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“A girl who is not me”

Patrick Evans's recent novel *Gifted* is a remarkable portrait of Janet Frame from the point of view of Frank Sargeson, and evokes again the extraordinary interactions between her autobiography and her complex and riddling texts. Frame's fiction has constantly challenged readers to fresh interpretive strategies. Her work has been co-opted to a succession of discursive moments deriving from postmodernism, postcolonialism and feminism, yet all her narrative characteristics have been in place since she published *The Lagoon and Other Stories* in 1951. A particular problem for critics has been the interaction between Frame's autobiography and her fiction, but a way to think about this might be to consider Frame's instructions to readers in *Living in the Maniototo* (1979) which ask the reader to take seriously some of the riddles of being that apply not only to the dead author's texts but to the questions she poses for readers who pay attention.

On a summer Saturday in 1955 Frank Sargeson received an unexpected visit from a “peagreen Morris Minor” driven by “my standard nightmare visitor: age indistinct, medium to heavy tonnage, with a bosom like a bed bolster and her autograph book in her hand.” In the back seat of the visitor's car was a young woman “made so anonymous by dark glasses and headscarf that there seemed hardly any point in my coming out to meet her” (Evans *Gifted*, 16-17). So opens Patrick Evans's recent novel *Gifted*, a remarkable fictional portrait of Sargeson and the young Janet Frame, who, in one of the more famous residential relationships of New Zealand literary history, lived for sixteen months in an army hut in Sargeson's Takapuna garden while she wrote *Owls Do Cry*. This period of Frame's life has been the subject of more than one novel¹ and been written about extensively, particularly by Frame in the second volume of her autobiography and Michael King in his biographies of both writers.² It is a story seductive for its fairytale qualities – the act of generosity which turned a patient into a writer – and for its fabular literary history, thrifty old man Sargeson, father of the nation, sheltering the vulnerable young female genius.

Evans, who has long been a leading commentator on Frame and who published the first substantial critical account of her fiction in 1971,³ has been a controversial figure in Frame criticism. As Allan Weiss notes in his essay in this issue (43), he has been a leading proponent of the view that Frame is both a social-realist and an autobiographical writer whose work can only be fully understood by recognising references to the events of her life (Evans *Janet Frame*, 41). The critical divide that Weiss and others have described⁴ between those who wish to claim Frame's work for postcolonial, social and nationalist critique and those who see its overriding modality as metafictional, has produced an unhelpful dichotomy, in which Frame's allegiance to “New Zealandness” or “postcoloniality” on the one hand and “imagination” on the

1. See C.K. Stead, *All Visitors Ashore*.

2. See Janet Frame, *An Angel at My Table*, and Michael King, *Wrestling with the Angel* and *Frank Sargeson: A Life*.

3. See Patrick Evans, *An Inward Sun: The Novels of Janet Frame*.

4. See also Marc Delrez, *Manifold Utopia: The Novels of Janet Frame*.

other, are in opposition. Frame's own famous description of her transition from “this” world to “that” in her *Landfall* essay of 1965 seems to fortify this interpretive division as something almost structural – that in turning her back on the classroom and the waiting inspector that fateful day in 1945, Frame precipitated herself not only into eight wasted years in hospitals but also the apparently interminable critical dialogue about where her work sits: world or imagination? body or mind? autobiography or fantasy?

This essay looks back at *The Lagoon* from two vantage points: her 1979 novel *Living in the Maniototo* and Patrick Evans's novel *Gifted*. The fateful intervention of the Hubert Church Memorial prize⁵ in her life, a story of magical escape from what would have been a disabling neurological operation, linked Frame's medical history with her literary and imaginative gifts in ways that provoked pathological readings of Frame's texts. The metaphorical inventiveness and textual richness of *The Lagoon* and *Owls Do Cry* were frequently received as the self-portrait of a disturbed mind, but the interplay of wit, imagery, cadence and persona that characterises her fiction and makes its tone so complex and hard to decode has remained a consistent feature of her fictional mode and worlds. The play between narrator and narrative cannot be separated out into discrete interpretations, a point often made overtly in her later work. It is surely a deep irony that Frame, whose fiction is so rich with materiality, of words and images and objects and events, whose expression of ideas is saturated with tactility, textures and pleasures, and whose every material image resonates with the deferral of meaning, should also have been for so long the textual embodiment of dualism. How do the stories in *The Lagoon* prefigure and anticipate the critical problematic that Frame's work has posed, and how might Evans's novel help to resite Frame in her own fictions of being? Norbert Platz's observation that critical work on Frame's fiction testifies indirectly to the difficulty of coming to terms with it (204) is borne out by even a cursory scan of the shelves of Frame criticism. Her work has been co-opted to every discursive moment, from the fissured author to subversive fiction, from feminism and queer theory to abjection and melancholy, from autobiography to linguistic theory. And this is as it should be. Frame's oeuvre is ample and what Mark Williams has called the “spillage of unreality” (25) in *Living in the Maniototo* could also be described more generally as the overflow of possibility. Frame's fictional worlds are not restrained by verisimilitude; as she said more than forty years ago, her “words go astray, with unexplained stops and ‘wrigglings’ of concentration,” because “I'm of the country – the country of words” (Frame “Beginnings,” 42). Platz's observation about critical work on Frame implies that it is possible to “come to terms” with her work, and most critical writing rests on the same assumption – that there is a discursive frame into which her fiction will fit. But are we, as readers, trying too hard? Despite the metonymic temptations of her name (or names, as “Clutha,” the pseudonym she used for many years to live her life in “this” world, is as expansive in its metaphorical possibilities as “Frame”),⁶ her fiction inevitably overflows any container. She offers a reading experience characterised by abundance, an amplitude which can also seem

5. *The Lagoon* famously won this prize in 1952. At the time Frame was on the “operation list” but the hospital superintendent, Geoffrey Blake-Palmer, noticed her award in the paper (Frame herself had not been told of it) and took her off the list, telling her he didn't want her changed (King 112).

6. Clutha is the name of a river in Central Otago, a region which appears frequently in Frame's fiction.

(and sometimes is) excessive, overdetermined, full of wriggings and strayings which cannot be squeezed into place. Frame's fictional worlds overwhelm, they teem with objects, images and metaphors, they defy containment, and they constantly challenge the reader to fresh interpretive strategies. Her novels in that sense deploy familiar postmodern techniques, but to call them postmodern is to ascribe a category that seems both too thin and too obvious. Surely the rich awareness in her work of the presence of a reader ("postmodernism") is accompanied by an equally rich awareness of the world in which she lives (a hyper "realism") and the media in which she lives it ("metafiction") – the collision of these sensibilities produces her superabundant text.

Frame's "postmodernism" has been there from the beginning, before it was known by that name, and has always involved a deep selfconsciousness about the nature of fiction. When *The Lagoon* was published, Frame was sneeringly described as an imitator of Sargeson in the *Christchurch Press*, and accused of a style which "can convey no emotions except the simplest and the most sentimental" (King 108). But Sargeson himself praised the book, and noted that the language "despite the simplicity of statement and rhythm [...] is the author's own special creation" ("New Light" qtd. in King 108-109), and Dorothy Neal White described it as prose woven from the "thread and idiom of everyday speech" (King 109). Despite the *Press* reviewer's dismissive comments, *The Lagoon* was quickly recognised as the advent of a gifted writer with a distinctive voice. The "simplicity" of style which struck contemporary reviewers may not seem a "postmodern" effect to current readers, and it is true that the stories in *The Lagoon* are not as overtly ironic and playful about writing and fiction and the architecture of the novel in the way that characterises *Living in the Maniototo*, but the world that is represented in *The Lagoon* and the way in which Frame engages and is aware of her reader is not substantively different. Rereading *The Lagoon* makes me notice how the whole body of Frame's work, with its complex of interests and many spillages and overflows, is nevertheless always making the same demand on the reader, a demand that is most clearly articulated in the chapter headings of *Living in the Maniototo*, with their temporal suspension indicating a continuous duty: Naming, Paying Attention, Attending and Avoiding, Avoiding, Bound by, Avoiding and Paying Attention. As a set of instructions what could be clearer? The interpretive problem arises when you start to wonder how to apply them.

In *Gifted* the young Janet, awkward, shy, secretive, plays a game with Sargeson. One night, puzzling over Janet's private life while turning back the bedclothes, he finds a square of paper on the bottom sheet.

I picked it up and turned it over:

A fruit in the middle of its location –

I stood there, staring at her ink. What on earth could she mean – I say *she* because who else? It was her writing [...]. (150)

It is not the only riddle Janet leaves for Frank. He keeps finding what he thinks of as gnomic messages – in the meatsafe, and on the floor by the bed. They irritate him, he burns one, and they continue to nag at him as he tries to understand their "strange terrible sentences" (162). Evans's Frank is like any of Frame's readers, more overtly confronted perhaps, since the fictional author has been in the fictional room, but it is essentially the same paradigm the "author" offers the reader in *Living in the Maniototo*. The Prologue to that novel, which is apparently straightforwardly entitled "Naming

people and places,” plunges the reader into the central riddle of the novel, the riddle of “I,” a pronoun attached to a narrator whose names pile up in ever longer and more mystifying lists and who accretes contradictory metaphors. The challenge of interpretation, the puzzle, of understanding who “I” might be, is immediately followed up with an actual riddle, though it is a riddle complete with an answer: “I am your skin” (14). In *Gifted*, Janet, the young genius playing a game with Frank, unlike Alison Hendry, Margaret Burt, Jan Godfrey or Violet Pansy Proudlock, does not offer an answer to her riddle, and it is some long time before Frank gets it – 67 pages in fact. Pulling handfuls of loquat leaves from the tree to make a healing infusion for his lover Harry, Janet’s phrase comes back to him, “*A fruit in the middle of its location*”: “[I]t was quite a terrible shock to seize the *thing* when finding the *word*, as if the first was the seed of the second [...]. [I]t is not at all untrue to propose that in the middle of *its location* is a fruit [...]. The *word* enclosed the *thing*, *became* the thing [...].” (217).

The difficulty of adopting the riddle as an interpretive paradigm for Frame’s fiction in general is obvious enough, and has been perhaps part of the critical problem she has posed for her many commentators – the feeling that there is an answer can be seductive as well as fruitless, but Frank’s *aperçu* here points to what is also happening in the Prologue to *Living in the Maniototo*. The riddle of the skin can be read as an example, a signpost, a flag, a naming, a clue about how to read, coming as it does in the middle of a prologue which poses a much larger riddle about where this story is coming from and who is telling it, why and to whom. Violet Pansy Proudlock (whose name seems to be a spur-of-the-moment invention by the multiply named narrator at the end of the previous section) declares: “I am here to entertain you” (13), but the reader is forced to puzzle again about the location of those pronouns, and where Violet’s acts of ventriloquism lead. Whose “skin” are we in? It is a riddle the novel does not let the reader forget. Is Frame suggesting that the novel is a riddle which can be solved, or does the presence of a riddle in the text back up, in a more general way, the larger set of instructions in the contents list? What the reader is specifically asked to do, more than once, is to pay attention. A riddle is a way of forcing attention, and the point may not be a specific puzzle (but then again it may) or indeed the idea of puzzles and answers, but more a method of induction – think about this as you experience it, the word encloses the thing as Frank, ventriloquised by Patrick Evans, put it.

In his Author’s Note Evans writes that he was told about

Janet’s trick of giving people enigmatic verbal riddles to solve some years ago by Dr Craigie McFie, who observed it at the Maudsley Institute fifty years ago, when Dr R.H. Cawley, a psychiatrist there, gained her confidence in part with his ability to solve overnight various word-puzzles she gave him; in *Gifted* I have transferred his role to Frank. (302)

Gifted draws on Frame’s life in various ways to suggest a complex of motivations and behaviours that lie behind and inside her fiction. The synergies it suggests between autobiography and imagination are enriching, and perhaps indicate a way of thinking across the critical walls that divide the “life” from the “work.” Frame obviously enjoyed riddles and puzzles of various kinds, and, as Evans’s note above suggests, used them to test people she met, to identify, perhaps, friends and

confidantes, as her psychiatrist Robert Cawley has also described.⁷ But they are certainly also part of how she “tests” readers, and that seems to me to be the point. Frame’s later novels bristle with instructions to the reader, as if she has got tired of readers not getting it. The chapter headings in *Living in the Maniototo* exhort the reader not only to pay attention but keep “paying attention” to different kinds of categories, categories which pose riddling and apparently incongruent lists – The Ice Pick, the Diamond Account Book, a Family Heirloom, Husbands, Dead Writers, the Blue Fury, Debtors and Debt Collectors, Keepsakes, Shelter and the Withering of a Tongue Blossom. These categories make the task of paying attention far from simple. When the ice pick, to which attention must be paid, appears, it is in fact a weapon, “‘my only weapon’ Brian said,” and “comes together” in the narrator’s mind as part of “my work and the kind of pain that makes a writer want to throw away the words that are screens, moveable walls, decorations, unnecessary furniture, and keep only the load-bearing words (the load-bearing birds) that keep the sky from falling” (78).

Living in the Maniototo is full of sentences such as this that require the reader to think about language as if it were a three-dimensional object. The load-bearing words keep the structure up, and the structure that is kept up is the one the reader inhabits, along with the narrator and her many selves and characters, and while you are there, you must pay attention to it. It is, you might think, the act of paying attention that bears the load, as the need to pay attention is explicitly and repeatedly drawn to the reader’s notice. Do these instructions reflect Frame’s view of reader deficiencies? And might the early stories, so apparently simple in their “thread and idiom,” also repay more attention?

A number of the stories in *The Lagoon* have been anthologised and much discussed (the title story, “Keel and Kool,” “The Day of the Sheep,” “Swans”) while others have received almost no critical attention, and, other than H. Winston Rhodes’s 1982 article and a brief discussion in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* (Wevers 240-242), the collection as a whole has been remarkably little discussed. What is striking about *The Lagoon* read from end to end is how it sets the ground for so much of Frame’s later work, not only thematically, as Winston Rhodes demonstrates, but methodologically. As a whole *The Lagoon* is a habitation, an architecture to use Frame’s own metaphor above, in the way the later novels are – the words are load-bearing and set in place her characteristic narrative method, with the author in many guises always embedded and concealed in her text. *The Lagoon* prefigures some of the famous metaphors Frame uses to describe her writing practice, like the narrator in “The Day of the Sheep” who has “no grammar of journeys” (52) and whose story travels between pronouns (“I” and “she”) and down the plughole of the dirty kitchen. In *Living in the Maniototo* Mavis Furness, working at being a writer, describes a good sentence as one which “travelling, looks out of portholes” (50). Frame’s figures of speech are often re-used and thriftily reworked. Like riddles, where the word becomes the thing, they embody the journey of her craft. Many of these metaphors and figurative puzzles require the reader to think of Frame’s prose as something an author has brought to life, her words are entities, wriggling and straying, words which ignore,

7. In an essay about Janet Frame, her doctor at the Maudsley Institute, Robert Cawley, noted that her recreational activities included lace making and devising and breaking verbal codes (9).

as Robert Cawley put it, the boundaries between reality and imagination which were “unimportant in her natural schema” (6). The game Frame seems most often to play with her reader throughout her work is the teasing question about where the “author,” who may or may not be imagined, is located in her work.

Discussing the reception of *The Lagoon* Michael King wrote:

The book caused something of a minor sensation in Oamaru. Those who knew the Frames or who were part of the Waitaki Girls’ High School network were astonished, and in some cases angered, that they could recognise the characters who had inspired some of the stories; and that some of these characters [...] retained their “real” names. (*Wrestling* 110)

The Oamaru reaction to *The Lagoon* was driven by specific recognitions – Miss Gibson in the lumber room who was an actual teacher for example – but the threads of a verifiable life which weave more generally between the stories and their author are clearly marked, and it is not possible for any reader of Frame’s autobiographies or King’s *Wrestling with the Angel*, to read *The Lagoon* now without noticing them. The family of railway children, a sister with a dicky heart, grandparents in Picton, the sharp lonely absence of a dead sister, hospital patients, teachers and small towns – this is the landscape of authorial experience. But do these recognitions reduce or contain the ways in which the text constitutes a separate fictional world? Winston Rhodes described the method of the stories in *The Lagoon* as “a distinctive way of seeing, the double vision, the combination of the inward and outward look” (129), but the idea of a “double vision” perpetuates the critical idiom of dualism which has bedevilled Frame studies. Throughout her work, Frame’s narrators draw attention to themselves and to the business of writing to raise the problematic question of whether and how boundaries of reality and imagination exist. Her fiction continuously poses the riddle of textual existence, the text which is the world, the word which encloses the thing, the author who is her book. Several characters in *The Lagoon* are called “Jan”; famously Jan Godfrey, who is writing a story about “a girl who is not me.” The activity of writing is the explicit subject of three stories and constitutes the methodology of several more, as if the question of how to manipulate narrative conventions (and readers) is being tried out. “A Note on the Russian War” dissolves the world of the child-narrator into the landscape of the Russian War. The dialogue fable “Spirit” projects the dead narrator (who has a biography so colourless that it becomes a further commentary on the “realness” of written and lived worlds) into the vividly juicy and material afterlife of a slug. Almost every story in *The Lagoon* uses free indirect discourse to “float” the narrative voice. The indistinctness of the narrator, sometimes deliberately obscured or multiplied as in “Jan Godfrey,” offsets the sharp distinctness of the stories. Clarity of detail and expression locates the stories in class, gender and social history while some vagueness about where the narrative voice is coming from forces the reader to pay attention to the emotional colouring of the narrative and to its undertow.

The title story features an “I” narrator visiting a grandmother in Picton. This narrator appears “transparent” and has been identified as a child’s point of view (and an authorial persona) by many readers of the story, but it is pronominally complicated from its opening paragraph, which uses a universal second person singular. Later it is clear that “I” is telling a story from memory, and the layering of narratorial time and

forgetting (“Perhaps I liked the new Picton, I don’t know”) is embedded in a layering of narrative modes – the grandmother’s story, the aunt who “guesses things” and prefers Dostoyevsky to *Truth*, the “sort of story they put in *Truth*,” and the narrator who is reminded of “the women in films.” In its brief space, “The Lagoon” complicates the “I” persona and unsettles the narrative reliability of the story (what kind of story is being told) yet richly evokes a pool of tidal water, a seaside town, a provincial culture, a local idiom and a colonial, familial and authorial history.

In *Living in the Maniototo* Mavis Furness, taking a writing course, reflects critically on the “I” book:

Brought up on western films and on the love lyrics of the time, “Darling, I surrender,” I found the power of the “I” writer over the reader too confusing and eroding [...]. A writer taking on the “I” takes a straight line that can be turned in on itself to become a circle or curved to become a hook or left alone as a prelude to infinity or have its back broken into the hypotenuse, the opposite, the adjacent. (61)

If the point of drawing reader attention to riddles in *Living in the Maniototo* is to intensify the reader’s attention span and its quality, then the larger use reader attention can be put to is explicitly marked in the later fiction and in Frame’s autobiography. It is also present in *The Lagoon*. The great riddle of Frame’s fiction, which is also the oldest form of riddle, is Who am I? All of Frame’s fiction refers to the questions raised here in some form or other – the power of the “I” writer is always at issue and the “I” persona is always in question. It is not possible to transfer “I” to the author in any direct way; but nor is it possible to exclude the biographically known writer whose “straight line” takes on the circle, the curve or the hypotenuse. Instead, somewhere in this dialectic of writer and reader a multitude of shifting registers and possibilities exist, which cannot be neatly split off. Don’t Frame’s narratives, for example, inhabit the role of reader as well as writer? To some extent what has been described as Frame’s “postmodernism” has been the constant effort in her work to hand some power back to the reader, a reader who is made visible because he or she is continually tested and teased – does the reader “get” the distinction between Dostoyevsky and Truth that the aunt makes in “The Lagoon”? If words are the “sole heroes and heroines of fiction,” if they can “cover the whole earth like a feasting-cloth or a golden blanket” (*Maniototo* 92, 26), then someone has to read them, and read them well. Frame’s reader is always nudged to take notice of words and how they work, feel and taste, to consider and reflect about whose words they are.

The stories in *The Lagoon* are mostly pretty short – some only a page or two. Their brevity might argue for a high degree of transparency and they have been received as “simple” by some commentators, but in a variety of ways the stories draw attention to these underlying questions about who and what and whose. Most of the stories in *The Lagoon* derive their idiom and rhetorics from talk. They are patchworks of “wise saws and modern instances like a false skin, a Jiminy Cricket overcoat” (“The Day of the Sheep” 56). The talk that flows and eddies through the narrative voice is a rich mix of sayings, adages, lines of songs, bywords, maxims, commonplaces, gossip, chat, stories, warnings, quotations, headlines from magazines. It is talk of grief, anxiety, homesickness, longing and fear, and it is recycled through shared speech.

A sad blow, people said, to lose your first, just when she was growing up to be a help to you. But it’s all for the best, and you have Wonderful Faith Mrs Todd, she’s happier in

another sphere, you wouldn't have wished it otherwise, and you've got her photo. It's always nice to have their photos. Bear up Mrs Todd. ("Keel and Kool" 21)

The talk which flows through the stories speaks a world of small towns and families, poverty and thrift; the speech itself, as above, is poor and thrifty, recycling threadbare comfort, the same words applied like a bandage to every calamity, taking on capitalisation ("Wonderful Faith") from generations of use. As in Frame's later fiction, the stories in *The Lagoon* pulse with interjections and opinions whose origins are undisclosed. It is not so much an "inward and an outward look" that governs their narrative structure as a press of narrative detail and sound and voices that cannot completely fit in the small space of the story – the cry of Keel and Kool for example, which echoes past the final full stop, or the French phrase dropped casually into "The Bedjacket" as if an unidentified voice has taken time off from the breathless rhythm of storytelling to practise vocabulary and translation.

[...] they switched the light on all the time because they couldn't trust you to sit in the dark, and sending a brass band out every two months to play hymns on the lawn, and stare at you because you were a loony, and having a man from the city come every week to give you a paper lolly and ask kindly after your health, how could you be expected to knit a blue bedjacket in a shell pattern?

But in spite of all, en tout depot [*sic*], Nan continued her labour. ("The Bedjacket" 33)

In her *Landfall* essay of 1965 Frame described how she wrote most of the *Lagoon* stories in a linen cupboard which she was using as a bedroom at the boarding house where she worked as a housemaid. The boardinghouse was in Caversham, a working class and poor district of Dunedin, and the view from her window was "pure Caversham' – dreary grey stone buildings with a glimpse of the tall chimneys of Parkside, the home for the aged" (King 78). She wrote her stories after work, sitting on the bed. After the shockingly unexpected death of her sister Isabel, referred to in her *Landfall* essay as "another family tragedy," she moved to a "racing" hotel in Christchurch where she continued writing, describing herself to customers who asked why she was working as a waitress with "her education," as someone engaged on "private research" (King 93). At this time Frame started to read New Zealand literature, including Sargeson's postwar short story anthology *Speaking for Ourselves* which had as its ambition, as the title suggests, to generate a New Zealand idiom.⁸ Frame has written that these stories "overwhelmed me by the fact of their belonging" (*Angel* 70) and it is belonging and unbelonging, who and whom, where and how, that constitutes a major thematic in *The Lagoon*.

Some other reflections of the author and her life can be glimpsed behind the stories in *The Lagoon*. Some take place in confined spaces, such as "Miss Gibson – And the Lumber Room," or the room where Jan Godfrey is writing a story about a girl who is not her. It is tempting to think of the stream of talk that floats the narrative as the rumble of chat Frame heard while she was making beds and serving meals. Poverty and financial hardship is a recurring thread which links the world of the

8. *Speaking for Ourselves* was a collection of stories edited by Frank Sargeson and published by the Caxton Press in 1945. The title indicates an overt literary nationalism. It included stories by younger male writers who became known as the "sons of Frank" – John Reece Cole, Maurice Duggan, A.P. Gaskell, David Ballantyne – many of whom used his trademark prose style which was laconic and colloquial. Sargeson's contribution was his famous story "The Hole that Jack Dug." Other contributors included Greville Texidor and Roderick Finlayson.

stories: the woman and her little girl who live in a boarding house in “The Pictures”; Myrtle and the narrator Nini “arranging things” on their way home in “The Secret” after they have sneaked fourpence for a milkshake; the father’s best suit which needs mending; specked fruit from the Chinaman’s and stale cakes from Dent’s in “My father’s Best Suit.” Her characters save up and make do and look for treasure in the lining of armchairs. The stories are also full of women who knit, like Nan in “The Bedjacket,” or tatt or sew, practising the thrifty crafts of the interwar years but also, as Rosemary McLeod has described, who formed the “parallel culture” of domesticity, typically unheralded but producing the “small masterpieces” (15) which adorned and expressed the female world Frame evokes in her fiction. The narrators notice the details of people’s clothing, in the way Frame herself records doing in *To the Is-Land*: “it was around clothes that my life was suddenly centered [...]. In a life where people had few clothes and a man one suit and one overcoat, the clothes were part of the skin, like an animal’s fur” (250-251).

Clothes are the marker of class and difference, of social desirability, as well as being covetable in themselves in *The Lagoon*. The narrator in “My Cousins – Who Could Eat Cooked Turnips” observes that both her cousins have a dress with a “cape collar” which makes them look like “pink lollies waiting to be licked”; the cape collar returns four times in “Child” where the narrator’s friend Minnie has “button-up shoes instead of lace-ups, [...] a fringe and a dress with a cape collar and a skipping rope with shiny blue handles!” (60).

The point of paying attention to the ways in which the stories echo and mirror Frame’s social context and life experience is not to claim for them a biographical authenticity or an enhanced realism, but to resist the idea that autobiographical sediments should be excluded from notice. In the fertile mix that sucks and drags the currents of her fiction, exposing a baby octopus or the drowned wreckage of a child’s boat, filling with sea weed and driftwood, flashes of autobiographical play (is this my life?), provide another interpretive tool. One of her earliest images of storytelling, a lagoon, is still an appropriate imagistic clue for readers wanting to chart the complex workings of the author and her text. The riddle of who “I” might be in *The Lagoon* is allowed a generous referential allusiveness and accretion of detail which evokes the dead author at the same time as it denies her presence. From a critic’s point of view, the stories in *The Lagoon* lightly anticipate the discursive moments which will follow – metafictional strategies provoke a postmodern reading, deft references to colonial histories and class distinctions gesture towards postcolonialism, the author of “Jan Godfrey” erases herself from the text, the ghost of Janet Frame begins on her autobiographical recollections. But from the point of view of a reader who is, as later instructed, paying attention to the “wide, rich tapestry of language” (*Maniototo* 26) and the lived-in fictional world, the stories of *The Lagoon* offer many pleasures, which need not be divided or projected into a single discursive frame. One of them is the pleasure of recognition, the repetitions and echoes of the girl who is not me ●

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