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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/5403>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.5403

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2012

Number of pages: 45-53

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Alice Braun, “The enormous burden upon the I to tell all”: Metafiction as Unveiling in Janet Frame’s *Living in the Maniototo*, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 35.1 | 2012, Online since 18 April 2021, connection on 23 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/5403> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5403>

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“The enormous burden upon the I to tell all”: Metafiction as Unveiling in Janet Frame’s *Living in the Maniototo*

Janet Frame’s 1979 novel *Living in the Maniototo*, which features an artist not unlike Frame herself as its main character, raises questions about the representation of the self in a work of fiction and the relationship between metafiction and autobiography. What does it mean for an artist to say ‘I’? Does speaking in the first person require one to be truthful?

Transparency is a problematic notion in Frame’s work, as it is often linked with the question of truth and truth-telling. In her novels, which are all concerned with the experience of marginality and exclusion, telling the truth is represented as a normalising imperative, an injunction to confess that is addressed to those who do not conform and stray instead from the rules of accepted behaviour. In the novels that deal with Frame’s experiences in psychiatric hospitals, the notion of truth is associated not only with the disciplinary imperative of not telling lies,¹ but also with the writer’s responsibility to report what she has seen and to restore some form of dignity to her fellow sufferers, the “faces in the water” that can be beheld on the other side of the dividing line between reason and madness.² Other novels by Frame, such as *Owls Do Cry* or *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, feature characters who are summoned to account for their actions or whose privacy is intruded upon in the name of conformity, as if difference could be normalised through explanation. In her later novels, such as *A State of Siege* or *The Carpathians*, Frame questions the cannibalistic impulse for knowledge that drove the enterprise of colonisation, and persists today in the practice of modern-day tourism, as a global commodification of entire cultures. Transparency is therefore exposed as a destructive imperative that rests upon the rationalistic dualism which opposes clarity, rationality and scientific truth – notions traditionally valued as positive – to their negative pendants, such as opacity, secrecy, and even mendacity. Yet Frame deconstructs and even short-circuits these binary representations by confronting them with the logic of fiction which draws a line of flight across the divide between truth and lie. Is the act of writing fiction the same as the act of telling lies? Or does writing mean creating another truth altogether?

Frame herself was a victim of the tyranny of transparency, which partly prompted her to write her three-volume autobiography, a response, by her own admission, to the intense public scrutiny to which she was subjected throughout her career, and which was characterised by a particular and sometimes unhealthy focus on her years spent in psychiatric hospitals. Frame described her autobiographical project as a re-establishment of the truth, a way of regaining control over the representations of her self: “my

1. Michel Foucault shows that the modern-age psychiatric treatment is based on the re-establishment of truth, equated with reason, over the lies of madness (132-3).

2. See an extract from *Faces in the Water*: “Listening to her, one experienced a deep uneasiness as of having avoided an urgent responsibility, like someone who, walking at night along the banks of a stream, catches a glimpse in the water of a white face or a moving limb and turns quickly away, refusing to help or to search for help. We all see the faces in the water. We smother our memory of them, even our belief in their reality, and become calm people of the world; we can neither forget nor help them. Sometimes by a trick of circumstances or dream or a hostile neighbourhood of light we see our own face” (150).

say,” as she famously claimed in an interview (Gordon & Harold 114). Although this appears to be in blatant contrast with her usual mistrust of truth imperatives, she explains in another interview:

I am always in fictional mode, and autobiography is found fiction. I look at everything from the point of view of fiction, and so it wasn't a change to be writing autobiography except the autobiography was more restrictive because it was based in [sic] fact, and I wanted to make an honest record of my life. (Gordon & Harold 137)

Frame here dispels any kind of illusion as to the possibility of writing a transparent autobiography in the tradition of Rousseau, who claimed in the introduction to *Les Confessions* that his intention was to write a purely honest and uncorrupted account of his life.³ Frame does away with the tradition of Rousseauian autobiography as a genuine unveiling of the self by affirming both the precedence of fiction over fact and the central role of the imaginary in the shaping of the raw material borrowed from experience into the literary text. In many ways, Frame therefore breaks the autobiographical pact, to the dismay of many of her critics who were overtly hoping for more transparency.⁴ The question that she really asks in her autobiography is not so much the Romantic, ontological “who am I?” but rather “what does it mean to be a writer?” The quest for a definite, clearly shaped identity is what led to her catastrophic internalisation, as she explains how she took on the part of the schizophrenic for no other reason than to escape the terrifying void of being nobody, to fit her being into an existing narrative. Only later in her life did Frame realise that she could take charge not only of her existence, but also of the narrative of her existence, by becoming a writer. The autobiography can therefore be read as an *ars literaria* as well as a life narrative, focusing on the artifice rather than on the supposedly transparent transmission of information.

These questions are at the heart of *Living in the Maniototo*, the novel that Frame wrote in 1979 immediately before she embarked on her autobiographical project.⁵ The plot of the novel revolves around the character of Mavis, a writer who has been lent a house in Berkeley by her patron friends, the Garretts, who wish to help her write a new novel. The first part of the narrative recounts certain events at various stages of Mavis's life that led up to the summer she spends in the house in California. After the sudden death of its owners, Mavis finds out that the house was bequeathed to her, but she is soon joined there by friends of the Garretts who draw her attention away from the novel that she had originally set upon to write. The novel offers its own allegorical reading: Mavis is in fact alone in the house of fiction, which the novel dubs “the house of replicas,”⁶ because of the large number of artwork reproductions that it contains, and her guests gradually turn out to be characters born out of her imagination. This two-fold structure provides a basis for the metafictional aspects of the novel, as it exposes not only the

3. “I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself” (17).

4. See Mercer.

5. Janet Wilson also evokes the possibility that the writing of the autobiography may have had an influence on Frame's last two novels, especially in terms of the representation of the self (129).

6. The recurring motif of the replica has turned many critics' attention towards the theory of Jean Baudrillard on the “precession of simulacra,” as in the article by Chris Prentice, for instance. The motif of the replica has also informed many debates regarding the novel's affiliation to postmodernism: see Daring and Wilson. For Mark Williams, the motif of the replica is not so much borrowed from Baudrillard as a re-writing of Plato's myth of the cave in *The Republic*, which he claims Frame is using by “borrowing his concepts and terms but rescuing a function for the poet as ‘maker’ whose fictions tend towards a higher kind of truth, that of the mere realist or imitator of the outward forms” (48).

rules of fiction-writing,⁷ but also the very mechanisms of the imaginary, by staging the alchemical process through which "real-life" material is incorporated and transformed into fiction, diffracted as though through a prism.⁸ The stroke suffered by Mavis's husband in the first part of the novel is thus echoed in the second part when the character of Theo, one of the guests in the house of fiction, falls victim to the same fate. Metafiction makes the novel-writing process visible, almost transparent, albeit "in fictional mode," thus placing the figure of the author at the centre of the stage by making her an actual protagonist. Like the autobiography, *Living in the Maniototo* can be read as a reflection on the condition of the artist, trapped between her need for privacy and the necessary self-disclosure that is part of any form of artistic expression. The novel nevertheless offers a way out of this aporia by foregrounding the logic of fiction: what if metafiction were the ultimate form of autobiography? What if the only thing an artist had to reveal about herself was precisely the making of her art? My contention here is that metafictional unveiling necessarily entails a reflection on what it means to be an artist. Marc Delrez argues that the novel is "centrally concerned with the sacrificial dimension inherent in all fiction writing" (77), and while we do find elements of the traditional representation of the artist as sufferer and slave to her art, we will see that it is itself also one of the replicas of the original, a fiction of the real. The artist figure that emerges from the novel is no longer that of the lonely misfit found in Frame's earlier novels, but rather a multifaceted trickster whose self is dissipated into her fiction rather than aggregated into one character.

In many ways, *Living in the Maniototo* can be read as a reflection on the praxis of the imagination. However, Frame's purpose is not to formulate a theory on the topic, but rather to elaborate her own idiosyncratic representations of it. Imagination alternates in the novel as a shape, a place and an object, but all these representations are related to the question of the writer's condition and of her relationship with the imaginary. One of the first representations of the imaginary is the hypotenuse. A discreetly recurring image in the novel, it usually appears in those passages which are concerned with the opposition between the real and the fictive. In one such passage, Mavis is musing on her husband's job as a debt-collector and his unquenchable desire to make people pay:

Life on earth is so arranged that you may be granted each day, day after day, for a lifetime, and avoid making payment – a secondary avoidance. The primary avoidance is in being unable to see that the desire to pay is essentially one untroubled by petty calculations and is not even dependent upon having been given, having received, bought, or stolen. It is in not recognising that in a world of replicas the original cannot be matched in value, and the real fact is often a copy of the unreal fiction, and perpetual human joy and suffering lie in the yearning, not only to pay, but to identify the original as itself apart, not as real or unreal or as opposite or adjacent; paying for it in the sense that the blossoms pay for the spring by flourishing within it as a part of it. (64-5)

Frame confronts the capitalistic logic of debit and credit with a vision of paying as creating, a way out of the binary structures that make up our relationship to the world and to one another, a segue to Turnlung's "I have what I gave" in Frame's earlier novel

7. This being the definition Patricia Waugh gives of metafiction: "In novelistic practice, this results in writing which consistently displays its conventionality, which explicitly and overtly lays bare its condition of artifice, and which thereby explores the problematic relationship between life and fiction" (4).

8. This is actually an idea explored by Chris Prentice: "The text diffracts its material as light is diffracted through a prism" (160).

Daughter Buffalo (212). This alternative modality of being in the world, over and above the simple logic of loss and gain, is only accessible to the artist, who creates from nothing, borrows from the unreal and short-circuits the hierarchy between original and replica, symbolised by the opposite/adjacent divide, by assuming the role of the hypotenuse. Judith Dell Panny identifies the figure of the hypotenuse with the author herself (193), although it extends beyond her individual self and rather serves as a figuration of her imaginary. This tripartite representation of the imagination has obvious similarities with the theory that Coleridge develops on the subject in his *Autobiographia Literaria* (167) and that Frame claims, in her autobiography, to have learnt by heart before quoting it extensively (163). It is also close to Wolfgang Iser's theory of the imagination in *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, where he replaces the usual binary opposition between fiction and the real with a triad composed of the real, the fictive and the imaginary: "The fictive, then, might be called a 'transitional object,' always hovering between the real and the imaginary, linking the two together" (20). The function of the fictive is close to that of the hypotenuse whose personified voice is heard in a poem in the middle of the narrative:

I am Hypotenuse.
 Here burdened by the weight of opposite and adjacent
 proved equal to others, never to myself.
 I square with myself for the satisfaction of others who count more than I
 who lie as thin as a garden line in my fleshless body
 who lie and square and cube and carry and join.
 I am Hypotenuse. I close in
 a shape that is nameless without my prison. (89)

Much like Iser's dimension of the fictive, the hypotenuse is the shaping impulse which makes representation perfect. However, this poem's true focus is the pain endured by the Hypotenuse which is both "burdened" and imprisoned by its task⁹ and condemned to strip itself of its individuality, this suffering hinting at a sacrificial dimension in the writer's work.

Another figuration of the imagination in the novel is the manifold. An image borrowed from the Kantian theory of cognition, it refers here to the store of experience that the writer collects before lending a shape to its elements. In the following extract it also enters into a tripartite relationship with replicas and originals, as Mavis describes her life in the house of fiction: "I found myself beset upon, not knowing what to do, in a whirl of avoiding, haunted by the manifold, the replicas, and the originals" (137). Here the writer appears confused, under the spell of the manifold, a word which, uncoincidentally, also refers to a notebook. Once again, the imaginary is represented as an escapist force ("a whirl of avoiding"). This representation gives the writer no choice but to attend to its demands, just as the hypotenuse is "burdened by the weight of opposite and adjacent." The writer is condemned to self-effacement and even transformed into a mere insect, a fly on the wall. "A writer, like a solitary carpenter bee, will hoard scrapes from the manifold and then proceed to gnaw obsessively, constructing a long gallery, nesting her very existence within her food. The eater vanishes. The characters in the long gallery emerge" (154). In other words, the writer's self must disappear in order for the characters to thrive, and thrive they do in the house of fiction as Mavis gradually

9. Dorothy Jones picks on the usually ambiguous nature of the shelter in Frame's work, both protecting and entrapping (185).

retreats to her office, and all but disappears from the house that the guest characters now have all to themselves.

The house of fiction itself is a common enough representation of the locus of the imagination, yet it is doubled in the text by another mysterious space called the Maniototo, which also appears in the title of the novel. There is an apparent paradox in that while this imaginary region is mentioned once in the text, Mavis, for all her travels in the narrative, never actually goes there. This could mean that the title is deceptive – assuming it has a descriptive relationship with the text. The Maniototo is the region where a famous New Zealand writer is supposed to have lived all his life. Its description is multifaceted and contradictory, marked by possible or imaginary violence and suffering.

What was the Maniototo? people asked. Where was it? Not everyone in the north knows the geography of the south, and even some in the south did not know. It was a high plain, they were told, in Central Otago – you know, where the air is known to be rare, where apricots grow, and there’s a scheme to drown the land and the towns. Central Otago with its battle-place names – Naseby, Glencoe, Cromwell – and the Maniototo itself where Peter Wallstead lived, didn’t it mean plain of blood after the battles fought there? But wasn’t it a place where patients went to be cured of their sicknesses? (75-6)

The final reference to a place where sick people go creates an echo not only within the novel with Mavis’s experience in psychiatric hospital, of which she gives an account in her novel *The Green Fuse*, but also outside the novel with the writer’s own experience. For Janet Wilson, the Maniototo can be construed as a metaphor for the author’s imagination, which reveals the missing link between the title and the text (122). Yet the deserted, inhospitable and possibly violent nature of this space also hints at suffering in the condition of the writer, once again condemned to exile and solitude.

These descriptions of the imagination draw a picture of the artist’s condition as one fraught with pain, her life selflessly devoted to her writing. Several artist figures appear in the text, often fleetingly, as if flashing through the narrative, like Beatrice, a writer that Mavis claims to have met in New York and whose story reads almost like an allegory. Suddenly unable to find warmth despite the blanket that Mavis gives her as a present, Beatrice ends up drowning herself in the East River: “The purple blanket might have warmed her, but in the end there was no room left in her hibernating, winter heart for further cold seasons” (252). Herself a writer, Mavis understands her artist friend’s need for protection; it is as if being an artist meant exposing oneself, at the risk of death by exposure, and being transparent as one strips off one’s own skin. The story of Beatrice can be read as a parallel with the description of another artist that appears earlier in the text and that Mavis refers to as “the famous poet” from her Auckland suburb of Bleinheim:

some said that he was wearing his skin inside out and it must have hurt even to have the air touch it, and that he’d been born that way, with his skin put on the way we taught our children to put on their socks – outside in, then quick-flip, and the warm side is in and the ridged side out, and there’s no hurting, but with the poet something went wrong in the putting on, a ridged side was there for life, inside and hurting. (75)

This description insists both on the inadequacy of the artist’s condition and on the existential pain that he is condemned to suffer. The word “wrong” and the idea that the poet was wearing his skin “inside out” draw a picture of the artist as different, maladapted. The reference to the children’s socks creates a humorous contrast and points to the

over-dramatic quality of this representation, as yet another cliché about the artist and his proverbial suffering.

Another representation of the artist in the novel is that of the ghost who haunts the streets of the different cities where Mavis stays in the novel, just as the artist is obsessed with the manifold. Blenheim, the Auckland suburb where Mavis lived before going to the US, is also haunted by a “black fantail,” an avatar of “the famous poet” who is rumoured to have “collapsed in the street and died” (40). In Baltimore, where she then stays before moving on to the house in Berkeley, Mavis reads about a ghost who is believed to manifest itself in the guise of a “howling wolf” and to have been the inspiration for one of Edgar Allan Poe’s stories:

I was reminded that Edgar Allan Poe collapsed and died in the streets of Baltimore. The howling dog (surely the sound I heard, the cry of the wolf?), the fluttering black fantail, the piwakawaka: two poets dying in the streets of two cities and becoming a part of each city and a responsibility and pride, and changing it in untold ways. (49)

Artists in *Living in the Maniototo* are often fleeting presences, “fluttering” like the black fantail: they appear only to disappear quickly afterwards, sometimes even literally, like Tommy, the artist jeweller from Baltimore, who is simply erased from the narrative by the sheer power of a detergent called the Blue Fury (57). The artist is always already elsewhere, ghost-like, his presence diffuse, yet ungraspable, his self an unnecessary appendage to his work.

Yet even beyond the question of representing the artist, *Living in the Maniototo* focuses on the question of the self and its representation in a narrative. Throughout her fiction, Frame illustrates her fundamental distrust in the notion of identity which, she shows, is essentially constructed and maintained by discourse, and more particularly in the myths we elaborate about ourselves. In her last novels, Frame takes her radical critique of the self to a metafictional level by questioning not only the nature of the characters’ selves,¹⁰ but also the inscription of the writer’s self within the text. The guest characters in the novel all claim to have a separate, distinct identity, yet they are easily confused with one another. They all try to counter the feeling of their own unreality by engaging in lengthy autobiographical monologues. The boundary between the character’s actual discourse and the fictional text is blurred, as all of them say they intend to write a book about themselves while they are already being written about without knowing it. They are all moved by a desire for absolute transparency and by the same impulse to “tell,” a verb which carries the weight of its own ambiguity in the novel, in that it means not only to relate or confess, but also to report mischief, as when a child “tells on someone.” However, all that the characters succeed in communicating is the artificiality of their own telling, the artificiality of their own discourse. Roger Prestwick, who is one of them, is painfully aware that he is “transparent,” the term here alluding both to Roger’s unprepossessing personality and to his very fictionality as a character. Here, the metafictional and the autobiographical collude once again: “I have said that I am a man without secrets. I should say that my one secret from most people is the fact of my life’s being the shadow of a conventional well-documented reality. I am what the scholars call a ‘textbook’ person” (160). Roger’s fictionality is inscribed within

10. For Patricia Waugh, the metafictional laying bare of the artificiality of characters is often a reflection on the myths around our identity, and poses the question of the referentiality of the literary text in the most acute fashion (93-4).

his own personality and his own discourse on it; like any other fictional element in the novel, he is but a replica of something else existing outside the realm of the narrative. Roger is aware too that his desires are themselves replicas of other desires, shared by a whole generation: "I too will write a book. Another book. I know that our age has been propelled, blackmailed into becoming the Age of Explanation" (164). Indeed, in the novel, the characters' compulsion to tell their stories is interpreted in cultural terms as a phenomenon related to the egotism of their age and is humorously dubbed "the Great Californian Confession (the GCC)" (174). Here, Frame is deriding the drive for self-disclosure as a major aspect of the New Age culture which flourished in the United States and more generally in the Western World in the 1970s. The use of upper-case letters as well as the acronym hint at the growing popularity of this practice, which for Frame is turning into a cultural imperative. In the first volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité*, entitled *La Volonté de savoir*, Michel Foucault shows that the injunction to talk about oneself is not recent, but dates back to the seventeenth century, when science became a discourse in itself and imposed the necessity to confess, mostly in matters relating to sexuality (29). Foucault is particularly critical of the contemporary period which has disguised this hygiene-related imperative into a possibility for release and even liberation. Frame makes a similar point in her description of experimental workshops dedicated to self-disclosure:

If it hadn't been for the practice known as The Great Californian Confession (the GCC) I might not have gleaned so much about my guests. At that time, as a requisite of the Age of Explanation, the GCC was at its peak, especially in California, and even Brian, usually taciturn, had stayed at experimental centres where guests, stopping only for sleep and food, poured out their hearts to one another, like sacks of coal (which burns) or wheat (which sprouts), and when their hearts were emptied they did indeed appear like empty sacks and may have been as desolate had not the owners or carriers realised that sacks are of the material which, in other circumstances, can be woven into fine linen, embroidered with bright flowers, birds of paradise, fish, castles, places and symbols of an age of imagination. (175)

This passage shows the extent to which we have internalised truth imperatives which are transformed into therapeutic paths of self-discovery. However, Frame wants to draw our attention away from the truthful content of those confessions by focussing instead on the sacks that contain them. In other words, the shaping of the life-narratives matters more than their substance, as the line of flight of fiction lies in seed, waiting to stem ("sprout" or "burn") from the sacks that have been discarded as one sheds one's skin.

As an antidote to these monolithic discourses about the self, Frame opposes the multiple identities of the narrator, whose self is divided into several personae. The narrator has successively been "Mavis Furness, Mavis Barwell, Mavis Halleton" (29), having "buried two husbands," a sentence that she quotes ironically and that is presented as the epitome of the type of clichéd discourse one is likely to produce about oneself. However, Mavis is not the only narrator: there is also Violet Pansy Proudlock, "an expert in near, near-distant, and distant ventriloquism" (31), and Alice Thumb who has "'turned to' eavesdropping and gossip" (31). Each of these three avatars of the narrator is alternately in charge of the narrative, and the trinity that they form could be read as another materialisation of the tripartite representation of the imagination, along with the group formed by the three locations where Mavis successively stays in the novel

(Blenheim, Baltimore and Berkeley). The “I” in the novel, which refers to three distinct representations of the narrator who together relate a single narrative, is therefore a device illustrating the necessity for the artist to dilute her identity in her writing in order to “seize control of all points of view,” to quote Dinny Wheatstone, another trickster narrator, who appears in Frame’s later novel, *The Carpathians* (85). Mavis gradually retreats to her office as her house is taken over by the guest-characters, and she is replaced by her alter ego Alice Thumb, the eavesdropper, who is always on the other side of the partition and records the guests’ confessions. *Living in the Maniototo* destroys the myth of the almighty yet suffering artist at the centre of his creation and replaces it with an image of the artist as mere entertainer, a label that Violet Pansy Proudlock claims for herself: “You might think it strange that I choose to be a ventriloquist, to be in a narrow path on the margin of creation and recreation when I could go to the centre, but I choose to be here, as an entertainer” (31). As creation becomes synonymous with recreation, the mystique of the marginal artist is replaced by a representation of decentring as empowerment. Metafictional unveiling in *Living in the Maniototo* allows us readers to take a peek into the writer’s chamber within the house of fiction, and what we discover is that the writer is never only in one place – she is always already elsewhere, her presence diffuse, discreet and unobtrusive. She does not stand at the centre of her art, but rather dwells in its margins, which remain for Frame the ideal location from where to write.

As a corollary to the representation of the author within the literary text, *Living in the Maniototo* asks another fundamental question: who says “I” in a first-person narrative? And how much of him/herself does the pronoun reveal? Before she embarks on the writing of her novel, Mavis attends a writing class where her teacher, an American writer named Howard Conway, instructs her never to use the first person. “I might have been surprised by his tidy air of caution had I not realised that a skintrapped ‘I’ could have no place in the writing of such a roving omniscient as Conway” (81). Two principles of writing are brought into opposition here: on the one hand, the first-person narration, which restricts the perspective to the point of view of the author, and on the other, the all-encompassing vision of the omniscient. Mavis is ambivalent about writing what she calls an “I-book” and is worried about “the enormous burden upon the ‘I’ to ‘tell all’ while viewing through the narrow I-shaped window that restricted the vision and allowed only occasional arrows to be fired with no guarantee that they would pierce the armour of ‘otherness’ worn by the characters of the book” (81). While Mavis is afraid to remain confined in the fortress of her self, with only an arrow slit through which to observe the world outside, Howard Conway, a double of the “con artist” that her debt-collector husband is chasing, writes “in a kind of blowaway tradition – women with streaming hair and eyes, horses with flowing manes, and trees and men with flowing seed, set in storm and hurricane country” (75). It is tempting to adopt an elitist reading of the character of Howard Conway as a figure of censorship of authentic artistry, his writing a mediocre example of the literature that appeals to the masses; however, he is also comparable to Violet Pansy Proudlock, in that she too is “a mere entertainer.” However trite his style may seem to Mavis, it has a fluidity and ease of movement that she lacks, “skintrapped” as she is in her own point of view. It is only by reaching beyond her own self, just as the hypotenuse extends into infinity, that Mavis will succeed in welcoming the characters into the house of fiction. However, she can only do so at the cost of reality. Thus her escapist flight of fancy comes to a brutal halt when she

makes a discovery that she has hitherto been avoiding: that of her best friend's death. Although the news is diffracted within the house of fiction through the sudden death and resurrection of the Garretts, it remains out of reach and outside the narrative until the very last pages of the novel, outside the opposite, the adjacent and the hypotenuse.

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