

## BRITFILMS STUDY GUIDE: WHALE RIDER

New Zealand 2001, 101 min

German certification: minimum age 6,  
recommended for 10 years and over

director	Niki Caro
script	Niki Caro (based on the novel of the same name by Witi Ihimaera)
cinematography	Leon Narbey
editing	David Coulson
music	Lisa Gerrard
featuring	Keisha Castle-Hughes, Rawiri Paratene, Vicky Haughton, Grant Roa and others

### What WHALE RIDER is about

Of all people, it is the 12-year-old Pai who was named after the legendary ancestor who is said to have reached the east coast of New Zealand over 1000 years ago on a whale. Her grandfather Koro, the chief of the Maori tribe in the small locality of Whangara, does not approve at all. For tradition has it that only a boy can assume the legacy of the great Paikea. While Koro looks for a suitable successor among the boys, Pai tries desperately to prove that she too knows the customs of the Maori and can carry on the tradition. But Koro refuses to change his mind. When he discovers that she has been getting her uncle to train her in secret, there is an argument, and Pai has to move out of Koro's house, where she has lived since the death of her mother. Things only change when, one night, whales are beached on the coast of Whangara.

In her film version of the novel by Witi Ihimaera, Niki Caro consistently occupies the perspective of her young protagonist, who fights with all her might to earn love and acknowledgement from her grandfather. In the process, the film takes a nuanced look at traditions, showing how these can both limit people and separate them from one another, and also strengthen them and bind them together.

The following worksheets focus on

- background knowledge about the Maori
- traditions and change
- the meaning of symbols

### Publication details

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Photo credits: Arthaus

(All the stills are taken from the DVD WHALE RIDER, released in Germany by Arthaus. They serve as image quotations, to enable study of the film's content, and not as illustrations.)

**Maori culture in WHALE RIDER**

Find out what the following four terms mean. Assign them to the pictures from WHALE RIDER and write a short explanation.

- *tekoteko*
- *waka*
- *taiaha*
- *marae*

term: \_\_\_\_\_



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term: \_\_\_\_\_



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## Tradition and change

At a gathering, Pai gives the following moving speech:

*My name is Paikea Apirana and I come from a long line of chiefs, stretching all the way back to hawaiiiki, where our ancient ones are, the ones that first heard the land crying and sent a man. His name was also Paikea and I am his most recent descendant. But I was not the leader my grandfather was expecting. And by being born I broke the line back to the ancient ones. It wasn't anybody's fault. It just happened.*

*But we can learn. And if the knowledge is given to everyone, then we can have lots of leaders. And soon everyone will be strong, not just the ones that have been chosen. Because sometimes even if you are the leader and you need to be strong, you can get tired. Like our ancestor Paikea, when he was lost at sea and he couldn't find the land and he probably wanted to die. But he knew the ancient ones were there for him. So he called out to them to lift him up and give him strength. This was his chant. I dedicate it to my grandfather.*

On another sheet or on the board, draw a diagram showing Pai's/Koro's idea of a community. Discuss which version you think is better, and justify your opinion.

What does Pai think of the traditions of her people? Make reference to her speech in your answer.

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How could Koro reply to Pai's speech? Write a short text, then present it in your class.

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Can traditions separate people? Or do they connect people? Discuss this with the class, referring to examples from WHALE RIDER.

**Symbols in WHALE RIDER: the *waka***

Describe what is happening in each of the following scenes and what significance the *waka* has in it. Describe in particular how this meaning changes.



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### Symbols in WHALE RIDER: the bicycle

Describe what is happening in each of the following scenes, and what significance the bicycle has in it. Discuss in particular how the relationship between Pai and Koro changes here.



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- Think of another symbol to represent Pai's affection for her grandfather Koro.
- Discuss, in small groups, what other symbols occur in WHALE RIDER, and whether these change their meaning in the course of the story. Then present your findings to the class.
- Why are symbols like these so important in films?