



The New Zealand Society of Authors (PEN NZ Inc.)

Janet Frame Memorial Lecture 2012

LEARNING TO SWIVEL.

The Changing Face of New Zealand Fiction - A Personal Hindsight. **By Marilyn Duckworth**

Kia ora and greetings, New Zealand booklovers. I'm very happy to be here and to be one of you.

The Janet Frame Memorial Lecture aims in a different way each year to reflect on the general health of literature in Aotearoa – a huge and ever deepening task. I will do my humble best to fulfil the prescription. Reflections can startle when one peers across more than fifty years – the length of my time as a published novelist. The face of NZ literature in 2012 stares back at me defiantly – changed like my own face, but enriched by new bulges and hollows. Times might be hard for the industry but there's always a heartening measure of good news for New Zealand readers and enough reasons to celebrate. To be celebrating it here under the Janet Frame banner is an honour and an added pleasure. I was lucky enough to be staying in her friend John Money's row house in Baltimore in 1987 and slept in the narrow bed he told me had been Janet's when she visited. The house itself conjured scenes from her distinctive novel *Living In The Maniototo*, a work of genius. Sadly genius is not catching.

I used to think I knew a mounting number of things about being a writer. The truth is there appears to be so much more to know and understand than when I began to write decades ago. This has come to me as I swim on the internet like a fish with my mouth half open wondering what to swallow.

It meant a lot to this particular fish to be chosen as President of Honour for NZSA/PEN and I thank them for their generosity. I owe much to the organisation from that day fifty two years ago when I was nominated for membership by John Pascoe, author of *Mr Explorer Douglas*. I had one title in hard covers and a second due for publication, which I believe was at the time the necessary criterion for membership of P.E.N NZ. Soft cover original editions

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hardly happened in those days of course, paperback reprints being reserved for best sellers and mass marketing; radio stories and radio plays weren't taken with the seriousness they deserve. It wasn't long after this that the membership criterion was revised. Due to misplaced confidence I found myself nominated for the committee far too soon. I was startled, but so flattered. I was barely 24 years old, a wide-eyed innocent. I can't say I contributed much at all to the literary debate in those early meetings – I was too shy, but Denis Glover told me it was my job to look decorative. I smiled but didn't tell him I'd observed how carefully he combed his hair in a shop window reflection that day as I following him up Woodward Street to the meeting. I took on the job of editing the P.E.N Newsletter, searching out ideas for the few pages, which I would deliver regularly to Bayley's Typing Services.

In 1959 I remember the PEN committee as mostly male, apart from the poet Ruth Gilbert who later became my first daughter's mother-in-law, in that sometimes comforting way that degrees of separation dwindle in New Zealand. John Pascoe was a true gentleman, as was Monte Holcroft, the president of PEN. Monte was also the editor of the NZ Listener and commanded awe in me, as well as respect. Each would raise his hat politely if we passed on Lambton Quay. I think Pat Lawlor, who originally founded the New Zealand PEN Centre in 1935 – (the year I was born, incidentally) - was on the committee when I first attended meetings. I wasn't aware of this distinction at the time. The sharpest memory I have of Mr Lawlor, as I knew him, is an unkind remark about my first novel *A Gap in the Spectrum* which he'd found unnecessarily shocking. He preferred, he said, a novel by another woman writer, also published by Hutchinson - *Light Cakes for Tea*. I'm afraid I've never read it. I'm sure there was nothing remotely naughty in it, unlike in mine apparently. I couldn't see what was wrong with mentioning what might happen between lovers conventionally in bed together. I learned recently that Pat Lawlor was a friend of Michael King's family. Michael wrote that Pat enjoyed rating New Zealand writers –“the way a racing form guide would rate horses and their chances.” At least he'd allowed this naughty contender onto the race track.

Stuart Perry, the City Librarian, congratulated me on my speedy second publication but impressed on me that writers had to keep on turning out titles this way if they expected to command continuing respect. I could see that in my new career I might have taken on more than I could deliver. I'd failed to stick at an earlier job as a student psychiatric nurse, and slept my way through Greek History Art and Literature at Victoria; would I do any better as a writer just because I wanted it so much? Barbara Strauch, medical science editor at the New York Times, told Kim Hill last year that adolescence has been discovered to persist until age 25. It seems I'd written my first two novels as a mere adolescent.

P.E.N – begun for poets, playwrights, editors, essayists and novelists - helped me over the years to connect with other writers and to believe in myself. It's something writers can have

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trouble with; that's a fact, despite our huge egos. Members of PEN/ NZSA will know what I'm talking about. We're at the mercy of reviewers and indeed publishers; it can prove a damaging ride. It was useful to hear how others managed the experience. It was endlessly entertaining too. Those early PEN parties, with Ngaio Marsh's ringing tones, Nelle Scanlon in her dainty hat, and the Glovers, Denis and Khoura, making the most of the good wine – these were eye opening occasions and unforgettable. I remember one year in the 70s when Harry Seresin, my partner for the evening, and the novelist, Noel Hilliard, started swapping name tags to liven up the proceedings. They were lively enough already and we received a black mark for leaving the premises in the old Red Cross Building on Willis Street in less than perfect order. But that was the parties – some very good results, or the fashionable word 'outcomes' were achieved as well. Late in 1971 we were campaigning for the Public Lending Right and I accompanied Ian Cross to plead our case, but as usual I barely opened my mouth. Ian did a great job and it came about anyway. In 1973 the Authors Fund was established and since 2009 it's labelled the Public Lending Right – a *right*, as we always hoped it would be understood – and now managed by the National Library. Thanks to the Green Party and Helen Clark's Labour Government the Fund got a boost in the nineties and also writing grants and awards increased, raising the profile and sometimes the income of struggling writers. The Prime Minister's Awards for Literary Achievement were born.

Novel writing is a dangerous occupation. I took my first blithe step into that crocodile swamp in the fifties. My youngest daughter, Mia Farlane, had her first novel published recently, in England, after completing a Middlesex University MA in Creative writing - an often familiar story these days. Classes in creative writing proliferate. University courses like those of Bill Manhire and Witi Ihimaera have spawned some of our celebrated writers. My telephone conversations with Mia have focused my attention inescapably on the very different path and mode of travel for an aspiring novelist today. There are plenty of signposts and tour guides in this century showing writers the way – perhaps too many. I suspect the excitement of stepping out into mysterious terrain, as I knew it, is sadly altered. It remains a tough world. No change there.

My debut novel was published in 1959, also in England, as Mia's was. Mine was written longhand and typed out on a clattery old typewriter before it was posted. Six weeks on the water, and then at least three more months of waiting - while I tried to forget about it. It had already taken far longer than I'd planned. Finding typing with two fingers so slow – I'd played hooky as a teenager from the evening shorthand typing classes my mother signed me up for - I submitted a few of my chapters to Bayleys, that same public typist I would later use for the PEN Newsletter. In the course of shifting premises Bayleys at once lost my precious exercise book. An intelligent writer would have made a fuss, claimed some recompense. I very nearly gave up but I didn't, not quite. I filled another exercise book and chose a UK publisher from the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook, believing real novels were

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only published outside New Zealand. Certainly at the time that was largely the case. Janet Frame's *Owls Do Cry* had appeared under the Pegasus imprint but I knew even then that she was an exception. Ian Cross's novel *The God Boy* had been published by Andre Deutsch of London. Sylvia Ashton Warner's *Spinster* would be published shortly after by Secker & Warburg.

My understanding of how to complete a readable manuscript had been gleaned over the years through reading satchels of novels lugged home from the Miramar library, from laboriously counting the number of words needed, and from listening to my mother, Irene Adcock, an early member of the admirable Women Writers Association. It's worth noting by the way that this organisation dates back even further than PEN New Zealand. I chose the UK publisher Hutchinson because I'd recently won a Hutchinson novel in a competition and I thought mine was rather better. It was my sheer good luck that Hutchinson had just launched an adventurous imprint "New Authors" that concentrated on debut novels. They were later to publish a novella series which included Maurice Gee, CK Stead and Maurice Duggan. "We are proud to be able to introduce three such remarkable men to a wider public." I had chosen well. In 1958 I was able to telegram my mother "First novel accepted Hutchinson." (No exclamation mark, a more recent email habit of course, but it was certainly implied.) Her return telegram expressed shock as well as pleasure, similar to my own reeling response at the time. No doubt first time novelists share much the same feelings today, but then the differences begin. The changes haven't happened all at once, but very gradually over the five decades of my writing life, first insidiously, then picking up speed frighteningly.

Speed is the first difference in fact – not speed of writing, but certainly speed of editing and of communication. Publisher's editors play a much larger part in writers' lives today. What appealed to me as a shy, fairly inarticulate person was the solitary nature of putting a book together. I'm sure this is what often appealed to most first time writers, with no one else telling them what to do. You would no more dream of delivering a manuscript that needed considerable editing than go out wearing a half finished dress or pair of trousers. Times change. Editorial input and advice have become a necessary and useful part of the process, although I can't help resisting.

Isolation and solitariness are harder for a writer to find. There are a number of short residencies available but email access encroaches. Nothing stays the same today for longer than the latest weather report. Everywhere we look electronic equipment and devices are upgrading in record time. Type writers and even carbon paper belong now on the Antiques Road Show. Digital books and internet access are fast threatening bookshops. People are learning to read in a different way, gulping instead of chewing words slowly. They read on the web as well as on Kindle and ipads. Time moves faster and can't be wasted. Time is

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money they say and money is the root of – if not evil, certainly the weeds that infest a writer’s progress.

There will always be bookshops, we know that, but closures are everywhere occurring – Dymocks, Borders - leaving some sad gaps in our shopping streets, like spaces where teeth have fallen or been pulled. ebooks are not quite like false teeth, *instead* of the originals, but they are certainly easy to take out and put away in a convenient place. So why not? In the sixties Wellington had Whitcomb and Tombs on Lambton Quay, Souths around the corner in Willis Street, and David Archer’s Phoenix Bookshop not far from where Unity is today. Hugh Price’s Modern Books in Manners Street - one of the smallest - was my favourite because one saw such unusual people browsing there – Peter Varley, barefoot gay actor – Jim Winchester carrying his encyclopaedic knowledge of theatre on one hunched shoulder. The books were unusual too. Perhaps Hugh Price noticed me because surprisingly he gave me my first ever window display. Parsons Bookshop on the Quay, altered but still alive today, heavily stocked with DVDs and CDs as well as books, was the only one with a “Coffee Gallery” in those early days. It was a quiet meeting place for book lovers and like minded artists, a setting that we could certainly do with today.

Sadly libraries are struggling and certainly changed. Even the silence sounds different. But the New Zealand writers displaying on the Best Seller stands turn over with gratifying speed. The Returned Fiction shelf usually includes plenty of books with the home grown label and confirms we are still reading and valuing our own. To reserve a new New Zealand title can mean a long wait in a queue, but this is heartening evidence of unflagging interest. More available copies would be a better solution but that’s in an ideal world. Nevertheless it’s part of the writer’s job to help libraries survive as best we can and we mustn’t forget that.

In 1959 I was basking in the publication of my first novel - no such thing as a launch in those days, or not in New Zealand - just a very private celebration. My then husband used a clumsy reel to reel tape recorder - part of the necessary equipment for a radio advertising copywriter. For fun we recorded a debate after dinner with two family friends, one of them John Thomson, (later initiator of the magazine New Zealand Books.) He’d suggested the topic – Should novels be sold like soap? I wish I’d been able to keep some of John’s clever comments, but I do recall it was the first time I heard myself termed a *lady novelist* and realised I wasn’t meant to be more than that. It took me a couple of decades before I noticed that for years I’d been conducting an unconscious battle to resist being sidelined by my gender.

Women novelists in our country were spread thinly at the time. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Ruth France, Janet Frame; barring popular romance that was about it. On Marmite jars as a child I’d seen the phrase -“Too much spoils the flavour.” As far as women writers go that’s a nonsense which was to be dealt with in no uncertain manner a couple of decades later. Too

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much, perhaps, but the flavour? Nothing very wrong with that. My novelist daughter was told by her agent that she might have written a "Marmite novel". Readers would either love it or hate it. We need our Marmite novels as well as fast food fiction. Debate is what helps our literature develop. That happens now in blogs but not enough in print, or on Free to Air TV or radio.

Naming and labelling plays a part in any writer's life. It was after my fifth novel I saw I had to begin resisting labels. Labels tended to supply another rigid set of rules. Labels and pigeon holes had always bothered me. Feminism was another one of these. I believed in equal rights and opportunities for women but I always had, it seemed so blindingly obvious. When my first husband referred to me as a career woman in the fifties I knew it was a term of abuse. "Deep down" he'd say "you're a *career* woman." As if it was some sort of kinky aberration. What I wrote in my fiction was always a way of displaying feminist striving, I can see this now. But that didn't mean I would carry a flag to say so. No way.

In the seventies, with the second wave of Feminism - or Women's Lib as it was then called - critical prescriptions seemed to shift from *how* an author should write to *what* an author should be writing about. A fashionable compulsion to confront contemporary "issues" in literature became apparent. The problems of society needed to be exposed in novels; of course they did, but incidentally. It wasn't up to any writer to solve social ills, I believed.

At the same time I eagerly watched the surge in fiction by women- Joy Cowley's *Nest In a Falling Tree*, Margaret Sutherland's *The Love Contract*, Patricia Grace's *Mutuwhenua* - and gave due credit to those who took on the responsibility of social conscience as something of a deliberate project. I was happy that they could do it better than me. Some of them made such a good job of it that society sat up and listened. There were eager readers waiting. Fiona Kidman was notably one who did this consciously in the late 70s perhaps for the first time. Critics didn't always avoid a prescriptive mode of reviewing and this had the effect of sometimes drawing attention to the social role of characters and plot before paying attention to literary merit. This might have benefited society - exposing social ills has never been better achieved than in great fiction. Dickens and Chekov are cases in point. But my suspicion was that the art of literary criticism in New Zealand was edging downhill, short-changing our writers. Male writers were mostly immune, unsullied by accusations of posturing and hysterical voice raising. They had no need for it. Their voices were loud and reverberating already. But it was clear what was happening in the pages of small magazines. Landfall sometimes carried two reviews of the same title to cope with this phenomenon. Writers must learn to grit their teeth. Message novels occasionally got a bad press from me, I'm afraid, when I took my turn at reviewing. The title of one of my books - *A Message from Harpo* - was in fact a sly dig at this kind of writing. I based it on a telegram Harpo Marx had once sent that read simply: "No Message - Harpo." I'm not sure anyone

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got the sly dig, which was in a way my own fault because what else was I doing but attempting my own message?

In the eighties the reading community was lucky to have Bert Hingley of Hodder & Stoughton Auckland. I'd read his Bookmarks column in the Listener and recall admiring his velvet jacket at a wild seventies party, but in the eighties he was much more than a velvet jacket. He was a notable publisher, energetic and innovative. I was overjoyed when he dared to take me on. I think it was Bert who instituted publishing original trade paperback novels - quality soft cover editions - and identical hard-covers at the same time. Sue McCauley's best selling *Other Halves* was perhaps the first of these, in 1982. Penguin and other New Zealand publishers were following suit in close order. This proved good news for our bookshops and for writers alike. New Zealand fiction displays became increasingly prominent in shops, so that it's hard to remember when New Zealand novels had to struggle to be noticed, masked by overseas titles. Women's Bookshops opened, in Wellington and then in Auckland and did a good trade. In the seventies we had had the magazine Bookworld, with Elizabeth Alley as the reviews editor. In the eighties new literature friendly journals appeared like Quote Unquote and City Magazine. Monthly glossies like North and South, Metro and others carried regular books pages. Gordon McLauchlan conducted a regular TV interview.

The Listener Women's Book Festival began to happen in a number of city centres. I was invited onto a light hearted one of these, debating "A Post Feminist Paradise." "Men have come a long way, with our help," I said. "We've taught them Guilt. On the domestic front guilt used to belong exclusively to women. Now men have learned to lie about with their feet up, prostrate with guilt, *apologising* while women do their 70% of the housework." In 2012 the percent of women doing the housework in the publishing field is probably something similar. Harriet Allan of Random House is one I'm seriously indebted to. It's been twenty years and eight titles I owe her now. In 1986 the first Writers and Readers Week came about, organised by Ann Mallinson and with essential input from Elizabeth Alley, Bill Manhire and the committee. It was an outstanding success. I later served my own time on this committee, under the leadership of Jenny Patrick and Chris Price – some of the most enjoyable meetings I can remember. I'd learned at last to open my mouth and let my writer's voice out.

John Thomson had raised the question humorously – Should novels be sold like soap? Indeed. Publicity machines make more suds and more noise now than anything I expected to hear fifty odd years ago. It didn't matter then if one was shy, tongue tied and very secretive about the writing process. Doreen of the radio station 2ZB was understanding and patient when at my first interview for her portable recording machine I simply nodded or shook my head. But promotion is a huge part of the job of writing today and nothing much happens without it. If you're not prepared to put some real effort into selling your own titles

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- and indeed yourself - you're of little use to a publisher. The role of writer has become cast in a different mould. My first novel sold somewhat better in England than it did in my own country oddly enough, and I certainly had more advertising "pulls" in the UK and more reviews. Advertising in print had to do the job, instead of author tours. I can't have been alone in this colonial experience, but there are so few writers around today who were writing in the sixties that it isn't a conversation I can indulge in very often. We were always told New Zealanders were avid readers, but there were less than three million of us when I began. There are over a million more today, but not, I suspect that many new readers or not of all the deserving titles. The NZ Listener was devoured over my growing years by every serious book-lover. Monte Holcroft, Ian Cross. The list of celebrated editors can shine in the dark. For decades it had a monopoly of radio and early TV coverage and correspondingly high circulation; for decades its reviews were some of the most reliable and memorable. David Hall impressed me and I took his reviews to heart. Book reviewing in our newspapers made less of a ripple in the sixties, with the possible exception of the Auckland papers and the Hawkes Bay Herald Tribune where Louis Johnson was features editor. Gill Shadbolt in Truth made a determined showing with her books pages in the sixties, going so far as to swipe and preview one of our friend Barry Crump's novels ahead of its release. There were the more academic Landfall reviews of course, a scattering in literary magazines such as Numbers and shorter ones in wider market magazines, including even the Weekly News and others like the glossy Femina, I find, if I dive into my yellowing files. And at least we had Arnold Wall's weekly radio programme Bookshop, when two or three books would be analysed. I recorded my own first ever book review - Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* - in Arnold Wall's recording studio in Christchurch, quaking with nerves. Another Christchurch recording studio would be demolished fifty years later following a real and tragic quake. *Memento Mori* indeed. National radio remains the writer's friend. We don't need any damaging quakes there.

When I recorded that first review I was still hanging firmly onto the apron strings of Britain. I had an excuse. It had been my childhood home and the place where I returned as an eighteen year old and married my first husband. For years I felt "sandwiched between two worlds" – as a young person, and later as a working novelist; a common enough feeling among our writers. When I was a teenager our schools were teaching, for the most part, literature set in England, America, Nova Scotia - anywhere but here. New Zealanders still had a weird and lingering habit of referring to England nostalgically as "Home" even when they may never have personally visited the place. Those were the days when ship board travel created separation. Katherine Mansfield belonged comfortably to both worlds at least in the way she reached us at school. But I was surprised - distressed almost - to come across Robin Hyde's *Godwits Fly* in my fifth form year, set in Island Bay! It couldn't be a real book! In fact I was boarding that year in Island Bay, while my parents camped in Mt Victoria on the modest property where my father was helping builders construct our new

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home. It took me a while to rid myself of my literary prejudice and it took New Zealand even longer.

By the eighties, when my fifth novel appeared it was set firmly in Wellington - the year of the Springbok Tour. I have a character reflect that “the rest of the world will never look at New Zealand in quite the same way again”. I didn’t look at it in quite the same way either. Most of my novels since then have had a New Zealand setting. Conversely it has become a commonplace for New Zealand writers - addictive travellers as we are - to set their fictions confidently in exotic places – Berlin, Burgundy, Albania. C K Stead, Elizabeth Knox, Lloyd Jones, Sarah Quigley, Paula Morris. Publishers, and readers, love it. We have joined the global merry go round. The Wellington Writers & Readers Week brought the exotic places closer along with visiting overseas writers - David Lodge, Angela Carter, Ian McEwan, Alice Walker. Dunedin and Auckland followed suit and had little trouble attracting audiences for our own writers as well. Writers have become big news. Perceived success has never shown up in my bank account but I’ve had my share of good luck. Two of the writing fellowships I enjoyed in the eighties – the- NZ Australia Exchange Fellowship and the Fulbright Visiting Writer’s Fellowship – are now defunct. But on the plus side there are fellowships that currently take our writers to Berlin, to Iowa and to Katherine Mansfield’s Menton in France. The Menton Fellowship is our oldest overseas fellowship and in 1980 it changed my life. Chris Price last year was the 42nd fellow.

My position as a writer is increasingly dated. I use a laptop but still do some of my writing longhand. I might not have cataracts but I am looking through a thinning lens. My favourite novelists are aging and tired, if not already dead. Penelope Fitzgerald, Doris Lessing, Ann Tyler, Beryl Bainbridge, Janet Frame. Margaret Drabble has written her last novel, she says – she feels in danger of repeating herself. I understand how she feels. 2012 is a risky time to be a seventy something novelist in any gender and any country. However we can look with admiration at the continuing energy of Maurice Gee, C K Stead, Margaret Mahy and Fiona Kidman.

It makes no sense for any of us to rail against change and digital hijacking, any more than against unwelcome grammatical innovations and strange, genetically modified language. The times - straitened by disasters, environmental and economic – must dictate new rules for the creative young and energetic. Post modernism is growing whiskers. Nostalgia has become something of a dirty word. There are plenty of new ones and I bow my head to the inventive younger writers who use them. I do love words, what writer doesn’t? Harry Orsman had already started work on his massive New Zealand Dictionary when he stood up in 1952 as Alistair Campbell’s best man and I was my sister Fleur’s sixteen year old bridesmaid.

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My late husband Dan introduced me to a new word “interface” in 1978. I couldn’t make much sense of it. I can see now that we are at an important interface between print and digital. It’s frightening to be balancing on a cusp. How long have we been teetering here? Which way will the future tip us? I’m increasingly aware that the young will be more intelligent than my generation. I’ve read this somewhere, possibly online. Will they really? Their books will demand more, question more, but answers? I can only shake my head. Not too vigorously. You have to look after your head as the grey hairs multiply. In 2008 I went to “360” an innovative play for the Wellington Festival devised and written by Carl Bland and his late wife Peta Rutter, where an audience sits on swivelling seats chasing the action as it moves, spectacularly and beguilingly, in ever changing directions. It was an extraordinary experience which challenged all my senses as well as my brain - and my neck. I didn’t have to throw up until at least an hour after I left the Te Whakaari theatre and I still think it was worth it. Something like the same clever juggling of viewpoint confronts us in literature today. I feel a similar revolving and swooping challenge to my senses and sneakily prefer some of the older titles sitting sturdily between hard covers. People will make their own choices. Graham Beattie’s blog deserves to be bookmarked by booklovers and there are others too if one has the time. Thanks to the internet there are countless opportunities for critics - qualified and unqualified - to exercise judgement willy nilly. It’s a worry, in my book. Nevertheless reading - however and wherever we do it – remains one of the nicest, most rewarding things anyone, of any age, can do.