

***Guardian of the Dead* by Karen Healey**

An outstanding novel that brings contemporary characters and settings together with ancient mythology, *Guardian of the Dead* is an elaborate text that is superbly written and driven by a compelling plot. In the style of Margaret Mahy's *The Changeover*, this trickster story carries the history of NZ fiction into the present.

What appears on the surface to be a nod to fashionable crime fiction becomes a much deeper narrative journey as the mysterious Eyeslasher is revealed to be more than a serial murderer. While attending boarding school in Christchurch, the protagonist, Ellie Spencer, must draw on strengths not before realised to defend not only her friends but the entire New Zealand nation from malevolent Maori ancestors.

The text depicts age-old tradition and myth alongside modern settings and attitudes in a contemporaneous account of co-existence. This novel is filled with cultural knowledge: NZ history; Maori traditions, language and creation myths; modern life in a multicultural society. While it is set in NZ and focuses on specific NZ cultural history, it is valuable in its model of connectivity across time and space.

One of the joys of this novel is the way in which Healey has developed strong and interesting characters. Not only are Maori and settler cultures sensitively merged in a realistic and empathic fashion, but Ellie's fellow boarders, Samia and Iris, carry their ethnic heritage as integral, rather than adjunct, to the narrative. The characterisation of Ellie's friend, Kevin, is especially remarkable as it demonstrates Healey's courage to surface issues of teen asexuality and complicated family histories. Kevin has his own more personal battle with Reka the non-human patupaiarehe.

As in most Young Adult fiction, there is a love interest. There is more to the enigmatic and theatrical Mark than first appears, and his loyalties are complex; his enduring love for his ancient culture and his new love for Ellie contribute to one of the most endearing relationships in narrative history.

Guardian of the Dead is a rich and rewarding tale of a strong female hero in a contemporary battle with the dark side of myth and mystery.

Trish Lunt, Victoria

This is a first novel by a New Zealander living in Australia in which she creates a powerful mythological fantasy of epic proportions. Under her skilful writing abilities, Maori legends and traditions come alive through the young adult characters, especially Ellie and Mark. I was engrossed in the plot from the opening chapter which establishes the teenage 'normalcy' and credibility of the central character Eleanor Spencer, a New Zealand born and bred rather large adolescent finishing her final year at the South Island High School, Mansfield College. She fantasizes about the opposite sex, worries about her appearance and is experimenting with alcohol with her fellow senior students. Apart from her abilities in tae kwan do, Ellie seems to be nothing exceptional.

Rapidly events at the local University Drama Society draw Ellie away from the comfort of school and into a life and death battle with real Maori legendary creatures and some Ms Healey has created. The future of the North Island (Ellie's birthplace) and its inhabitants lie with her and other magically strong characters. The Maori Underworld becomes vividly real and threatening disaster through volcanic activity in this world is powerfully evoked.

This novel would appeal to 16 years plus female and male readers of action-packed fantasy. It is not necessary to have a previous knowledge of Maori and Polynesian Mythology, the novel informs the reader through the plot and the Glossary and Afterword offer enrichment also.

This introduction to the rich Maori otherworld is what I particularly enjoyed in reading Ms Healey's work and I would recommend all school and public libraries to purchase copies. Also the parallels with Greek and Roman myths were well done; Celtic links could also have been drawn and with Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime characters. This is not a criticism as there is only so much can be done in one novel and this is one very powerful work.

Susan Hill, secondary HS teacher/librarian, NSW

New Zealand author, Karen Healey's debut novel *Guardian of the Dead* is another foray into the paranormal genre which seems to be so popular with teenage fiction at the moment. Ellie Spenser is an ordinary school girl, living a fairly normal life with fairly typical concerns. Her world changes dramatically as legend and myth become reality and an alternative world, 'the land of mist' becomes merged with the world she always thought she knew. The guy she crushes on is intimately part of this new world as she tries to save not only herself but also her best friend, Kevin, from the dark forces. Other interesting characters abound in this tale that believably is set in both the modern and supernatural worlds. One of the most effective and interesting parts of the novel is the aspects of Maori legend and culture that are seamlessly interwoven into the plot (and there is a handy and brief guide to Maori lore in the back) which ends up making this novel quite an original read.

Gersha Shteyman, Kesser Torah College, NSW