Haunted by batlike beings

F
light and 
reconciliation, 
reconciliation, 
purification and 
purification and 
purgation are the themes 
purgation are the themes 
of this enigmatic novel.
of this enigmatic novel. As well as being an 
As well as being an 
involving drama, it is 
involving drama, it is 
also a meditation on 
also a meditation on 
the function of fiction:
the function of fiction: "novels can no longer sit 
"novels can no longer sit on shelves and pretend 
on shelves and pretend to be reality; they are 
to be reality; they are inventions and must 
inventions and must declare themselves as 
declare themselves as such," Weldon states.
such," Weldon states.

Interspersed with the 
Interspersed with the main action of the novel 
main action of the novel are slices from the life of 
are slices from the life of the author as she writes 
the author as she writes the book; events in her 
the book; events in her own life come to bear on 
own life come to bear on the fiction (but of course 
the fiction (but of course those “real” events are 
those “real” events are just as likely to be made 
just as likely to be made up as the plot of *Kehua!*
up as the plot of *Kehua!*)

The *kehua* are spirits 
The *kehua* are spirits originating from 
originating from the Maori 
the Maori 

bloody past. Scarlet’s 16-
bloody past. Scarlet’s 16-year-old niece takes drugs 
year-old niece takes drugs and attempts to seduce 
and attempts to seduce Louis, who is possibly gay.
Louis, who is possibly gay. Meanwhile, Weldon sits 
Meanwhile, Weldon sits in the basement of her 
in the basement of her house, which appears to 
house, which appears to be haunted by Victorian 
be haunted by Victorian domestics and its 
domestics and its sexually incontinent 
sexually incontinent master.
master.

This might sound rather 
This might sound rather messy and Weldon (in a 
messy and Weldon (in a way aside) acknowledges 
way aside) acknowledges it as such: “It’s this sort 
it as such: “It’s this sort of novel, I’m afraid. Like 
of novel, I’m afraid. Like a river that overflows its 
a river that overflows its banks, it spreads sideways 
banks, it spreads sideways rather than curves its way 
rather than curves its way forward, plot-wise.”
forward, plot-wise.”

But the author does 
But the author does tame the flood, bringing 
take the focus about halfway 
the focus about halfway through onto Beverley.
through onto Beverley. Weldon wrinkles into 
Weldon wrinkles into the octogenarian’s past, 
the octogenarian’s past, exposing the deception 
exposing the deception and outrage that have led 
and outrage that have led her family into such an 
her family into such an impasse (which include a 
impasse (which include a murder, several apparently 
murder, several apparently incestuous seductions, 
incestuous seductions, posh communists, a 
posh communists, a gay architect, a drunk 
gay architect, a drunk journalist and a high-class 
journalist and a high-class courtesan).
courtesan).
The effect is wickedly 
The effect is wickedly stylish, with an acute tinge 
stylish, with an acute tinge of melancholy. All the 
of melancholy. All the women in the novel end 
women in the novel end up imitating, consciously 
up imitating, consciously or not, the patterns of 
or not, the patterns of their ancestors and each 
their ancestors and each character gains depth, 
character gains depth, even where you least 
even where you least expect it. Scarlet’s lover, 
extpect it. Scarlet’s lover, for instance, is brought 
for instance, is brought into a sympathetic light 
into a sympathetic light when we see his horrible 
when we see his horrible first wife, while Louis is 
first wife, while Louis is shown to be far more 
shown to be far more complicated than we 
complicated than we first supposed. Weldon 
first supposed. Weldon is uncompromising in 
is uncompromising in her examination of her 
herself and their mistakes, their pride and 
her characters, showing their 
their sacrifices.
sacrifices.

*Kehua!* may be in 
*Kehua!* may be in danger of disappearing 
deray of disappearing under its heft, but as a 
deray of disappearing under its heft, but as a study of fiction, femininity 
study of fiction, femininity and family it is bursting 
and family it is bursting with intelligence and fire.
with intelligence and fire.

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**The kehua are spirits originating from the Maori**

Philip Womack

© Philip Womack's latest novel is *The Liberators* (Bloomsbury)