

Haunted by batlike beings



Kehua!
by Fay Weldon

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★★★

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

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

The *kehua* are spirits originating from the Maori of New Zealand, “adrift from their ancestral home. They’re not dangerous, just lost souls making themselves useful.” These batlike ectoplasmic beings hang around disconnected family members, trying to herd them together again.

Weldon’s trick is to use the *kehua* as a metaphor for the way in which tragedies can stain

families. But what a task the *kehua* have with the family in this novel.

It begins with Scarlet, a brash journalist, walking out on her “husband” Louis (they never actually got married, but they did have a party) into the arms of a wolfish actor. Her sister Cynara runs away from her lesbian partner D’Dora. Her mother, Alice, has found Jesus; her grandmother Beverley ruminates over her three (dead) husbands and her own somewhat

tame the flood, bringing the focus about halfway through onto Beverley. Weldon winks into the octogenarian’s past, exposing the deception and outrage that have led her family into such an impasse (which include a murder, several apparently incestuous seductions, posh communists, a gay architect, a drunk journalist and a high-class courtesan).

The effect is wickedly stylish, with an acute tinge of melancholy. All the women in the novel end up imitating, consciously or not, the patterns of their ancestors and each character gains depth, even where you least expect it. Scarlet’s lover, for instance, is brought into a sympathetic light when we see his horrible first wife, while Louis is shown to be far more complicated than we first supposed. Weldon is uncompromising in her examination of her characters, showing their selfishness and their mistakes, their pride and their sacrifices.

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

Philip Womack

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

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

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

But the author does

