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Janet Frame Memorial Lecture NZSA 2013

Two Cheers for Eccentricity

Delivered by James McNeish

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ONE OF THE comforts of growing old is that instead of being condemned to sit through yet another academic “improving” lecture, as I was in my student days, you are occasionally invited to deliver one, and can thus be as ungrammatical and un-academic as you like.

First I want to thank Dame Fiona Kidman for her generous introduction. It’s a great privilege to be invited to give the Janet Frame Memorial address, now in its seventh year. My sincere thanks also to the sponsors, the New Zealand Society of Authors and the Wellington City Gallery.

This address is entitled *Two Cheers for Eccentricity* on a theme of creative non-fiction. Let me say at the

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outset that I have a difficulty. Officially the address calls for “an overview” of the state of literature in New Zealand, but for much of my young adult life I was out of the country and I have been absent a great deal since. It would be false for me to attempt any broad coverage. Besides, in his inaugural lecture in 2007, Owen Marshall did this so well as to almost rule out further comment. He described the enrichment of our literature over the last half century, covering everything from the flowering in women’s writing to writing for the stage and television and the emergence of Maori and Pacific writing, and much more. My approach is limited and my views are likely to be warped, from absence, besides contaminated by that aspect of writing that has come to interest me of late, namely creative non-fiction, which for better or worse is what I seem to have been doing for most of my life.

What do we mean by creative non-fiction? Some would say it’s a hybrid, neither one nor the other. Well, it’s more than that. Overseas – recent examples being de Waal’s *The Hare with Amber Eyes* which is essentially non-fiction but reads like a novel, and Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, two historical works which have raised to the level of “fictional certainty” a blacksmith’s son

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called Thomas Cromwell who hardly existed before the novelist got to work on him - overseas, especially in Scandinavia, creative non-fiction has been cemented in for years as a literary genre in its own right.

Briefly, it's invention. Invention invading the world of fact. A way of tampering with truth - "truth" in inverted commas, because in the writer's world, what most people think of as the plain unvarnished or literal "truth" does not exist. One of my favourite stories is of the English novelist Rose Tremain and Prince Charles. They met at a party. Charles had read one of Tremain's books, he was very taken with a scene in it about a teenage girl. "Tell me," he said, "do you yourself have a fourteen-year-old daughter?" "No, I don't," Rose Tremain said. Prince Charles was astonished. "You mean you made it all up?"

There's a subtle difference between fact and fiction, between reality and fantasy, between truth and legend, which sometimes puzzles critics - a blurring at the edges. To a writer, this blurring on the margins of fact and fiction can offer peculiar satisfactions. Certainly this is true of a writer like Janet Frame who sometimes took refuge in this borderland area and indeed is about to do so again in a novella not previously published. I'm coming to

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that.

In 1957, the landmark year when Janet Frame published *Owls Do Cry*, I left the country. I think the Fifties were a terrible time for aspiring writers in New Zealand, especially aspiring women writers. I was away for most of my formative years and so missed that burgeoning period ignited by *Owls do Cry* which was to find fruition in the 1980s when homegrown New Zealand-written and New Zealand-published prose, especially prose fiction, began to take off.

Today I'm astonished at the mix of writing here, starting with an explosion of books for children by writers like Margaret Mahy and Joy Cowley, two among several who have established international reputations. At the growth of titles entering the mainstream about everything from literary biography and sport to science and crime fiction, from memoir and essays on how to drink a glass of wine or catch a cricket match, to poetry and prose of striking power - and subversion - from writers as diverse as Patricia Grace and Steve Braunias, latecomers like Jacqui Sturm and Barbara Anderson and newcomers like Elizabeth Knox and Lawrence Pagett. Equally astonishing to me - I look back to a time when practically every new

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publishing venture in this country was doomed to fail - is the rise of small independent publishing firms, from the feminist Spiral collective which first published *The Bone People* to Bridget Williams Books and the Awa Press and Craig Potton Publishing. Admittedly some have since disappeared, but nonetheless their mere arrival and their staying power in adversity, is - to this returning expatriate - remarkable, since it's occurred in what is effectively a village society which liked to pride itself, and in many ways still does, on its anti-intellectualism.

In 1957 when I published my first book there were in effect only two general publishers in New Zealand: Whitcombe & Tombs and AH & AW Reed. If you weren't a poet or a short-story writer, and I was neither, there was nowhere else to go. Whitcombe & Tombs ran to books about sport and AH & AW Reed specialised in mainly local history and books on gumdiggers and the Four Corners of New Zealand. My first book - for Reeds - was a social history of New Zealand pubs which, looking back, had a certain quaintness since the founder of AH & AW Reed was still alive and was a crusading teetotaler. But neither Reed nor Whitcombes was interested in publishing fiction. Novels came from somewhere else, largely imported from

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England.

Ten years on in the late 1960s general fiction was still suspect. I remember suggesting to Hodder & Stoughton a book based on the exploits of Mackenzie the sheep-stealer. Notice that I say "Stoat-on" (if you signed up with Hodder & Stoughton in London, you received a memo reminding you how to pronounce the name). But Hodder & Stoughton were also in Auckland, the New Zealand end of the London parent company. Over lunch they expressed themselves interested, excited even, at the prospect of a book about Mackenzie - a biography, as they assumed. No, I said, not a biography. A novel. Their faces fell. They wanted a photograph, not a painting.

It's against this background that I come to the theme of creative non-fiction - a blurring at the edges. Truth-telling but with a difference. Fiction masquerading as fact. Here's the point: fiction as a source of dynamism transforming fact.

Couple of examples. One from a French writer, Jean Echenoz, the other English, Alan Bennett.

Jean Echenoz wrote a book called *Running*, which I first became aware of in Berlin a couple of years ago. It had been translated from the French into German and was

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being extracted in German newspapers. The book, ostensibly non-fiction, was about a real-life figure, Emil Zatopek, the great Czech middle-distance runner who after collecting a string of Olympic gold medals fell foul of totalitarian politics and ended up as a road-sweeper in Prague.

Echenoz writes - this is after Zatopek is let loose and easily wins his first two races:

“People congratulate him, encourage him, reward him with an apple and a slice of bread and butter.”

“An apple and a slice of bread and butter”? Now how does Echenoz know that? He doesn't know. It's an invention, one of many inventions in this non-fiction novella. But with that phrase - *an apple and a slice of bread and butter* - the author has told us more about the climate and the conditions of life in iron-curtain Czechoslovakia than if he'd written an entire encyclopedia of facts.

So here's a case of fiction blurring fact in a way that supersedes literal truth and transforms it.

Second example: Bennett, the playwright. Now my good friend Alan Bennett, whom I have never met (note the blurring please! the distinction between fact and fiction) - Alan Bennett, having as he says been brought up a

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historian, finds it hard in his writing to depart from historical truth. Yet here he is on King George. Bennett wrote a play you'll remember called *The Madness of George III* which was then made into a film. Here he is in an essay, writing about the making of the film in which he brings the King, King George, from Kew to Westminster to confront the Members of Parliament. But the King in life never confronted the MPs in Westminster. Westminster is an invention. Yet, says Bennett, had the director of the film suggested at the outset that he depart from what actually happened, he (Bennett) would have been outraged. But (Bennett goes on), "By the time I was plodding through the third draft, I would have taken the King to Blackpool if I thought it would have helped."

So here are a couple of examples of writers who seem to be saying that fiction is a form of lying that helps us recognise or realise the truth. To put it another way, histories that contain no lies - I'm quoting Anatole France - are "too dreary for perusal".

So what price veracity? Or historical truth? Or, what we tend to worship in New Zealand, the Literal Truth? You can usually tell when an author is under suspicion and is about to be damned. If the reviewer is uncertain or

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bothered - I read a notice in the *Listener* the other day in which the reviewer said: "It's hard to be sure which parts of the book are actually true." You can tell, because the reviewer will stop short of calling the author a liar outright, but say instead with a hint of malice that the author has "embroidered" the truth.

I became aware of straying into this minefield in the early 1970s. I'd published a novel in London and then in New Zealand a book of non-fiction which among other things was critical of the class discrimination and land-grabbing by some of our founding fathers. In Canterbury I was stopped short by a woman whose husband I'd come to interview for the radio with the words, "Of course, you're a novelist. You don't have to tell the truth."

I was stunned at the time, forgetting how long I'd been away and not realising I had broken a tabu, the idea that non-fiction was sacrosanct.

We all remember Truman Capote's book based on the murders of a rural American family, *In Cold Blood*, published in 1965. Capote called it "a non-fiction novel". Truman Capote is supposed to have invented the genre. I'd been working in Sicily with a man who'd written a book which President Kennedy read and which became a source of

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inspiration for Kennedy's founding of the Peace Corps. It was a sociological book based on oral texts which was hailed in London as a literary masterpiece. The book was *The Outlaws of Particico*. The author was a social reformer named Danilo Dolci and he was about ten years ahead of Capote.

What Dolci had done - think of Freud before him, think of Oliver Sacks after him - was to elevate case histories, in Dolci's case oral texts, into literature. And it was working with Dolci in Sicily which changed my life. Without my realising it at the time, he both affected and influenced my approach to writing.

Let's talk a moment about the enrichment by creative writing workshops, begun here by Bill Manhire, and I do mean enrichment. I know the creative writing movement has been criticised. It's been accused in England by Jeanette Winterson who actually teaches creative writing - it's been accused of being an industry. "Factory fiction", she calls it (but I think Jeanette Winterson was thinking more of American writing schools). I find it interesting not so much that it's happening here, but that it's spreading as a source of dynamism in our literary culture. Although it's not that new. Remember John Osborne? *Look back in Anger?*

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John Osborne as a young man took a correspondence course at the British Institute of Fiction Writing Science in the 1940s. But three cheers for what's happening in New Zealand. Three cheers, that is, for originality and variety of style and language, and for subject, though I'm not quite sure about "subject". Some of the books I see by new authors who've graduated from creative writing courses and won prizes, while imaginative and original in conception, raise questions in my mind.

I find myself asking, what is it they have to say?

And what about the ones that got away? Where are they? The ones who left home and got out to broaden their range of experience in order to have something to write *about*? The eccentrics?

Because there's no shortage of help if you want to get out and travel. Here's another change in my lifetime: the boom in scholarships for overseas travel and research that can take a writer from this country just about anywhere on earth. I think the first scholarship of this nature, the Winn-Manson award, known now as the Katherine Mansfield scholarship, was in 1970. I was fortunate to get it for 1973. I remember the reaction of David Campbell the Australian poet - "Nothing like this for writers in

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Aussie," David said to me. Since then awards for travel and residencies abroad have proliferated, as we know. Does it count? And if so, how?

I think it counts in the same way it counts that New Zealand's place in the world is affected by a growing number of Kiwis abroad employed by international agencies. So it counts that New Zealand writers should have a say abroad. Strangely enough, if you get into print outside New Zealand, you're sometimes listened to. I'm always reminded when I'm in Germany of a neighbour, she was a farmer's wife called Mary Scott. Mary wrote novels. I think of Mary when I meet young Germans and notice how they begin to salivate at the mere mention of New Zealand. Their eyes glaze over. To them it's the Last Paradise. Word's got round and if I'm not mistaken this is partly because of invisible influences like Mary Scott. Mary Scott, a farmer's wife living in the King Country in a place called Ngutunui, wrote country stories about New Zealand life which sold in Germany after the war in their millions.

I mention New Zealand's place in the world, because what we're good at, and are sometimes *perceived* at being good at, is identifying with the underdog and the under-

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privileged. In international think tanks and organisations like the United Nations there's a premium put on people who come from colonial situations like ours, who identify with Third World aspirations, while remaining at the same time part of the Anglo-Saxon world. And if this is true of people like Helen Clark and Margaret Shields and Mike Moore, it's also true of writers like, say, Lloyd Jones and Sarah Quigley.

I mention these two younger writers (young from where I stand) - there are others, like Martin Edmond in Sydney, but two will do - because in the New Zealand scheme of writing they are the bloody-minded ones, the eccentrics. They're today's taboo-smashers. They have broken the mould and got out. Without the benefit of an award they might never have done so.

In Lloyd Jones's case it was the Mansfield scholarship to France in 1989 that provided the opportunity. Jones happened to be in Nice when he saw in a local newspaper pictures of the Berlin Wall coming down, he jumped on a train and went to Berlin; this led the following year to Albania, the last country to hold out as communism collapsed across eastern Europe; in Albania Jones visited the political refugee camps and wrote a book which would

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make for him an international reputation.

In the case of Sarah Quigley it was a Creative New Zealand residency to Berlin which opened the way. She stayed on in Berlin and produced, not as was expected a biography of Charles Brasch, but instead a non-fiction novel set in Russia, *The Conductor*. Sarah Quigley now lives in Berlin. Lloyd Jones's Albanian novel, *Biògrafi*, appeared in 1993; Sarah Quigley's in 2011. Thinking about this, about the exhilaration and bonuses that can result from "getting out", I imagine it was for them, as it was once for me - it's a bit like driving down the road in a prewar Morris Minor and discovering you've got an extra gear and can go into overdrive. It's another dimension. I'm talking, in New Zealand terms, of eccentricity, maverick-ism, of taking risks, going against the grain. Even with such a solidly Auckland-based writer as C.K. Stead. I think of Karl Stead's novel *My Name was Judas*, set in Jerusalem, a complete change in subject matter and direction. I think of one of my novels, *Penelope's Island*, set in New Caledonia, the result of my getting mixed up in a civil war. But this is an old hat, forget Stead, forget McNeish. It's a younger generation that is revealing.

Sarah Quigley's book, *The Conductor*, is a novelist's

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response to the 1941 siege of Leningrad. It gives a new perspective to Hitler's plans to starve that city into submission. Lloyd Jones since his book on Albania has written *Mister Pip*, set in another disturbed, equally remote place: Bougainville. Two New Zealand writers focussing on unknown or forgotten corners of experience - classic examples of the new world bringing to the old a hidden view of things which it might have seen for itself, yet didn't.

"Characters migrate", Lloyd Jones says in an epigraph to *Mister Pip*. I think he's using the word migrate in the sense of characters in fiction moving about. Never mind, the idea of migration applies just as much to real characters - people like us, ordinary New Zealanders, who migrate in vast numbers, don't we, and turn up in alien lands in every occupation and trade, except - here's the point - the trade of writing.

The other day I was sent a list of New Zealand expatriates, famous ones. They're all there, the dead, the living, activists, academics, politicians, judges, artists, sportsmen, New Zealanders who've made a mark outside their land of birth in almost every field of human endeavour - more than sixty of them. And only three are writers.

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Which seems to me - when you think of the number of writers in New Zealand who register for the Authors Fund each year (last year it was 1699 writers) - to make Jones and Quigley interesting exceptions.

Let's pause to put this in perspective. If you go back to 1936, to the Spanish Civil War, that moment in history which lit the fuse for the calamitous nature of the rest of the 20th Century - if you go back to Spain 1936 and look for a response from New Zealand writers, guess what? There isn't one.

The only New Zealand writers who wrote or cared about Spain were a handful who'd left home and were already in the neighbourhood so to speak, Robin Hyde, John Mulgan, James Bertram, and Geoffrey Cox. Cox, it's worth noting went to Spain. In 1937 Geoffrey Cox, reporting for the *News Chronicle*, found himself trapped in Madrid and, prefiguring Lloyd Jones's eccentric hit with *Mister Pip* by sixty years, brought off a world scoop in journalism. Hunkered down in Madrid, Cox discovered he had omitted to organise an escape route and made a virtue of the fact by staying on in Madrid and writing a book about it.

But in New Zealand nobody noticed. Nor was this because we were short of writers. The Thirties was a

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heyday for a cast of remarkable writers which included Frank Sargeson, Charles Brasch, O.E. Middleton, James K. Baxter, E.H. McCormick, Allen Curnow, R.A.K. Mason, M.K. Joseph, Denis Glover, A.R.D. Fairburn. Yet with the single exception of Denis Glover, who asked:

*How would you act [he put the question in a poem] if
natives from the islands
Were armed and paid to massacre the people
And run amok and murder all the children
While priests approved the action from a steeple?*

Glover was the only one. None of the others, to quote Glover again, living "at our ease" over here, noticed the Spanish were involved with a "game of death" over there.

To be fair, there was a reason. Sargeson and the others were preoccupied not just with their own writing but, more importantly, they were trying to forge a New Zealand idiom from a cultural wasteland, a vocation little understood at the time. This required - as Owen Marshall has pointed out - "a sense of tenacious determination".

Still, there it was. Local concern versus ideological passion. The local argument won. Our literary response to Spain, to quote Lawrence Jones who is the authority here, was "almost invisible".

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Returning to creative non-fiction: the question arises, does it matter? I think it matters, if only in the field of biography. (Let's exclude literary and sports biographies which are specialised and which we do very well.) In my view the best biographies are written by creative writers - think of the novelist Sebastian Faulks's group biography, *The Fatal Englishman*, think of the novelist Sybille Bedford's two-volume biography of Aldous Huxley. In New Zealand, biographies in the main are written by journalists and historians. There's a difference.

Nabokov says there are three points of view from which a writer can be considered. The writer can be considered as a story-teller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter - and a major writer, according to Nabokov, combines all three. That's especially true, I find, in fiction. Which brings me back once more to the contribution made to non-fiction by my two guinea pigs, Sarah Quigley and Lloyd Jones.

What these two have in common is a certain power of enchantment. Both in essence are poets, besides novelists. They understand the business of the novel which is to interpret and simplify in order to tell a story, but they

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go further and apply the technique of fiction to a real figure. Fiction is neater than fact. It serves to heighten fact but also to make it more comprehensible, even - heaven forbid - more popular. There is this strange notion in some circles that literary and popular values are somehow separate, which is silly. Oh for days of Charles Dickens and the Brontes, when "popular" meant "good"!

It seems to me that fact and fiction are so interwoven in our everyday lives, there is no reason not to celebrate the phenomenon in our literature - and at all levels.

More examples. I think of the Israeli writer Amos Oz and his extraordinary memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, which haunts the imagination from within its cloak of non-fiction. As does the American Lillian Hellman's book of childhood reminiscences, *Pentimento*. And, closer to home, Janet Frame's three-tiered autobiography, particularly the last volume, *The Envoy from Mirror City*. It's story telling. It's *popular* story-telling. All three writers tell a story but they tell it slant; nothing is quite what it seems; what you see - it's as if you are looking through a corner of your eye, and the unexpected happens, you are surprised into enchantment. It's once again the

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imagination working which is another way of saying the writer has rearranged the facts to suit the message and is not always telling the literal truth.

With Janet Frame, the deception is less in the way she handles facts than in what she does with remembered speech or dialogue, it's very subtle. With Hellman the deception is more dangerous, what passes for autobiographical fact is a veneer of candour concealing, in the words of Paul Johnson, "a bottomless morass of mendacity". Paul Johnson also accuses Hellman of plagiarism. Yet as an admirer and reader of Lillian Hellman I have to say it doesn't matter. (I can forgive her the lying, if not the plagiarism.)

Writers' lives seldom measure up to what they write and it doesn't matter, any more than it matters that Amos Oz and Janet Frame, both eccentric stylists, pay less attention to fact in their non-fictional writing than what it is they want to say.

I mentioned a new work by Janet Frame - it's yet another unpublished book about to be released by the Janet Frame Literary Trust, only this time from a publisher in Australia and this time it's satire. It's a book set in Menton entitled *In the Memorial Room*, after the room in the

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south of France in which visiting New Zealand writers were once expected to work. Frame calls it a stone chamber. She compares it to a tomb. She writes, "There was an air of desolation in the room ... and a layer of cold along the bare tiled floor. There was no access to running water or toilet, little light and little warmth."

Fact or fiction? It's fact. Those of us who were there in the early days will recognise the room straight off, with no lavatory and no running water and the noise of trains constantly passing close by. What's interesting is that instead of rearranging the truth to enhance a work of non-fiction, the usual procedure, Frame has done the opposite - she's overlaid the fiction with a hard patina of barely concealed fact. *In the Memorial Room* is a novella, creative non-fiction *in reverse*. It's social satire, it's a send-up, and it's very funny.

Its genesis is a novel Frame wrote many years ago in which she describes the memorial room almost word for word as she does in the coming publication. I suspect she didn't want the novella published in her lifetime because it is just that, a send-up, a satirical portrait of some people who are only thinly disguised. However, I for one am grateful to find in Janet Frame such a timely ally for my

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thesis, even if in reverse. Indeed I'm tempted to describe *In the Memorial Room* as a kiss of death, putting paid to the idea of memoir as merely factual - even, shall I say, as a posthumous suicide note, albeit 37,000 words long.

I don't claim any authority for saying this, but instinct tells me that Janet Frame is a pioneer in the field of creative non-fiction which - exactly one hundred-and-ten years after her mentor Frank Sargeson was born - is finally starting to be recognised as an acceptable genre in this country. It's probably the most interesting development in the New Zealand canon in my lifetime and I like to think it comes in part as a by-product of our creative writing workshops. A harbinger of change.

I've talked about change. About the need to banish earnestness and expand biography, about the need for young writers and journalists in a small society to get out. Obviously you don't always need to visit a place to write about it. But it helps.

So, getting out - I offer it as a challenge, as well as a proposal.

The book has been compared to the wheel. Once invented, it can't be bettered. I happen to believe that the book will never date, despite television which used to

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be Enemy Number One, and has now given way to Enemy Number Two, the digital revolution, which appears to convince sane and intelligent people that direct experience has become irrelevant; all you need do is retire to a cave underground and everything you want will be available at the press of a button. This, as E.M. Forster demonstrated in a story written about a hundred years ago called *The Machine Stops*, is a recipe for reducing the human race to a state of paralysis. Which makes it all the more urgent for young writers to get out and extend their range of direct experience while they can.

I've talked of Lloyd Jones and Sarah Quigley as agents for change - a change that's qualitative. I hope it's here to stay. I'm not sure. So perhaps not three cheers yet, two will do. Two cheers for eccentricity.

Owen Marshall's new book, *The Larnachs* - "a sensitive and discreet reworking of facts" - is an example of this change. Dean Parker's radio play, *Midnight in Moscow* - a slighter exercise but it makes the point - is another example. Creative forays into areas - politics and biography - which major New Zealand writers have previously overlooked, or shied away from. I'm not sure why.

I am optimistic enough to think that in New Zealand we

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are entering an era where it is no longer thought beneath one's dignity to "entertain", or make people laugh, or send up the establishment, or blend literary with popular values, or hurl brickbats at what Joy Cowley on this platform a couple of years ago called "the bleakness" of our national literary genre. Where it is no longer considered a crime for a writer to get a name or someone's birthday wrong in a work of fiction, or in a work of non-fiction to invent a conversation that never happened.

I was once taken to task because in a novel I'd got the date of a church wrong. The reviewer - this is 1970 - spent nearly half the review complaining of the error. I wonder what he'd have said if he'd been confronted with Jane Eyre's dress or Emma Bovary's eyes, both of which change colour unexpectedly in the space of a few pages. Or if he'd been reviewing *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf who said, "All my facts about lighthouses are wrong."

"Of course, you write novels. You don't have to tell the truth," was a refrain I heard more than once after I returned to New Zealand to live. Happily - can you smell the relief on my breath? - happily strictures like this, and the bugbears associated with the "bleakness" Joy Cowley talked about, have begun to wane. And recede. I

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almost said secede. Wouldn't that be nice?

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