

Janet Frame's World of Books

By Patricia Neville. Stuttgart, ibidem-Verlag, 2019.

RRP: US\$40, ISBN: 978-3-8382124-25

Reviewed by Jane Stafford.

The reading habits of an author are always of interest, and in the case of Janet Frame, notoriously protective about her inner life but in her autobiographies fluent and enthusiastic about her life as a reader, such a study seems promising.

Janet Frame's *World of Books* divides its area for investigation into two: Frame's own reading practices, and references to literary texts in her novels, poems and short stories. It does not claim to be exhaustive. Neville writes, 'As Janet Frame was such a voracious reader, any investigation of her extensive reading later in life can only be very selective and will focus on the writers who are most visible in Frame's writing'. Nevertheless, the range of literary reference here is wide, from Arnold to Yeats with much in between: Blake, Rilke, Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman, Sylvia Plath, the Bible, fairy stories, folklore and myth, and of course, again and again, Shakespeare.

However, there are difficulties in both approaches, the author's life as a reader and her use of reading in her writing. Given Frame's autobiographies' emphasis on what she read, especially in the first volume, it is important to ask what can a critical study add? How to avoid merely repeating the catalogue of reading encounters set out by the author herself? As for the second category, the use of literary references, again, Neville is certainly detailed, but more could be made of the material than simply noting, recording and recounting. What James Wood calls 'serious noticing' is called for – and perhaps an overarching argument. What kind of relationship with the reading audience does literary citation imply – one of community, one of superiority? What does it mean to cite an author in a novel or short story? What is the difference between citing a familiar author or quotation and smuggling in an obscure suppressed reference that only the author might be aware of? Within the text, does it matter who is making the reference (the narrator or a character?) and what kind of character, one that the narrator admires or, often in Frame, one that she mocks?

Here as in many places *Janet Frame's World of Books* is constrained by reliance on Frame herself and her autobiographical narrative. Even from the grave, she is a very controlling source, and there are few other sources. Perhaps we should read the autobiographical material more critically and sceptically. For example, Neville, citing the autobiography, recounts the story of Frame's father bringing home a volume of Oscar Wilde's fairy stories 'which he had found in the rubbish'. But in her 1965 essay 'Beginnings' published in *Landfall*, Frame says that he bought the twelve volumes (not just the fairy stories) of Wilde in an auction at Wyndham in a lot 'which included a yellow and black chiming clock, a pair of hedge shears, and a bagpipe record, "The Wee McGregor"'. It was Grimms' *Fairy Tales*, Ernest Dowson's poems and George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* which 'had been found in the town rubbish dump ... occasional pages stiffened and curled as if they had been exposed to the weather which they had been'. But – another but – further on in *To the Is-land*, there is an account of Frame borrowing a volume of Grimms' stories from her friend Poppy and having to return it when Poppy's precocious knowledge of sex made Frame's parents ban the friendship.

So, should more be done with that story (books, rubbish dump) than simply offering it as evidence that Frame and her sisters read fairy stories? How usual was it to source reading from

the dump, for heaven's sake? Is Frame expecting us to read this story, or stories, in a literal manner? Or is she playing, teasing, manipulating us with this account of dump reading matter, where metaphor looms large? One thinks of the potency of the image of the dump in other contexts – Frame's brother Bruddie, rejected by the other children, '[overcoming] this exclusion by accumulating power with goods salvaged from the Coquet Street rubbish dump, goods that we needed for our games and plays'; or the magic and terror of the dump in *Owls Do Cry*: 'the stink and filth of it, with the toi-toi like a fringe of shawl ... dead logs and twisted iron ... smoky with the smell of petrol and kerosene and rubber and stifled rages', the man guarding it shouting 'Get away you kids or you'll be blown up, or burned'.

To read Frame's fiction has always been to be forced into unaccountable and uncomfortable reading positions – why should the autobiographies and their account of Frame's education as a reader be any different? In *To the Is-land*, Frame writes about using her school poetry anthology after her sister Myrtle's death and feeling that 'the poets ...were writing the story of my feelings'. What is the tone here – faintly satirical, undercutting the jejune line that she valued and lived by poetry? It's never a good idea to read Frame simplistically. What we get in the autobiographies is the adult author Frame's presentation of her young self, and it is often self-mocking. And her relationship with capital C Culture is not straightforward – as suggested by the description of the socially anxious Chicks in *Owls Do Cry* where culture and social climbing are linked, or Malfred in *State of Siege* with her tired and unproductive reading of Keats and co – and her envy of her pupil who can read and respond to New Zealand myths and imagery. As Frame warns us at the beginning of *To the Is-land*, her record is a 'mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction [is] always towards the Third Place, where the starting point is myth'.

If we want to struggle free of Frame's narrative, her highly curated version of herself, a consideration of wider contexts – historical, cultural, critical – might help. There is a tendency in works of biographical criticism such as *Janet Frame's World of Books* to see Frame as a unique genius, decontextualised from her historical moment, her local geography, or her class and its manifestations at home and school. But what was reading context for someone in Frame's class at that time? How representative were Frame and her family in this regard? How representative was she of a type: the Depression-era brainy working-class girl without actual or cultural capital? If we read Frame in the context of, for example, provincial class hierarchies and cultures, the history of New Zealand state education, the manner in which English canonical literature operated ideologically in the state school curriculum, or a wider New Zealand history of reading – and there is material available – would her 'world of books' seem both less unique and more generally significant?

Neville gives us the familiar stories sourced from the autobiographies: of infant publication in newspapers, 'Dot's Little Folk', the encouragement of her literary but eccentric mother, and the cultural world of school where social embarrassment and literary enlightenment went hand in hand. What is surprising is that there is little here that suggests Frame or the sources she encountered were in any way unusual or subversive. Instead, the overwhelming impression is that of an autodidact's deferential respect for Great Literature. Despite the experimentation of her novels, Frame's reading world presented here is conservative and middle-brow – the English literary canon as delivered by the worthy women graduates who taught at Waitaki Girls, reinforced by Otago University's English Department's timid and predictable syllabus: 'Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Yeats, Eliot and the King James Bible', English and rather elderly New Zealand anthologies, all treated by Frame with Arnoldian reverence.

The second and obvious focus for a discussion of Frame's world of books is the operation of influence, the traces of other writers and writing in her works. Neville finds this difficult, as have others. In his 2000 biography *Wresting with the Angel*, Michael King explains that he was constrained by Frame's stipulation that 'it not be a critical biography (an analysis of her writing)'. *Janet Frame's World of Books* notes literary friendships – Frank Sargeson, Ruth Dallas, Jacquie Sturm – and describes Frame's enthusiasm for the anthologies of New Zealand poetry that appeared in 1940s and 50s. This could be pushed further. Indeed, a quote from Sargeson – 'a curious sight is to see Janet in company with Jacquie Baxter, they are like two superior peasant women who communicate by having nothing to say to each other meaning they get on famously' – is offered without comment even though it surely raises all kinds of questions about the place of (the very few) women writers in the literary world of the time. As well as showing Sargeson to be a patronising git. Neville has a tantalising account of Frame's interest in the French roman nouveau and especially the writer Nathalie Sarraute but this is not developed otherwise. A chapter on Sylvia Plath and Intensive Care assumes a knowledge of Plath on Frame's part which could be more firmly substantiated.

One tantalising piece of evidence of contextualised reading, which Neville doesn't develop, is in a copy of Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness: When is a Woman Mad and Who Decides* (1972), given by Frame to Philip Wilson and inscribed 'something romantic from Janet'. This is intriguing. In a 1975 review, Shoshana Felman described Chesler's work as 'laced with the voices of women speaking in the first person, literary excerpts from the novels and autobiographies of woman writers, and word-for-word interviews with female psychiatric patients'. Felman states that 'the book derives and disputes a "female psychology" conditioned by an oppressive and patriarchal male culture. "It is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must 'adjust' to and accept the behavioral norms for her sex even though these kinds of behavior are generally regarded as less socially desirable ... The ethic of mental health is masculine in our culture"'. It is difficult not to apply such judgments to Frame's life and work. But did Frame give *Women and Madness* to Wilson because she liked it and wanted him to read it – or does it mean that she didn't like it (or hadn't read it) and wanted to get rid of it? What did she think of the argument, and could it have influenced the way she presented her own illnesses, in her fiction and in her autobiography? Why did she give the book to Wilson in particular? Why the term 'romantic'? Chesler's work was widely read in the 1970s and at the very least Frame encountering it is suggestive of wider book worlds than that of Shakespeare etc.

Here and elsewhere, it would be a great help to the literary contextualising of Frame's works if we could read her letters alongside the fiction, poetry and autobiographies. What a difference a collection such as Sarah Shieff's editions of Frank Sargeson and Denis Glover would make. When will a full scholarly critical edition of Frame's correspondence appear? Is it projected or planned? All we have now are heavily curated scraps. This forces potentially significant endeavours such as *Janet Frame's World of Books* back on Frame's crafted autobiographical accounts, on the few and limited correspondences (with Sheila Nautch, with Bill Brown, and 'in conversation' with Charles Brasch, whatever that means), and, for Neville, a reliance, *faux de mieux*, on convoluted citations such as 'in her letter to [Peter] Dawson, cited by Michael King ...' It is not good enough.