

## Book reviews

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### **HER LIFE'S WORK: CONVERSATIONS WITH FIVE NEW ZEALAND WOMEN**

**Deborah Shepard**

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Deborah Shepard explores the life histories, to date, of five prominent New Zealand women. Marti Friedlander's portraits of these women, on the cover of this excellent book, communicate visually the women's strength, humour and wisdom that is told through Deborah Shepard's skilful interviews.

The book consists of individual 'conversations' with five remarkable New Zealand women: Jacqueline Fahey, Meri meri Penfold, Anne Salmond, Gaylene Preston and Margaret Mahy – women who are or have been artists, educators, linguists, academics, activists, a film maker/producer and writers as well as friends, mentors, daughters, wives, widows, mothers and grandmothers.

The conversations which form the narrative of the book are lengthy, honest and respectful. Shepard uses a semi-structured question and answer style that will be familiar to many qualitative researchers. Although occasionally this results in a slightly stilted or unbalanced interaction, Shepard's skill as an interviewer and her knowledge of her topic generally invites a feeling of a natural conversation with her interviewees. The author's choice of including descriptions of laughter, facial expressions and pauses, does much to enhance the feeling of being in the same room as these people. This feeling of intimacy with the subjects is also reinforced by her brief but eloquent introductions to the circumstances and physical surroundings of the interviews which take place in each subject's home. As well, the author's candid style of including the many interruptions to the interviews due to hair appointments, pets, family and work commitments helps to communicate the complex and vital lives this group of women still lead.

Each conversation begins with talk of the circumstances surrounding the women's birth, their family's background and history and works through their childhood memories, their education, careers, relationships, birth of their own children, their homes, supporters and detractors and most importantly, how they managed to forge and continue their careers while juggling family life and other commitments. They have lived complex lives and the many interconnections between the women's stories adds to the sense of just how significant this work is as a source of New Zealand cultural history.

Topics in the conversations include aging, the influence of Maori culture and Maori cultural renaissance, race relations, in particular the Maori Land protests and the Springbok Tour, and most frequently feminism. Shepard writes from a feminist standpoint and as such she allows her participants a strong voice. These women come from varied backgrounds both rich and

poor, Maori and Pakeha, and their views differ, particularly in the discussions on feminism. As the women range in age from 62 to 89, their stories cover times before, during and after the second wave of feminism until the present day and their interpretations of these times are likely to prove fascinating particularly to younger readers. Virginia Woolf's motif of the importance of a 'room of one's own' is a major theme introduced and discussed within each interview as a way to try to understand how these women succeeded in the strongly male, pakeha dominated society of the twentieth century.

As a social history of New Zealand women in the 20th century this book is to be treasured as it covers a wide range of issues and in great detail with many references to events and personalities who have helped shape this country. As a testament to the women's lives, there is a sense of privilege to having been admitted to tender, sad, angry and frustrating aspects of these eminent women's lives as they struggled to pursue their careers and their passions. Within their stories their good humour, dignity and warm humanity abounds, despite the difficulties the women all faced as they pursued academic, artistic and humanitarian concerns throughout their lives. Their stories as told through Deborah Shepard are an inspiration to us to keep on pursuing women's rights in a world which believes the battle has been won.

*DEBORAH TAYLOR*