

Wrestling with the Angel: a Life of Janet Frame

Reviewed by Jan Cronin

Wrestling with the Angel: a Life of Janet Frame

Michael King

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At this year's readers' and writers' week in Wellington, Michael King found himself in a precarious position. Due to speak about his forthcoming biography of Janet Frame, he received a phone call from his subject which requested that he substitute one Frame for another; he was licensed to speak about the process of writing biography, but not about the book's content. Since the publication of *Wrestling with the Angel* it has become apparent that there are those who perceive the biography as an exercise in similar discretionary tactics, and believe that like the protagonists of so many of her novels, Frame has succeeded in pulling off yet another virtuoso act of ventriloquism.¹ The validity of these perceptions hinges on the relationship between autobiography and biography within King's text and the status of the two stipulations outlined in the author's note.

There is something disconcerting in the notion of a biography which seamlessly interweaves large extracts from the subject's autobiographies with its own copy without a self-conscious commentary. While King often exploits the discrepancies between the accounts of various meetings contained in Frame's letters and the impressions of other parties, only once is any doubt cast on the authenticity of the autobiographical recollection, and this is from a purely historical perspective rather than one that takes account of authorial agency.² Yet it seems to me that at such moments King is reaffirming his commitment to life rather than art and history as opposed to literary criticism, even if this demands a somewhat unhealthy trust of textuality. This is especially pertinent given that Frame's second stipulation is that "it not be a critical biography (an analysis of her writing)". This has been seen as a cunning attempt to consolidate a new form of literary subjectivity for Frame, that of a character in a stable and transparent narrative. Given that Frame's life has been subject to the grossest of misinterpretations both by the New

¹ Such views were aired recently by Patrick Evans in a talk entitled "Desperately Seeking Janet".

² In a footnote, King alerts the reader to the fact that Frame's relationship with Irishman Patrick Reilly was resumed by letter rather than by a chance meeting as recounted in the autobiographies.

Zealand health system and overzealous academics who have insisted on reading her fiction as autobiography, it seems entirely understandable that the division between history and literary criticism should be imperative. Far from establishing King at the helm of a reductive historicist process, this presents a tricky problem: how to attempt a 'complete' picture of a subject without delving into that which the biography claims is integral to her being. King's strategy is to deploy a healthy selection of reviews of each book, and by addressing the prophetic relationship between her fiction and life, cleverly neutralise the biographically inclined readings.

The repudiation of the madness myth is doubtlessly a prime motivation in the authorisation of the biography, just as it was in the genesis of the autobiographies. Much has been made of the stipulation that King "not quote verbatim from...interviews with her".³ Certainly the absence of these quotations serves to naturalise the process, erasing the medium of memory, but to see this as blatant manipulation seems deeply unfair. Surely Frame has a right to publicly 'set the record straight' with regard to her sanity. That this requires the maintenance of an aura of objectivity does not necessarily render the account any less valid. To this end Michael King fulfils the role of R. H. Crawley, the psychiatrist who issued testimonials to Frame's sanity to various sceptical parties. More than anything it seems the problem here is a general reluctance to allow the demythologising of Janet Frame. The same readers/critics who demand access to the 'true Janet Frame' are determined to keep her shrouded in mystery, genius and madness.

The crucial factor then is the extent to which King is aware of these tensions. Having sustained a uniformly historicist narrative for 500 pages, the final twenty evince a shift in approach. For the first time King comments on the fraught status of the autobiographies, asserting that they and the subsequent film "provided new texts on which commentators, whose ranks included some of the would-be biographers could base speculations on her motives, on whether or not she had been truthful, on whether she was intent of concealing as much as she revealed and on the supposed relationship between her life and art." He cannot fail to realise that his efforts are on a continuum with those same autobiographies and as such constitute fresh material for deconstruction. His conclusion, while problematic, deftly asserts the inevitability of this process: "she conveyed a vivid sense that reality itself is a fiction and one's grasp on it no more than preposterous pretence and pretension." The question now is whether this statement significantly undermines the biography as a whole or whether it contains and hence

³ Patrick Evans has asserted that the purpose of the biography was to normalise an abnormal life.

neutralises the cynical view. To have issued it at the start of the biography would have been to compromise his project, but coming as it does at the end, it suggests that the text was written with a sense of the ironies involved in producing the biography of a woman whose philosophies of truth and reality defy such generic distinctions. This paradox is present in the title "a life of Janet Frame", and explains the necessity of the avoidance of the literary criticism which would doubtlessly draw attention to the false consciousness of the biography. However this degree of false consciousness is ultimately what facilitates a meticulously researched, well written and genuinely satisfying account of a remarkable life. Perhaps the only flaw in the book lies in the very last line which depicts Frame sitting in front of her computer where, via the internet, "she rediscovers the world and engages with it, without the burden of social contact". This concluding image of Janet Frame seems to reinstate the notions which the book is so dedicated to dispelling, and demonstrates the potency of the mythology of Frame which will certainly generate less accomplished biographies in the years to come.