

Resisting what she sees as the male-dominated focus of the BBC version, and resisting also the primacy of the written text, she tried the scene two different ways: one with Angelo and Isabella historically costumed but watched by a young woman in modern clothes who kept the focus on Isabella (or Isabelle, as Varney prefers to call her); the other with Isabella's body bound tightly in a large black cloth, signifying her oppressed position. Cold on the page, both images may sound over-explicit to the point of banality. But if I may speculate about a performance I never saw, I suspect the second image in particular could have a theatrical power resonating beyond its immediate moral.

In the final essay, "Regimes of Value," John Frow breaks the whole subject open, challenging paradigms on which some of the other pieces are based (such as the separation of high and low culture) and arguing that Shakespeare is now not the possession of the dominant class, but of the middle-class intelligentsia, who can use him, and the power of culture generally, for good. Speaking as a member of that class, I wish I could be happier about our track record; *la trahison des clercs* is one of the recurring facts of history. But at least this informative, provocative collection of essays tells us a lot about one of our chief problems, and alerts us to our responsibility.

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Delys Bird

FRAME CELEBRATED

Gina Mercer, *Janet Frame: Subversive Fictions*. University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994. 293 pp. ISBN 0 7022 2459 6

Gina Mercer begins her exhaustive study of Janet Frame's fictions with two quotations from the writer, each of which establishes the direction of Mercer's work as well as the mysterious and indeed the subversive power of Frame's writing. The first is from a 1983 interview with Frame, in which she describes what for her is "one of the fascinations of writing ...", which lies "in the coding of what is written to describe what is not written." She goes on, "I like to think of the contents of a book as a signpost to a world that is not even mentioned." The other is from one of the novels, *Intensive Care* (1970). It represents a writing of woman's body, one that conveys not an esoteric essentialism but a gendered politics that exists in the threat of those bodies, produced in their hidden, multiple meanings. "Even after the doses of tranquillisers there were parts of Gloria that couldn't be reached: women have so many secret pockets and undiscovered ravines, the government never dreamed. If protests arise ... they will come from the women ..."

Frame is a writer whose interest lies in the what is not said, and the writing struggles always to express that

unwritten world. Those who are denied a speaking position within dominant discourses voice their otherness in these fictions, which are for Mercer "a celebration and exploration of all the multiple possibilities, or many-folds, of that which French feminist theorists term 'le féminin'" (1). Frame is fictionalised protests — on behalf of those who are marginalised and against both the repression of differences and the institutionalised means of oppressing persons or groups or ideas that do exhibit difference — provide the basis of Mercer's rereading of her work and its contexts.

Mercer's critical practice is extraordinarily sympathetic to and empathetic with Frame's very demanding *oeuvre*, without ever being sycophantic. *Subversive Fictions* skilfully demonstrates how entangled the practices and politics of writing and reading are. This rereading takes place outside the often prescriptive and sometimes delimiting modes that our term "criticism" implies; most importantly it denies the power of the critic and constantly reinvests power in textualisation. Using poststructuralist French feminist theories, most significantly the work of Luce Irigaray, Mercer does not allow this dense framework to overwhelm her enterprise. The body of theory and its particular relevance for this critic to Frame's work — in what has often been criticised as its incomprehensibility, incoherence and so on, that is, in its writing of *le féminine* — is usefully explicated. Its limitations as well as its aptness are part of the ongoing exploration and dis-

cussion of Frame's work, while the focus always remains on that writing.

In one sense, Mercer deals with Frame's work quite conventionally. She devotes a chapter to each of Frame's books, beginning with the first, *The Lagoon & Other Stories* (1951), moving through the twelve works of fiction and the three works of autobiography in the order of their publication, and ending with the last, *The Carpathians* (1988). In other senses, it interrogates and shifts the conventions of literary criticism. For example, Mercer's work as critic is itself made a subject of this book. That is, the work of criticism and the presence and politics of the critic are not hidden but become part of her text. Just as the practice of writing and the matter of creative work is one of the concerns of the fictions, so Mercer writes about the practice of criticism as well as participating in it. And her reading practice is inclusive; she brings to the novels all the critical material surrounding them as well as autobiographical detail; her personal responses to the works and her encounters with the author. In many ways *Subversive Fictions* describes the journey of a devoted reader through a fabulous, formerly unmentionable world, the world of Janet Frame's fictions.

Frame's work gained a wide readership only with the publication of her three autobiographies; *To the Is-Land* (1982); *An Angel At My Table* (1984); and *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985). That readership was extended with the release of Jane Campion's award

winning film *An Angel at my Table*, based on all three autobiographical fictions, which enjoyed an unanticipated success first as a telefilm, then in mainstream Australian cinemas a few years ago. As Mercer notes, it is ironic that the film, "more than anything else, has influenced the reading and popularity of Janet Frame" (223). More accessible than Frame's other major works of fiction, these "found fictions" as she calls them, which however for her are "just conservative narration from beginning to end" (quoted 224), also become part of the current appetite for life writing. Here, readers are offered an apparently "simple, everyday glass" that allows us a space from which to identify with the often tragic events of Frame's life, always protected by the safety of our own sameness.

This is a valuable work both for Frame devotees as well as for new readers of her work. It will also engage those interested in the ways the positions and the functions of reader/writer, author/critic may conjoin and the ways these two modes of writing and of thinking can be made intersubjective instead of divided from one another. Then critical apparatuses and practices can enhance rather than diminish the fictions that are the object of their attention. In a chapter on *Living in the Maniototo* (1979), which Mercer constructs as a dialogue between two kinds of discourse, which are perhaps dream, perhaps reality, she effects a transformation of more conventional critical practices. Her fiction is of two critics, one entering,

caught up in and negotiating the apparently perverse maze of the novel; the second delivering a properly structured and pedantic academic paper on it. It offers a witty, playful representation of the shifting possibilities of the "many folds" of Frame's duplicitous, wise and wonderful fictions as well as of the many frustrations and foibles of traditional criticism for writers. This is a fine and itself occasionally fantastical book on Janet Frame's extraordinary output.

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Gina Mercer

THE DAYS OF LOVE ARE LETTERED

Jennifer Strauss, ed, *The Oxford Book of Australian Love Poems*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, 294 pp. RRP \$29.95 ISBN 0 19 553297 X

Dear Maria,

Was great talking to you the other night, though I was sad to hear you so upset. Thirteen year olds are an awful challenge, aren't they? It must have been such a shock, when Leigh has known about your relationship with Mona for so long, that she should suddenly become furious about it. Do you think someone at school said "Ya, your mum's a lezzo" or something and that set her off? Though as we've often said in our late night discussions