



THE NEW ZEALAND
SOCIETY OF AUTHORS
(PEN NEW ZEALAND INC) TE PUNI KATUHI O AOTEAROA

The Janet Frame Memorial Lecture

**Sponsored by the NZ Society of Authors (PEN NZ Inc) and Random House NZ Ltd.
Presented by Owen Marshall at the 2007 NZ Book Month launch Te Papa Tongarewa**

Thank you your Excellency for the generous introduction. I appreciate the privilege of giving the first Janet Frame memorial lecture associated with NZ Book month, itself in only its second year, yet already established as a success both artistically and commercially.

My sincere thanks to the joint sponsors of this address - The NZSA and publisher Random House. Without their initiative and support it wouldn't be taking place.

And I'm delighted that the Janet Frame Trust agreed to the lecture bearing Janet's name. What better mantle could it wear?

How interesting that not only did her posthumously published book of poems win the poetry prize at this year's Montana Book Awards, but that a previously unpublished novel is now in the wings.

I am a long time admirer of Janet Frame's work. Her intuitive and symbolic view of the world is unique in our literature. I met her only twice, had a brief exchange of emails with her towards the end of her life, but I do have a rather more substantial link through our association with the South Island town of Oamaru. Janet lived there as a child and young woman, I taught there for twenty years. One of the last places I went to in Oamaru, before leaving the town in 1986, was the Frame house at Willow Glen. The place was derelict, with birds roosting inside and a scatter of newspapers and torn books on the floors. Everything a snarl of desolation. From a small basin in the corner of one of the rooms I tore off a grimy plug as a memento. I have it here. Michael King told me jokingly that he would swap it for Frank Sargeson's paper knife, but died before we could negotiate. I'm thinking of giving it to the Eden Street Trust, the organisation which preserves the other Frame home in Oamaru, but perhaps instead I should put it on Trade Me, and see if people consider it of greater value than Tana Umuga's handbag.

So, the Janet Frame Memorial Lecture. Mine will not be an academic address, because I think this audience, and the concept of Book Month itself, call for a broader, more inclusive, approach. But I do hope to be true to the brief I was given, which was to discuss the value of our writers and writing, to give an opinion as to trends within the artform and society's relationship with it. In all of this I claim no greater insight than my colleagues, and these are personal views, biased no doubt towards fiction, which is only one part of our literature. When I reread those comparatively early New Zealand writers, who, unlike Katherine Mansfield, chose to stay in New Zealand, people like Frank Sargeson, RAK Mason, James K. Baxter, Robin Hyde, O.E. Middleton, Charles Brasch, Allen Curnow, E.H. McCormick, I have a sense of work being cut and hammered out of adversity. A sense of a tenacious determination to make a literature out of a young society's experience and attitudes that were increasing different from more established communities overseas. And often too, I have a sense that it was a vocation not understood, not much valued, by New Zealand at large. McCormick referred to his longing to be a writer as 'the absurd ambition.' Sargeson talked of the 1950's being a time of great personal difficulty and poverty. Yet he persisted and also generously encouraged others. Janet Frame wrote to him much later, in 1978 and said, 'The great irrigation scheme of New Zealand literature is having marvellous results - remember the narrow channel you made, all alone, into that part of the land where everyone said nothing would grow? And remember the struggle you had to get people to accept that it was necessary? You can look at all those creeks and canals that followed --- and see the orchard. What an orchard.'

So the base for a national literature was established, and later writers were released from that responsibility. The base may have been a narrow one - in fiction polarised between Sargeson and Mansfield, in poetry between Curnow and Baxter, and non-fiction dominated by a new rigour in historical study after the second world war - but it was a sound platform.

We owe a lot to those writers who accustomed fellow Kiwis to hearing their own stories in the New Zealand voice, and so established New Zealand writing as acceptable literature, the equal of that produced overseas. When Sargeson began publishing, he received considerable criticism that his wasn't proper writing - in other words his work wasn't like that of the great majority of British authors.

The generations that followed have had a much easier road, and for the bulk of my talk I want to discuss the trends and developments that have made that the case. These developments have generally enriched New Zealand writing and culture, but also in some instances brought negative effects.

There has been a splendid flowering of form especially in what one publisher has termed commercial fiction - thrillers, romance, historical fiction, chick lit, fantasy, even graphic novels. Books on sport, gardening, cooking and politics also abound. Writers have been encouraged to take risks, partly because the publishers are more adventuresome, and the reading public more receptive.

Writing for children and young people has had perhaps the most spectacular growth and success. Margaret Mahy, Gavin Bishop, Joy Cowley, Tessa Duder, David Hill, Lynley Dodd, Pauline Cartwright, Paula Boock, Ken Catran, Jack Lasenby, are all among our most successful writers artistically and financially, and several have established international reputations.

Maori and Pacific writing has entered the New Zealand mainstream, bringing a special enrichment and character. Following Witi Ihimaera's breakthrough in fiction with the collection of stories, 'Pounamu; Pounamu' in 1972, have come the important figures of Patricia Grace, Hone Tuwhare, Ngahuia Te Awakotuku, Alan Duff, Keri Hulme, James George, Sia Figiel, Albert Wendt and others. Huia Publishers are specifically dedicated to Maori and Pacific writing, and introduce many new voices.

Writing for stage and television has come of age, with Roger Hall, Renee, Robert Lord, Stuart Hoare, Greg McGee, Briar Grace-Smith, Carl Nixon only a few of the significant names.

Women's writing, restrained by patriarchal attitudes and condescending censure in the first half of the 20th Century, now goes from strength to strength. Janet Frame's undeniable authority began with 'Owls Do Cry', 1957, Sylvia Ashton-Warner was important in a more strident way. Fiona Kidman's novel 'Breed of Women' published in 1979, is a landmark in our writing, and the confident freedom and dedication shown in Lauris Edmond's prose and poetry provided powerful models. The feminist movement had effects in literature as it did in all other aspects of society.

It was the feminist Spiral collective which first published 'The Bone People' in 1983 after an equivocal reception by the mainstream publishers. Women buy most of the books today, even those destined for men we are told, and it seems at times they write most of them also. And the influence of women is strong in the wider world of books - in publishing, editing, assessing and bookselling, and a beneficial influence in general it is.

Our poetry has become a rich scene, visible not just on the page, but in formal and informal readings in cafés, pubs, schools and universities. Jenny Bornholdt, Alistair Campbell, Elizabeth Smither, Sam Hunt, C.K. Stead, Kevin Ireland, Vincent O'Sullivan, Cilla McQueen, Bill Manhire, Brian Turner, Ruth Dallas - the list goes on.

In non-fiction too, New Zealand writing shows a greater reach and authority, especially in history and biography. From the last decade or so Literary biographies and memoirs alone make a substantial library shelf. Michael King, Vincent O'Sullivan, Anne Salmond, James Belich, Claudia Orange, Philip Temple, Rachel Barrowman, and many others helping us understand our own history and our own peoples and cultures.

It's surely evident then that our writing early in the twenty-first century is more varied, more voluminous and more assured than ever before. It's natural to speculate on the influences at work.

One is the effect of writing courses. A full address could be given on this subject alone. Personally I see the advantages outweighing the disadvantages, though courses are not necessary for a writer, and don't suit all dispositions. We have been fortunate here that the success of Bill Manhire's work at Victoria University has established a credibility for writing classes that has benefited those who followed. Writers may be born not made, but a good many more are born than you may think, and in many cases their progress can be accelerated, and chances of achievement increased, by writing programmes. One of the reasons why more talented writers are being published at a younger age is surely that many are advantaged by stimulating

courses, and the publishing contacts gained through them. Carl Shuker, Paula Morris, Julian Novitz, Emily Perkins come to mind. And the University classes constitute just the banner bearers and are supported by a host of short term summer schools, extension classes, and free lance tuition courses.

Roger Hall once invited me to a Dunedin restaurant with himself and Malcolm Bradbury, who in 1970 with Angus Wilson established the famous and ground-breaking writing course at the University of East Anglia. I recall Bradbury remarking that a great value of his programme was the opportunity for collegial exchange and challenge.

Another powerful presence in the contemporary world of books is the net. I'm rather IT challenged, and find these changes somewhat bewildering, but younger writers and publishers are quick to see possibility. Already some works appear directly on net rather than being published in the traditional way. Books may be purchased on line, and reviews, articles and interactive comment are available there. I noticed in Graham Beattie's bookblog recently, mention of a heated debate among independent booksellers as to whether to go on line, and the message seemed to be 'go digital and get on line, or perish'.

Contemporary New Zealand writers have the support of a strong, active and competitive publishing industry, despite traditionally small profit margins within that industry. There is a stronger commercial base for NZ books: more publications, more publicity and promotion, more activities built around books. Our presence here today and the Book Month itself is one proof of that, as are Poetry Day, National Awards, best seller lists, radio and print reviews, the writers in schools scheme and other NZ Book Council events. J.C. Beaglehole said that in the 1920s and 30s New Zealand was a 'colony of the British Publishing Empire.' Certainly that's not the case today.

New Zealand writing is at last achieving significant penetration of international markets. No longer is Katherine Mansfield our only name abroad. A great many more New Zealand authors are finding agents and publishers overseas. There are the especially notable successes. Ian Cross's 'The God Boy' first published in 1957, was last year the second New Zealand book ever to be selected as a Penguin classic for international distribution. Janet Frame's reputation stretches far beyond these shores. Keri Hulme's enduring success, 'The Bone People' was a Booker Prize Winner, and of course most recently 'Mr Pip' by Lloyd Jones, which won the Commonwealth Prize for literature and is now long listed for the Man Booker Prize. Margaret Mahy and Joy Cowley sell consistently and widely overseas. Maurice Gee, Alan Duff and Witi Ihimaera have had the added exposure of major films based on their work. These people are just the more notable among a surprisingly large number of our writers published overseas. This trend may be partly explained by a marked interest from traditional literary centres in the last twenty years or so in writing from the periphery and the rise of post-colonial literatures, but it must also attest to the quality of the writing concerned.

And not just our books appear overseas. Increasingly there is opportunity for New Zealand writers to be there in the flesh through a network of festivals, seminars, residencies and conferences. NZ writers regularly appear in Britain, Australia, France, South America and Canada, many funded by the International Writers Programme of Creative New Zealand. Last year eleven Kiwi writers were the guests of the French Government for two and half weeks and toured the country in twos and threes giving readings and talks. A wonderful privilege, and a rich experience.

Writers today are more valued and supported by their community. The public is increasingly enthusiastic and knowledgeable. This is expressed in various ways, from the proliferation of suburban book clubs to the mass audiences at major festivals. The overseas stars are admittedly a big drawcard, but Kiwi writers also attract large numbers. Death of the book? I don't think so, more books are now taken out from libraries than ever before, despite the increasing competition from electronic media.

Greater status and recognition are given to writers than in the previous generations. Writers appear regularly in the Queen's honours lists. We have at least two literary Dames in the non-colloquial sense, and two writers, Margaret Mahy and Karl Stead, hold the highest honour the country can bestow - The Order of New Zealand. The Arts Foundation celebrates our culture with prestigious icon and laureate awards. Cities and other local communities celebrate writers associated with them by plaques, literary walks, and the preservation of the houses where they worked and lived. Writers have penetrated the bastions of academia, being appointed to positions within the universities on the grounds of their writing rather than formal qualifications.

The financial support available for writers is so much greater now than formerly, much of it government patronage, but not all. Creative New Zealand, the New Zealand Book Council, The Arts Foundation, the

Authors' Fund, university and overseas fellowships, residencies, Montana Book Award prizes, are some of the best known sources of support.

The jealousy with which some regarded Frank Sargeson's small special pension seems laughable now. The CNZ Michael King Memorial Fellowship is worth \$100,000, the Prime Minister's Awards for literature \$60,000, and the Prize in Modern Letters, offered every second year by American philanthropist Glenn Schaeffer through Bill Manhire's Institute of Modern Letters, is worth \$65,000. And these are just the more impressive examples. How earlier writers would have marvelled. I have a letter from Frank Sargeson, written not long before he died in 1982, in which he told me in some detail, and with considerable pleasure, that he had just received \$50 for work published in Japan.

Of course good writers deserve every cent of what's available, as do all other artists with talent. The increase in support is a sign of our growing maturity as a culture and a nation, and a somewhat belated recognition of the value of art by a society for too long materialistic and crass. And there's always vehement debate as to how the funding cake should be cut and who should be the recipients. No system is perfect, but I was for some years a member of CNZ's Arts Board and developed a considerable respect for the expertise and dedication of CNZ staff in a sometimes thankless task. No matter how many times it's explained that funding decisions are made by committees drawn from people active in the various art forms, a large number in the community who should know better insist on seeing a conspiracy of faceless bureaucrats.

So far this afternoon I have been full of good news. The fortunate garden of New Zealand literature in which writers, publishers, booksellers and readers besport themselves. But it's not my intention to play Pollyanna. So what of my reservations and apprehensions?

The flood of NZ books published is a positive thing overall, but does have the corollary that perhaps good books tend to be lost in a tide of mediocre ones, and no longer do new releases necessarily attract reviews. Greater ease in publication may sometimes lead to greater indulgence by authors. More importantly, booksellers often don't bother to restock other than the best sellers, because of the constant influx of new titles. The shelf life of books seems so much shorter now.

With a few honourable exceptions I'm not impressed by the standard of reviewing in this country. Books are often clumped together by genre and given a cursory ranking rather like the horse racing results. Poetry and children's writing are especially poorly served in this regard, and important non-fiction work may go unremarked, except by a serious review journal such as New Zealand Books.

I know that part of the problem here is the lack of adequate payment for reviewers. I recently reviewed a 450 page American novel, and estimate that I was working for less than \$10 an hour. Many newspapers and periodicals don't pay for reviews at all, considering that the complimentary copy of the book is reward enough. Often I'm afraid it's not. There is also the difficulty of reviewing in such a small literary community, and many writers, ideally qualified to comment, are reluctant to do so because of personal acquaintance with the authors concerned, and the fear of giving offence, or suffering critical reprisal.

As a noted curmudgeon, I'm also opposed to the trend towards gossipy, personality focused reviews and columns: Felicity Ferrit's literary cousins who are more interested in displaying the most salacious opening line in recent works, or some spiteful remarks from one writer about another, than in providing a balanced coverage of books. Each day we confront a received, celebrity-ridden view of the world that everywhere impacts on far more than just the arts.

There is some evidence of falling editorial standards within the publishing industry. It's especially noticeable overseas, but also a danger here, and one commented on by experienced reviewers. More titles mean tighter deadlines and greater internal stress: cost cutting is a constant goal. Some younger editors lack the mastery of grammar shown by their elders. A competent editor is the writer's angel: the invisible hand that is a blessing for the author and also the reader.

I've mentioned the greater financial opportunities for writers today, especially the increased patronage, yet all that remains somewhat precarious and politically sensitive – as examples of that, I understand that one of the major university residencies has this year been discontinued, and even our most famous and well established overseas fellowship, that commemorating Katherine Mansfield and associated with Menton, France, was this year in jeopardy because of the withdrawal of a corporate sponsor. And the increasing number of authors eligible for payment under the Authors' Fund, which compensates writers for the use of

their books from libraries, has not been matched by an increase in the money available, so that source of income also may well be reduced for many.

Another apprehension among writers is that the bookseller retail chains are having undue influence on editors and publishers because of their large market share - a sort of reflux by which purely commercial considerations dictate decisions as to publication. To what extent this threat is perceived, and to what degree actual, I'm not sure, but if publishers are experiencing this pressure then it will certainly have a detrimental effect in regard to the more literary works that in the long run are especially significant to our culture.

Even more fundamental as a concern is that the difficulty of earning significant amounts from serious writing remains. The impressive and well deserved successes of books such as Jenny Patrick's 'The Denniston Rose,' or Michael King's 'The Penguin History of New Zealand' are extremely rare. The financial surveys of its members carried out by the New Zealand Society of Authors clearly illustrate the relative poverty of writers. New Zealanders are per capita generous purchasers of books, but the market is a small one - rather like publishing exclusively in Melbourne, Australia. A New Zealand novel may well take two years or so to write, be well reviewed, and yet typically sell less than 3,000 copies, and return the author less than a lawyer's monthly earnings. In a recent interview Ian Cross was asked why he had given up writing novels. One reason he gave was the necessity to provide for his family: another was that perhaps he 'lacked the inner resource to survive the lonely literary confinement.' For poets the situation is worse. Poets must starve: we see it as their badge of office, and a means of maintaining a pure vision unsullied by the material world. My friend Brian Turner, a former Te Mata Poet Laureate, told me 'Poetry, the thing of greatest importance to me, is something that I've found only a small amount of time for.' His articles, essays, golf caddying and highly successful sports biographies are the necessary subsidy for the poetry.

The writer's life, the artistic life more generally, is seldom an easy one. Poor Vincent van Gogh wrote - 'We don't feel we are dying, but we do feel the truth that we are of small account and that in order to be a link in the chain of artists, we are paying a high price in health, in youth, in liberty, none of which we have any joy of, any more than the cab horse that hauls along a coachful of people out to enjoy the Spring.'

And American John Cheever, in one of his more despondent moods, confided to his journal - 'Shall I dwell on the crucifixion of the diligent novelist? The writer cultivates, extends, raises, and inflates his imagination, sure that this is his destiny, his usefulness, his contribution to the understanding of good and evil. As he inflates his imagination, he inflates his capacity for anxiety, and inevitably becomes the victims of crushing phobias that can only be allayed by lethal doses of heroin or alcohol.'

So it can be argued that the writer has internal as well as external pressures peculiar to the vocation. But there are wonderful satisfactions and fulfilment as well, and that is why there is never any shortage of people, here or elsewhere, who wish to write, and even more who love to read.

New Zealand writers rarely become rich from their endeavours, and the margins in publishing and book selling are not large, but as I have already suggested the infrastructure is considerably more robust than earlier, and money is not what literature is fundamentally about. What is important is its cultural value as a reflection of our society, its role as a voice for our aspirations and attitudes as a people, and its ability to give pleasure. In these terms also I think we can be positive. We have more writers, more readers, a greater variety and a greater quality of work. Writers need no longer feel they are operating in a community that doesn't understand, or value, them. They receive more support, are encouraged to take greater risks, and operate within a vigorous industry. The presence of all of us here this afternoon is a proof of that.

My thanks again for the opportunity to be involved in a day of such varied and worthwhile activity. My special congratulations to those people whose work appears in 'The Six Pack Two,' and my thanks on behalf of writers to the many people who have worked so assiduously to organise the events. I'm sure Book month 2007 will be a success in all respects.

Owen Marshall
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