# Book ReviewSolly, R. (2021). *Tōku Pāpā.* Victoria University Press

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Ruby Solly (Kāi Tahu, Waitaha, Kāti Māmoe) is an accomplished writer, musician, and taonga puoro practitioner. She holds a Master of Music Therapy (Solly, 2019) and currently works in the tangata whaiora space. Ruby has performed and recorded widely, including releasing her album Pōneke, a holistic soundscape journey of Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Wellington (Solly, 2020). Ruby has published on a number of platforms, including the New Zealand Journal of Music Therapy (Sabri et al., 2020) I was delighted to have the oppotunity to review her first book, *Tōku Pāpā*.**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

This collection has already been well received in other reviews, and readers would do well to refer to them (Green, 2020; Latham, 2020). I was
particularly struck by Arihia Latham’s words:

I don’t know how you, a stranger to us, will read this book. I can only tell you how it is, as whānauka to consume these words like she has translated the braille of clay on rock from our tupuna. (Latham, 2020, para. 2)

I acknowledge that I, a tauiwi South East Asian woman practising music therapy in Aotearoa New Zealand, will not be able to plumb the depths of this collection. Nor should I be expected to, as I believe this book was really written for tangata whenua. As one trying to appreciate stained glass windows from the outside, I cannot see the full beauty and richness of the design. I trust though that whatever I see will draw me inside, to perceive it with greater clarity and perspective. I hope this review compels you to do the same.

Enriched extensively by kupu Māori, the deeply autobiographical narratives recounted in these poems are often told in part, but hint at something far deeper, and sometimes ambiguous and unfathomable. This reminds me of Te Pō in Māori cosmology, when the *night* is framed as nurturing and full of creative potential, as in the maternal womb (Royal 2009). It also brings to mind similar spaces that inhabit Western understandings of music therapy, when we sit in the not knowing with those we work with, but trust in the process all the same (Cozolino, 2004).

Ruby’s first book, as a poet, complements her practice as a taonga puoro practitioner. The collection features several mentions of playing taonga puoro. In her Master’s thesis Ruby describes the healing nature of the taonga to process and release emotions and refers to Richard Nunns, who likens “taonga puoro to sung poetry that heightens the voice “ (Solly, 2020, p.10). The instruments are deeply evocative and have an ability to potentially draw out emotional responses, and this was my experience of her poetry collection. Just as the taonga have a grounding, centring, and healing effect, so too are these poems rooted in Ruby’s identity

In a recent article about the importance of community for staying safe in the arts industry, Ruby mentions her music therapy work with tangata whai ora living with trauma. She says:

Do you know the secret to a fast recovery, or avoiding PTSD all together? Telling someone you love and trust as soon after the event as you can and being in a space where you feel safe. The prevention, and the cure is community. (Solly, 2021)

In the context of intergenerational trauma in te ao Māori, Ruby’s healing spaces of safety and security are evident. The groundedness that comes from a deep intimate ancestral knowing shines through. I also felt a strong sense of the aroha afforded by her relationships with tupuna, Pāpā, and whānau, amidst all the challenges, complexities, and contradictions of life.

I feel that prose does not serve this review well, and so I offer the following personal response.

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###  Tōku Pāpā - A Response

I struggled to find a modality:

how do I review this collection of

beautiful rangi, kupu sounds on paper -

how to do this justice?

Proud in the strong identity

of tangata whenua,

filled with familiar

themes that resonate with me,

you first called out to me

from the beautiful monochrome cover,

a formal traditional pose:

is it about past, present, or future?

Yes.

Ruby invites me into her lived

experiences and values,

invites me to wonder and search

for context and meaning:

her meaning, my meaning

the meaning in the kupu

digging deeper.

Rangahau. Deconstruction. Enlightenment.

A worldview not too far removed

from my own South East Asian life:

I fill in the gaps and

construct my own meaning and truth.

Some poems are lavish, luxurious:

I want to read them over and over;

others disturb, unsettle:

I sit in the not understanding space and ponder.

Tōku Pāpā: My Father.

Whakapapa. Identity. Memory.

Framed in circular concepts of time,

experiencing repeating themes.

We often read to understand:

now read to not understand;

in te pō an insight may come:

and with it mauri ora.

## References

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### Link to Publisher’s Webpage

<https://teherengawakapress.co.nz>

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1. Readers unfamiliar with te reo Māori are advised to consult the online Māori dictionary, <https://maoridictionary.co.nz> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)