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# A Life of Fiction, The Lagoon and Other Stories: Naissance d'une Oeuvre

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## **A Life of Fiction, *The Lagoon and Other Stories*: Naissance d'une Oeuvre Pierre.Nicolas.Boileau.**

Janet Frame's fiction has always remained on the margin of the establishment: the author was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize several times, unsuccessfully, and after critical studies flourished in the 1980s and 1990s, her works seem to have gradually sunk into oblivion, were it not for the passion of a few isolated scholars<sup>1</sup>. The decision to put her first collection of short stories, *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, published in 1951, on the syllabus of the highly prestigious and competitive *agrégation*, the most selective exam that qualifies teachers in France, must therefore be welcomed. As is wont to happen with writers that combine geographical distance (Janet Frame comes from New Zealand) with fictional experimentation<sup>2</sup>, Janet Frame is indeed no longer amongst the favourite authors of the scholarly canon, and the film that contributed to her fame, shortly after the publication of the "readable" three-volume autobiography that she published throughout the 1980s, is probably unknown to most of the students that will take the exam this year. Most of her novels, with the notable exception of that collection of stories, are out of print, or difficult to find. *The Lagoon and Other Stories: Naissance d'une Oeuvre* is therefore very valuable for the research in that field, even if it is primarily published for students. It offers a perceptive synthesis of the critical works on Frame's short fiction, and will therefore be useful to any reader that takes an interest in the New-Zealand writer. Alternating between detailed analyses of the text, which will help those that want to take the *agrégation*, as well as teachers, and thematic analyses of the stories, the book also reflects the two critics' previous works on the various aspects of Janet Frame's fiction and autobiographical writings. Each chapter was written by either Claire Bazin or Alice Braun, as specified, except for the introduction and conclusion. This, unsurprisingly, results in some repetitions (the motif of the hair for example). Furthermore, the choice of either author, at times, seems at odds with what we know of the critical works that these two critics have already produced: for example, it seems that Claire Bazin bases her analysis of "Jan Godfrey" on one of Alice Braun's papers (p.47 *et passim* "Portraits of 'mad women' as artists"), which leaves us wondering why Alice Braun did not write that part herself. On the whole however, and even more so because of the lack of any serious, challenging work on Janet Frame in recent years, both writers share a similar approach to Frame's fiction, a shared perspective which provides us with a consistent, well-researched and articulate insight into Frame's short fiction.

Janet Frame's life is perhaps better known than her works, because it is "extraordinary" as the authors rightfully remind us (19) and therefore it is often the starting-point of critical works on Frame: she was diagnosed with schizophrenia and institutionalised for almost a decade before the diagnosis was invalidated in Great Britain. Her life is linked with literature, and more precisely with this collection of stories, because she was saved from a lobotomy when she carried off a literary prize with *The Lagoon and Other Stories*. The introduction however starts off on a different note: unlike most Frame critics, C. Bazin and A. Braun situate Frame and *The Lagoon* in the literary context of its publication. This is most important, because they manage to show how this collection can be inserted in the literary heritage both of the former ~~British Empire and of the more local, long-standing tradition of New Zealand literature.~~

<sup>1</sup> In recent years, Claire Bazin, Marc Delrez and Maria Wikse are amongst the few who have dedicated more than one article to the New Zealand writer.

<sup>2</sup> V. Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance: The Autobiographies of Simone de Beauvoir, Maya Angelou, Janet Frame and Marguerite Duras*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1997.

Yet, this approach in itself is quite bold because the stories have often been regarded as a form of naïve art that is likely to be discarded. A significant number of stories indeed deal with the realm of childhood and/ or are told from the point of view of a child, which results in a very simple style. Neither C. Bazin nor A. Braun is put off by this and the Romantic poets are evoked, together with Katherine Mansfield and the New Zealand production (Introduction, "Texte et Contexte"). The authors remind us of the difficulty to classify Frame's works, as they seem to belong both to the modernist and post-modern trends. The way they address this issue proves very useful, especially in as much as it introduces us to the history of New Zealand Literature, an area that is often unknown, and enables us to reflect on the relation between western production and New Zealand creation. As the introduction progresses, Janet Frame's life comes to be evoked, especially as it had a great impact on her writing. C. Bazin clearly wants to assert, against most contemporary critics, that it is possible to take the author's life into account without perverting the analysis of her work, nor yielding to the temptation of reading it only through this prism: this aspect of the critical debate is only referred to and could have been exposed more clearly in order for the contemporary reader to understand why this question is such an issue. It is debatable however that the authors should have chosen to use Frame's autobiography in order to provide the readers with an account of Frame's life. Frame's autobiography, as is recalled here indeed, was primarily meant to re-establish some truth about her life, a decision that resulted from Frame's dismay that critics such as P. Evans analysed her works with reference to her life only. Moreover, this account is rather long, perhaps unnecessarily so, since some elements will be told again as the authors analyse the specific stories (for example, the motif of the clothes as a metaphor for the way the individual fits into society is repeated throughout the monograph).

The monograph as a whole seems to seek to establish Frame as a canonical writer, and the authors' emphasis on the motifs of Frame's *oeuvre* are insightful and perceptive, and most surely intriguing as such incursions really tempt the reader into knowing more about it. The detailed analyses of the stories are of great quality and great value because it is often what Frame critics have failed to achieve (A. Braun's analysis of "My Cousins – Who Could Eat Cooked Turnips" is one of those, 57-60; or "Swans", 80-81 *et passim*). Both writers seek to demonstrate that their reading of the stories is based on the texts themselves rather than on moral, psychological or biographical considerations, something which has often plagued the reception of Frame's novels. Most of the stories are therefore tackled, although as is appropriate, the most important ones in terms of what they tell us about Frame's art and aesthetics are given more comprehensive readings.

The first chapter, entitled " 'Memory returns, cripples, there is no relief from its pain': l'expérience asilaire" is written by Claire Bazin. The chapter hinges on the opposition Frame expresses in the following statement that "A trap is also a refuge", a sentence extracted from Frame's autobiography that Bazin sees as a fruitful way of addressing the paradoxical representation of the psychiatric asylum which is given in the stories. From a postcolonial perspective the unreliability of the concept of "home" in Frame's fiction has other implications, but here Bazin wants to argue that the way folly or mental instability is presented in a few stories can only be the result of the tension inherent in the etymological definition of "asylum", both a place of alienation and a refuge. Bazin therefore refers to various stories such as "The Bedjacket", in order to show that Frame's depiction of the asylum has to do with her own experience transformed by the work of the artist. She also analyses "My Father's Best Suit" in a

similar fashion in order to argue that mental illness itself is perceived as the place where one is both protected and entrapped. C. Bazin points to the way the text already contains the seed of future developments and obsessing themes that would recur in Frame's fiction: the punishment of the inmates, the familiarity between patients, nurses and doctors, the comparison to Hell, etc. Patients are assimilated to children (45-47). The analysis of "Jan Godfrey" comes at the end of this chapter, not only because it is one of the most autobiographical stories, but also because it is one of the stories that can be read as a meta-commentary on the fictional process: mad women are presented as creators in Frame's stories. The precise analysis of this text, which is the story of a girl wanting to write a story – a story which enables the author to comment on the process of creation but which seems to portray a schizophrenic character (the narrator seeks to prove the existence of a fictional character with whom we are led to believe she lives) –, reveals how madness is creative. C. Bazin thus concludes on how important the language of marginal and innocent beings can be, as they bear witness to the gestation of fiction. She thus suggests that the children in the stories may have a function akin to that of the mad characters.

The second chapter is "Enfance de l'Art, Art de l'enfance" and was written by A. Braun. It focuses on the children's stories, for there are quite a number of stories in this collection in which the main characters, and narrators are children. The plots are based on their concerns: an outing, the death of their cats, etc. What this section might be criticised for is that the author seems to adopt Frame's vision to the extent that Frame's representation of childhood seems to be based on truth, as if children indeed were the innocent, perceptive and clear-sighted beings that Janet Frame portrays them to be. Yet, this is only fiction or an idiosyncratic vision of the author and children's language has no more bearing on reality than the adults' (62). That being said, A. Braun pays tribute to the complexity of Frame's fiction beyond the apparent simplicity of her style, as when she studies "My cousins – Who Could Eat Turnips" (58-59), which ends on a decision similar to C. Bazin's in which these themes are seen as motifs of Frame's *oeuvre*. This part is well-researched and gives us references to New Zealand culture and intertextual references (76), which are valuable resources, together with great analyses of "Swans" and "The Lagoon" (76-78). The aim is to show that children's vision of life makes them eligible to the function of poets. A. Braun then conclusively proves that Frame's stories are not as easy as they seem.

The third chapter, "The Lonely People", borrows from A. Braun's PhD thesis to analyse the dialectics of power between the centre and the margin, showing how the individual's frail limits of being can be analysed. The themes of the previous chapters are expanded to show how identity is a struggle against the cliché imposed by others and the attempt at finding one's voice. Here again we cannot but praise the agility with which Braun moves from one story to the other, making the collection cohere in a way that readers might have been unable to do.

The last part is written by C. Bazin and is clearly directed at the students preparing for the *agrégation*, as it is a detailed analysis of "My Cousin" and "The Last Story". This enables the author to draw similar conclusions to the one described before and expand on them by showing how they enable to carry out a detailed analysis of the text.

Even if this book is primarily directed at students, we can perhaps wonder why the authors have chosen such classical references as B. Bettelheim, Gina Mercer and Kristeva, or B. Friedan, J. Butler, and Minkowski (1927), especially in as much as these

references are not contextualised: Friedan and Butler belong to different eras of feminist criticism and have their opponents, and Minkowski's study of schizophrenia precedes most of the theories that were to inform Frame's doctors and advisers. This could well be the only fault we could mention for what is otherwise an exciting work on a novelist who has long gone unnoticed. On the whole therefore, this monograph on *The Lagoon and Other Stories* is both a useful tool for students working on Janet Frame and a formidable insight into the potential critical readings and debates that Frame's works could lead to.