The Whale Rider

Below are selections from Witi Ihimaera’s novel The Whale Rider and some background to novel (plot summary, country, library resources, film version). Think about a task in which you exploit the text in a cultural/historical way. It is important that you should make your students aware that English is spoken in countries other than the UK and the US, and that these countries have different cultures and beliefs. You may show the part of the film version related to the extracts below.

Selections from chapters XV, XVII.

“The news was communicated to the town. On the beach there were two hundred whales, waiting to die…”

“Nobody saw Kahu go away and enter the water. Nobody knew until she was halfway through the waves…”

“If the whale lives, we live. These were the only words Kahu could think of. The water was freezing, but not to worry. The waves were huge, but she could do this. The rain was like spears, but she could do this. “Greetings, sacred whale”, Kahu wishepered. She was cold and exhausted. She pressed her cheek to the whale’s side and kissed the whale. “Let us go now”. The whale began to rise in the water. “Let us return to the sea”, said Kahu. “Yes, my lord”, the whale said. Slowly, the whale began to turn to the open sea and the other whales followed her…”

“She is going, our Kahu”, Kahu’s grandmother thought. She was going into the deep ocean. She was going with the whales into the sea and the rain. She was a small figure in a white dress, kicking at the whale as if it were a horse, her braids swinging in the rain…”

Plot: Eight-year-old Kahu, a member of the Maori tribe of Whangara, New Zealand, fights to prove leadership. Her people claim descent from Kahutia Te Rangi, the legendary "whale rider." In every generation a male heir has inherited the title of chief. But now there is no male heir, and the aging chief is desperate to find a successor. When hundreds of whales beach themselves and threaten the future of the Maori tribe, it is Kahu who saves the tribe when she reveals that she has the whale rider's ancient gift of communicating with whales. (plot summary and image taken from www.amazon.com)

Country: New Zealand (Maori culture)

Library resources: A Concise Encyclopedia of Maori Myth and Legen, by Margaret Orbell; Rautahi: The Maoris of New Zealand by Joan Metge; The Oxford illustrated history of New Zealand by Keith Sinclair; The Whale Rider (Niki Caro’s film version)