

## AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA GRACE

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Patricia Grace, of Ngati Raukawa, Ngati Toa, Te Ai Awa descent, was born in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1937. While she was working as a primary-school teacher, Grace wrote the first short story collection to be published by a Maori woman, *Waiariki* (1975), whose immediate success encouraged her to pursue a writing career and eventually allowed her to give up teaching and devote herself to full-time writing. Her first novel, *Mutuwhenua*, came out three years later, becoming once again the first work of its kind to be published by a Maori woman. In 1985 Grace obtained the Writing Fellowship at the University of Victoria in Wellington. This was the beginning of her consolidation as a novelist and short story writer. In 1986 she published *Potiki*, a work which immediately obtained recognition both internationally and at home, where it won the prestigious New Zealand Book Award.

Grace's work has evolved immensely since she started writing back in the 1970s. She has mastered the short story genre in the purest New Zealand tradition, she has written five superbly constructed novels, using polyphony and storytelling techniques to recover the silenced voices of her community, and she has also published several children's books and a volume on Maori mythology. All her works are invariably concerned with the political struggle of her community and several well-known contemporary conflicts—such as land claims, domestic violence, racism and cultural subordination—have served as their frameworks. However, despite this obvious political compromise, her main concern remains to offer faithful portraits of varied characters, their voices and their everyday lives within a communal setting. Aesthetically, her works have reached highly sophisticated levels.

Patricia Grace lives in Plimmerton, Wellington, in the ancestral territory of her extended family. This interview was conducted in the National Library of New Zealand/Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa in mid-July 2000, while I was working on my Ph.D.

*I would like to start talking a little bit about the beginning of your writing career.*

Well, I always liked writing when I was a child, even though we didn't really do creative writing as such. I was also a keen reader and I began writing in my mid-twenties when I joined a woman's writing group that was based in Auckland. I was living too far away to go to the meetings, but I joined as a country member and took part in the monthly writing competitions that they held throughout the year. It was from the encouragement that I got from judges, sometimes doing quite well with my stories, that I gained confidence; and then I began sending stories to be published in journals and magazines and in particular the *Te Ao Hou* magazine, which was the official journal of the Maori Affairs Department. That was where I also started seeing writing by other Maori writers in English for the first

time, so that also helped me develop the kind of confidence that I needed. And eventually my work came to the notice of a publisher in Auckland—Phoebe Meikle—who contacted me and asked me if I had enough short stories for a collection. So that’s how my first collection of short stories *Waiariki* came about and it was published in 1975.

*What was happening in New Zealand at that time? I believe there was a group of women who started having their work published around 1975, like Fiona Kidman, Rachel McAlpine or Lauris Edmond.<sup>1</sup> Did you feel that you were part of that generation or, on the contrary, that you had arrived at that point independently?*

I didn’t really notice it at the time. But it was only later when I came to know these other people that had books published around the same time, although I do remember that I was at Fiona Kidman’s and Lauris Edmond’s book launch in the same year.

I suppose my main realisation was that there was beginning to be work by Maori writers published because Witi Ihimaera’s book *Pounamu, Pounamu*, which came out in 1973, was the first book of fiction ever written by a Maori person. Before that was Hone Tuwhare’s poetry. Hone became a role model for Maori writers, and not only Hone Tuwhare, but there were also other pioneer writers who did not have books published but they were writing at the time.<sup>2</sup>

*Did you exchange unpublished material among you?*

No, we did not even know each other, although I did meet Witi Ihimaera when we came to live in Wellington. I met him just prior to his book being published but I had not met any of the other writers.

*You have often mentioned the influence of Amelia Batistich and Frank Sargeson<sup>3</sup> as writers who helped you perceive the “authentic” New Zealand voice. Could you comment on this?*

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1. Fiona Kidman’s controversial novel *A Breed of Women* (1979), where she narrates the life of a woman struggling to escape the confinement of a monocultural and patriarchal suburban environment, initiated a trend in New Zealand literature nourished by the arrival of second wave feminism to the country. Coinciding with the International Women’s Year in 1975, other women writers started reflecting similar concerns in their works. Lauris Edmond’s *In Middle Air* and Rachel McAlpine’s *Lament for Ariadne* were published in the same year.

2. Together with Grace, the poet Hone Tuwhare and the novelist Witi Ihimaera became the pioneers in the inscription of the Maori voice in New Zealand literature. Ihimaera’s *Tangi* (1973) was the first novel to be published by a Maori writer and Tuwhare’s *No Ordinary Sun* (1964) became the first collection of poetry.

3. Amelia Batistich, of Dalmatian origin, has been one of the few voices to contribute to the inscription of a non-Maori ethnic minority in New Zealand. She has published several novels and collections of short stories since the 1940s. Frank Sargeson, who started writing in the 1930s, is considered to have been one of the pioneers in the shaping of the “authentic” New Zealand literature. Grace has repeatedly acknowledged the influence of both writers and all those who struggled to shape the cultural profile of a country still strongly influenced by the British tradition.

Yes, all through my schooling I had never read a book by a New Zealand writer, or maybe I had in the school journals but I didn't really remember those because our reading experience at school really had to do with standing up straight and raising our voices enough. There were so many things that we had to remember to do while we were reading that I don't think I ever absorbed the material. Reading wasn't for enjoyment, it wasn't for the information even. It was for learning to read aloud, correctly, and to enunciate perfectly. When I went to Teachers' College I read the works of Frank Sargeson and for the first time I realised what writing was. I realised that it started from your own personal knowledge, background and surroundings, whereas before, during my school experience, writing had been the opposite to that. It was based on other reading material. So I read the works of Frank Sargeson and started hearing the New Zealand voice for the first time in literature. And then when I read the work of Amelia Batistich I realised that she had a different New Zealand voice. It reinforced the idea that writers had their own voices. It occurred to me when I read those works that I had a voice as well, and I thought that I would like to try that out.

*Do you feel there are connections between the issues you deal with within a Maori context and those of women writing from different perspectives?*

I feel motivated and moved by any good writing and a lot of it is writing by women which I enjoy a lot. I also feel very comfortable when I am writing about women, especially when I am writing about strong Maori women characters. I come from a culture where women are strong. I particularly enjoyed, for example, writing *Cousins*. Again I wrote that based on my own experience and my own cousins and I didn't have too much trouble finding a voice for each of the cousins, even though they were all of the same era. Sometimes it can be difficult to make characters distinctive. But I really enjoyed that challenge.

*Would you call yourself a feminist writer?*

I sometimes don't know what to say when people ask me if I am a feminist writer because I am not well-versed in feminist theory. But that does not mean that I don't understand the position of women in society. In some ways I regard myself as a feminist activist in that I am a *woman* and I have always *acted*. I've always believed, and was brought up to believe, that I could do whatever I set my mind to doing. I have never felt in my family—although outside my family I have seen it—restricted by being female. So I have grown up with the idea that what I wanted to do, I would be able to do. In spite of being rather a quiet, introverted child, I still had plenty of self-esteem.

*How do you think that your writing in particular, or Maori writing in general, differs from Pakeha<sup>4</sup> writing?*

I wouldn't like to too closely define it because Maori people are all different from each other, just as any other group of people are, so you get a variety of backgrounds that are

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4. New Zealanders of European descent.

Maori. But these varied backgrounds may have some things in common ... Themes could be similar: wider family relationships may be explored, and community dynamics may be explored.

I've heard it said that it has become a cliché in Maori writing to write about death. I don't know whether I would call it a cliché because if we write about what we know, probably from our background and experience, and we bring other things to bear on that experience, then death and the protocols and what happens when a person dies are very much part of everyday life. And I know that none of us is putting it there to try and be exotic. Another theme is to do with the interrelations between family and family members, but remembering that that includes ancestors and people who are not yet born. Writing can also be about the disruption of communities and families, about dislocation rather than location.

*Do you speak Maori?*

No.

*So, could it be said that the Maori words you use in your work are a conscious choice?*

No, where appropriate, I use a type of English where Maori words are introduced because I am used to hearing and speaking that type of English. So it's a matter of matching the type of language to the characters. The language belongs to the characters. You want them to be authentic.

*It's interesting what you are saying about Maori people coming from varied backgrounds and approaching their writing from those different points of view. Much has been said about the impossibility, or the inappropriateness, of defining what Maori literature should be about. The poet Bub Bridger, for example, says that she is not "a Maori Writer, but a Maori who writes" (McGaw 1988: 3). Would you agree with this statement?*

We don't give these labels to ourselves. Other people do that. I don't object to them—woman writer, Maori writer, New Zealand, Pacific or Oceanic writer, short story writer, novelist. The only adjective I would use for myself is "fiction," that is "fiction writer." But I've always known that I am Maori. In the case of Bub Bridger, because the knowledge was kept from her and she did not find out until she was in her forties about Maori ancestry, I think that when people call her a Maori writer she gets self-conscious about it a little because she hasn't been brought up in a Maori environment. So I think, in fact I know because she is a good friend of mine, that this is what Bub Bridger is saying.

I must say that I agree with Witi Ihimaera's definition of who is a Maori writer: they are people with Maori genealogy who identify as Maori and people who are accepted as Maori. His definition is culturally correct because it is part of our culture to be inclusive and it's part of our culture to say who we are.

*So you would agree with what Witi Ihimaera says in his introduction to the fifth volume of Te Ao Marama, the anthology of Maori writing: "The time has come to recognise that Maori writing cannot continue to be lumped under one generic heading" (Ihimaera 1996: 17)?*

Yes, and there is his collection *Growing up Maori*. He had several entries there but there could be ten more books and everyone would have different stories.

*Do you feel that Maori writing has to be political?*

No, I don't think it has to engage in political themes, and I don't think that it has to define Maori culture either. But in another way it always will define Maori culture, because there is Bub's way of being Maori, there is Alan Duff's way of being Maori ...<sup>5</sup> There are so many different ways ... and the more different ways that we have in the pool of Maori writing, the more close the definition of being Maori becomes. But, can there really be a definition? There are writers like Roma Potiki,<sup>6</sup> for example, who was brought up by non-Maori parents ... There are so many different experiences. There are people who have been traditionally brought up, whose first language is Maori, and people who have been deculturalised, and a wide range of people in-between.

But I think in a way that all of our writing is political. The first stories that I wrote for *Waiariki* were mostly set in rural areas. They were about old and young people going about their daily lives. People think of issues such as land, language and education and all those types of things, I never thought of these stories as being political until someone said to me that if you are in a position ... I don't like using the word "minority" very much, but you know what I mean ... You're few in numbers, in your own country and through the political and the social events that have happened in that country the small group has become powerless, if you are writing about those people in their powerlessness, whether you do it deliberately or not, the writing is political.

*How do you feel about your work being analysed from a non-Maori point of view?*

Well, analysing and breaking things up into compartments is really not a Maori activity, it doesn't really fit a Maori worldview, I suppose. But at the same time I've always said that I want my work to be read and discussed, and to quote myself "chopped in the marketplace along with everybody else's." I haven't written it for a specific audience that is Maori. In fact, I don't have a readership in mind when I write. I write what I want to write in the way I want to do it so that it is true to me. And when I finish a piece of work I know that I've done the best that I can do. I revise a lot, I put it out there and then it's gone from me. So there's nothing more that I can do about it. Anything else that anyone does after that is kind of the other side of the communication process. Whatever people do with it in their own ways is really up to them, and I am pleased enough that my work is distributed out there in whatever way. So if that means it is studied, or talked about, or discussed, or just read I think that it's all positive. It's all part of discussion.

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5. Alan Duff has become one of the most controversial Maori novelist, a reputation he acquired after the publication of his first novel *Once Were Warriors* (1990), where he offered a bitter portrait of Maori urban gangs and condemned issues such as domestic violence, drug use and alcoholism, in a way other Maori writers had not done before.

6. Roma Potiki has published several collections of poetry (*Stones in her Mouth*, 1992; *Shaking the Tree*, 1998) and is also very well-known as a playwright.

Sometimes when I look at what people have written I know that I would rather people were talking about ideas, language, or themes instead of thinking “now, I have to find out what’s postcolonial in there.” Because “postcolonial” does not mean anything to me, really ... I don’t write postcolonial literature according to *me*. I am just writing what I know about and bringing creativity to bear on that. Nevertheless, I am often astounded by the scholarship and analysis. It is wonderful to have my work so appreciated outside New Zealand.

*So in a way the words you used to close your novel Potiki—Ka huri—or “spread the word” are a way of conveying that other part of the communicative process, once you hand in the finished work, aren’t they?*

Yes. *Potiki* is set out like a *whaikorero*, a piece of oratory, and a formal piece of oratory has a format to it. It will often have at its beginning a chant, *tauparapara* it’s called, something that brings the attention towards the speaker. And then we have the greetings. Then will come the body or main part of the speech and at the end there will often be “Ka huri” to turn over to another next speaker or the next storyteller to tell his/her story.

*Do you see your writing as didactic? Do you consider yourself as a kind of teacher or merely as an spectator of what surrounds you?*

I’d rather leave it to other people to make that judgement. People often tell me that they have learned things from reading my work and that they have come to understand things that they did not understand before. I think my writing does have an agenda though, except that the issues brought up are really everyday life things for a lot of Maori people. In that way they are unavoidable.

*Some of the scenes that feature most prominently in your work are precisely school scenes, where you use children to talk about social injustices and their disadvantaged position inside the classroom. Are those scenes based on personal experience?*

Yes, most of it is based on personal experience, or second-hand experience. “Going for the Bread” is a true story about something that happened to me when I was about five.<sup>7</sup> Some of the stories will be from my own children and from my teaching experiences as well.

*You have often talked about your secure family background and how important it was for you when you were growing up that your parents encouraged both sides of your identity. Would you say that this bicultural upbringing helps you in your writing?*

I suppose it does. I have always been aware of a double heritage but of knowing which foot I was on all the time. That hasn’t been something that caused problems for me. You just get used to the way you grow up. I’ve always found it very easy to understand what Maori are talking about and what Pakeha are talking about and that has been important for me.

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7. Included in her collection *Electric City and Other Stories* (1987).

So in some ways I have been able to see myself as a communicator between two groups of people. All Maori people are of mixed ethnicity.

*You have said that “New Zealand is a multicultural society, but you wouldn’t know this from reading our literature” (Kedgley 1992: 63). What do you think about the state of New Zealand writing at present, especially with respect to the absence of minority writers? Do you think that enough is being done to encourage those voices which would truly make New Zealand literature multicultural?*

No, I don’t think that enough is being done. We wouldn’t know that we are a multicultural society by looking at our literature. Maori writing has gained much more focus now than it had previously, but there is still a lot missing. There is a lot missing from people of other backgrounds too. I think it would be good to be more proactive about encouraging writers from all sorts of backgrounds as New Zealanders, because until that happens, our literature is not whole, it is not showing fully who we are in this country.

*In your writing you make certain characters speak up in a very resolute way, without resorting to violence, but using language as a weapon. I am talking about characters like Rose in “A Way of Talking,”<sup>8</sup> Tangimoana in Potiki or Mahaki in Baby No-Eyes. Is their attitude the result of a kind of insight into both cultures?*

In Maoridom there are plenty of characters like Rose, Mahaki or Tangimoana. People in a position of *having* to be bicultural for their own survival. So all Maori are bicultural to a certain degree, whether they are old or whether they are young. The very elderly people that I knew as a child could still function, sometimes not very easily, but they could still function in the whole environment. They may have felt safer and better in their own environment, but they were able to function in the new one. What I always noticed about them too was the level of understanding that they had. They understood what was going on, but they could not do anything about it. Then younger people grew up and usually they were the ones that were educated, so they found out how they could stand up for themselves and their culture. That did not mean that the older people did not know, it just meant that the young people were less afraid, I suppose.

*One of the assets of your work is precisely the way in which you make all these different people speak. You talk through very different voices, from those of the older generations, engaged in recollections of the past, to younger voices narrating contemporary experiences and more directly involved in political struggles. I would like to know how difficult, and how important, it is for you as a writer to achieve this diversity.*

I love doing that! For me my main interest is in the characters. The stories happen because of the characters, the language belongs to the characters, the settings, the environment, the moods ... everything. The characters are central to all that. People are very important to me, but also communities. I live in a community where everybody is related to me. That

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8. Included in her collection *Waiariki* (1975).

does not mean that we always get on well together. We don't manage that all the time. But when it comes down to the basics, I suppose that we do. So I have people of all ages surrounding me all the time, and it is this which I have to draw from in my work.

*Do you find it easier to talk through the voice of children?*

I find it easy, I don't know about easier. But I like it and I enjoy listening to children, talking to children. I find that children can often comment on what's happening freely.

*Is the way in which your children characters get together to help each other—like Toko and Manu in Potiki, or Baby and Tawera in Baby No-Eyes—part of the dynamics of community?*

Yes, that's part of Maori culture. There are what we call tuakana teina relationships. These are relationships between the older and the younger children, but not only children. It goes right through adult life as well. So older siblings have responsibilities for younger ones to look out for their welfare, to teach them, to guide them. And the younger ones have responsibility to the older ones, to listen to them, to be guided by them, to be loyal to them. And it is not only between brothers and sisters but between cousins, different ages and generations and so forth. It does not always work out, but is a basic philosophy: you take responsibility—all of you do—for all those younger than you. It does not matter whether you are my age or your age. I would have loyalty to people older than me, I would listen to them, I would not want to contradict them unless it was unavoidable. I would want to respect them in every way, unless they did something that made me feel that I could not.

*I would like to talk a little bit about Baby No-Eyes. Since I first read it I felt it was a very different novel, compared to the previous ones. In what ways do you see it as a point of departure from your previous works, if you see it like that at all?*

I am not sure whether it is a departure so much as a different level. I don't know whether a higher level ... It's a different aspect of storytelling for one thing and, it might be different in lots of ways, but the storytelling nature of it is still there, as it was in *Potiki* and in *Cousins*. But this was another way of having people telling their own stories and me finding a way for them to tell. So, for example, Gran Kura's stories could stand alone and could be taken out of the book and just read on their own as stories.

In some ways it is probably the most organic book in that it may not be obvious where it is all leading. All I could do was just hope that it would pop out whole by the end. I enjoyed trying to do that. It was a big challenge. I don't know how successful it is from the point of view of other people, but for myself I managed to bring it all together. I don't know whether people who read the book connect with what happened to the baby in the hospital and genetic engineering, with indigenous values and the feeling of indigenous peoples around the world when it comes to intellectual property and genes.

*In a way you move on from Potiki, where you deal basically with land claims, to introduce a whole range of issues concerning Maori people, don't you?*



Yes, I suppose in a way *Baby No-Eyes* is like an expansion of all these issues. Genetic engineering, the mining of genes of indigenous people becomes the new frontier of colonisation.

*The incident you narrate in the novel, in which Baby's body is returned to her family after a car accident without her eyes, did take place in a New Zealand hospital. What made you choose a real life incident and enlarge it into a novel?*

I think when you start off any piece of work it is because you've been moved in some way, maybe by some little thing, like in *Potiki*. When I began that it was because I looked into a room and I saw a man there bending over a carving and making something. I came out with a very strong vision of that. But with *Baby No-Eyes* I was very moved by the story that I was told and what happened with the family when they went to pick up a still-born baby from the hospital. It stayed in my mind so that one day I thought that I would like to give that baby a life. That's really how it all started. I didn't really know how I was going to start it. I started it off with a woman walking, and the point of view of the baby that she was carrying inside her. I thought that was going to be Baby, not Tawera. But I needed Tawera. I needed the real life, physical baby presence. So that voice became the brother to Baby. That was a very important relationship for the telling of the story.

*This type of narration is also found in Cousins, in the part narrated by Missy's unborn twin brother. Is this technique a way of reflecting what you were saying before about the need to rescue all voices to tell the story, not only those of the ancestors but also of those who are not born yet?*

Yes. I think the idea here came to me because of the experience of writing *Cousins*. When I first wrote *Cousins* it was all told in the first person. I decided that there was not enough variety, that I wanted to find a way to use different voices, different points of view. So it occurred to me to write Missy's story from the point of view of the twin that had not been born. I found that a very interesting and rewarding piece of work to do because the twin had an overall view of everything. I wanted to develop that here, Tawera having a voice before he was born. I like that, I enjoyed writing about the relationship between him and his sister.

*What about the image of the eyes? I am interested in how you take the loss of the eyes further from the physical and turn it into a deeper way of understanding the relationship between the characters, between Maori and Pakeha cultures. I particularly enjoyed the way in which you make Tawera explain colours to Baby.*

Well, I am interested in you saying that about the colours because no one has really brought that up with me before. When I was writing it I was thinking "this is so crazy, because that colour really does not have anything to do with that action," but then I thought "maybe it *does* have" and I wondered what people would make of it, you know, saying that grey is like licking a window or something like that. I didn't particularly associate grey with licking a window when I was writing it. I just wanted Tawera to make

up things that he could say to his sister so she could get a feeling in some way. It may be nothing to do with his vision of the colour but it did not have to be because she could not see it anyway. He was appeasing her.

*When you wrote about Tawera, guiding his blind sister, giving eyes to her, were you thinking about Potiki and the way in which you had the carver giving eyes to his carvings as a final gift before releasing them into the world?*

I don't think I related it, it was not a conscious thing. In our meeting houses the eyes of the carvings are very strong and very noticeable. But I still don't know whether that has anything to do with the way I write or not. I think that you learn a lot from people's eyes, the movements of the eyes. I suppose I have always been an observer, also a participator, but basically an observer. I never used to talk a lot, I used to watch and in a way that is a learning pattern too. People learn by watching.

*I also found the epilogue, where you present the adult Tawera as a painter, very interesting. What made you turn him into an artist and how is this related to your own writing process?*

I thought about it near the end of the book because I did not know how I was going to end it. I thought about who he was before he was born and while he was growing up and in developing that character I wondered what sort of an adult he would become. I just knew that he would most certainly be involved in the politics of his people, as his mother was. I thought that his involvement would be through art. That's how I saw it. He was already an artist. Throughout the story he drew pictures. Art was part of his life. His sister had had a life, and then she'd gone. But he was the one who knew about his sister and now he was going to show this. He wanted to show it through the world through his paintings.

*Do you see a connection between his paintings and the carvings in Potiki, or other forms of Maori art like weaving which you have often used in your work?*

Yes. I suppose I do, but in this case I see them more related to the idea that he was going to give his sister a life and make known all the issues to do with that life as well. The carvings in a meeting house are not really seen by "the world." They are more to do with family stories.

*I can see how that intimate character regulates the storytelling process in the novel, especially in the parts narrated by Kura, and I was wondering what she meant when she said: "by the time I die I hope to be again the person who I was born to be" (Grace 1998: 66)?*

What Kura is referring to is that she started off being a certain person, and then as she grew there were more and more things that she had to keep secret because she did not want to make trouble. That was typical of that generation. They suffered a lot of poverty, a lot of deprivation and they always had to be "good" so that they could survive, not to do things that would get them into trouble. They did not want to speak out. This is what she told Shane. He knew that there were things missing from his identity and that had been

hidden from him. He was trying to get that from her. And Kura came to realise that he was quite right, that he had a right to know all these things, otherwise he would just be a hollowed out person without a culture. So she made up her mind that from then on she would tell all the stories.

*Is that the reason why you used the image of the ball wrapped around layers, which she had been accumulating throughout the years, to convey her final transformation?*

Yes, that's right. She is unwrapping the layers from inside herself. She looks upon it as a poison that she'll get rid of so that she will be a good person again. She will be someone who sees herself as worthy of her descendants.

*Why did you make Kura's death and Baby's journey back to where she belongs coincide in time?*

Baby goes off with her at the time of her death because that was a convenient time. Well, there are two things really. First of all, I've heard people speak about a baby that has died, or a stillborn baby, even a miscarriage or a baby that has been adopted out, and they say that they think about that child everyday, and how the child has been missing all through their lives. This is how I regarded the relationship of Te Paania, the mother, with Baby. But also quite often, little children have a soul mate or a companion, and that soul mate is very real to them. They go through life with the companion but at a certain age they have to be free of the companion. The way that I worked it out in the story is that the sister really thinks that it is time for the brother to be free of her. So he goes through a period of grief and then finds a way of coming to terms with it through his art.

*What is your next project?*

I am writing a novel, fairly near to completing it. I am sure it'll be out during next year sometime.<sup>9</sup>

Wellington, New Zealand  
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9. Grace is referring to her last novel to date, *Dogside Story*, which came out in 2001.

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