

## **"A Straight Steal": "An Affair of the Heart" and Maurice Gee's *The Fat Man*.**

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"An Affair of the Heart," first published in 1936 and since then frequently anthologised, is one of New Zealand's best-loved stories. It made a significant contribution to the reputation of its author, Frank Sargeson, who following Katherine Mansfield's death was considered to be New Zealand's most important writer of short fiction. Narrated by the middle-aged Freddy Coleman, the story tells how old Mrs Crawley, bent double from years of poverty and toil, sits night after night in the local shelter shed. She is waiting for the last bus and the return of her long-absent son, Joe, who never returns. Coleman wonders if Joe is in gaol or has escaped to America. He recalls how even during his own (and Joe's) childhood, Mrs Crawley was a pitiful figure who had been abandoned by her husband. Clad in a man's old hat and coat, she would scavenge for pipis, mussels, and kauri gum on the beach near her tumble down bach. She had three daughters as well as Joe, but Joe (whom she nursed past infancy) was her favorite child.

*The Fat Man* was first published in 1994. It is one of ten novels for children by distinguished New Zealand novelist, Maurice Gee, who combines writing for children with writing for adults. *The Fat Man* went on to receive several awards and international acclaim, and because of its violent subject matter it was also the subject of much debate. However, in spite of the attention given to this novel, a connection to the Sargeson story has gone unnoticed. As Gee himself has pointed out in a recent interview, Sargeson's story is the source of his portrayal in *The Fat Man* of old Mrs Muskie, the widowed mother of Herbert (the eponymous "fat man"). The reader learns how every weekday she walks into town, spends a quarter hour shopping, and waits for ten minutes on the railway station platform for the arrival of the train from Auckland – only (after scanning the passengers) to go home again. She dreams always of the return of Herbert who thirteen years earlier went to America and became a gangster. Herbert Muskie has two sisters and a brother, but during childhood it was he who was his mother's favorite, a fact that is underlined after her death when he asks his wife Bette to sing "Old Fashioned Mother" (112):

How well I remember in years long gone by,  
Together we sat, she and I,

More like two old sweethearts than mother and son,  
In days long since gone with a sigh . . .

Gee has described his borrowing from Sargeson as "a straight steal", and the similarities between his story of Mrs Muskie and Sargeson's "An Affair of the Heart" are indeed obvious. Each mother seeks to embellish an empty existence by imagining her son's return. Particularly interesting is the way that both Sargeson and Gee depict a lover-like relationship between mother and son and, through the use of a first person narrator who is intrusive yet not directly engaged in the action, create a narrative distance between it and the reader.

Further similarities are also interesting. Although Sargeson leaves the plot details uncertain whilst Gee's narrator reveals far more, each son is obviously of dubious repute. Joe has a possibly criminal career whilst Herbert is a thief and worse. He returns home secretly and steals his mother's jewels. He then stages for his mother a heroic return by train before going on to murder her. At the same time, Sargeson's narrator is a fully defined character who is fallible whilst Gee's narrator is enigmatic and authoritative, but both narrators modify the stories.

To explain: Sargeson's Coleman is a character in the story. Driven by personal curiosity, he learns from the bus-driver that Joe has not visited his mother for years. The knowledge causes him to realise that his own "affairs of the heart" have been "petty and mean" but this is an insight that is then undercut by his contempt for the young people around him. Coleman's final reflection that Mrs Crawley's love for her son is "a terrible thing" and also "so beautiful" (51) therefore seems to be an attempt to gain self importance through vicariously participating in the tragedy. Ironically it emphasises by contrast his detachment and real pettiness, and how very tragic Mrs Crawley's life has been.

Gee's narrator has an intimate knowledge of the thoughts and feelings of Colin (the child protagonist and hero of the story). This suggests that the narrator could be an older version of Colin and perhaps also a version of Gee. Indeed, Gee has frequently acknowledged the use in his writing for children of autobiographical material and has drawn extensively on his boyhood in Henderson, Auckland, for settings, characters, and events. However, the narrator refers to Colin in the third person and thus seems enigmatic and more authoritative. The narrator is therefore able to distance juvenile readers from the unpleasant subject matter by stepping in and reassuring them that this is after all just a story: "One more chapter will finish our story. A night and a day and it was over – Colin, Verna, Lauie and the rest were free of the fat

man. He nearly dragged them under but not quite” (119). As in the Sargeson story, the distance between the narrator and the “affair” between mother and son emphasises the tragedy of their lives.

Significantly, when Gee's narrator (like Coleman) learns from another character of the son's staged return (a non-return in the Sargeson version), that other character turns out to be a "Mrs Sargent." Given Gee's debt to Sargeson at this very point, the name seems to be a coded acknowledgement. Indeed, Mrs Sargent may be a version of Sargeson – Certainly she is a storyteller, although her sentimentality contrasts to Sargeson, the clear-sighted author. Also interesting is the fact that where Gee draws on Sargeson and attributes the material to a character that brings him closer to Sargeson's method, he does not move out. We are still aware of the self-conscious narrator who is registering that this is a story (74):

It was, Mrs Sargent said, the loveliest thing she'd ever seen, it made her cry. It went like this:

Herbert Muskie and Grandpa Potter drove out to Sunnyvale Station – just a little hut it was on the near side of the creek, with Sunnyvale painted over the door – and Herbert Muskie waited there while Grandpa drove the Buick back to Loomis. Mrs Muskie came into town not long after that, keeping to her timetable – grocer, butcher, station – and when the three o'clock train pulled in from Auckland she stood up as she always did and watched to see who stepped down from the carriages. When it was Herbert Muskie, grinning, easy, with a cigarette in his mouth and his hat tipped on the back of his head, she let out a shriek. She almost fell over – did a sideways stagger and held herself up against a goods trolley standing there.

Herbert Muskie ground his cigarette out with the toe of this shoe and went up to her and said, 'Here I am, Mum. I've come home,' and he took her in his arms (Mrs Sargent wipes her eye) and kissed her so her hat tipped backwards at the same angle as his. Then he led her down the ramp to his waiting car.

Sargeson and Gee writing fifty-eight years apart, with one acknowledging a debt to the other, have concerns that are the same – the human condition within the setting of the Depression in New Zealand. It is their skilful handling of what could be perceived as dubious subject matter that makes both stories deeply moving.

*WORKS CITED*

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