

Girl power

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

One of the most satisfying films of the year, Niki Caro's *Whale Rider*, is set in a small Maori village on New Zealand's eastern shore. The film begins with the juxtaposition of life and death, as a mother dies giving birth to twins. The male twin also dies, leaving the infant girl, Pai, as the sole survivor of this sad day. What makes her arrival all the more difficult for her family--especially her stern grandfather, Koro, the aging tribal chief--is that the dead grandson was prophesied to be the heir, the one who would lead the struggling tribe once Koro passed on. What use is a girl? he observes bitterly, as he all but abandons her in the delivery room.

As the years pass, however, it becomes clear that Pai (named after the tribal ancestor, Paikea, who supposedly arrived at the village on the back of a whale) has all the right stuff to become the next chief, including intelligence, creativity, courage, patience and as much wisdom as a young girl can possess. But all that is not enough for Koro, who is unable to see beyond the sex of his grandchild. He starts looking elsewhere in the village for the next chief, going so far as to initiate male-only training sessions, forcing the persistent Pai to peek through windows and around corners for the knowledge she desperately seeks.

What makes *Whale Rider* more than just another uplifting coming of age story is the complex relationship between Koro and Pai. While it would be easy to turn the story into a simplistic feminist tale of a man who can't appreciate what a girl is capable of, writer-director Caro, working from a 1986 novel by Witi Ihimaera, takes it a step further by showing how the only one who appreciates Koro's dilemma is Pai herself. She's not happy about it, but as a born leader, she understands the responsibility weighing on him--that he's doing what he believes is right for his village.

The movie is thick with other moving characters, including Pai's grandmother, Nanny Flowers, the proud matriarch of the tribe, who must stand by her suffering husband even when she knows he is wrong; Pai's father, whose grief at the death of his wife and son forces him to flee his home; and the father's younger brother, a once-proud warrior who has gone to seed, only to be rescued by the spiritual hunger of his young niece.

The film's heart and soul is in the stunning performance by first-time actress Keisha Castle-Hughes as Pai. In scene after scene she exhibits a maturity that belies her age (she was 12 when the film was shot), displaying an otherworldly understanding. More than once I was moved to tears watching her struggle with the knowledge that she is unwanted, even as she shoulders the burden that is given to her. The religious subtext finally surfaces during the dramatic third act, where the story of a legend becoming fact turns into a parable, celebrating the power of love, sacrifice and resurrection.

The end of summer brings another film dealing with a young girl's struggle for acceptance, but whereas *Whale Rider* is subtle and profound, *Thirteen* is overt and simplistic. Directed by first-timer Catherine Hardwicke, who co-wrote the script with teenager Nikki Reed, *Thirteen* ostensibly concerns the trials and tribulations of girls growing up too quickly in Los Angeles. But it's actually about a cinematic monster who is created to scare the bejeezus out of parents everywhere.

Hardwicke seems to have a perverse sense of glee in introducing viewers to Tracy (Evan Rachel Wood, in a brave performance), a supposedly sweet kid (she still plays with Barbies) who is really a ticking time bomb. In a twisted attempt to become popular at her new middle school, Tracy spices up her wardrobe, starts hanging out with the bad girls, learns to steal, deal and drink, gets a tongue stud and a belly-button ring, drops acid and has

sex. Meanwhile, she is slicing up her arm with a scissors and razor to let the demons out. This all happens, the film suggests, because Tracy's hard-working mom (Holly Hunter) doesn't have time to monitor her properly, being too busy running a makeshift beauty salon out of her living room.

Of course, it doesn't help that Tracy's father, who has divorced her mom, is too busy on his cell phone to spend any time with her; that mom is sleeping with a recovering cokehead; or that her best friend, Evie (played with Lolita-like lasciviousness by co-writer Reed, who is clearly older than 13), is always willing to up the ante on bad behavior.

The film may be intended as a cautionary tale for young girls and the people who care about them, but it is so hysterical and overstated that it is more likely to inspire snorts and guffaws than a genuine understanding of teen life.