

Ben Brown, *Between the Kindling and the Blaze: Reflections on the Concept of Mana*, with accompanying CD of selected readings (Anahera Press, 2013).

Completed under a Michael King Writers' Centre Māori Writer's Residency (Auckland 2011), *Between the Kindling and the Blaze*, subtitled *Reflections on the Concept of Mana*, is a collection of poems and prose poem pieces about a major concept common to all the Pacific's Polynesian cultures. In the book, writer, poet and performer Ben Brown (Ngāti Paoa, Ngāti Mahuta) addresses the subject specifically in respect to his Māori heritage, 'not by attempting a definition of the concept of mana, but rather in presenting a personal reflection on its myriad qualities and nuances.'¹

An important first feature of the book is its glossary. Aimed at those approaching *Between* with no in-depth knowledge of Māori culture and tradition, it lists Māori words and phrases used, with their meanings given in English. Reference to it beforehand as well as during reading will prove essential to a fuller appreciation and understanding of the actual poems and prose pieces.

For example, mana itself is described as 'prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma', and mana wahine² as 'the qualities of mana possessed and manifested by women, including strength, respect, leadership etc.' Further reading on mana, however, would also be strongly recommended, with, as the author himself suggests, the concept having manifold meanings, of 'myriad qualities and nuances.'

In Māori culture, as throughout Polynesia, mana is seen as not only applying to people, but also to places and objects, to the environment, to the inanimate as well as animate. Regarded as a supernatural force, it goes hand in hand with the tapu or atua, another elemental Polynesian concept, this time for the holy or sacred, the creator. Mana is inherited, received by a person; a person is therefore an agent of mana, never its source or maker. In mana, responsibility and stewardship come with such attributes as power and control, in respect to the tribe or community, the land and water, the natural world.³

Brown first addresses mana in regard to the natural world and man's custodianship, in an opening piece entitled 'Preface':

The rock is humble ... and is slowly eroded away.
 The rock has memories of being a mountain.
 It knows one day it may be no more than a grain of sand.

The tree stands majestic and strong, observing the passage of time.
 The man with the axe who comes to the tree is humble.

The man comes ... to gather rocks and shovel sand.
 The man must build a house ... he builds it of rocks and sand and timber.

¹ Press Release, 'About the Author Ben Brown', Anahera Press, 5 December 2013, and book blurb.

² 'Woman', Glossary.

³ John C. Moorfield, *Te Aka: Māori-English, English-Māori Dictionary and Index*, 3rd edition 2011, <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/maori-dictionary>.

Book reviews: *Between the Kindling and the Blaze: Reflections on the Concept of Mana* by Ben Brown. John Miles.

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Small birds will nest beneath the eaves and he will exalt in their singing.
Here is a place of mana. (1)

The next piece, simply entitled 'Mana', shows mana in regard to a person, though not without some whimsy along with the gravity:

Mana is my grandfather in his retirement

Mana is his right to deafness when the noise of meaninglessness
assails his ears and he sees fit to visit his church
of ancestors and lost lovers, whispering his kōrero⁴
to them amid the clamour of grandchildren and aunts.
Aunts think they run this world yet he remains remote
from their cacophony. Never mind, they mean well eh.

Mana is the man who does without saying. (2)

Between contains the dedication 'For the whānau'. As a noun, the glossary gives whānau as traditionally meaning the immediate and extended family, though also with an added modern usage that includes those of value with no kinship ties to the speaker. Here also the glossary is of further use, in that it also includes New Zealand vernacular terms of both English or Māori origin. 'Bro', for example, as perhaps is widely known, means brother in the mateship sense, firm friend. 'Chur' on the other hand means *thank you*, though idiomised to the extent that it comes with an awesome or impressive connotation.

In 'Chur bro', as in a number of poems and pieces in the book, Brown employs the wider meaning of whānau, with simple vernacular becoming a strong statement whereby tribute is paid to a fellow Māori poet, the pre-eminent Hone Tuwhare who died in 2008 aged 86:

Anyway
What brings you down
this way bro
Muttonbirds and oysters
Maybe
Cooler women
Greyer seas
Both more enigmatic

And that's a neat trick too man
Turning the Pākehā's⁵
English into a
Reo⁶ all your own (12-13)

In 'The brother come home' things are darker. Dedicated to the Māori Rastafarian Chris Campbell who died violently in 1990, it is one of the poems also included in the CD selection.

⁴ 'Speech, narrative, story, conversation', Glossary.

⁵ 'New Zealander of European descent', Glossary.

⁶ 'Language', Glossary.

Its reading there, masterly done through skilled caesura and full emphasis of the refrain, builds powerfully from its written form:

The brother come home from the city
He done with the concrete cold
Steel heart got him angry
All that Babylon burned him out

The brother come home from the city
Blood him a tribe for his troubles
Run with the horsemen riding hard
through his sorrows
Scorning his fate

The brother come home from the city
And home he stayed (24-25)

Brown has held a multitude of jobs in both urban and rural New Zealand. Those of barman, forklift driver, railway and construction worker would have contrasted with farm and forestry labourer, shepherd and gardener. This can be seen in two consecutive poems, 'Hui'⁷ at the doorway to heaven' and 'The Field', with or without the connotations of mana. From 'Hui':

To find meagre words
in the glimmering city
Where actions speak louder
of fought and lost battles

Here sprawled unruly
These towers of inconstant dreaming
climb higgledy-piggledy higher than hope (39)

And 'The Field':

And given eyes I saw
a field
Laid fallow empty earth
Yet yield to me the sky
and every star therein

to feel as breath across my face
before a lover's kiss (41)

Two final, untitled pieces appear on the back jacket. In both, the holism of the mana concept, its myriad quality and nuance once again, form a fitting closure, while at the same time revealing the nature of the book's title. From 'Untitled 1':

The colour of mana is red they say, from warm sunset tones to bold,
vigorous and bloody shades of power and authority.

⁷ 'Meeting, gathering', Glossary.

But where is the white of purity, the certainty of black, the humility of grey?
Colour then, will not suffice in the exploration of mana. (Back cover)

And 'Untitled 2':

Karanga mai Karanga mai⁸
The call is great and echoing
Between the rivered hills
Between the islands and the sky
Between the daylight and the darkness
Lit with every twinkling eye
Between the kindling and the blaze. (Back cover)

Brown is also an award-winning children's book author, having collaborated with his wife, the illustrator Helen Taylor in his 17 publications in that genre. Born in 1962 in Motueka at the very top of New Zealand's South Island, he lives in Lyttelton on that island's central east coast.⁹

The poems and prose poems of *Between*, like Brown's working life and creative output are wide-ranging. And if, as explained, mana is all things to all things, that is consistent. The book, along with its accompanying CD of selected readings, was widely and positively reviewed in Brown's homeland. Frank and authentic, it is a collection that at the same time has a kind and generous quality with its touches of whimsy. A mana authority of its own, in fact, at a time when it is said that few poetry collections by Māori writers are making their appearance.

Between the Kindling and the Blaze ranges across the full spectrum of the Māori milieu, and although it stands in its own right, it does offer a bonus. Written in English per se, it nevertheless has a strong bilingual leaning in its use of Māori words, sayings and idiom. It is a book that can lead its readers into finding out more about the rich tradition and history of the Māori people as a whole.

John Miles

⁸ 'A ceremonial call of welcome to visitors onto a marae or courtyard, the open area in front of the whareniui or meeting house', Glossary.

⁹ Writers' Files, *Brown, Ben*, May 2016, New Zealand Book Council Te Kaunihera Pukapuka o Aotearoa, Wellington NZ, <http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/>

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