

## **JANET FRAME MEMORIAL LECTURE 2009**

### **New Zealand Book Month**

#### **William Taylor**

May I extend warmest greetings to all of you present here this evening. I am honoured to have been invited to present this lecture, commemorative to the memory of the late Janet Frame. The lecture, generously sponsored by the New Zealand Society of Authors (P.E.N. New Zealand Inc.) and Random House publishers, is now an annual event, fittingly part of New Zealand Book Month. This is the third such presentation since the inception of this lecture, and I can only hope I am equal to the rather daunting task!

My first book, 'Episode', one of a half-dozen novels I wrote for adults, was published almost forty years ago. In preparation for what I have to say today, I took it down from where it rests, gathering dust with its five mates on the top shelf of a bookcase. I had not looked at it, much less opened or, heaven forbid, read it, for many years. 'Episode' was co-published in April 1970 by Whitcombe & Tombs of Christchurch, New Zealand, and Robert Hale of London.

The stated aim for this lecture, and the brief I am expected to address, is 'to deliver an overview of the "state of the nation" for literature and writing in New Zealand'. Now, in all honesty, there are very many within the New Zealand literary community who could address this topic with a far greater degree of perception and erudition than I could ever hope to muster. Fortunately, however, the brief does go on to broaden the aim to encompass 'what it means to be a writer in New Zealand'. Thank God, I thought; - after forty years of hard labour in this particular vineyard, and forty-something titles to my name, at least this is something I can say a little about and, I trust, also say one or two things about that literary 'state of the nation' at the same

time. I took added heart when I re-listened to the broadcast of the first of Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood's series of Massey lectures; a beautifully crafted speech that dealt almost solely with the need for thrift instilled within her as a child feeding her piggy-bank with her pocket money. Thrift, of course, is quite crucial if you are thinking of being a writer; - indeed compulsory rather than obligatory. Ms Atwood gave sound advice, but I suspect her undoubted level of erudition was at such sophisticated heights that it eluded me.

Back to my first novel. The production of the book, alone, says much about what it meant to be a writer in New Zealand when I started out four decades ago. It was no easier then to get a novel published than it is today. Clearly I spotted that the old New Zealand firm of Whitcombe & Tombs was my best bet. If I remember rightly I toured bookshops and libraries to ascertain the most likely outlet for my endeavours and I was indeed fortunate that Max Rogers, editor and publisher at the firm, liked what I sent him and I became part of his sizeable stable of New Zealand writers whose work was co-published by Whitcombes and Robert Hale of London... Robert Hale, and later his son, John, did much to enable publication, and obviously provide a wider market for New Zealand fiction for some thirty years. I have memories of visiting them in the late 1970's. It was a pleasant, if somewhat stilted and formal meeting over afternoon tea - I didn't quite rank dinner! - and I was ceremoniously handed a cheque for my share of the option on the television rights to my novel 'The Persimmon Tree'; a slightly less than princely sum of £50! The most stunning feature of the reception in John Hale's office was neither the hospitality, the conversation or the cheque - it was the view from his large office window;- directly out onto the dome of St Paul's Cathedral.

The dust-jacket of 'Episode' gives a couple of clues to writing and writers in New Zealand at that time. As my first novel there were clearly no previous works of my own to be promoted on the back cover and it is used to promote the work of others. 'Not Here Not Now' - one of the later novels of Dan Davin, and David Ballantyne's 'Sydney Bridge Upside Down'. The closing lines of the Ballantyne blurb say quite a lot about the New Zealand writing scene of forty years ago; - 'The author, New Zealand born, was last year awarded his country's annual \$2000 Scholarship in

Letters'! Indeed thrift was of the essence back then! Take note, not only of the amount, but the singularity of the award. Both Davin and Ballantyne had also been recipients of Literary Fund patronage back since its early days in the mid- to late-1940's under Peter Fraser's Labour government. In 1948 Ballantyne eventually scored £100 to enable him to write a second novel at around the time his first effort, 'The Cunninghams' was about to be published in New York. The advisory committee for the fund had some concerns in regard to the content of his first book. The secretary to the committee, Pat Lawlor, read the manuscript of 'The Cunninghams' considered the work pornographic and withheld recommending the grant until he had had an avuncular talk to the young writer whom he advised to think of his mother! As the author of two young adult novels that have been required to carry 'health warnings' as to explicit content, language and theme, my sympathies are fully with Ballantyne, although, in my case an admonition to think of my mother would have been futile as Dorothea had already shuffled off this mortal coil.

State patronage for writers in the twenty or so years between the inception of the Literary Fund and when I began my writing career was hard to come by, and, in my own eventual field of endeavour, writing for the young, non-existent. It would not be until the establishment of the Choyse Bursary for Children's Writers in -the late 1970's that a specific, contestable grant enabled writers for the young to feel part of the literary scheme of things. It is interesting to note, in a corollary to this, that one of the oldest writing awards in the English-speaking world is the Esther Glen Medal, awarded by the New Zealand Library Association since 1945 for the 'Best children's book written and produced in New Zealand'. A lovely medal, but it came, then, with no money.

It's around twenty years ago, now, that the Literary Fund ceased to exist as a separate entity and its functions were absorbed into the Arts Council of New Zealand, Creative New Zealand, where it rests, at times uneasily, with all the other art forms. There continues to be debate whether this serves the needs of writers satisfactorily. Whatever, I have no intention of generally debating the point at this time. There are arguments for and against. You can still hear the occasional voice that cries out that

writers and artists should not be holding out their hands at all! Most certainly, regardless of inflation and changing times, there is a great deal more financial support and assistance available to very many more writers than was the case when David Ballantyne scored his Scholarship in Letters in 1969.

As a writer I have certainly not been averse to holding out my own hand for an occasional grant - most particularly when I have wanted to write something that I considered of some worth but of a lesser commercial viability. I am grateful for the couple of relatively modest monetary grants I have received to write specific books and for the three residencies I have been awarded. I have done my level best to ensure that all have been productive. I know, too, that in one or two instances my smaller publishers have been helped to publish my work. None of this help was anywhere near on the horizon when I started out writing back in the late 1960's. I had written, and had published, four of my early novels before, under the Kirk government in 1973, the Authors' Fund came into being: In brief, the Authors' Fund compensates writers for the use of our books in libraries. It started with a hiss and a roar and an initially splendid payout to eligible writers of \$1.30 per copy on the estimated holdings of our individual titles held in public and institutional libraries. Never provided with statutory status, sadly, it was then forced to wither in worth as inflation galloped in the later 1970's and '80's and the pot remained static. It has never been inflation indexed, although, more recently it has received a couple of significant top-ups. Just as well, really. Back in its first year of existence I was one of around 300 writers eligible for a pay-out. Today, and this certainly says something about the 'state of the nation for literature' there are approximately 1700 recipients! As one of the major recipients of income from the Fund it could be said I have a vested interest in ensuring not only its continuance but, equally, doing something about those 'top-ups'. The first of the big replenishments came in the early days of the new millennium when, in return for their confidence and supply arrangement with the then new Labour government, the Green Party secured a one-million dollar sum solely for literature. This was largely the work of the indomitable Sue Bradford. A terrific windfall indeed! The Minister for the Arts, Helen Clark, through her Associate Minister, Judith Tizard, set up a hastily cobbled together 'advisory

committee' of a dozen or so representatives of the sector and of Creative\_NZ and the Ministry of Arts, Culture & Heritage, to recommend how the funds should be applied. As President of the New Zealand Society of Authors (PEN) at the time, I was asked, along with the late Michael King, to represent writers... I have never worked out why Ms Bradford, herself, was not included. An oversight, I feel sure.

Michael King and I had a working breakfast together to plot our strategy. One of the more worthwhile meetings I have ever had! The pallid state of the Authors' Fund was uppermost in both our minds. Neither of us was confident of any degree of success in this regard. If luck was on our side, I thought, well maybe one or two-hundred thousand just might be a possibility. 'We'll start big,' said Michael. 'We'll go for the whole lot.'

I am sure I gulped, 'The whole million? We haven't got a hope in hell.'

'Why not. It's more than overdue. Realistically we should have a fall-back position. What d'you reckon?'

I decided to enter into the spirit of things, -'\$750 000?'

'Good,' -he said. 'That's settled.' And then we enjoyed breakfast.

We got \$500 000. It was at this one and only meeting of the advisory committee that the \$50 000 annual awards to an established writer of fiction, of non-fiction, and poetry were established. A noted member of the group, who shall remain nameless, came up with the notion of naming them 'The Prime Minister's Awards'; a suggestion that would be bound to meet with the approval of the Minister for the Arts. It did.

Last year, 35 years after its establishment, the Authors' Fund finally became enshrined in legislation as The Public Lending Right for New Zealand Authors, removed from the control of Creative\_NZ and given a new administrative, and more

appropriate home with the National Library of New Zealand. Possibly to celebrate this milestone it was again topped up by a significant amount. I understand that no provision has yet -been made to feed it sufficiently to take account of either inflation or increased demand on the resource.

My latest, possibly last, work is a memoir. Very loosely a memoir. Even more loosely an autobiography. Perhaps, more accurately, a meandering reminiscence, the book will be published by HarperCollins in May of next year, just slightly in excess of forty years after my first book. Like most writers, I can't say in all honesty that I am absolutely proud of every word I have written. Of bits and pieces, yes. In the main, generally so. I am proud, however, of being able to say that I have remained in print as a New Zealand writer for every one of those forty years. This has taken some doing. For twenty-five of those forty years I have made my living from writing. This is no small feat for a writer in a nation of slightly more than four million souls.

If one thing has changed in the last four decades it is assuredly in the field of how we acquire and then hone our skills as writers. I suspect that, basically, some old precepts remain the same. I learnt to write by writing. I continue to believe that what I write today is better than what I wrote yesterday. This may be stretching things a little but, fundamentally, this is what I believe. A certain innate facility for the felicitous use of words, a curiosity about, and a degree of insight into, the world around us and the human condition, a good ear and a keen eye, I can't for the life of me think that very much else is needed.

I doubt very much had Bill Manhire's wonderful International Institute of Modern Letters been around forty years ago that I would have gained entry. Well, maybe Bill Manhire, the poet, wouldn't have, either! One can only admire the work of this particular school and others like it that appear to be now cropping up in the nation's tertiary institutions up and down the country. The product of many is superb and the rapid increase in the numbers of our top-quality younger writers attests to their worth... On a slightly acerbic note, I do hold them in part responsible for there now being 1700 recipients from the Authors' Fund! Superb product, indeed, and

invariably beautifully crafted, but sometimes the grumpy old man within me finds himself wishing the producers had been allowed a little more time to mature and have a little more to say in their exquisite prose. Not that this is particularly important in a post-modern sense, and definitely not if we are moving on to post post-modern development of literature.

There is something about writing that leads vast numbers of people to believe that they can do it, that there is a poem, a story or a book within them. What is it that leads so many to this belief in numbers exceeding by far those who think they can paint a picture, sculpt a figure, sing an aria, dance or act? There's no absolute answer to this, and those of us who do write should probably be pleased that we are practitioners within such an egalitarian art-form, and go on smiling when yet another hopeful corners you to announce, 'I'm going to write a book one day. Everyone says I should.' I have a feeling that those of us who write for the young get assailed along these lines more than most. 'My grandchildren love the stories I tell them.'

There is certainly no shortage of help if Grandma or Grandpa or anyone else wants to have a go at seeing if they can find the light of published day. Apart from the creative writing schools within our tertiary institutions there are workshops and courses, short and long, on-line and off-line, and designed for the writing of short fiction, long fiction, non-fiction in all its forms, indeed every genre you can think of; an abundance of help. The provision of such help seems to have become a growth industry over the past few years. While much of what is on offer is of good, sound quality, some appears slightly suspect and more designed to lure the hopeful into parting with their hard-earned cash than actually coming up with the goods. I guess the providers of this help may certainly be counted among the small number making a reasonable living in our wider literary community today. This is an industry with no regulation! Further along the literary pipeline, there is equally no shortage of manuscript assessment and editorial services; -often quite expensive. At the very end of that pipeline, of course, there are the publishing firms who must mine this sizeable lode in the obvious hope of finding that elusive nugget of worth. Back in 1970 I can remember being told by Max Rogers of Whitcombes that roughly 2% of manuscripts

that landed on the desk of a publisher, anywhere in the English-speaking world, would see the light of published day. More recently I have been advised that this percentage, today, is significantly lower. For all this, hope continues to eternally spring.

Following the publishing of my first novel in 1970, I was nominated for membership of P.E.N. Yes, nominated. A prospective member needed to be nominated by two existing members of the organisation. My nomination was successful and I became a member: Above anything else, regardless, even, of the success or failure of the book that I had written, becoming a member of P.E.N. told me I was now a writer... Why it should mean so much to me, I have no idea. I knew that P.E.N. was an organisation based in England that had spread world-wide and worked in a variety of ways to better the condition of writers and writing. I even knew the poets, essayists and novelists bit! I knew there was a total national membership of a couple of hundred - I knew that there were a couple of New Zealand factions and that those in Auckland frequently disagreed with those in Wellington and that the debate could get somewhat heated. Apart from all this, it didn't have much effect. I can remember going to one meeting in Wellington but have no memory of what may have been discussed. The only thing I do remember is that we had a cup of tea and a biscuit at the end of the proceedings. However, I have been a member ever since and I became more active in my membership when the organisation allowed for the establishment of branches throughout the country... By this stage, membership did not require nomination - a prospective member applied to join, either as a full member with published work to their name, or as an associate member - a writer as yet unpublished. I must admit that I voted against the changing of the name from P.E.N. to the New Zealand Society of Authors (P.E.N. Inc) in the 1990's. Ever the traditionalist!

Many things have changed over the 75 years of the organisation's existence: No longer something of a club, today it is a fully professional outfit with a membership approaching 1500, working for the benefit of writers and writing, and offering a very full range of services to members. A list of the Society's publications alone attests to this latter point. The NZSA provides mentoring programmes, pairing established

writers with those who are starting out, some assessment services, advice to writers, legal advice, weekly newsletters, periodical magazine, administers a range of awards and fellowships and so forth... With my own writing career reaching what I considered a natural end, I was happy, in fact honoured, to become national president of the Society for the years 2001-04.

What it means to be a writer in New Zealand? - \_

I gave up my fulfilling and enjoyable career as a teacher 25 years ago to become a full-time writer. A risky decision, but one I have never regretted having made... Risky? Well, quite simply from the standpoint of making a living. I had no great financial resources behind me. The only provision I made was, really, that I had paid off my mortgage, and my two teenage sons were to at least a degree off my hands, and I was single. I had a dozen books behind me, either published, or in the process of being so. Clearly I was able to write and to be published. My chosen field of writing fiction for the young was, at this stage in our literary history, in a period of growth. Commonsense told me that in order to make a living in this field I must be both prolific and able to come up with a product that publishers wanted. While there were stories I wanted to tell and themes I hoped to explore, I should add that I had no high-falutin' opinions on my actual literary ability. I was, if not a tradesman, then at least a journeyman writer and with all the foregoing in mind, I set out to prove, as much to myself as anyone else, that I could do it. For all that, I was not entirely sure that I would avoid falling flat on my face. I didn't. With a degree of ability, self-discipline and industry and a dollop of luck, I achieved my aim.

Luck, and the right place at the right time counted for more than a little with many of my books being picked up by overseas publishers in the United States and the U.K. and seven or eight European countries, and option rights for this and that being sold from time to time. I believe I may be the only New Zealand writer to have been translated into Albanian - not highly productive financially! - and I did on one occasion score one advance in the millions; -sadly, of Italian lira! Overseas attention is flattering, balm to the ego, but it has never meant much to me. I was never particularly interested in writing for the overseas market; -while my stories may be

universal in scope they are all firmly New Zealand-based and written for our children and young adults. However, grist to the mill or dollars in the bank account, it all helps.

It may be surprising to a naïve few that boundaries can be pushed in writing for children and young adults, most particularly for a writer who believes in ‘telling it how it is’. My first experience in this instance came with just my second novel for the young, ‘Possum Perkins’, the story of a growing friendship between a couple of fourteen-year olds, a girl and a boy: It was not the friendship that caused the problem, rather the relationship between the girl and her alcoholic mother and, more crucially, that between the girl, Rosie, and her over-attentive, somewhat obsessed father. ‘To the pure, all things are indecent’, and the novel was rejected by the first publishing firm to which it was submitted on the grounds that it was slightly too edgy, maybe too uncomfortable for them to handle. I thought little of this at the time because the novel was quickly picked up by Scholastic New Zealand and, in turn by their parent company in New York, Hutchinson in London, and by major firms throughout Europe where, obviously, it appeared in translation. Reviews, particularly in the United States, were consistently very good indeed. The first hint that I received that others were reading more into the story than I had ever intended was when Scholastic NZ advised me that the education authorities in Queensland, Australia, would allow only a single library copy to be held in a school unless I provided a disclaimer that the relationship between Rosie and her father was not incestuous - I declined the invitation. ‘Possum Perkins’ remained in print for around 25 years and is probably the best-selling title of my writing career. Other titles would follow that were far more contentious; most notably ‘The Blue Lawn’ and ‘Jerome’ that look at same-sex attraction between young adults, the former being award-winning both here and overseas but, despite that, managing to offend the sensibilities of talk-back radio devotees, right-wing members of parliament, and, of course, the fundamentally religious. ‘The Blue Lawn’ is still in print almost 20 years later, doesn’t appear to have noticeably sapped the moral fibre of the young of the nation and, possibly, may have helped a few readers along the way, as indeed has my comic novel ‘Agnes the Sheep’ for an equally long time. Dear old Agnes may be the only sheep, possibly

‘Agnes the Sheep’ the only NZ book ever to have made it onto the American Library Association/Library of Congress list of ‘Books Challenged or Banned’ 1995-96, where it rests contentedly alongside the work of Chaucer, Mark Twain, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker, and many others. The book was banned from schools in some parts of the great American state of Georgia for the overuse of the words, ‘God, hell and damn’. According to its listing, more liberal parents appealed the ruling to higher authority. They lost! The listing, of course, did have an upside; -sales of the book in the United States increased significantly.

-

All of this is now quite a long time ago and it would great to say that times have changed. Experience tells me they haven’t. Publishers, most particularly in the educational field, now regularly inform their writers of what is acceptable and what is not. That is as true here in New Zealand as in anywhere further afield; protecting our young from anything perceived to be a hazard or peril along the road to growing-up can have a truly stultifying effect that, in the end, stunts rather than promotes growth. A quarter century after I wrote ‘Possum Perkins’ and with the rights having reverted to me, a major New Zealand publisher expressed an interest in re-publishing the book for sale here and in the U.S.A. I was very happy that the work would get a new life. It was to be a fairly lavish production and work proceeded happily and more than satisfactorily with a new design for the work and extensive artwork... Design and artwork were complete when I was contacted by the editor with the bad news. They were not going ahead. To say that I was displeased is an understatement. Apparently an ‘advisory panel’ had considered the work unsuitable and unsavoury in some aspects of the father’s relationship to his daughter. Given that the prime market for this edition was to be in the United States, I asked from what right-wing Christian fundamentalist corner of that great nation this coven of ‘experts’ had been assembled. ‘Oh no. Not in America,’ -the poor editor said. ‘It was our local panel here in Auckland...’ -

I declined the editor’s generous offer of a gift of the new artwork.

Most of the significant writers for the young in New Zealand who came along in the ten or fifteen years before my first children’s novel was published in 1980, really

needed to take a different publishing route; for example Margaret Mahy, Ruth Dallas and Anne de Roo, whose earlier works originated from U.K. publishers - Elsie Locke would have been an exception here. Around 1980 things started to change. A sea-change, really. Many of us came of age in the decade following and our primary publishing was indigenous; Joy Cowley, Lynley Dodd, Tessa Duder, Maurice Gee and myself, and, slightly later, Jack Lasenby, Sherryl Jordan, Gaelyn Gordon, David Hill, Janice Marriott - and many others. An abundant crop indeed... Some of us are getting a little long in the tooth these days and it is good to note regeneration in that crop, headed by the likes of Kate de Goldi, Vicki Jones, Bridget Lowry and, again, many others. Children's writers make up a fair proportion of the full-time writing community in New Zealand. Some may mutter 'disproportionate'! Of the dozen or so top recipients of income from the Author's Fund, over half are writers for the young. However, to level things out a little, when writing grants are doled out via Creative\_NZ, writers for kids generally get half the amount given to writers for grown-ups, and I note, with a degree of amusement that when writing residencies are specific to children's writers they are usually for half the time given to a writer of adult books... While our end product, published fiction in particular, frequently retails for significantly less than adult stuff, it often sells twice the number of copies. Swings and roundabouts.

Margaret Mahy is our nation's most highly honoured living writer... Mahy is, of course, a writer for children. Honoured not only nationally but internationally, Margaret Mahy is known and loved world-wide.

Writers for the young are blessed with a vital, vigorous and enthusiastic audience of consumers; -the young themselves. It can be a very demanding, assertive and, at times highly critical audience. I doubt that there would be any of those I have mentioned in the preceding paragraphs who have not faced audiences of dozens, scores, indeed hundreds on many occasions. One of the most successful activities of the New Zealand Book Council must surely be their Writers in School programme.

Encouraging in the young a love of reading, an enthusiasm for books, and reading for

sheer enjoyment and pleasure is highly essential. Unless engendered, encouraged and maintained in the child, at home and at school, from the earliest of ages what use, then, the novels of Emily Perkins, Elizabeth Knox, Lloyd Jones, the stories of Owen Marshall or the poems of Bill Manhire, much less the legacies of the great Janet Frame or Katherine Mansfield? Well, I have done my bit to encourage that love of reading and books, facing off to thousands of kids over the years. It has been a rewarding adjunct to my life as a writer in New Zealand today. I have written hundreds of letters, more lately e-mails, in reply to their questions, queries and comments - it has been a great audience with whom to correspond. Some of their letters have been superb. I would bet my last dollar that no writer for old people has ever received a carefully drawn and phrased note from a reader such as these: 'Dear William Taylor, - Your book was the best thing I've read since sliced bread.' And; 'Dear William Taylor, - You are a very exciting and enjoyable author and your books are exciting challenging and new. One day I am going to read one.'

Literary awards, prizes, honours and the like seem to have grossly proliferated over the span of my writing career. Human beings are a highly competitive species, and few more so than Kiwis! It's all somewhat akin to a lottery, really - very occasionally you may win, more often you lose. When it comes to literature, other forces may also come into play; what is in fashion, what may be considered politically correct for the moment, indeed, possibly, what 'brand' may be applied to your work, and even, I suspect, who you know and who knows you! Very occasionally, there may even be an element of 'the emperor's new clothes'! I have had what I consider to be my fair share of success. Sometimes I have felt hard done by, and on other occasions felt extremely lucky. I have been judged and I have judged. We are a small literary community here in Aotearoa-New Zealand; - very frequently the judges know the judged and it is a little difficult for objectivity to reign supreme. It's virtually impossible to opt out of the process. Publishers and booksellers see that process as a commercial imperative. For all that, there is something faintly ludicrous about judging one work of art against another that may be quite dissimilar in every meaningful respect, and then pronouncing which is the better. I am not the only practitioner in the field of children's literature, where many of us tend to be prolific, to have had one of

my books competing against another of my books. It's a bit hard to be pissed off when one scores and the other doesn't! As I get older I find myself forgetting who won what and when. However, I seldom forget something I have read, winner or loser, that has 'said' something of worth to me.

There may be a few writers in New Zealand today who have been published by more firms than I have used in my forty years. I can't think of any, but there must be one or two. The history of publishing in this country is truly a rich story in itself. From the early days of our European history small presses have been established, some that have lasted for a long time and others that have quickly quit the literary scene. More lately the large multinational publishing firms have established New Zealand branches or adjuncts, occasionally gobbling up small indigenous firms. I have had experience of the small and the large, the local and the international. Invariably, as a writer, I have been treated with courtesy, generosity, consideration and, not infrequently, kindness. In all truth, I can think of only one occasion on which I have taken exception. Certainly I have provided a more than reasonable financial return for some - but not always - as writers, we do tend to believe that our publishers make vast fortunes at our expense. A cursory glance through the balance sheet of almost every publishing firm in this country would show this to be largely a myth... What I do know, when I think back to when I started out and compare then with now, that some things have changed enormously. In the area of book production alone, I have only to compare the 'look' of my later titles with that of my earlier works to know that there has been enormous growth in quality. This might reasonably be expected from the large international outfits with a multiplicity of resources, but a survey, for example, of the product coming out of, say, Longacre Press of Dunedin indicates that a small local firm can stand comparison with anything from anywhere. Publishers are often accused of doing insufficient to promote our work. I don't believe this is generally so; -after all, doing less than could be done in this regard is a double-edged sword. Sensibly, it is in a publisher's best economic interest to promote any title to the best of their ability. Possibly my greatest quibble with publishers in New Zealand today is that a few of them, and certainly not all, allow titles to go out of print too rapidly. After all, if you go to the effort to write a book you might reasonably hope that it has

a currency of longer than five minutes, or, in real terms, a tad longer than that first initial rush and peaking of sales.

Forty years hasn't seemed to me, living through it, all that long a period of time. The likely fact that the creators and developers of Google had not been born forty years ago proves, on the other hand, that four decades is a fair stretch of time.

My act of writing today is little different from what it was back then when I started out. The mechanics may have changed. Well, they have for a lot of things.

Computers are no longer the size of a small office building for one thing. Our means of communication have altered. When I wrote 'Episode' it took over two months for the manuscript to reach London by sea, surface mail - and then it got lost on the way! Today, I click something through electronically in a couple of minutes at most, and it would take less time than that if I could get Broadband in my isolated corner of the King Country. 'Episode' was typeset in Bristol... While I am certain it wasn't hand set in little lines of lead letters, the process was still largely manual. Not quite the process we enjoy today. As I write these words, I am self-editing on my computer screen; -a far cry from what once was my habit when, in the course of writing a novel, I would spend countless hours trying to decipher what I had written in my first hand-written draft. For all that, a little part of me misses the click, clatter and rhythms of my old manual typewriter - one of my sons has given up pointing out to me that it is neither good for, nor necessary to pound my computer keyboard quite so vigorously!

Like many writers throughout the western world I mourn the demise of many of our independent booksellers. In that equation of writer, publisher, bookseller and reader, the place of the bookseller is of obvious significance. Large firms and franchises of international outfits have largely taken over the bookselling scene... Individually, and this often depends on the management and enthusiasms of the staff of a particular branch, some outlets are very good indeed.

The two King Country towns nearest to my home once supported several smallish independent firms that sold books. They were bookshops. Good ones, too. The people who owned them ran them. They knew their stock. Invariably they were

booklovers themselves and it was a delight to browse their shelves. Well, those days have gone. There continue to be shops in both towns that sell books. They also sell Lotto tickets, giftware and, in one instance, also serves as a PostShop. They are both parts of a franchise and obviously sell the restricted range of generally best-selling titles supplied by that franchise. There are clearly sound market-place economic principles behind all this. I understand this, and I am not a latter-day Luddite, but I still miss the quality of what once existed.

The demise of the book and of reading has been debated as long as I have been writing... Clearly, today, we can readily access information and entertainment in many forms only dreamed of when I started out. We can read things on-line and can read things on little hand-held electronic devices that pretend to be 'books', conjuring out of the ether almost whatever we want. We understand that those methods of communication that we only dream of now are likely to be reality just around a corner or two into the future. For all that, the book as we know it, seems destined to be part of that future for much, much longer than all the doomsayers would have us believe. We are reputed to be a nation of book readers. Probably this is true; recreational reading regularly tops our lists of preferred leisure activities. It's okay for me as an old man to pronounce that nothing will replace the traditional form of a book in my life, and very frequently in my hands. I am not looking for alternatives; I don't want them. I want what I write to be published and then, I hope, read, in the old-fashioned, conventional form. Not on-line, and not on some cute little device. I know I am not alone, here, among those of my generation - however, these days, I am able to come up with an example from the other end of the age scale. I have a three-year old granddaughter, Isla, who has been an avid reader for almost all of her very short life. She loves her books, she knows her books, she has books she can recite from beginning to end, she has even consumed a book or two - in its more conventional, physical sense. Not a complete book-worm, she also enjoys TV and DVD's and her ambitions for her future veer between being New Zealand's next top model, a doctor or an ice-road trucker - trucking, medicine or modelling notwithstanding, her books are the real love of her life - they go with her everywhere. Judging by the state of many of the titles her parents help her lug home from the local library, she is not the only young reader

around with a love of stories and books...

In conclusion I wish to pay tribute to the memory of Janet Frame. Her contribution to our literature, indeed to our nation, is of greatest significance. I first learnt of her in 1957 when I was an eighteen-year old student at Christchurch Teachers' College. This was the year when her first novel, 'Owls do Cry' was published by the Pegasus Press of Christchurch. Those of us studying English were urged by our lecturer to buy the book. It was said to be a remarkable piece of literature. I bought it. It cost fifteen shillings - less 10% student discount. I read the book and have remembered it ever since - my copy of that first edition, published with the assistance of the New Zealand Literary Fund, - is one of my treasures.

I never met Janet personally, although when I was living for a while in Palmerston North and she was living there at the same time, I would see her occasionally as we did our food shopping at the same small supermarket. I would nod and smile, and generally she would do the same. We never spoke. I wish we had.