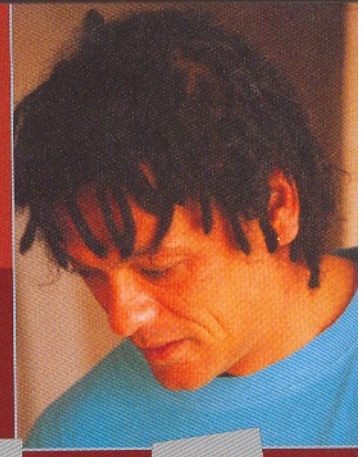


Apirana Taylor is an award-winning full-time writer. His mother was from the Ngāti Porou and Te Whānau-ā-Apānui tribes, and his father is Pākehā. Apirana talks about his life as a writer.



Playing with Words

by Apirana Taylor

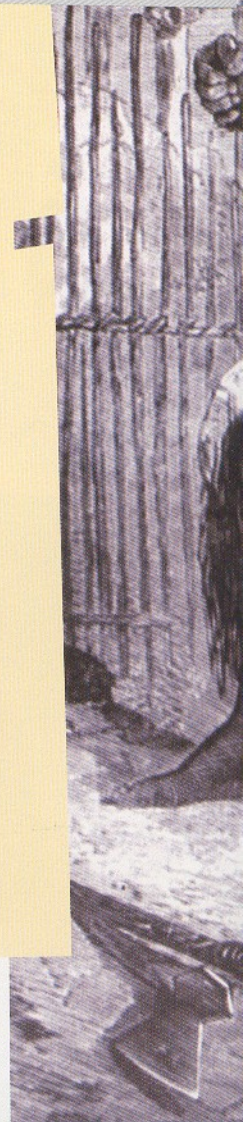
When I was a little boy, I loved playing with words and phrases in my mind. I was always trying to make them more memorable. For instance, if someone said “the missiles went really, really fast over the sky”, I’d change that line to something like “the missiles *rocketed* over the sky”.

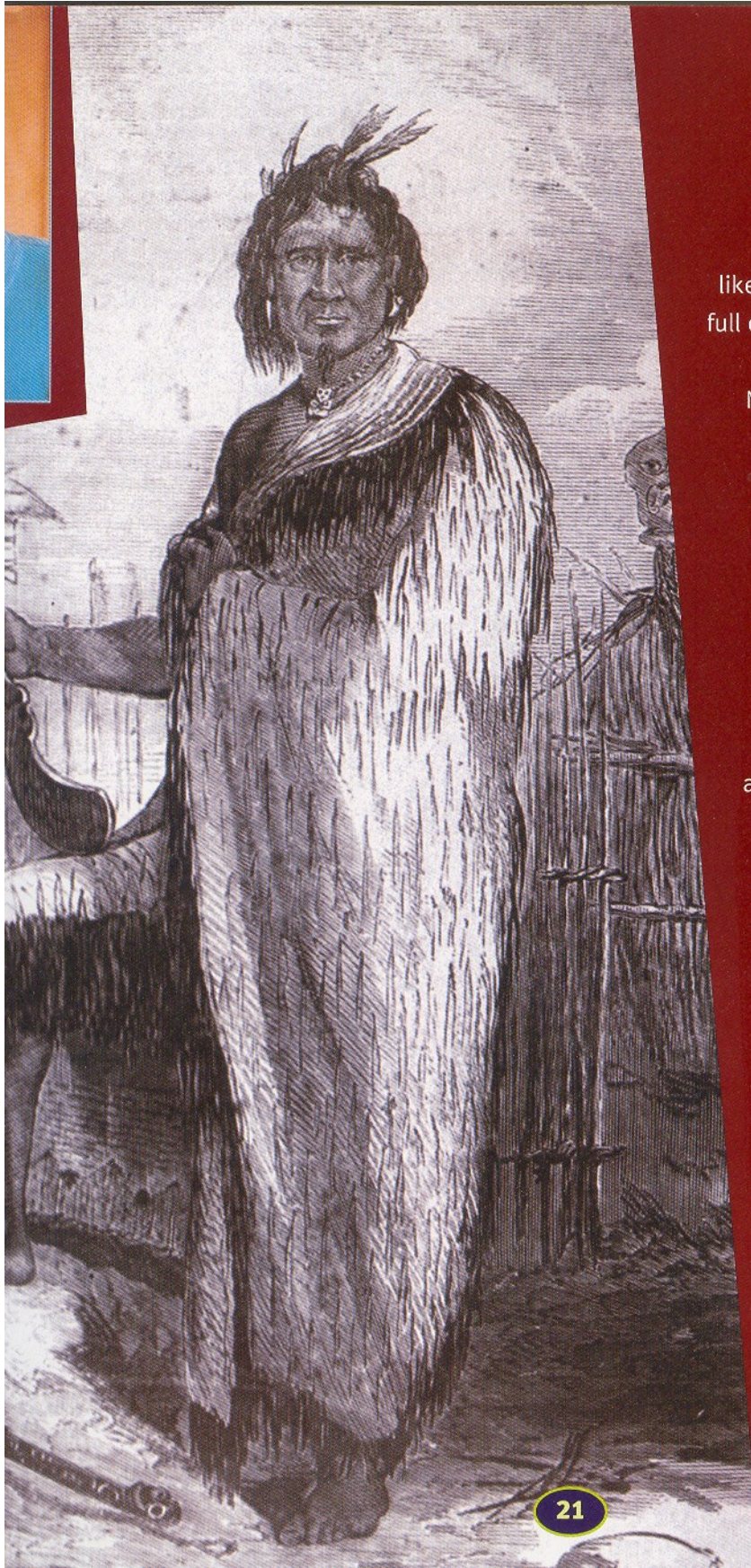
As a child, I found reading difficult. I wrote a lot of my letters backwards, like this: *loekret*. One teacher helped me overcome my difficulties, and now I read thousands of books, and I write almost every day.

My father was an excellent journalist and, as a boy, I wanted to be a writer like Dad. Once I learnt to read and write, I found that I got a lot of satisfaction from writing. Most kids love it when the teacher gets them to paint or draw. I loved it when the teacher got us to write because, to me, words were like paint. I could use them to create atmosphere, express my feelings, develop my imagination, and tell stories. Teachers praised my stories and poems, which encouraged me.

Less focus was placed on writing as I grew older. We didn’t do any creative writing at secondary school, and it wasn’t until my first year at Massey University that I remembered my childhood dream to be a writer. One evening, I saw Alistair Campbell reading his poetry on television. That reminded me that I’d always wanted to write – and I started writing that very evening.

I decided to write a five-hundred-page poem. I spent about two months in my room working on this epic. Here is the poem that resulted from all that work:





Te Kooti

Once hāngi grew
like melon-pregnant bellies
full of black and white flesh.

Now the stones are cold.

Te Kooti is dead
under incubus earth.

We are ashes of his fire
dead a hundred years.

Safe in our houses
we have stripped him
to a feather in the wind
as distant as a morepork
that calls in the night.

What was supposed to be about five hundred pages of writing finished up as thirteen lines. I did a lot of editing, but when I'd finished the piece, I felt such a huge rush of exhilaration that I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life writing.

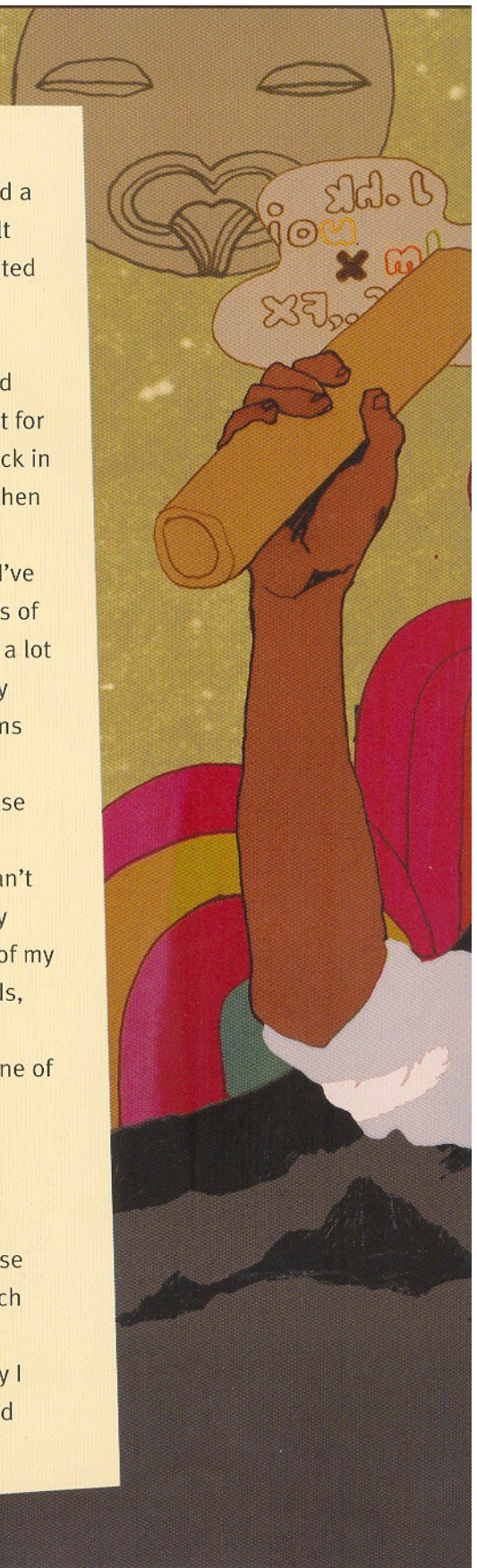
When I was about twenty, I'd spend about ten hours a day doing hard work like scrub cutting and then I'd spend most of the night writing. I did that for nearly ten years. Sometimes I got up at four o'clock in the morning and wrote for about four hours, and then I went to work.

That was nearly thirty years ago. In that time, I've written three books of poetry, a novel, three books of short stories, and a book of plays. I've also done a lot of painting as well as acting in and directing many plays. I've also acted in a couple of television films and series.

I'm nearly fifty now, and I refuse to do much else other than write and create art. I love what I do.

People sometimes ask me why I write, and I can't think of one satisfactory answer. Maybe it's in my blood. My father was a journalist, as were many of my uncles and aunties. They loved playing with words, too, and they had a gift when it came to using language. Both my sisters are playwrights, and one of them, Riwia, wrote the screenplay for *Once Were Warriors*. The writer William Taylor is my second cousin.

I love writing because it's really just being a storyteller, and I feel free when I'm left alone to use my imagination. I love writing poetry because each finished poem I write is as close as I can get to perfection. Sometimes I think that asking me why I write is like asking someone why they breathe. I'd explode or implode if I didn't.



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I write about many things, from an ant to a mountain and beyond. Sometimes, people ask me what skills they need to become a creative writer. I think talent and hard work is not enough; you need to have luck and tenacity. I tell them that you need to have the sensitivity of a poet and skin as thick as that of the rhinoceros to survive the hard knocks that this life is full of. Then I wish them good luck.

