



Adapting Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*  
from novel to graphic novel



a Spiral Collectives initiative



# Te Kaupapa

*To safeguard and uphold the mana  
of this literary taonga and its author,  
in a new medium for new generations.*

# Keri and *The Bone People*

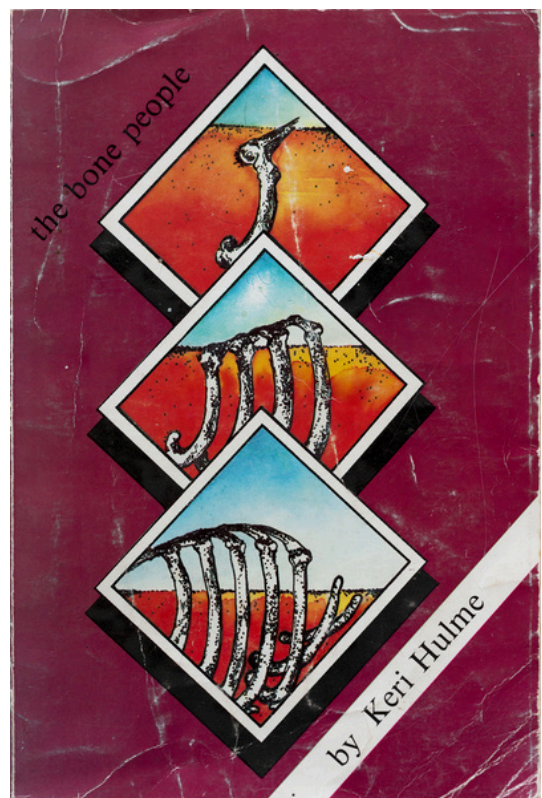


**Keri Hulme** (1947-2021 Ngāi Tahu, Kāti Mamoe, Orkney, Lancashire) was a writer, artist and fisher who published seven books, contributed to many more, exhibited her art at the Women's Gallery and wrote the libretto for Anthony Ritchie's opera *Ahua – the story of Moki*.

Keri spent all her life in Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island. Moeraki on the Otago East Coast was her tūrakawaewae-ngākau, and she lived for over 30 years in a house she built herself, in Ōkārito on the West Coast.

*The Bone People* was Keri's only published novel. When she was 18, she dreamed of the child Simon dancing on the beach at Moeraki and started to write the book, with her mother Mary as her only editor. It took her 12 years. She wrote the story for both sides of her whānau, as "a new kind of novel blending reality with dreams, melding Māori and Pākehā and weaving strange and hurtful pasts into strangely bright futures". As Tiaki Mira, the book's kaumātua elder, concludes, "Eternity is a long time ... Everything changes, even that which supposes itself to be unalterable. All we can do is look after the precious matters which are our heritage, and wait, and hope".

Publishers were very interested in Keri's manuscript, but would publish it only if she would edit it. Each had different ideas about how it should be edited. She refused all offers and planned to abandon the project and encase the manuscript in resin. Then, as she wrote later, "Enter, to sound of trumpets and cowrieshell rattles, the Spiral Collective": Irihapeti Ramsden (1946-2003), Marian Evans, Miriama Evans (1944-2018). With love and with loving support from many, they published *The Bone People* in 1984.<sup>1</sup>





*The Bone People* won the New Zealand Book Award for Fiction and then three major international awards: the Mobil Pegasus Prize, which included US publication and a promotional tour; the 1985 Booker Prize — the first time a book from Aotearoa had won; and the 1987 Italian Chianti Ruffino-Antico Fattore Prize for “renowned literary works” expressing the values of environment and nature. The next winner was Nobel laureate Toni Morrison.

The book has been translated into many languages, most recently Spanish (2018) and Arabic (2024). But Keri refused over 100 offers to adapt it for the screen, because she didn’t want an actor to have to play Simon, the abused young child at the heart of the book. Keri waited for technology to catch up. And then offered the animation rights to Spiral. Spiral is now developing a graphic novel which will become the basis for the animation.



<sup>1</sup> For more details, see [Keri Hulme Our Kuru Pounamu](#).

# Development To Date

In our early development, funded by the Ministry for Culture & Heritage and Spiral, with our generous associates, we have:

- established a legal structure thanks to Russell McVeagh's expert assistance, a registered charity that aligns with Spiral Collectives' long-held values and will hold the intellectual property
- transposed the book into script format in chronological order, to better understand Keri's intentions and personal beliefs and her structural choices when she conveyed the oral tradition's rhythms and patterns;<sup>2</sup> and her humour, dialogue, poetry, songs, and visual descriptions
- published two of Keri's high school short stories, *Moeraki Hillside* and *Moeraki Hilltop*, which illuminate the early development of her ideas in *The Bone People*<sup>3</sup>
- employed an accomplished artist to develop images of the main characters, with reference to Keri's own depictions
- employed a highly skilled and experienced screenwriter/producer as a consultant, to report and advise on our progress
- employed a highly skilled and experienced producer who shares our values, to advise us
- decided to start with a graphic novel, to establish a narrative and a visual world that will form the basis for an animation

We learned that no single individual will be able to adapt the story, without producing the kind of edit that publishers sought when Keri presented them with the manuscript — their own spin on what 'should' be there, for example by filling the often very subtle gaps Keri carefully placed in the narrative.

To retain *The Bone People*'s mana and integrity and present an authentic work that Keri would love, the task requires a rigorously contested collective effort, one that uses the book itself as the primary reference point.

<sup>2</sup> When she first read *The Bone People*, Irihapeti recalled being a child in the wharehau, her ancestral house, listening while her elders conversed through the night. She responded strongly to how Keri conveyed the feeling of that oral tradition's rhythms and patterns, to an extent she hadn't ever before experienced in book form.

<sup>3</sup> Both are in [Keri Hulme Our Kuru Pounamu](#), accompanied by a response from kura kaupapa student Leigh Te Ahuru-Lam Sheung ; *Moeraki Hillside* is also published separately as [a teaching resource](#).

# The World & Characters

*The Bone People* is set in late-1960s rural southern Aotearoa New Zealand. It features our breathtaking taiao, the land, sea and sky. Every page is a window into a world of small towns, kāika, beaches, baches, pubs, hospitals, boats, trucks, motorbikes, a marae and a tower.

Adding to the setting are flawed human inhabitants, Māori and Pākehā, often wearing jeans, swannies or waders and sometimes pounamu and silk. Māori spiritual beings weave into the story, often changing the course of the characters' lives. Together, it all forms a stunning portrayal of the colonised past and present of Aotearoa.



*Madison Kelly*

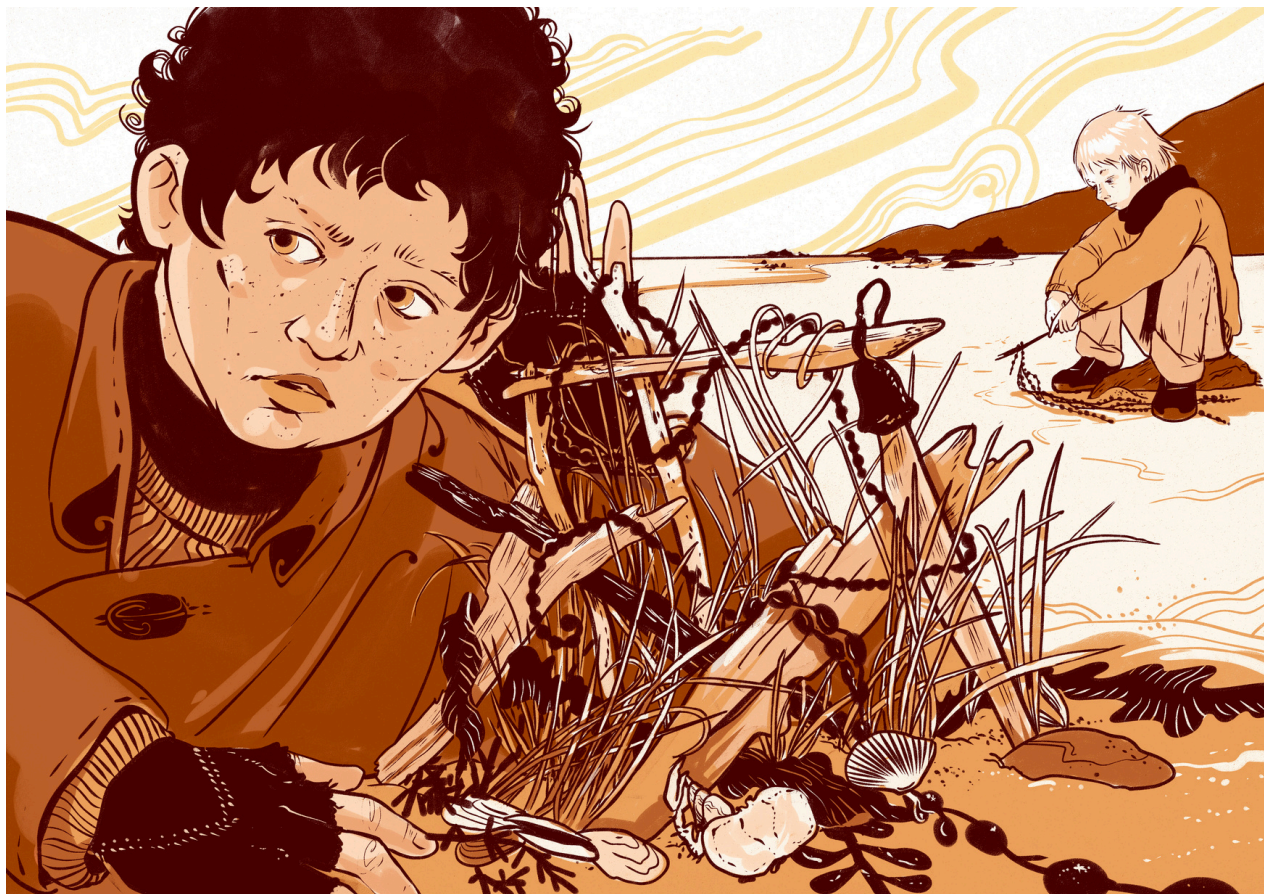
*The Bone People* has three central characters. Two are Māori: Kerewin, a reclusive, unexpectedly wealthy and asexual artist estranged from her family, unable to paint, and living in a tower she built herself, and Joe, who has lost his wife, their child and hope. The other is Joe's adopted son Simon, a mute, feral and enchanting Pākehā child aged six or seven, the sole survivor of a mysterious shipwreck. A fourth character, Tiaki Mira, a reclusive kaumātua, also has a significant role in the story, as do a series of grandmothers, alongside other whānau.



# Synopsis

Artist and loner KEREWIN finds the young waif SIMON in her beloved spiral tower home. Kerewin outwardly keeps her distance from Simon, but in truth she's quietly intrigued by this strange, mute child. She meets his father JOE and learns Simon was found on the beach after a shipwreck when he was younger. So begins the burgeoning friendship of this trio of misfits, who start to share regular meals and drinks together.

Kerewin begins to care deeply for young Simon - so when she discovers that he is being physically abused by Joe, she's horrified. Kerewin finds her own solution to this problem. After taking Joe and Simon away to her whānau's beach house, Kerewin uses her martial arts skills to beat Joe into submission. Then they make a deal: he must not hit Simon without speaking to her about it first.



*Madison Kelly*

But Kerewin is estranged from her family, and she's asexual - her life has been complicated for a long time. Joe wants an emotional and physical relationship from Kerewin that she simply isn't in a place to give him. The mismatched needs of Joe and Kerewin send the two into dark headspaces, and Joe falls into his old pattern of beating Simon. When Simon goes to Kerewin for help, she's in a bad place and sends him away. Without the adult support he needs, Simon flies into a rage and smashes all the windows in the town's main street

When Joe learns this, he lashes out at Simon yet again — but this time Simon is ready, and he stabs Joe back with a shard of glass. Both end up hospitalised, and Joe loses custody of Simon. Feeling intense guilt for her role in it all, Kerewin burns her home down and leaves town. Joe spends time in prison, while Kerewin develops a mysterious pain in her gut.

Now on their own individual journeys, Joe and Kerewin both find themselves having life-changing spiritual events. Joe meets Kaumatua TIAKI, who gives him the responsibility of looking after the mauri, the heart of Aotearoa. Kerewin becomes sure her stomach issue will kill her, but a spiritual creature miraculously gives her a drink that cures her. Now both of them are ready for the next stage of their lives.

Kerewin rebuilds her tower, and looks into adopting Simon. She begins to formally pull Joe back into the folds of their unconventional whānau. Joe finds a way to bring Kerewin's family back together, and the rifts with her whānau are mended. Simon still loves Joe dearly. The mauri buries itself on the tower's land.

Te Mutunga – Ranei Te Take... It is the end — or the beginning.





# New Medium, Same Spirit

A collective of **four writers** and **four visual artists** will collaboratively adapt *The Bone People* into a series of **four graphic novels**.

These core values will guide the process:

## **Honour Keri's work and embrace complexity.**

*The Bone People* is a complex and poetic narrative. It conveys a variety of meanings to individual readers, and a single author cannot adapt it effectively. A collective effort is necessary.

To ensure consistency across the project, it will be co-ordinated by individuals who are committed to retaining the mana and integrity of Keri's voice and vision.

## **Honour Keri's wishes and do no harm.**

Keri's firm beliefs about representation of child abuse will permeate any and all adaptations of *The Bone People* in the illustrated and animated space.

## **Honour Keri's spirit and trust the process.**

*The Bone People* would have been published sooner had Keri sacrificed authenticity for digestibility: working with skill and patience, our collective will make something that Keri would love and her whānau will love.

# Adaptation Overview

We will follow *The Bone People's* four-section, twelve-chapter structure, with the final publication being a collection of four books, each with three parts.

## **1. Season Of The Day Moon**

Portrait Of A Sandal

Feelers

Leaps In The Dark

## **2. The Sea Round**

A Place To Sleep By Day

Spring Tide, Neap Tide, Ebb Tide, Flood...

Ka Tata Te Po

## **3. The Lightning Struck Tower**

Mirrortalk

Nightfall

Candles In The Wind

## **4. Feldapart Sinews, Broken Bones**

The Kaumātua And The Broken Man

The Boy By His Own...

The Woman At The Wellspring of Death

# Adaptation Goals

## **A Collective Vision Executed by Individual Voices**

- Collaborative story tables followed by facilitated remote work
- Consistent collective input across the development process
- Consistent facilitation for both narrative and visual development
- Each writer/artist creatively leads a book
- A closing collaborative table to collectively craft the *Prologue*, *Epilogue* and outer cover

## **Emotional & Cultural Safety**

- Safe and respectful protocol for discussing/representing child abuse
- Safe and respectful protocol for deeply layered culture-specific storytelling

## **Sustainable Labour**

- Fair compensation for preparation, collaboration, and creation
- Equal pay for equal work



Madison Kelly

# Adaptation Process

## Stage One: Research & Development

### Recruitment

- Hire writers
- Hire artists

### Mini Story Table

- 5 days prep + 5 days collaboration
- Establish a big picture vision
- Establish a script format
- Create an outline for *Portrait of a Sandal*

Write the script for  
*Portrait of a Sandal*

Create the visual art for  
*Portrait of a Sandal*

Deliver completed *Portrait of a Sandal* as proof of process

## Stage Two: Implementation

### Extended Story Table

- 5 days prep + 15 days collaboration
- Reconnect as a creative team
- Create outlines for remaining chapters

Write the scripts for  
remaining chapters

Create the visual art for  
remaining chapters

### Closing Story Table

- 2.5 days prep + 2.5 days collaboration
- Collaborate on the Prologue
- Collaborate on the Epilogue
- Collaborate on the outer cover

Deliver completed adaptation for publication



# Budget Overview

To reflect our two-part development structure, we will fundraise in two stages:

**\$120K (+GST) for Stage One** (Portrait of a Sandal)

**\$630K (+GST) for Stage Two** (remaining chapters)

Taking a single chapter all the way through the process allows us to build and test the creative pipeline while crafting a prototype to showcase for our second fundraise.

Lessons learned in Stage One will no doubt impact the schedule/budget of Stage Two, adding costs in some places, streamlining costs in others.

## Kaitiakitaka and Cultural Care

Our cultural responsibilities are two-fold. We must ensure the cultural safety of our creative teams, and the cultural accuracy of our materials whenever the book itself is not explicit.

As a result we have budgeted for kaitiaki to be present at all story tables, and to give feedback through the development process.

These practitioners will have a strong grounding in Kāi Tahu lifeways and history, will set the tikaka for the working process, help unify the various aspects of Te Ao Māori throughout the text and help guide any visual references towards their most specific and authentic to the time and place of *The Bone People*.

<sup>4</sup> A more detailed budget/schedule breakdown available upon request.

# Fundraising Strategy.

*The Bone People* is a literary taonga, a treasure. Literature is a medium where preservation often means re-interpretation not restoration. We believe that to preserve this work authentically in new mediums, for new generations, it's necessary to be free from market pressure.

The Spiral Collectives Trust is a registered charity (CC62215) with a long history of innovative and successful projects that platform diverse female storytellers and their work, in text and in visual forms. To protect its integrity, we funded the original publication of *The Bone People* partly through generous donations, offered with love to a venture widely perceived as risky. And now, because the victory conditions of this again values-driven venture don't align with traditional investment models, we are again fundraising through donations.

Once the adaptation is complete, Spiral will either publish the work or engage with publishers with the goal of finding the best fit for Keri and *The Bone People*. This outcome will be possible only with your generosity, your aroha. Kā mihi nui. Thank you.



# Team Bios

## **Rebecca Barnes** (Ngāi Tahu)

### **Narrative Facilitator**

I'm Becca Barnes, a writer born and raised in Ōtepoti Dunedin with Pākehā and Ngāi Tahu heritage. I worked on the show *Power Rangers* for almost a decade, and rose to become a head writer and co-producer in my time there. I have experience leading writing rooms through complex storylines, and in establishing a safe and enjoyable environment for all involved in the writing process. I'm also writing a children's graphic novel series for publisher Hachette.



Last year, I created a consultancy report on the idea of adapting *The Bone People* to screen as an animation, or as a graphic novel. *The Bone People* and Keri Hulme have become deeply important to me as a fellow creative from the South Island. Keri's words blew up the Aotearoa literature scene and put Māori storytelling in the global spotlight. Every word is laced with Keri's distinct point of view and storytelling style. The story and its subject matter feel as if they are meant to be taken and examined from every angle by every reader - then discussed and dissected from multiple views.

Keri's words evoke countless evocative visuals that could truly come to life in a graphic novel format. To me, this is a story about caring for what is precious - what could be more important, in a world where things we value are being threatened? I'd love to see this book in a new format so that new generations can have their own opportunity to dive into Keri's world.

Keri's shoes are simply too big for one person to step into alone. I believe it would take a team of writers, including Māori voices, to achieve any kind of adaptation of *The Bone People*. Collective creativity will help honour Keri's intentions, and will find a path to telling this complex story anew. As a team, we can come closer to filling Keri's shoes, and to giving *The Bone People* a new life she would be proud of.

# Madison Kelly (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Mamoe)

## Visual Facilitator

I am an Ōtepoti-based artist, musician, and lead kaiārahi/forest guide at Te Korowai o Mihiwaka Orokonui Ecosanctuary.

Grounded in Kāitahutaka, my practice explores field research, mark making, and sensory experience as tools for learning and sharing multispecies whakapapa.

The full scope of Keri's work has been a significant anchor for me in many ways — as Kāi Tahu, as an artist, and as takatāpui. My work and life on Otago's East Coast is deeply tethered by an intersectional experience of Te Taiao, our lifeways, and our stories, all of which sit so complexly and carefully in Keri's creations. I am honoured to join this kaupapa and to use my skills to whakamana this treasure, *The Bone People*.



# Cathasaigh Ó Fiannachta

## Fundraise Facilitator

I am a nonbinary award-winning writer/producer living and working in Kēkerengū, Aotearoa. An alumnus of the United World College programme in Singapore with 15+ years professional film/TV experience in Aotearoa and abroad, I am a disruptive innovator in talent and intellectual property development, dedicated to connecting unorthodox ideas with useful resources and unconventional funding.

My role on *The Bone People* adaptation is to help design and finance a creative pipeline that can successfully, safely, and sustainably deliver a globally significant, cross-cultural masterpiece to new audiences. It's a privilege to honour Keri's wishes, work and spirit.



# The Spiral Collective

Poet Heather McPherson founded Spiral, an artist-led series of collectives, in 1975. Working as volunteers and committed to whānau-friendly and sustainable practices, we cherish and educate about the storytelling practices and legacies of women and nonbinary people, and awhi, tautoko and support them with publications, exhibitions, events, moving image, websites and archives.<sup>5</sup> And patience.



Spiral trustee Dr Marian Evans — who was an immigrant child and then a member of the collective that first published *The Bone People* — is co-ordinating the project for the Spiral Collectives Trust.

*The story of the Spiral publishing collective and how you came to publish The Bone People is, in my opinion, one of the great stories of Aotearoa New Zealand in the 20th century. For a relatively inexperienced publishing collective to take on a novel no one else wanted and win the Booker...you conquered an Everest!*

— Professor Paul Millar, Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha University of Canterbury (2024)

*If you consider the history of New Zealand writing, it is both frightening and inspiring how influential the Spiral collective has been.*

— Emma Wehipeihana, reviewing Patricia Grace's *From the Centre: A Writer's Life* (2021)

## Keri's Whānau

Keri's whānau was at the centre of her world and is kaitiaki of her legacy. Spiral cherishes our forty-five year relationship with them. We acknowledge this privilege, this honour, with warm and deep appreciation; our project is made possible and is immeasurably enriched by the whānau's support.

<sup>5</sup> Our publications are freely available online to [read and download](#). Selections from our archival work are also [recorded online](#).



Donate to Stage One of *The Bone People* adaptation:

<https://www.spiralcollectives.org/>

If you have any queries please contact:

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