A survivor against the odds—noted New Zealand writer Janet Frame dies

Margaret Rees
2 March 2004

Prolific author Janet Frame died on January 29 of leukemia aged 79. She was one of New Zealand's best-known writers and her life became the subject of Jane Campion's 1990 film *An Angel at My Table*, which earned her books an even wider audience.

Frame's best writing provides an account of complex and tormented psychological states. It had the hallmark of authenticity, much of it based on her own experiences.

Born in 1924, Frame grew up in the South Island of New Zealand, the second daughter in a family of four girls and a boy. Her father was a railway worker and later an engine driver, and although he kept his job during the 1930s Depression, the family had little money to spare. When the son George, developed epilepsy, the family's meagre funds went on a fruitless search to find a cure for his condition.

Even more tragically, Janet's older sister Myrtle, aged 16, went swimming one summer afternoon at the local pool, and drowned. She was the victim of a congenital heart defect—the same condition that claimed the third sister Isabel, who died 10 years later at the age of 21 in another drowning accident. Frame wrote in a letter: "I cannot bear to be thinking that tonight outside in the dark I have two drowned sisters, even colder than any live people."

Frame lived a socially restricted life, and as she grew up became inordinately shy. She found normal interaction with other people almost painful, and in her loneliness turned to literature and the resources of her imagination. Studying at teachers college and the University of Dunedin during World War II was both liberating and terrifying. She was afraid to enter the student common room, although she longed to do so, but wrote poems and short stories about her inner life that were published in student publications.

At 21 she found herself unable to continue with her new teaching job. She loved the children, but separated herself completely from the staff. When an inspector arrived to evaluate her progress, she excused herself from the classroom and ran away from the school. Soon after she attempted suicide and then wrote about it in an essay that she submitted to her psychology lecturer, John Money. Alarmed, he arranged for her to be hospitalised for a period of rest.

Frame's mother Lottie arrived to take her daughter back to her hometown Oamaru. But Frame overreacted angrily, overwhelmed with the burden of returning to her family. As a result, she was transferred to Seacliff asylum for the insane, an isolated and forbidding institution further up the coast from Dunedin. There she was incorrectly diagnosed as schizophrenic, a diagnosis that condemned her to years of incarceration, often under nightmarish conditions, interspersed with occasional visits home. Life in the insane wards seemed so surreal that she was unable to mention the details to anybody.

As she recalled in her autobiography: "The attitude of those in charge, who unfortunately wrote the reports and influenced the treatment, was that of reprimand and punishment, with certain forms of medical treatment being threatened as punishment for failure to 'co-operate' and where 'not co-operate' might mean a refusal to obey an order, say, to go to the doorless lavatories with six others and urinate in public while suffering verbal abuse by the nurse for being unwilling. 'Too fussy are we? Well, Miss Educated, you'll learn a thing or two here.'" (*An Angel at My Table*)

At first Frame thought her condition was incurable. She underwent 200 shock treatments, "each the equivalent, in degree of fear, to an execution." After eight years she was scheduled to be lobotomised and her mother was persuaded to sign the relevant documents. Frame wrote to Money, now resident in the US, and he advised against the procedure. She was only spared the operation at the last minute when she won a national prize for her book of short stories *The Lagoon and other stories* (1951), which had been published with Money's encouragement some time earlier. Frame wrote later: "It is little wonder that I value writing as a way of life when it actually saved my life." She emerged, aged 29, with her sanity intact.

The conditions for New Zealand writers and artists generally were not propitious at this time. The objective situation—geographical isolation, a largely rural economy with only a few cities, a population under three million, and oppressive conditions for the indigenous Maori population—translated into an exceedingly insular cultural milieu that had a stifling impact on more sensitive, creative individuals. The response of many earlier writers was to leave and write about New Zealand from afar.

One person, however, who decided to stand his ground rather than become an expatriate was Frank Sargeson, whose own short stories were social realist with a dark undercurrent. Sargeson's influence on New Zealand letters was far wider than simply his own writing. A lawyer who lost his job because of his homosexuality, he lived from 1931 until his death in 1982 in a northern beach suburb of Auckland. From there he conducted on ongoing campaign against parochialism on behalf of his fellow New Zealand authors and anyone regarded as slightly different according to the prevailing conservative values.

Having read Frame's book of short stories, Sargeson became concerned about her plight. Upon her release, he offered her a lifeline, acting as her mentor and champion and providing her with food and shelter for over a year. Frame lived in a shed behind his house, and learnt from him how to discipline her days to write. There, she wrote her first novel, *Owls Do Cry* (1957), a lyrical work with strong references to her own childhood and experiences in Seacliff.

The novel is cast in the voice of three fictional siblings after the eldest child Francie is killed in an accident. There is Daphne, who is committed to an insane asylum, the epileptic Toby and the diary entries of Chicks, the youngest, who marries and whose life is measured by the problems of suburban respectability. Daphne's reflections weave the narrative together. Her father Bob, who has agreed for Daphne to be lobotomised, visits her in the asylum.

He tells Toby: "'I know your mother would have approved. The doctor said this brain operation was the only chance of making Daphne into a normal human being, a useful citizen, able to vote and take part in normal life, without getting any of these strange fancies that she gets now.' It was

© World Socialist Web Site

a long speech, and it frightened Bob to hear himself say it because it seemed unreal and not himself speaking."

Once the novel was published, Sargeson lobbied determinedly for Frame to receive a literary grant to enable the young author to go overseas. In her autobiography she explained how this was part of her mentor's ongoing campaign.

"He and I planned my next 'move,' which according to Frank, was for me to 'travel overseas' to 'broaden my experience,' a convenient way, both he and I realised, of saying that I was 'better out of New Zealand before someone decided I should be put in a mental hospital.' We both knew that in a conformist society there are a surprising number of 'deciders' upon the lives and fates of others." (*An Angel at My Table*)

In 1956 she set sail for England. There, at the Maudsley Hospital where enlightened psychiatry prevailed, she learned that she was not a schizophrenic at all. She received extensive help from gifted therapists to redress the damage she had suffered and enable her to take control of her life. Although she later complained that she was typecast for writing about insanity, when she returned to this theme it gave her writing a sharp focus and brought vivid life to her fictional characters.

In *Faces in the Water* (1961), Frame's protagonist Istina Mavret descends through the asylum wards—from the most enlightened "observation" ward, to the intermediate area and then to the living hell of the back ward, where "the movement was a ballet, and the choreographer Insanity".

In another disturbing sequence she explains: "And now I was in Lawn Lodge, the refractory ward, in a room full of raging screaming fighting people, a hundred of them, many in soft strait jackets, others in long canvas jackets that fastened between the thighs, with the crossed arms laced at the back with stiff cord, and no way out for the hands."

Like Daphne and Frame herself, Istina comes perilously close to being lobotomised. "The thought of the operation became a nightmare. Every morning when I woke I imagined, 'Today they will seize me, shave my head, dope me, send me to the hospital in the city, and when I open my eyes I will have a bandage over my head and a scar at each temple or a curved one, like a halo, across the top of my head, where the thieves, wearing gloves and with permission and delicacy, have entered and politely ransacked the storehouse and departed calm and unembarrassed like meter readers, furniture removers, or decorators sent to repaper an upstairs room.'"

Not surprisingly, her books began to strike a chord with those interested in exposing the abuses in institutions where psychiatric patients were detained. This included Constance Malleson and, through her, a circle around Bertrand Russell. Frame's writing provided them with subtle insights into the anguish experienced by inmates subjected to often-horrendous treatment.

While now a successful writer with six published books, Frame remained frightened of coming back to New Zealand and the possibility of renewed incarceration. Her fears were not realised when she returned after her father's death in 1963 but the social pressures of living there bore down on her in a different form. At first, she was feted as a celebrity by the press. What she needed, however, were the conditions to continue writing.

Frame remained in New Zealand, but felt unable to stand up to the provincial atmosphere, becoming increasingly restless. With the support of publishers and friends, whenever New Zealand became too stifling she travelled overseas, moving back and forth between England, Europe, the United States and then back to New Zealand.

Altogether Frame wrote 11 novels, four collections of short stories, a children's book and a book of poetry. The middle novels, for all their stylistic flourishes, are unlikely to stand much retrospective critical scrutiny. The strength of her earlier work lay in the directness and honesty with which her disturbed protagonists faced their nightmare environment. Of all her fictional creations, they remain the most compelling.

In some ways Frame was a transitional figure—younger than Sargeson by 20 years and yet older than the post-war generation that was increasingly calling the old certainties into question. While she was sensitive to the changes taking place in the world, this did not always translate into artistic clarity in her fiction. The conflict between permissiveness and puritanism underlies *The Adaptable Man* (1965), set in a small village in England, but the plot creaks and Frame seems to be unsure about which side to align herself in the generation gap she portrays.

Even more confused is *A State of Siege* (1966) about a retired New Zealand schoolteacher trying to become an artist and hounded by an unknown fury. The disconnect between the individual and society swallows the author as well as her protagonist, who comes across as a genteel elderly spinster terrified by her own repressed fears. Frame herself could clearly chart the intersection between alone and lonely, but here it seems as though her old enemy, the pressure of suburban respectability and conformism, had managed to cloud her vision.

Frame's literary momentum revived triumphantly in 1983 with the publication of the first volume of her autobiography *To the Is-land*, covering her childhood in an impoverished working class family. The title referred both to her mispronunciation of the word as a child, and to an existential state of being. The second volume, *An Angel at My Table*, took its title from a poem by Rilke. The third, *The Envoy from Mirror City*, covers her first expatriate years in England and Spain, especially Ibiza, the island where she found both romance and freedom to write.

The trilogy revived her career, won her many literary honours, and ensured her place in New Zealand letters. Before it was even finished, a young film student, Jane Campion, requested permission to turn it into a television mini-series. Transformed into a movie it gave a further dimension to the saga of Frame's life, viewed as a work in progress.

As she wrote in the third book, describing a disaster that befell her when she first arrived in London, "For a moment the loss of the letter I had written seemed to be unimportant beside the fictional gift of the loss, as if within every event lay a reflection reached only through the imagination and its various servant languages, as if, like the shadows in Plato's cave, our lives and the world contain mirror cities revealed to us by our imagination, the Envoy." This conception underpinned the trilogy and seems to express the most enduring aspect of Janet Frame's work.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site