

Address at the launch of *I Have What I Gave*, August 28, 1992.

Elizabeth Alley

[Editorial note: the material that follows is reproduced from an address given by Elizabeth Alley at the launch of the first edition of *I Have What I Gave* — Judith Dell Panny's study of Janet Frame's fiction. That book has subsequently been revised and the second edition was published in 2002. As the opening sentences make clear, Elizabeth Alley was a victim of inclement weather, and the address had to be delivered *in absentia*. What makes it of particular interest, though, and accounts for its reproduction here, is its inclusion of the text of a letter from Janet Frame, in which Frame recalls her sometimes 'bruising encounters' with critics, and records by contrast the 'amazed gratitude' with which she read and responded to this particular account of her work.]

Hello everyone. This is Elizabeth Alley speaking to you from Wellington. It's certainly the most bizarre book launch that I've ever not attended. I'm really sorry that the elements have beaten me and that I'm marooned in Wellington, but I'm pleased that technology has allowed the event to go ahead as planned, thanks to the co-operation of my good Dunedin colleague John Clark, who has undertaken to get this message to you tonight. I hope that you will have a good evening and a successful book launch. I wish I were there to share it with you. I hope your numbers have not been too sadly diminished.

I was both delighted and disconcerted to be asked by Dell Panny and Daphne Brasell to launch Dell's book on the fiction of Janet Frame -- delighted because it's always a pleasure to welcome a new book into the world, especially when it's one that illuminates and celebrates the work of such a writer as Frame, but a little disconcerted, too, at the thought of speaking to an audience that includes so many scholars and critics and analysts of Frame's work, people whose response to her fiction has differed somewhat from my much more pragmatic journalistic one.

I thought a personal message from Janet to bring to this occasion might be in order. When I asked her what she felt about the fact of a weekend conference on her work, she answered, "Incredible!" and then added, and don't hold your breath, "Tell them I wish everyone well."

A few months ago I had the honour to receive on her behalf her honorary degree from the University of Waikato. When, in attempting to formulate my

own response, I asked her what she'd have said, had she been there at the ceremony, her reply was, "Oh just, 'Thank you very much'." For a writer for whom words are the instruments of magic, she's certainly got the spare response down to a fine art, and largely, as we all know, reserves the magic for the written word.

Again, when I spoke with her about the real reason for this gathering, to launch Dell Panny's book *I Have What I Gave*, her reply on the telephone was similarly monosyllabic, but in the mail a day or so later came a typically thoughtful note, which I'd like to read to you. She says:

"I've often felt so misunderstood. I am always so amazed when people write from the receiving end of my work and say what they do. Some comments are pertinent, but many are strange, and any academic discussion seems like another world to me, being on the originating end. I have not always read essays on my writing. Often I've declined with fury or perplexity or a sense of disbelief or an unwillingness to accept what I know is the truth.

Those early bruising encounters with the critics who described *Scented Gardens for the Blind* as "unreadable in the worst sense" or, on the other hand, "a work of genius", were both unnecessarily condemning and fulsome. But I have grown up since then, and, over the years, there have been more perceptive, penetrating reviews, with, in some cases, understanding and imagination beyond anything I might ever have hoped to have.

Judith Dell Panny's book, *I Have What I Gave*, [she goes on] as a result of extensive reading and scholarship, arouses in me a feeling of amazed gratitude. So often the author complains, with justification, that her books are not even properly read by the critic, but Dell's book is different. It has a new and original perspective and approaches the work from angles that I hope will help others to find their way through my fiction in ways that are rewarding and enjoyable. That is really, ultimately all I want.

I thank Dell for noting that, far from being a random explosion or outburst, my books are the result of patterning and purpose. Patterns are my absorption - and my everlasting love and hate of and struggle with the words that compose the pattern. Many thanks to anyone who reads my writing and especially to Dell for spending time and brain and insight in thinking and writing her thoughts and opinions."

And that's the end of her letter.

It seems to me that one of the crosses that Janet Frame has had to bear and has perhaps even chosen to carry, is what might be seen as the gaps that she feels exist between writer and critic and reader. The extent of the

gaps, of course, depends on one's own approach to the work. There's little if any dissent or confusion about the magic of the language, "the language that is all we have for the delicacy and truth of telling, the words that are the sole heroes and heroines of fiction", to quote from *Living in the Maniototo*.

But then there is also the personal archaeology and the journeys of self discovery, the chilling truth of her logic, her imaginative fantasy places and worlds of myth and modern day reality, the perilously fragile dividing line she draws between the worlds of sanity and "the bent hairpins of unreason", the dark recesses of the mind and the creative but shaded probings into the labyrinths of memory, which few of us are privileged to understand, except in our own unique, but often ill devised ways. These are the gaps, which I think Dell Panny's book will help to close.

What Frame has described as her kind of inward sun, that is, the bright imaginary light by which she sees things, has been further illuminated for us, her readers, by Dell's meticulous scholarship, her painstaking and infinitely caring reading of all of Janet Frame's major fiction, from *Owls Do Cry* to *The Carpathians*. A longish short story, "Snowman, Snowman" about the nature of place, is tucked in alongside. And it is her approach to the work through the patternings she finds within it, the patternings which are of such supreme importance to Frame, that brings us beyond an exploration of the more obscure aspects of the work to find ourselves closer to that sometimes elusive centre.

Dell shows us that the weight of the centre, which is imperative to the ultimate understanding of Janet Frame, is inextricably linked to allegory, that 'speaking in other terms' to which Janet Frame has given a new and perhaps contemporaneous meaning. She has made it once more, though she'd abhor the term, fashionable or perhaps acceptable. In her skilful and detailed examination of each of the novels, Dell Panny reveals the clues that link the patterns of plot, situation, character or setting to either an earlier book or to myth, or to a documented sequence of events or an established idea.

In that all allegory involves concealment, Dell uncovers as many clues as are necessary to expose the irony and the humour, but still leaves sufficient space for each reader to make our own connections between images and ideas and to draw our own conclusions. She focuses our attention on the web-like network of complex motivations underlying the surface of the fiction. She adds substance to the shadows and to dream and light in ways that explain their recurrence as motifs in the fiction and shows how they fit into the picture of allegorical patterning.

This, for me, is the ultimate excitement of this book. It is a work full of ideas, which is appropriate for an exploration of the work of a novelist who has done perhaps more than any other to define the novel as a forum for

ideas, that one commodity, dare I say, that remains elusive to some of our fiction writers.

Dell's work seduces her readers to a further closer reading of the Frame fiction with the purpose of plumbing the subtleties of the eternal patterns of allegory, which armed with the new knowledge her scholarship affords us will be an infinitely rewarding and enriching experience.

So I am of course really pleased and feel very privileged to be able to commend this book to you, albeit from afar. I'm especially pleased to be able to welcome a book that I know Janet Frame is personally so happy with. *I Have What I Gave* is a remarkable contribution to our literature and one that will hold its head high among all that has and will continue to be written about Janet Frame. I have warm pleasure in declaring it alive and well and truly in this world.