

# Book review

## The Astromancer: The rising of Matariki

**Category:** Book Reviews

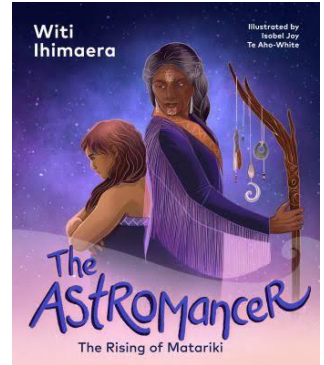
**Author:** by Witi Ihimaera; **Illustrator** Isobel Joy Te Aho-White

**Year:** 2022

**Publisher:** Puffin

**ISBN:** 9780143776154

**Audience:** Community



In his new book, renowned author and master wordsmith Witi Ihimaera creates a magical world to bring the legend and traditions of Matariki alive. The story follows Ariā, a young orphan girl, and her faithful dog Kuri. The book is accompanied by striking illustrations by Isobel Joy Te Aho-White, adding colour and nuance to bring the story alive.

At the front of the book, Ihimaera includes a foreword to introduce who the characters were inspired by and his childhood Matariki experiences. While researching the book, I listened to an [RNZ interview](#) with Ihimaera where he talks about the process of writing the book, and that as with all his writing, he writes with purpose to challenge others to broaden their understanding.

*"The tools that I use to write, even though I write in English, are the same as we would do when we utter karakia or when we create a waiata or when we create kapa haka, and they are te ihi, te wehi, te mana and te wero, and especially te wero, because if you don't have that te wero then you do not challenge yourself and you do not challenge others to think differently - so always I've really tried to make sure that the wero is there - and that we can change the world."*

As the reader follows Ariā's journey and the challenges she overcomes, they learn about Matariki and Maramataka (the traditional Māori calendar). Through the traditions and customs, it is evident that Māori are great thinkers and philosophers, with strong knowledge of mathematics, astronomy and science. My 13 year old son also read *Astromancer*, as he was learning about Matariki as part of his year's science curriculum. He thought that it added to his knowledge of Matariki and was also a good read with likeable characters.

Continued over ...

The relationship between Ariā and Kōkōrangī is central to the story; *tohunga kōkōrangī* translates as astronomer, an expert in the study of celestial bodies. Ihimaera notes he was influenced by his nan to show female leaders with strength of character, and in *Astromancer*, the role of Māori woman as spell casters.

Kōkōrangī the Astromancer chooses Ariā as an apprentice as she shows both grit and kindness.

*“Caring was for those who had been cared for. No one bothered about Ariā. She couldn’t even remember her parents, let alone whether they had ever loved her. As long as she and Kurī were fed, that was all that mattered.”*

Kōkōrangī sees it is these very qualities that would make her a great leader, but Ariā must first learn to trust and feel that she belongs and to show respect for others and traditions.

The story urges young people to learn from the wisdom of the past and to apply it in their own ways as they face the challenges of the future. Themes include rising above adversity and finding your place in the world, the importance of aroha and patience from a caring adult, and the power of traditional knowledge to guide us and learning from our surroundings.

This is not just a storybook for children, but also a great way for adults to cement their learning about Matariki (or give the te reo version a go this Māori Language Week!). It’s a valuable title for all home and library shelves.

The te reo edition, *Te Kōkōrangī*, was translated by Hēni Jacob.

**Review by Kim Higginson, Library Management Specialist, MHF**