



RANDOM HOUSE NEW ZEALAND LTD

Private Bag 102950, North Shore Mail Centre, 18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland 1310

Telephone (09) 444 7197 Fax (09) 444 7524

[www.randomhouse.co.nz](http://www.randomhouse.co.nz)

TO: Tilly Lloyd  
Witi

FROM: Tom Beran

Witi's speech notes



w. ihimera@dnokland.ac.nz

Laurence Oxenborg  
Press Attaché, French Embassy

Witi Ihimaera (FOA ENG) Fw: di Volie au ber

To: Nicole Kidman  
Subject: 2 Bella Vista Songs from the Violet Cafe  
Helen Bay, Auckland  
Lorraine, Erica Carter

Fracture der Gabel

In 1963, if you had wandered into Violet's Cafe, a small restaurant in a seemingly ordinary central North Island town, this is what you would have found on Violet's beautifully presented, handwritten and scrolled, surprising menu. You would have been able to ask for the Soup of the Day. As entree, you would have been able to select from three choices: Foie de Volaille au beurre (Chicken livers delicately sauteed in butter), Fritot de Cervelles (Fritters made of brains marinated in lemon juice and cooked in a pale ale batter) or Quiche au Crabe (A delicately flavoured crab quiche). Following this selection, Violet and her waitresses would have offered you four mains choices: Fish of the Day, or Tournedos Henry IV (Fillet steak served with sauce bearnaise, accompanied with French fried potatoes and salad) or Escalopes a la Creme (A melt in the mouth veal fillet, served with cream and flaming brandy) or Coq au Vin (Violet especially recommends this classic chicken dish, made with mushrooms and tiny onions and using only the finest cognac). Are your taste buds watering? And don't forget this is in 1963 when cuisine wasn't so haute and cordon wasn't so bleu, and when fine wine was not available in restaurants and normally came in a cardboard cask. And after the mains? Violet would have offered you as dessert Creme Brulee (It speaks for itself; Violet's is incomparable) or Tarte Framboise.

At the very bottom of the menu you would have found a note from Violet herself: Please do not ask our waiting staff for wine. Sadly, it is illegal to sell alcohol on these premises. C'est Nouvelle Zelande. After all, this is New Zealand. Bon appetit.

But those in the know would have whispered, instead, to the waitresses, "We'll have some of Violet's special tea." And for those who dined regularly, they would know also that one of the reasons why Violet's food was so alluring was because of her piece de resistance: the darkly perfumed truffles with which she infused her food, one of the rarest ingredients in the world.

Hello everyone. I can think of no better way than to describe Songs from the Violet Cafe in the same terms as Violet's menu itself: it is incomparable, at every turn it is totally surprising, marinated and delicately flavoured, and it has just the right amount of pungency to create a heady, strong and stunning intervention in the history of New Zealand letters. It's a book of graceful and seductive surprises, writing full of wisdom, unspoken joys and passions and with that earthy tang of truffles. No wonder that the reviews have been so highly complimentary, and I congratulate you on them, Fiona.

I also congratulate you, Harriet, for publishing Songs from the Violet Cafe, because it's the kind of book that a publisher can point to as representing among the best and most central they have to offer, the kind that affirms a publisher's reputation.

For the rest of us the novel is also the kind of book that practitioners know you can only write after years of practising and refining one's craft. Nobody gets to this kind of discontinuous narrative without having done a long apprenticeship - in Fiona's case through such books as A Breed of Women, 1979, Mandarin Summer, 1981, Paddy's Puzzle, 1983, and The Book of Secrets, 1987. No writer makes the kind of gambles that Fiona has made with regard not just to structure but also to character development, point of view, subtext and so on without long years of making decisions in the unfolding of narrative as in Fiona's short story collections all the way from The Foreign Woman, 1993 to A Needle in the Heart, 2002. Nobody handles such a huge cast of characters, including the wonderful Jessie Sandle, the main character, or the stories of the other waitresses whom Violet rules with an iron fist - Marianne Belle, Evelyn, Hester or the men and other characters in their lives like Lou, or Wallace or Owen or John Wing Lee - and makes it look so deceptively a simple balancing act without having been many times on the high wire - in plays like the early "Search for Sister Blue" to writing for radio and television - and acquiring the skills on how to avoid falling. You have to be writing for years to be able to suddenly remove such wonderful and moving characters as the Chinese wife Ming who appears on page 16 and disappears on page 35 or the enigmatic Hugo who appears on page 15 and is gone by page 102.

When I was with you, Fiona, at the Brisbane Writers Festival last week you said to me, "After all, this is what happens in life, people come and people go, one moment they are there next minute they are not." You're right, of course, but I still marvel that you have been able to trust to the reality of the fiction that covers so many characters and generations - it begins in 1943 and ends in 2002 - within a novel that is half the size. That you have managed the compression and still conveyed the teeming life, events, shifting locations, ethical and moral dilemmas - all those people who enter, exit and re-enter in surprising and revealing ways - as well as managed to maintain the chromatic nature of the relationships - and still able to sustain the tangential, the deflected and reflected, the stuff that spins in and spins off, is tribute to the organic nature of the text and the lives you write about. You cannot write such work without having been, yourself, generous in your own life. And all of here tonight know of Fiona's own generous life, her involvement and advocacy for writers and literature, her and Ian's political commitment to justice in Aotearoa, to resolution of problems in Cambodia, her deep and lasting personal relationships with all of us here tonight and to friends no longer with us like Bill Sewell and Lauris Edmond.

I mentioned the Brisbane Writers Festival. I have to tell you that Fiona is highly respected over there in Australia where she was chairing a session on Australian poetry. I mean, how many New Zealand festivals would I even consider having an Australian chairing a session on New Zealand poetry? I don't think so. And being with Fiona is such a buzz. When we were in the hotel and I asked the operator to put me through to Ms Kidman's room I heard her gasp, "Oh my God, Nicole Kidman is staying with us." Fiona also told me she thought she'd been upgraded on the flight because they thought she was related to Nicole; that never happened to me.

Like your character, Fiona, you also have taken a  
Mind and mind - this is what I believe in and this is what I do. In your own



As a writer, you have to be very sure of your art and your vision, when you introduce an accident such as befalls some of the characters during a storm two thirds of the way through the book, especially when it blows your narrative apart and from out of which emerges a kind of displacement - a sudden, surprising leap of the artistic consciousness when the centre of the novel moves offshore and twenty years ahead from the 1960s to war-torn Cambodia of the 1980s where it follows Jessie Sandle, Fiona's wonderful heroine - a heroine of Robin Hyde resonance and stature - as she grapples with the patterns and the circularities of a life. You also have to be certain of the history you are telling, yours as well as others, the personal as well as the political, and to be sympathetic to the fact that history does matter, must be substantiated, must be affirmed, that it is not just deployed for fiction's sake: Tell the truth. And then, to be able to move the novel forward again another twenty years to 2002, is another evidence of the novelist's strength and confidence. There are more surprises for Jessie as the patterns in her life return her home, back to her central history, her central geography, to the original compass point, back to that central North Island cafe, back to mou n Violet and back to all those unresolved strands of the life that could have been, the life that is. And what's so wonderfully satisfying about Fiona's work are the wonderful sets of moral choices that she allows her characters to make and the various journeys they are set upon as a consequence. No judgements are made about what is right or wrong, some things are disclosed, others not, some things finalised, other unresolved, some things offered in closure, other things offered for the reader to close himself or herself in whatever way we might like according to the expectations and wishes we hold for all those who inhabit the pages of the novel. This is Fiona's compassion. This is Fiona's tristesse: the book hurts, the books salves, the book forgives. The book heals.

And then of course there is the language: it is both implicit and explicit. It is allusive, literary, constructed on ironies, on nuances, on finesse as we might expect from Kidman the poet of published collections from Honey and Bitters in 1975 to Wakeful Nights in 1991.

On page 136, Violet gives an opinion on her own craft.

"Well, there's good food and there's excellent food," Violet said, resting her chin on her hand. "I serve good food day after day, but it's a performance. When people come they want some drama, if I'm to continue this literary metaphor. It's like peeling clothes off at a play - if you just brought the players on naked the patrons would think they'd been cheated."

"That sounds remarkably like sex you're talking about," said Owen lazily. Jessie thought again what an appealing and pleasant man Owen was, and more complex than he seemed on the surface, not at all raw meat and rough hands.

"Well, yes," Violet agreed, "sex does come into it. People do often come to a restaurant before a seduction - or that's what it was like when I lived in France. It's a little different in a town like this, although sex on an empty stomach is always a bit of a chore, even if it's just fish and chips, wouldn't you agree?"

Fiona, "Songs of the Violet Cafe" is not just good food, it's excellent food. Its also seductive, rich, not a chore, true cordon bleu.

Fiona, you and I have often said of each other that we are hitched to the same star. You wrote to me in August and you asked me "Have looked at Mars this week? It's so bright, the closest it's going to be to earth for um; teen thousand years. Perhaps that's our star!"

If it is, Fiona, it's an honour to be hitched with you to it. I join with your family, colleagues, publishers and friends in congratulating you for "Songs from the Violet Cafe" and in launching it with a song about violets:

"E puti puti koe katoa hia  
He piri ki te uma e te tau  
Aue aue kia piri tonu mai  
He putiputi koe  
Katohia."

To "Songs from the Violet Cafe" and to Fiona.