

THE JANET FRAME MEMORIAL LECTURE 2024

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Kia ora koutou.

Many thanks to Verb and the Society of Authors for putting this event together. Verb has become a Wellington treasure. The Society of Authors supports every local writer, member or not, for instance working constantly for the Public Lending Right and for copyright fairness. It also promotes fellowship between authors in all sorts of ways. If you're an author but not a member, check it out. Being its President of Honour is a true honour —

Though, being asked to give my opinion on the state of NZ literature, in public, was a shock. But in the 47 years since I was first published, I have made some observations. More recently I've heard a few repeated questions to do with writing in NZ now.

My working title for this was **Friends and Elephants**

Let's see how it turned out.

First I must mention Janet Frame whose name honours this talk. Her long legacy, with continued publication overseas, might be partly because of the way she used the inner lives of her characters.

Many of her friends were writers. One very dear to her was Jacquie Sturm, Māori writer of poetry and short stories. Frame and Sturm were each ground-breakers in NZ writing. An edition of their correspondence is being considered. It will show the value of friendship between artists.

J C Sturm used to be known mainly for being married to James K Baxter. Now it's for the significance of her own work. Many good things take time.

Recently I read 'The Laugh of the Medusa' — a 1975 essay by Hélène Cixous. It's about women breaking into the male-dominated scene. She said: "To write is to give without measurement, without the assurance of something in return. Writing is a birth and a transformation, unhindered by the Old history that came before." It seems to me that her words could be useful to many of we local authors today, no matter our background.

I saw the emergence of women writers in NZ. I saw resistance to it. Now we're accepted as a fact of life. Good things take time.

At the moment, reader appetite globally is for indigenous fiction. To a much greater degree than before, readers want to learn about other cultures — the ravages of colonialism, war and revolution, and domestic drama that can show significant particulars about how a society operates.

No other writing offers what is offered in NZ books. They provide glimpses of what it's like to live in our particular society. Fiction and poetry offer emotional detail. Non-fiction gives verifiable detail of our lives here.

Over my 36 years of being a manuscript assessor, I've seen the rise of Māori, Pasifika, and Asian New Zealand writing. It's been led by poets, women poets especially it seems to me, with a growing number of novels, short fiction and essay collections, genre writing and drama. It is incredibly exciting. As usual with new developments, it has meant a few elephants appear in the room: those issues and questions that have people sidling around trying not to say anything, which eventually becomes ridiculous. I'll be head-on — which in this small country might be equally foolish.

I've chosen a couple of big elephants, a smaller one, and a warthog crept in.

The First Elephant has 3 parts to it: 1 — 'Yes-but, where's the place for Pākehā writers now? We're as good as ever but we can't get published.' 2 —: 'I'm afraid I might be too Asian to be published in NZ,' and — 3 —: I might not be Māori-enough to be published.'

I'll say more on that soon. But Helene Cixous's words could be part of a response: 'To write is to give without measurement, without the assurance of something in return. Writing is a birth and a transformation ...'

The Second Big Elephant is: ‘Who owns stories, and who has a right to use certain sorts of character encompassing race, culture, gender, and so on?’

I feel writers always should have asked themselves this sort of thing anyway, as a matter of authenticity in their work, of avoiding stereotype. I also wonder if those who doubt themselves and their work in these ways could, in the end, be more likely to write something powerful. Feel your fear and write it anyway.

After all — to both Big Elephants — times change, readers change. Part of being a writer is to deal with trends, and shifts in taste.

For some perspective, here’s a glimpse at the history of NZ writing. In 1965 at Otago University there were only two NZ books in the Stage One paper: *Owls Do Cry* (Janet Frame) and *Landfall Country*, anthology of the first 25 years of the literary magazine. Otago didn’t offer a full paper in NZ writing till 1977. Local writing was only beginning to get that kind of official acknowledgement.

Then! In the eighties, women writers began surging out of the kitchen, from behind the secretaries desks, from librarian duties ...

Male voices were raised in outrage. Women kept writing. Local publishing grew.

Local writing for children was growing too. It had begun with Edith Howes, way back in 1916. My mother's battered copy of *The Cradle Ship* was my first account of human reproduction. Did you know — the human baby grows in a silken bag beneath the mother's heart?

Then, on to Margaret Mahy in the 1970s, Joy Cowley in the 80s ... Am I right, that children's writers often leap into the waves of change early? Maybe see potential, have more of an eye on the future ...

In 1997, 27 years ago, Chris and I visited London — he is my husband and partner in a literary advice agency — and was also President of Honour of the Society of Authors in 2018. As agents, we spoke to editors in big publishing houses. One had said if he saw a NZ address on a submitted ms he flung it straight into the rejects.

A more encouraging one said, 'NZ's time will come, but it isn't yet.'

A few months later one of my novels was published in the UK. The interesting thing was it led to a second, of which the publisher said, 'It may be set in NZ but we can take it because the emotional landscape is universal.' Emotional landscape, universal — note that.

In 2006, eighteen years ago, I was desperate for more writing by Māori authors. I'd edited five anthologies of children's stories for Random House, worried each time about the cultural balance of authors and

material. The publisher said the illustrator could address that by a balance in the images. Not ideal — but ...

This particular year I had 230 submissions sorted into four piles under the coffee table: Yes, Possible, Maybe, and Gawd-help-us.

I needed 30 stories. Only 29 fitted the theme. The thirtieth would absolutely have to cover Māori material. I had tried the usual call for submissions. It was January. Summer holidays. There were 2 weeks to deadline.

The only option was to write a piece myself. It had to be from a child's perspective. In the point of view of a European girl, the story focussed on the dramatic event near Nelson in 1863 where Hūria Mātenga helped rescue several men from a shipwreck. At least the collection could have an incident with a Māori woman hero. But it was not an ideal solution. I wouldn't have the same problem today.

By that time Huia Publishers had set up a mentoring system for authors with the Māori Literature Trust. Thank goodness. Assessing novels, I could offer advice from my European background in literature and writing but didn't have the cultural competency to give feedback on aspects of fiction from Te Ao Māori. Different cultures have different approaches to the way to tell stories. If a traditional method is adapted for another audience, what is lost for author, culture and readership? Is anything

gained? The psychology of fiction and ethnicity is an issue far too large for a half hour talk to cover.

The point is, the current wave of Māori writing has been building for decades, in a confluence of currents. Publishing is generally driven by what the marketing people (including booksellers) think readers want. It takes a few adventurers to get a wave moving and for marketers and then the reading public to take notice. It is very hard to find current figures but the number of Māori authors published for the adult market is still nowhere near that of Pākehā. Proportionally, it could be 13%, perhaps more. But my guess is, it will grow fast.

So, to deal with that First Elephant:

If you're a Pākehā writer wondering if there is space for your book now, or a self-doubting non-Pākehā perhaps yet to break into the market, what is your point of difference from already-published work of the last decades?

Before discovering my point of difference, I knew I was still figuring out how the tools work: how to make a sentence flow with its own rhythm and not look and sound as if it had been put together with a screwdriver.

Then I realised it was 'permitted' to write about middle class female life, that the ordinary can be revelatory and I could be funny with it.

Everything changed.

But these new times might need new approaches. To any ‘what about me?’ worries, I wonder if established and new authors could ask themselves: ‘Can I do more with my point of difference?’

So, how do you find it:

A successful local artist told me she thought that three things contribute to our creativity:

One: what you’re born into, like family, birth order, social surroundings.

Two: how you’re brought up, where you went to school, what happened to you as a child.

Three: as an artist, what you create from or with that background.

The first two, you can’t change. The third is up to you. It is often where you find your point of difference — what you want to work with, and your unique take on it. It’s about finding the value of your own experience and your individual angle on ‘life, the universe and everything.’

Whatever may have shaped us as individuals, our role as writers is to describe — to show, to illustrate — the ‘Now’. Writers in all genres do it: non-fiction, thrillers, romance, literary, children’s writers, even writers of historical novels. Inevitably, we show the workings of current values to the audience, for individual readers to make up their own minds, come to

their own insight, make their own decisions about what might need to change. So, no preaching. If we preach, we stuff it up. Show, don't preach.

Big Elephant Number 2, 'who owns stories', I'll address at its most basic, with an anecdote.

At the first evening at my first writing course (which I'd gone to without realising you'd have to write...) I was worried enough to ask: 'But how could I, a woman, dare write about a man? How can I know what a man would think and feel?'

The only man present in the class turned and said, 'Men are people too, you know.'

Frankly, it was a revelation. I continued the course. He never came back.

Yes. Take away politics, geography and gender, and the inner life of a human being is pretty much the same. I mean, any of us has basic needs: food, water and shelter, to be loved and respected.

But these days, we're more aware of race and cultural appropriation. Who can you write about? When do we have to step back?

Well, what does a story need? What is the author's intention and what will be the result?

Anecdote again: I was bailed up by a woman who said, 'There are no gay characters in your novels.' I quailed but said the stories hadn't called for any yet. Actually, there is a gay teenager in one novel. I decided not to out him on the page — it would have moved the dynamic away from where that particular story needed to focus.

These days, let's say for instance, you're a Pākehā novelist writing about a large corporation. Staff at any level would be Māori or Pasifika or Asian, and anywhere in the LGBTQ+ cluster. If they have only bit parts, is that tokenist? If they have bigger roles does — or how does — their cultural or sexual identity play into the story? As a Pākehā hetero author, are you allowed to include them?

And if that's not okay, does it work the other way round? Is someone non-Pākehā allowed to write about European New Zealanders?

Taking 'no' to the limits would mean we only write about characters of our own gender, race and social background. At the extreme, we could all only write memoir.

But since the dawn of story, writers have imagined the lives of others. I'd say the question should be: 'Am I writing all the characters, from bit parts to protagonists, with empathy?' (Even the villains ..) We may travel the

same emotional landscape at least to some degree. But we need to research, examine the characters we're putting on the page, and get appropriate feedback to make sure they're not likely to offend and are authentic in all ways. Know, don't tell.

When I was asked to write *Go Girl, a storybook of epic NZ women*, nine of the women the publisher wanted to include were Māori. I suggested there should be a Māori author for those pieces. They said they'd considered it, but, in the end, wanted the book to have a single author. I made them swear to get at least two Māori editors to examine the text. But I was terrified of stuffing it up. I had lunch with the brilliant Mere Whaanga, Children's Writing Fellow at Otago that year. She helped me straighten my backbone and carry on.

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I'm starting to edge near The Third Elephant. It is a complex creature, and comes out of the current situation with publishing:

First, here's another sequence of waves: our publishing history.

Up to the late 1960s

- NZ writers were published by NZ publishers (Whitcombe and Tombs, AH and AW Reed) and overseas (usually England). Most literary and genre fiction was published overseas
- International publishers had sales and sometimes distribution here, but no publishing ... we were just an export market for them.

From late 1960s through 70s

- International companies began publishing here
- Whitcombe and Tombs stopped publishing
- Other smaller local publishers were established

1980s

- Big mergers overseas led to redundancies in local international publishing —
- ... which led to more smaller local publishers being set up, e.g. Benton Ross, Mallinson Rendel
- VUP (THWUP) got into literary publishing

1990s

- Were a heyday of NZ publishing
-

2000s

- Small publishers from the 80s and 90s began to retire and some were bought out by the multinationals
- The market tightened, because of less reading (better TV) and online retailing
- Small publishers were not being replaced
- Multinationals started to pull out of fiction publishing
- Penguin-Random House merger

2010s

- New small publishers began to appear again
- Multinationals returned to doing NZ fiction ...

Currently: - the biggest publisher, Penguin Random House, has been cutting staff and its adult fiction list.

But: - other NZ companies have begun picking up local fiction again, a lot of them non-Pākehā books.

- and overseas publishers want writing that is diverse and unique to the NZ experience, that tells our stories.

It seems NZ's time has come.

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So. Everyone in publishing knows that building and retaining an audience is crucial.

And here it is: The Third Elephant:

We have many thoroughly attentive publishers and I'm very, very grateful to mine (big and small).

But a question I hear is — Do all local publishers give books the level of editing they need to get them to their best?

Even the most gifted new writer needs editing. So does the established author who thinks they don't need it any more and won't do rewrites. (Have I offended everyone yet?)

If your book is published but should have been edited harder — that's probably for longer — it is not being served well. Nor are you as a writer. Nor is the publisher and booksellers. Nor are readers. Local sales figures seem to be improving right now, but if the overall standard of what's published here isn't as good as it could be, will local readers keep feeling that local writing is second-best to overseas publishing?

Publishing is at its creative best when love of books is more powerful for the publisher than love of the dollar, when a publisher dares take a risk. But a publisher still has to earn enough, which is obvious, and that can mean cutting expenses. Too often, it means trimming editing costs.

Yet, in publishing, editors are — is it too strong to say the neurosurgeons? Psychologists? They are at least the physiotherapists. I'm talking about structural editing, consistent character development and characterisation, continuity, management of all the large and tiny technical elements that often mean a writer ought to do another draft, two more, three ...

Copy editing is the cosmetic surgery: when commas are put in the right place, long paragraphs broken up, and so on. As my mother used to say, it's not much use putting lipstick on a pig. That is cruel. However: if

every level of writing and editing is not done to its best, even the dullest reader is possibly going to be left dissatisfied though inarticulate about why. Now I will have offended everyone.

But the point is, dissatisfied readers may not be encouraged to buy or read another local book. Our market is tiny. Print runs are small and not cost-effective. But they all need the same investment and editing to compete and keep competing on an international stage.

We have the excellent Whitireia Publishing Diploma. I hope the qualified students then work with experienced editors until they've been knee deep in the trade for a long time.

I feel that editing of fiction needs a special sensitivity to story and language. It also needs practitioners to have read Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* a dozen times minimum, and John Gardner's, *The Art of Fiction* — he is great on common errors. Also, to have attended a creative writing course if only to make mistakes themselves, and hear them in the work of other students, mistakes that grate and jar the reader and are left unchecked too often.

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Now, to a topic that is talked about often, so it isn't an elephant: Creative New Zealand Grants.

First — NZ writing generally will suffer if smaller local publishers don't receive grants to help get ground-breaking or experimental work out there.

It might not make big sales. We still need it. It allows readers to gain some understanding of others and of themselves. This is a gradual process — eddies rather than a wave.

Second — Writing grants. I've been lucky and thankful. When I've missed out, it has still been worth while. To write an application makes you think harder about your work. Also, the more often you apply, the more often your name comes in front of people already in the literary scene, assessors and panelists — that can't hurt.

Mind you, when it comes to the bag of grant money, it seems Literature gets the lint left at the bottom, less and less of it, year by year. Money is given to music and screen at the expense of our writing and publishing — even though there's masses of research that shows:

- connections between local content and improved literacy, and
- between reading for pleasure and higher academic achievement.

When you're gloomy, you wonder whether governments of any political flavour don't really want writers to articulate and document the problems faced by a nation. Maybe they don't want a literate populace.

Now I've probably offended both Government and Opposition.

...

But I have come to The Warthog. This one's more fun. It's the use of endorsements on a book cover, those promotional quotes from other writers. At my book group recently, all of a sudden everyone was erupting

about them—I hadn't known 7 usually-peaceful women could make such a ruckus.

Yes: cover endorsements. It's reasonable to have quotes from reviews of any earlier work. But when a new book is fulsomely endorsed by someone, then you read the book and think ... otherwise ... it is also questioning the acumen of the endorser. It's not true criticism or true endorsement. At times it's as if friends are reviewing each other. And that would be a tricky elephant. Anyway, judging by my book group, as far as marketing ploys go endorsements can have an opposite effect.

And in the end, the quality of your book comes down to your skill with language, doesn't it? Whatever the theme, or emotion, or the psychology of the story and characters, it can only be expressed in words on the page. Words that carry a reader along.

Talent is one thing. It's even better linked with an understanding of technique, and respect for your own craft.

When I told a leading editor I hoped to mention style in this talk, she interrupted. 'Danglers!' she cried. 'Please, mention the danglers!' She meant the dangling or misplaced participial clause.

Participles are tricky. They have many problems. It would be another three hour lecture. Look them up online.

The dangler might be the most annoying stylistic writing habit I know. The thing is, a sentence has to make sense: the first part needs to fit with the rest.

Here is an example of a dangler and chronological impossibility. The grammatical construction implies that three actions are taking place at the same time:

“Beginning to run to the kitchen and making his coffee John shrugged into his coat at the gate.”

For a micro-moment the reader’s brain is scrambling to make sense of it: when did he reach the kitchen — did he make his coffee or not — it’s a surprise when he’s at the gate. (Rewrite, please.)

Here’s another dangler: “Floating in the soup, her tongue tasted parsley.”

The most simple, most useful style tip ever might simply be: watch out for words that end in i-n-g, especially when they come at the start of a sentence.

This is no more than a reminder that writing must be precise. Words on the page are our tools.

To sum up: the current state of our literature is a heady brew in a confluence. We’ll see much more of indigenous writing and more coming

out of newer immigrant groups. Our literature needs these stories. As I see it, it's an exciting time for any local author, to try new genres. New techniques. Not just push the envelope, but break the heck out of it. As Hélène Cixous has it: 'Writing is a birth ... a transformation.'

We need to keep publishers busy, editors at work, readers satisfied and hungry for more, so bookshops will thrive and more local publishing companies will spring up. Then literature might begin to get more funding, and more sponsors might fund more sets of book awards.

But good things take time. While we work, it helps to remember the value of friendship between authors and do something about it, across genres and across backgrounds. A sense of community can help us document the times — which, after all, is our job.

Kia kaha