

Janet Frame at 100

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Introduction: Janet Frame at 100

Remembering her childhood in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, the first volume of Janet Frame’s autobiography records that “birthday parties were unknown luxuries in our

home”, with only occasional, isolated presents being exchanged between family members (1990: 119). Frame’s mother, Lottie, dreamed “that each of her daughters [...] should have a white fox fur on her twenty-first birthday” (159) but this ambition was stacked somewhere far out of reach, shelved with other fantasies that included “the Second Coming of Christ” and the lives of “characters in fairy tales” (159).

Later, while enduring long stints in psychiatric hospitals throughout her 20s, Frame recalls that her family’s sparse, painful visits often coincided with her birthday. These brief interviews, which should have marked time passing, instead became emblems of stasis which confirmed “that I was now in hospital ‘for life’” (221). Yet despite this desolate promise, *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985) reappropriates the date as a critical turning point: “after thirty-two days at sea, on the day after my thirty-second birthday, the *Ruahine* berthed at Southampton where the passengers boarded the waiting train to Waterloo Station, London” (1990: 298). If the 28th of August had once been a marker of poverty, frustrated ambition, and incarceration, by 1956 Frame found a pleasing symmetry in escaping thirty-two years in thirty-two days. The date would now announce her belated re-entry into independent adult life, where she looked towards a new existence abroad and her own, flourishing career as a writer.

In contrast with these modest celebrations, the centenary of Frame’s birth in 2024 was marked by events, publications, and new appraisals of her writing. While many of these took place in her home country (including exhibitions of Frame’s papers, literary festival talks, and an academic symposium), Fitzcarraldo Editions’ reissue of Frame’s third novel, *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962), marked an upsurge of international interest in her life and work. In Britain several co-editors of this special issue organized “Janet Frame at 100” at the University of Oxford, while public screenings of Jane Campion’s biopic, *An Angel at My Table* (1990), hosted by Fitzcarraldo, reintroduced Frame’s remarkable life story to new

reading publics. As Catherine Taylor — a presenter at our symposium — writes in *The Guardian*, Frame’s award-winning writing remains “internationally renowned, strikingly original and unclassifiable” (2024). Like many of the contributors to this volume, Lucie Elven in her lengthy piece for the *London Review of Books* finds that Frame’s writing continues to compel her attention. “Frame’s tone glitters”, she comments of the short story “The Linesman”, as “the language of childhood” is “cut and rearranged by a future consciousness.” (2025: 27). Building on these recent developments, this special issue offers a further expansion of Frame studies in and for the twenty-first century. It asks how her rich and varied oeuvre, which includes novels, short stories, poetry, and life writing, might be understood through new methods and perspectives. Many of the articles which follow take their cue from critical developments and public debates that have developed after the turn of the millennium. As a community of international scholars and researchers, we are united by a common curiosity as to how Frame’s writing continues to be reinterpreted in the two decades since her death in 2004. Returning briefly to *The Edge of the Alphabet*, Frame has Toby Withers reflecting on the tendency of language to take on new significance belatedly, well beyond the speaker’s or writer’s control:

words may sometimes act like invisible ink, revealing nothing when they are spoken or written, yet days or years afterward, when they are breathed on or warmed by a flame or the friction of time, they often emerge stark and black with meaning and message, like telegraph wires against a clear sky (2024: 222-223).

In keeping with this journal’s core concern with “literature’s ability to shape, recast, and negotiate the complexities of imperial and postimperial imaginaries” (Ahmed and Pravinchandra 2024: 5) we realize Toby’s promise of finding new meaning in the act of return.

To name just a few of this special issue's concerns, we scrutinize Frame's interest in various forms of cultural nationalism, the legacies of colonial settlement, southern geographies, and the relation of her home country to wider political spheres and literary marketplaces.

Following *The Edge of the Alphabet's* invitation to re-read, we interrogate how twenty-first century concerns with literary translation (Sarabando), the public good of literary study (Dean), the global experiences of diasporic communities (Wilson), and collective panics over national border security (Parker) play out in Frame's writing. By presenting these together we highlight the commonalities and critical divergences of Frame studies today, offering perspectives both from established and up-and-coming scholars. Our work is particularly focussed on generating new readings of Frame for students at all levels, and for researchers concerned with twentieth-century global literatures. As an attempt to expand the still-flourishing field and increasingly diverse field of Frame studies, *Janet Frame at 100* builds on significant edited collections such as Jan Cronin and Simone Drichel's *Frameworks* (2009) and Josephine McQuail's *Janet Frame in Focus* (2018), both of which announce, in Cronin and Drichel's words, that these are "exciting times for Frame studies" (2009: ix). From the late 1960s to the present day, *Literature, Critique and Empire Today* (in its previous incarnation as *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*) published regular reviews of and articles on Frame's writing, which together discuss the full span of her fiction. This special issue follows in the rich vein of previous Frame scholarship, which included early, pioneering publications such as the 1993 special issue of the *Journal for New Zealand Literature* edited by Chris Prentice and Tessa Barringer. What Toby terms the productive "friction of time" has also produced more specialized discussions, including the focus on Frame's short fiction in a 2011 issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (edited by Marta Dvorak and Christine Lorre), along with a "special focus" 2015 edition of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* compiled by Janet Wilson. These offered important opportunities to discuss how Frame's posthumous

publications — which have included both new novels and revised short story collections — have shaped her changing literary afterlives (both Lorre and Wilson contribute new readings for this collection).

Despite these notable collaborative works, however, the majority of modern Frame scholarship has continued to coalesce around single-author monograph studies, with productive post-2004 interventions including Claire Bazin's *Janet Frame* (2011), Cronin's *The Frame Function* (2011) and Patricia Neville's *Janet Frame's World of Books* (2019). While these may have initially discussed Frame as a distinct national figure — what Bazin calls “the New Zealand writer *par excellence*” (2011: 5) — more recently critics have moved to understand how “Frame locates herself within a world-wide community of writers” (Neville 2019: 12). Yet Frame still remains curiously isolated from her literary peers. Patricia Moran is right to note that, despite concerted scholarly efforts to further contextualize her work, “Frame’s writing still has not received the serious attention it deserves” (2018: 1). The result is that she “remains woefully underrepresented in university reading lists and studies of postcolonial, women’s and experimental writing” (2018: 1-2). There is a risk that focusing on Frame’s singular or exceptional qualities, and tracing only the internal referents of her writing, will condemn her work to a state of splendid isolation which becomes synonymous with this continuing form of critical neglect.

This special issue therefore aims to provide materials that encourage scholars to integrate Frame, whether for the first time or as part of a critical reassessment, into their own wide-ranging syllabi or larger research projects on post-1945 literature. As several of our editorial team have published recent comparative studies of Frame among other twentieth-century life writers (Parker 2024) and post-WW2 metafiction (Dean 2021), we here continue our collective efforts to position Frame’s work alongside a variety of her literary peers. As Neville’s recent study on intertextuality demonstrates, there is a need for further, critical

conversations which position Frame in these broader literary contexts. Neither her unique stylistic experiments, nor her notoriously private habits, should impede Frame taking her place amongst experimental authors of the late twentieth century. To this end, this special issue solicits a wide range of international scholarly opinions on Frame's writing, and sustains a particular focus on novels that have been comparatively overlooked by critics, from *The Rainbirds* (1968) and *Daughter Buffalo* (1972) to *The Carpathians* (1988) and *In the Memorial Room* (2013). These gathered articles emphasize the breadth and scope of Frame's abilities as a writer, and the potential for her inclusion in broader literary studies.

This invitation is, by no means, an attempt to override or overlook the challenges that critics have previously faced in order to position Frame in generative critical structures. Frame, more so than any other Aotearoa New Zealand writer, has been subject to what we might call the disciplinary adjective: she has been, over the years, read as a postcolonialist, a social realist, a feminist, more recently an existentialist. Her work has been described as autobiographical, auto-fictional, metacritical, postmodern, and poststructural (this list could easily be expanded). Readers have benefited from such studies, if not always for their specific, disciplinary focus then by virtue of their number and difference. These proliferating approaches raise the possibilities of contrast and consensus appropriate to the riches and resistances of Frame's texts. As others have noted before us, Frame's works are always polyphonic and heteroglot, intertextual and transnational; her writing is so extraordinarily informed and restless that it remains both unsettled and unsettling. But if these texts permit certain intellectual traditions, including postcolonialism, no permanent purchase, they do remind us of the drama of subjection (to subject and to be subjected, to author or be subject to authority, to name or be named) that is essential to the ongoing engagement with postcolonial readings and theories. In another register, Toby Withers might remind us that the "meaning and message" in Frame's arrangements of language are subject to endless revisions and reiterations.

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We open the issue with a trio of essays which expand Mark William's argument — made previously in the pages of this journal — that Frame “was immersed in the life” of her home country and “New Zealand was inescapable for Frame as for no other writer” (2004: 122). Aotearoa New Zealand played a shifting but important role in Frame's writing throughout the full span of her career. Rather than confining Frame to a national context, each of these essays positions her home country within global networks of literary production, translation, and exchange. Beginning with Emma Parker's discussions of the mid-1960s novels *A State of Siege* (1966) and *The Rainbirds* (1968), continuing with Elleke Boehmer's discussions of *Owls Do Cry* (1957) and *Towards Another Summer* (2015), and concluding with Andreia Sarabando's consideration of *The Carpathians* (1988) in translation, each considers what Sarabando calls “the country's colonial history and contemporary policy of state biculturalism”. Whether in Frame's distinct use of New Zealand English, or in her southern orientations, these articles realize Alex Calder's earlier provocation that “there is room for a more grounded reading of the place of imagination and the imagination of place in Frame” (2011: 259).

In more specific terms, Parker's exploration of what has been recently termed the “coastal Gothic”, positions Frame within a literary sub-genre that probes “the limits of nation states and national identity”. Like Janet Wilson's article on “diaspora despair”, Parker reads Frame back within a distinctive, female Pākehā tradition, one most prominently exemplified by writers like Katherine Mansfield and Robin Hyde. If, as Parker suggests, these authors viewed their country's beaches and shorelines as haunted, unsettling places, in this women's writing tradition the coast is where national boundaries become unstable. Here the collective memories of colonial violence rise to the surface and are washed back to shore. By focussing

on watery borders in *A State of Siege* and *The Rainbirds*, Parker insists that Frame's coastal Gothic distorts collective memories of imperial settlement, transforming littoral spaces into sites of terror because these cannot operate as empire's firm frontiers.

Boehmer likewise situates Frame in distinctive southern spaces, in this case not the coastline but rather in the light and landscapes of the South Island. Reading the "book-end" novels, *Owls do Cry* and the posthumously published *Towards Another Summer*, Boehmer explores how Frame developed and honed techniques which at once locate her in antipodean spaces, while questioning and eventually consolidating her identity as a New Zealand writer. At one level, therefore, these readings support the view that Frame's work and perceptions were influenced by the identifiably modernist and mythic approach to South Island representation of New Zealand nationalist poets like Charles Brasch and Allen Curnow. However, at another level, this article responds to the special issue's overarching and animating concerns, by considering Frame alongside other southern writers from around the hemisphere. While her disruptive, exploratory techniques might be considered modernist, and hence as adopted from metropolitan sources, Boehmer shows that Frame's writing repurposed what she had borrowed, launching ways of seeing the far south that were firmly based within the spatial and climatic coordinates of her home.

Frame's translations are often understood metaphorically — as a way of navigating between language and space, for example, or metropole and periphery. In her own article, however, Sarabando takes a new approach, by addressing translation between Portuguese and New Zealand English in the final novel published in Frame's lifetime, *The Carpathians*. As a privileged mode of close reading, Sarabando shows how translation brings into focus questions of cultural specificity, and how different translation strategies place Frame's work, and Aotearoa New Zealand literature more broadly, in a continuum with other texts coming from outside Europe as they have been processed for European consumption. If *The Carpathians*

helps us to understand translation studies, Sarabando shows that the reverse is also true: thinking critically about translation helps us to understand *The Carpathians*. Translation is at the heart of the novel, she notes, both as concept and process, with a host of connections to be made between this and the metaphorical power of the Gravity Star (which makes everything simultaneously absent and present, rendering that which is foreign and inaccessible close and known).

The second cluster of essays within this special edition consider short stories as form, practice, and literary tradition in Frame's writing. These examine the importance of recapitulation (Wright) and the idea of a shared commons (Lorre) in Frame's own short stories, along with her broader connections, via Katherine Mansfield, to a New Zealand tradition of exile and short fiction writing (Wilson). Linking these is not just a focus on a particular literary form, but how Frame marshals its potential to undo established modes of institutional and intellectual authority.

Nicholas Wright begins these inquiries by addressing Frame's use of the short story. By contrast with expert accounts of the short story form, Wright argues in his reading of stories like "The Reservoir" and "You Are Now Entering the Human Heart" that these offer no sense of a lyrical beyond. Instead, they rather take us down into the fallen doxa of the social symbolic, among the relics of authority: the ideas and idioms that her small, Pākehā, and colonial societies ritually repeat. Frame's stories, as Wright illustrates, model an experience of authority — including her own — defined not by prohibition but by permission, or what Adam Phillips has referred to as "unforbidden pleasures" (2015: 48). The perhaps perverse pleasures of authority manifest in her stories's form-defining compulsion to repetition, to echoes, copies, mirroring, and quotations, all of which Wright summarizes in the term recapitulation. Drawing on the work of Michael Clune, Wright then identifies the agent of this formal aspect of Frame's work as something to which her stories express a distinct unease: expertise.

Christine Lorre likewise explores how significant collections such as *Gorse is not People* (2012), also published as *Between My Father and the King* (2012), reveal Frame's strong interest in social relations as understood through the notion of the commons. "The commons" may take on various meanings, referring to the air, water and land that are a natural common good and that all individuals should have fair access to. Lorre traces how, while in a British historical and cultural context the commons refers to social class, as related to property, in Aotearoa New Zealand these concepts also offer tense connections with live concepts in Te Ao Māori. In Frame's world, "the commons" refers to what her characters or narrators recurrently call "treasure", that is the share of joy, linked to forms of inclusion or to belongings that reflect inclusion, that individuals are entitled to as human beings. By pursuing the various meanings of the postcolonial commons in key stories like "Between My Father and the King", Lorre shows how empire shapes what is meant, and called into question, in these texts.

Where Wright and Lorre think in different ways about Frame and the short story, Janet Wilson focuses on Frame's relationship with one particular short story writer — "the godmother of New Zealand literature", Katherine Mansfield. Wilson explores how Frame came into uneasy contact with the ghost of Mansfield when she was awarded the Winn Manson Menton Fellowship in 1974. The Menton award took her to France and the "Memorial Room" of Villa Isola Bella, preserved in commemoration of Mansfield's own stay at the property between 1920 and 1921. Frame would write *In the Memorial Room* during the mid-1970s, but the novel was only published posthumously in 2013. In it the writer in the public space of diaspora is undermined by competing demands and expectations of local expatriates, including those from New Zealand who organize the Fellowship. Frame's protagonist, who remains at odds with these groups and disoriented, descends into a crisis of despair and a creative impasse. Wilson examines the novel's narrative strategies of analysis, denial (of self and others) and repositioning: as the author figure suffers sensory deprivation (being blind, then deaf), writing

becomes a burden, and language a hazard. Through her own readings, Wilson opens up the vexed questions of posthumous fame and the “anxiety of influence”, as among the many reasons for this complex response to the cultural wealth that Mansfield’s writing represents in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

Following these discussions of posthumous publications and short fiction, this special issue closes with a trio of articles considering the questions and problematics of memory in Frame’s writing. Each of these addresses, from distinct critical vantage points, the legacy of critical memory in discussions of Frame’s writing. Thirza Wakefield begins with a renewed reading of the importance of class, and the influence of Frame’s origins in Oamaru (a coastal town in the South Island), upon her life writing and autobiographical fictions. Andrew Dean extends the vexed question of Frame’s auto/biographical legacies by considering how the former Frame scholar, now novelist, Patrick Evans develops his own creative responses to her work. Simone Drichel then closes our discussions with a careful consideration of how reading *The Carpathians* invites us to follow Frame in her critique of knowledge – that grand Western tradition to which, as Drichel argues, Frame pits the ethics of memory.

Wakefield’s particular intervention develops an oft-recognized but little discussed element of Frame’s writing: the relationship between social class and literature, suggesting that this complicates previous discussions of a prescriptive authorial presence in Frame’s writing (Cronin, 2011; Dean, 2021; Evans, 2004). For Wakefield, Frame’s enchantment with language is profoundly connected to class, not only in terms of the effects of “sudden family literacy” on the material home, but in her early investment in oral storytelling as a sociable exercise, one exchanged between members of a community. There emerges, from this reading, an incoherence “between, on the one hand, the writing and reading environment of the working-class home, and, on the other hand, the world of letters Frame would enter in her twenties”. As a result, Frame is drawn to the gap between the spoken and the written word, navigating

between embodied knowledge and the textual artefact. By drawing on Frame's early writings (including 'Beginnings' and *Owls Do Cry*), along with the first volume of her autobiography *To the Is-Land* (1982) Wakefield positions Frame as a working-class writer, one concerned with preserving the orality that defined the domestic environments that shaped her consciousness.

Dean's explores recent critical and creative incorporations of Frame's work, addressing how Evans develops his own creative ways of responding to her literary memory. Evans, Deans shows, believed his criticism had failed to access crucial dimensions of Frame's writing, a contention that emerges from the wider relationship between literary criticism (and Frame criticism especially) and its presumed relationship to the good. Dean explores how Evans has put pressure on that relationship in his fiction, using this dimension of Frame's reception as a means to read those parts of her work that have so far tended not to be addressed by critics. To that end, Dean turns to the unsettling representation of Jews and the Holocaust in *Daughter Buffalo*, suggesting that critics must be willing to confront, rather than to evade or simply celebrate, the rebarbative capabilities of Frame's writing, and the consequences of her presentation of fantasy and darkness. If we struggle to assemble an ethical vision out of this, he argues, then it at least has the benefit of showing the divergent and challenging dimensions of this complex writer's *oeuvre*.

There is a productive critical tension in this focus on the ethical challenges of Frame's writing and the special issue's concluding arguments, offered by Simone Drichel, on the pursuit of non-violence in Frame's final novel *The Carpathians*. For Drichel, Frame reserved the most ambitious project of her career for last: the deconstruction of Western conceptions of truth and knowledge. Taking us on an imaginary return to the origin of Western civilisation as we know it — the Biblical Garden of Eden — Frame introduces us, in her final novel to the myth of the Memory Flower and asks what may have been if, "in the beginning", humans had

gained not knowledge but memory. Behind this question, Drichel suggests, stands a desire for an ethical sociality (developed in the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas) to replace the violent sociality that, for Frame as much as for Levinas, is engendered by the knowing subject. For Drichel, Frame is critical of how knowledge creates an objectifying relationship that allows the knowing subject to “possess” the known other while remaining unaffected by, and therefore indifferent to, that other’s needs. In contrast to knowledge, Frame uses her novel to propose memory as specifically ethical. Memory, as Drichel illustrates, transcends the grasp of the knowing subject and is fundamentally other-directed. As such, she argues that memory, in Frame’s vision, can found an ethical sociality.

In their totality, the individual articles in this special issue offer neither a coherent nor wholly united series of critical approaches to Frame’s writing. Similarly, they do not attempt to deliver a full and comprehensive account of her long writing career. But each contributor to this project offers, from their different critical vantage points, a celebration and reconsideration of Frame’s work in and for a new millennium. We view these critical divergences as opportunities for further, generative scholarship, and perhaps even as reflective of the complex internal contradictions which define many of Frame’s own writings.

An international community of scholars, many of whom are not represented in the articles that follow, made significant contributions to this special issue. In Aotearoa New Zealand we are grateful to Lynley Edmeades, Grace Moore, and Simone Drichel for hosting the symposium “Reading Janet Frame (for) Today” at Otago University in August 2024, at which our entire editorial team presented and developed our ideas in progress. In the UK we acknowledge the great and sadly late poet Fleur Adcock (1934-2024) who strolled casually into our Oxford symposium having agreed to read a clutch of her own, remarkable poems. In addition to reading from her work she shared a series of incisive journal entries, dated from the 1980s, which recorded her first encounter with Frame. Her description of sitting at the older

writer's feet during a public reading, and noting that she had, with typical generosity, gifted away all of her own author's copies, delighted our audience. Fleur was an exceptional poet and a generous interlocuter who will be sorely missed. Other speakers in Oxford including Clare Bogen, David Callahan, Susan Kinnear, Pat Neville, Catherine Taylor, and Delia da Sousa Correa all contributed their own generous insights on Frame's writing and shaped many of the articles which follow. We also gratefully acknowledge those postgraduate students from the universities of Oxford and Bristol who contributed to our conversations, and whose interpretations of Frame will trace out future pathways for reading, thinking, and returning to her writing.

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