the director has been careful not to be specific. In years to come it should still feel like the present day.

Main Characters

Paikea - the young girl is the central character. Her family are the other main characters: Koro (her Grandfather), Nanny Flowers (her Grandmother), Porourangi (her Father) and her Uncle Rawiri.

Keisha Castle-Hughes, the girl who plays Pai, was chosen from thousands of girls in an extensive school-wide search.

Narrative Focus

Stays with Paikea and Koro throughout the film.

In the small New Zealand settlement of Whangara, the locals claim descent from the Whale Rider, Paikea. The Chief is searching for a new leader to lead Paikea's people into a new age.

For Koro, the Chief, there is hope of finding a new leader when his eldest son Porourangi fathers twins – a boy and a girl. That hope fades when both the mother and the baby boy die in childbirth. The mother's last words were to name the surviving girl Paikea. For Koro this is the start of the tribe's misfortunes.

Pai is raised by her grandparents Koro and Flowers. While Koro still searches for the one leader, Flowers sees many outstanding qualities in her granddaughter which Koro is oblivious to. Pai's father left the country after her birth but returns twelve years later.

A massive herd of whales responds to Pai's calls to the Ancestors, but become stranded on the beach. Pai is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to save the whales and her people.

Discussion

The film deals with themes which children will recognise: leadership, expectations and disappointments, working together, feelings of achievement. To bring the film back into your students minds it may be best to start by asking which scenes they found memorable or powerful. From this discussion you may wish to track some of the themes or visual motifs in the film. Some students may also have noticed film techniques. What follows are examples of relevant scenes and related activities.



Powerful scenes

Paikea's speech – What made it so powerful? (The topic – her respect for her Koro despite his resistance to her). Children might comment on the tension as to whether or not her Koro would attend. How was the tension created? (Film cut between shots of Paikea, the empty chair, and Koro out of his bed and looking at his suit laid out, cut back to the speech etc.) Children might like to draw the storyboard of that section up to where he finds the whale.

Paikea and her father in the waka – both of them have failed Koro. This brings up the idea of expectations and not meeting them. Can students say where their sympathies lay, and why? Students may wish to write about that aspect of the film, or perhaps about situations they know of from their own experience.

Koro with Pai in hospital - at the end of the film when Pai is in hospital how do they know Koro has changed his attitude towards her? (He has put his whale tooth round her neck and addresses Pai as 'Wise Leader')

The scenes with Hemi - at the performance when his dad comes – then goes off so soon with his mates. Later during the taiaha lesson, and when he and Paikea fight. Then he is excluded from the boat. "Not you, Hemi." Encourage students to discuss what was happening in these scenes. How would Hemi feel? Which of Hemi's actions made Koro 'fail' him? Did they feel it was fair?

The Whale Tooth - when Koro realises who has retrieved his whale tooth. The look on Koro's face shows he has accepted that he was wrong. Students could identify some of the situations where he ignored signs of Pai's ability and aptitude to lead.

Pai calling to the whales (the ancient ones)
Koro grieves after the incident of the whale tooth. Pai's 'voice-over' says he was calling to the ancient ones but they weren't hearing. So Paikea tries - stands in the waka – the yellow blanket. Ask if that image made the viewers think of anything else. (It looked rather like a flax cloak.) Discuss other times Pai was in the waka and the blanket appeared. It was wrapped round her on previous occasions by her father and by her Nanny Flowers (giving her comfort, warmth – and chiefhood?)

The scenes with the beached whales - What feelings were present? Was it just concern for the whales? Or was it for the people, too?

When the community walk away together, Paikea comes from behind them and walks alone back towards the big whale. What did that image make you think about Paikea? (alone, small, determined, independent?)

The final scene with the waka - explore what made it appealing to students. When did they realise that Pai was in the waka too? (The shot of her with her Koro started in close, as if they were on the beach watching the waka depart.)

Tracking some themes

Leadership

Nanny Flowers says of Koro, "He has a lot of rules he has to live by." Paikea says later "He is the boss." Why does Pai support Koro even though he is so harsh to her? (She understands some of his concerns about being a leader?) Students could trace elements of Pai's leadership – eg her comments about smoking and health, fixing the rope, learning about her culture, participating in the life of the community

Why did Koro so desperately want a leader to follow him? What do the students think were the problems that faced him? How did viewers become aware of these? What scenes gave them these ideas?

Expectations and disappointments

What are students views on Koro and his expectations? Why isn't he proud of the achievements of Porourangi? Why wouldn't he be pleased with Pai for starting the engine? Should he have excluded her from the wanaga/lessons?

Other characters have disappointments too, eg Hemi

Working together

The community scenes on the marae, working together to help the whales, paddling in unison in the waka at the end.

How does Pai's speech change the idea of a leader from Koro's "chosen one"?

eg "knowledge given to all so we can have lots of leaders"

Feelings of achievement

Discuss the scene where Rawiri took up the taiaha again. How does this change carry on for Rawiri? (He later has a leadership role in helping with the whales "They'll do it for you", says Koro.)

Paikea's speech was a personal achievement. Students could be encouraged to discuss the sort of achievements that have made them feel good about themselves. They might write a speech introducing themselves and someone they respect.

Film motifs



As a focus on the visual language of the film – get students to look out for certain motifs or elements: the whale, the rope, Koro's staff, the waka, the bicycle. Discuss what they signify, what moods relate to them. Students could

discuss the appearances of these motifs i.e. where they noticed them and what place they seemed to have in the story. Students could track the relevant narrative sequence (maybe by drawing storyboard pictures).

The whale – What images of the whale did the viewers notice? Sometimes linked to the marae by shots of the tekoteko. The island was like a whale – its shape and its grey, striated cliffs. Could the students tell when the film was going to show the whales under the sea? (The music cued us to the undersea shots.)

The rope – Koro uses it to teach Pai about their history, but ... How does Koro interpret this broken rope? And what Pai does after that?

Later a rope does not hold the whale. Is that a bad omen?



Koro's staff – of authority (bangs it on the floor when the school concert is disrupted) of leadership - on the marae as a sign of his chiefly position, as a walking stick when he is cast low. And what happened to it at the end? How did students 'read' that image of the carved stick drifting in the sea by the whale?

The waka – Unfinished at the start. What do students think it would signify for Koro? (Porourangi's failure?) What events occur in the waka during the film? (Paikea comes to it when she is sad, her family support her there. She leads from there.) By the end of the film what is the role of the waka, and what event occurs there? (Koro acknowledges Pai with love and respect.) How did the viewers feel about the waka in those last scenes?



The bicycle - Paikea getting a dub, closeness of Paikea to her Koro, the 'final' ride before going with her father, when Koro does not give her a ride, eventually Pai overtaking the bus.

The title shots - the title shots provide a visual narrative of Paikea's birth. Your class may be able to recall how they felt the birth scene would end. Ask them what images made them know what was going to happen. (Close ups, worried faces, pain)

The music - were there any features of the music that your students noticed?

The sea music of the whale scenes?

The use of 'voice-over' - Pai's voice-over at the start and "Wished I'd never been born – but he changed his mind." What effect does this have on the viewers knowledge of the narrative shape? (Reassures as to the ending of the story.)

Humour - The women getting caught smoking. The golf trophy – for Rawiri's skill with the taiaha. When Rawiri jogged past Koro on the beach

Additional Activities

Have students view the trailer for the film without the audio (available on the website) and script their own voice-over.

Discuss the advertising poster for Whale Rider - what does the poster tell us about the film?

Revisit parts of the film through the static images available on the website.

Running Schedule

Opening Titles – Music – Whale sounds -Images of the Whales

Giving Birth to the Twins – Close Up on faces. Family gather at the hospital – mourning the loss of the mother and baby

Koro (grandfather) and Porourangi (father) argue in the hospital corridor. Porourangi says his daughter's name will be Paikea – Koro says he can't use that name. Porourangi walks away.

Koro attempts to bless the baby boy and tells Flowers to take the girl out. She stays close and Koro gets mad. She hands him the crying baby and it calms quickly. "See, she likes you". Flowers asks her younger son, Rawiri to look out for Pai.



Pai aged 11 close to Koro holding the Whale tooth around his neck – shot pulls out to reveal they are on a bike together.

Views of the township – establishing shots of the community

Koro gently pushes Pai off the bike. She goes inside to find Nanny Flowers and her friends playing cards. Pai tells them off for smoking and talks about the upcoming school concert.

Pai walks along road practising for the concert. 'If you ask what this house is called I will tell you...it is called Whitireia'

Concert – farting whale – laughter from audience, Koro thumps stick to restore dignity.

Pai's father Porourangi turns up. Porourangi greets his family. Koro and Porourangi in the meeting house. Looking at the carvings Koro says 'They've been waiting for you'.

Breakfast for Porourangi – Koro has already gone to fix the septic tank. Porourangi leaves to help. Rawiri turns up to eat Porourangi's breakfast. Nanny Flowers: "Your timing is spooky, boy"

School – Koro on bike, clips Hemi around the ears. "What's that for?" "The Concert". Koro rides home with Paikea on the bike.

Paikea watches Koro fix the outboard motor. She tells him about having to make a speech about where she came from. Koro talks about the Ancestors and Hawaiki. Koro shows her the rope and asks "What do you see?", "Lots of bits of rope all twisted together". The rope breaks but Pai ties it together and starts the outboard while Koro is away. He tells her off.

Slide show of Porourangi's art exhibition. With Pai, Flowers, Rawiri and his girlfriend. Koro bursts through the screen, bringing Pai's teacher. He makes Porourangi start the show from the beginning. Porourangi accidentally shows photos of his German girlfriend Ana. When asked who it is he explains that he's been seeing her and that she is pregnant.

Paikea runs out to the waka that Porourangi stopped carving when she was born. Porourangi comes to comfort her and talk to her. He explains that "Koro needs a prophet to lead our people out of the darkness and make everything alright again". Porourangi suggests Pai returns to Germany with him.

Koro and Pai on the bike going around the front lawn. Rest of the family waiting. "Are you ready to go Pai?", "One more go". Goodbyes to Porourangi and Pai. Koro returns inside without saying goodbye to Porourangi.

From the car looking out to sea. Whale Music. Pai asks to stop the car; she wants to go home.

Pai interrupts Koro's meeting to tell him "I'm back". He ignores her.

After school, Hemi tells Pai Koro won't be picking her up and about the school to teach the boys. Pai decides to wait. The boys and their families wait at the Marae. Nanny makes Koro wait until Pai joins them. Karanga between Nanny Flowers and Paikea leading the boys onto the Marae.

Paikea sits in the front row, Koro tells her to sit at the back because she is a girl – She refuses and is sent away from the Marae.

Pai watches through the window to learn what the boys are taught. During the taiaha training, Pai tries to copy the boys. Hemi hits Koro and is sent away. He gives Pai some pointers on how to hold and use the taiaha. Koro is angered by this.

Pai sitting in the waka looking out to sea. Whale music. Is joined by Nanny who tells her that Rawiri used to be good with a taiaha.

Pai takes Rawiri's golf/taiaha trophy to Rawiri and asks him to teach her. Koro on the beach with the boat – Rawiri jogging past – exchange of glances. Pai on the bike overtaking the bus.

Hemi's father turns up to the boy's school. Koro greets him and tells Hemi to perform first. Hemi's father leaves immediately after Hemi's performance with his mates. Hemi is upset and is round the back of the building crying.

Pai finds Hemi crying. He tells her to go away. They fight with taiahas. Pai wins, Koro hears the taiahas and tells them they have broken the tapu. Pai is made to apologise to the other boys – repeatedly until she means it.

The boys go out on the boat with Koro and Rawiri. Hemi is left behind. Final test and explanation of the significance of the whale tooth. Koro throws it into the sea for the boys to retrieve. They surface without it.

On their return Koro takes to his bed. Paikea is sent to stay with Rawiri. Pai hears Koro calling to the ancestors; nothing is happening so she calls too.

Pai goes out on the boat with Rawiri and his mates. Asks where Koro threw the whale tooth and dives in to get it. She is underwater for a long time. Pai reappears with a crayfish and Koro's whale tooth necklace. Rawiri gives the crayfish and whale tooth to Nanny Flowers. But she doesn't think Koro is ready for it yet.

Pai gives an invitation to the concert to Koro, and tells him he's her guest of honour. The concert scene opens with teacups laid out and people bringing food. Pai requests a chair is left for Koro.

Pai is announced winner of the speech competition. Cuts between Koro getting ready to go to the concert and Pai's speech. Pai dedicates her speech to her Koro. She suggests that there should not be a single leader, but many leaders.

On leaving the house Koro hears the whales. He finds them stranded on the beach. Locals come to help save the whales. Koro notices the large whale – Paikea's whale. They try to move it, but are unsuccessful.

Pai climbs up on the whale and rides it out to sea – totally unafraid. The other whales follow. When the locals realise, Nanny Flowers calls for her mokopuna. The boys begin singing.

Now Nanny gives the whale tooth to Koro. He looks puzzled and asks "Which one?" – she retorts "What do you mean which one?"

At the hospital, family and friends are waiting. Pai in a hospital bed with Koro beside her. She is wearing the whale tooth necklace. He addresses her as "Wise Leader"

The waka is finished and is being launched. Porourangi has returned home with pregnant Ana. Close-up of Pai chanting with Koro beside her, shot pulls out to reveal that they are on the waka.

Voice Over of Pai saying "My name is Paikea Apirana ..."
"I'm not a prophet, but I know our people will keep going forward with all of our strength".