



## Albert Wendt: A Tall Teller of Tales

### [Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree and Other Stories](#)

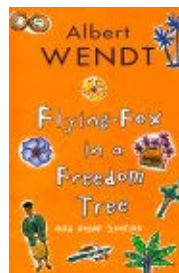
By Albert Wendt

Longman Paul Limited, 1974. Reprinted, UP Hawai'i, 1999  
Paperback, 158 pages, \$16.95.

### [The Birth and Death of the Miracle Man and Other Stories](#)

By Albert Wendt

Viking, 1986. Reprinted, UP Hawai'i, 1999  
Paperback, 176 pages, \$16.95.



### [Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree and Other Stories](#)

#### RELATED WEB SITES

[Echoes du Commonwealth: Albert Wendt](#)

[Albert Wendt Page](#), Postcolonial Studies at Emory University [contains biography, bibliography, useful links]

["Inside Us The Dead," Poetry by Albert Wendt](#)

[Web Page for Sons for the Return Home](#), a film adapted from the Wendt novel [Wellington Film Society]

["Imagining the future: Restructuring identity in Poulituli \[by Albert Wendt\] and Maiba \[by Russell Soabal\]," Sarah Doetschman \[World Literature Today article at Britannica.com.\]](#)

["Return to Exile: Locating Home," Juniper Ellis \[essay on Wendt in \*Jouvert\*\]](#)

[Extensive Bibliography for Albert Wendt](#), University of Auckland Library

[Albert Wendt: Author Entry from the Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature](#) [New Zealand Book Council]

[Samoan Sensation Fale Tusi](#) [bookshop]

["Albert Wendt: Growing up, Writing, Power, Colonization," Frances Meserve \[Kapi'olani Online, Kapi'olani Community College\]](#)

["English in the South Pacific," John Lynch and France Mugler \[World Englishes, special issue devoted to English and English-based creoles in the Pacific.\]](#)

### [Gay Partington Terry](#)

My interest in Samoa began with Margaret Mead's book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*. The book was an intelligent and, yes, romantic look at a culture the members of which lived in harmony with each other and with nature, or so it seemed. Later, during her final year of life, I worked in Dr. Mead's office at the Museum of Natural History. She was a force of nature—like a hurricane or cyclone—even in those last days; it was hard to imagine her as the fresh-faced 23-year-old in native costume on the cover of her book. She refused to acknowledge the imminence of her death and, in nostalgic moments, spoke about returning to Samoa. We all dreamt of returning with her.

I have returned to Samoa, if you can say that about a place you've never been, with Albert Wendt in his collections of stories: *Flying-fox in a Freedom Tree* and *The Birth and Death of the Miracle Man*. The fale (Samoan home) is still open on all sides, as Dr. Mead described it, and even those who live in European houses are not immune to constant scrutiny. However, other aspects of Samoan culture have changed. Wendt's Samoa is not the carefree, romantic Samoa of Dr. Mead's first book—although those elements contend among others, prowling various cultural networks and intricate circumstances, emotions, identities, displacements, fragments, and absurdities. Wendt's Samoa has expanded (exploded) to include a world of multicultural influences, modern technologies, complex economies, and expanded philosophies, as well as a heightened awareness of its own past.

Wendt illuminates these various currents in Samoan life and the constant struggle to overcome the discordance they cause with techniques taken from oral storytelling as well as from contemporary and post-modern literature. Tone and tense vary from story to story, within a story, even within a paragraph. Language does the same. There's the literate voice of the assimilated narrator (the patronizing, detached nephew who relates the events in "Pint-sized Devil on a Thoroughbred"), and the lively pidgin of the unassimilated (as in "Captain full" and "Virgin-wise"). Wendt uses Samoan phrases, for which a non-Samoan reader needs the glossary, as well as transliterations (alcohol is "Devil's Water" to some and "making fire" is making love). The interplay of technique and influence reflect the post-colonial situation of the Samoans, the dichotomy between loss of tradition and the freedoms and possibilities endowed by multicultural contact. Mr. Wendt weaves the elements of disarray into distinctive and intriguing tales. Language and technique transmit multiformity and render it universal:

A novelist, so a palagi [white] tourist once told me, has got to be honest (with whom he did not say). So before I continue

my novel let me tell you that I am, so my friends know well, a tall-teller of tales. (Or is it, a teller of tall tales?) So please read this humble testament with 15 grains of Epsom salts, and please excuse the very poor grammar. You see, I did not have much formal education. (Unlike many of the present generation who went away overseas and returned with degrees in such things as education, drinking, revolutions, themselves and more themselves etc. and who wave before you the rounded "r" and the long "e" and the short "t" in just about everything, especially their own importance.) Pepe is local-born, local-bred, local-educated so please do not expect too much scholarship, grammar, and etc. in this weak novel about his (my) life.

The young palagi doctor came this morning as usual, and as usual I pretended I did not know any English and he pretended I was fit as a ten-ton horse. He smiled as usual, he listened to my cough as usual, and he told the nurse to give me the usual pills, as usual. While he did the usual I looked at the juicy nurse by his side. (Me, I am no longer interested in making fire.) I look at her because every time she looks at the doctor she has the clinging octopus eye on him, but he does not know it. ("Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree," *Flying Fox...*)



[The Birth and Death of the Miracle Man and Other Stories](#)

Wendt's characters are members of an extended family (an *aiga*), a village, or an area (the *Vaipe*, or "dead water"); some of them have been transplanted to New Zealand and some have returned to, or remained in, Samoa. They are recognizably human, and yet many fall into mythic categories: hero, rogue, and trickster. They are Oceanic and yet they have troubles, inadequacies, and triumphs that are familiar to and speak to a non-Oceanic reader. There is Pepe who chronicles his life in the *Vaipe* from his deathbed; the not so admirable rogue, Pili; and Pielua, who brings prestige from New Zealand to the *Vaipe* in his suitcase. There is

Fiasola Ta'ase who feels that a Miracle Man is being born inside him in his dreams; Losua who becomes Hamlet for a time but in order to escape madness must retreat to his former mediocrity; a girl known as "Life," the only witness to the human side of the inscrutable Crocodile Willersey; and the wise and determined young woman, Peleiupu, whom Dr. Mead would have admired.

Margaret Mead understood the price paid for America's own heterogeneous, **unsettled** civilization. She would certainly sympathize with the upheavals the Samoans face as their culture rapidly evolves. It is **human nature to search for** meaning in life; in every culture the end of isolation shatters old traditions and causes disequilibrium. Wendt not only chronicles this process in his stories but also makes masterful use of divergent techniques to form new myths in order to inspire us all in our quest for meaning and wholeness.

Albert Wendt was born in Western Samoa in 1939. He is from the Aiga Sa-Tuaopepe of Lefaga, the Aiga Sa-Patu of Vaiala, and the Aiga Sa-Maualaivao of Malie. At age 13, he was sent to the New Plymouth Boys' High School in New Zealand on a government scholarship. His regard for Samoa and New Zealand and for their complex cultures has inspired much of his writing.

Wendt has written five novels, two collections of short stories, and three collections of poetry. Widely acknowledged to be a major Pacific writer, he is head of the English Department at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and established Pacific Studies at the university.

DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

Mead, Margaret, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization*. Harperperennial Library, 2001. Paperback, Reprint, 336 pages,\$14.00.

SOME OTHER BOOKS BY ALBERT WENDT

Wendt, Albert, [Black Rainbow](#). UP Hawai'i, 1995. Paperback, 272 pages, \$14.95.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Inside Us the Dead: Poems 1961-1974*. (Pacific Paperbacks). Out of print.

\_\_\_\_\_, [Leaves of the Banyan Tree](#). First published 1979. UP Hawai'i/Talanoa, 1994. Paperback reprint, 424 pages, \$18.95.

\_\_\_\_\_, Editor, [Nuanua: Pacific Writing in English Since 1980](#). UP Hawai'i/Talanoa, 1995. Paperback, 400 pages, \$16.95.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Ola*. UP Hawaii,1995. Paperback reprint, Out of print.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Photographs*. UP Auckland,1995. Paperback. Out of print.

\_\_\_\_\_, [Pouliuli](#). UP Hawaii/Pacific Classics No. 8,1981. Paperback, 148 pages, \$9.00.

\_\_\_\_\_, [Sons for the Return Home](#). UP Hawaii/Talanoa, 1996. Paperback, 224 pages, \$12.95.

ALSO OF INTEREST

Borofsky, Robert, Editor, [Remembrance of Pacific Pasts: An Invitation to Remake History](#). UP Hawai'i, 2000. Paper, 576 pages, \$24.95.

Freeman, Derek, [The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research](#). Westview Press,1999. Paperback, 304 pages, \$16.00.

Isaia, Malopa'upo, [Coming of Age in American Anthropology: Margaret Mead and Paradise](#). Universal Publishers/Upublish.com,1999. Paperback, 300 pages, \$25.95.

McLean, Mervyn, [Weavers of Song: Polynesian Music and Dance](#). UP Hawai'i, 2000. Book and CD, 560 pages, \$42.00

Schafer, William J., [Mapping the Godzone: A Primer on New Zealand Literature and Culture](#). UP Hawai'i, 1998. Paperback, 216 pages, \$18.00.

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