

# Editorial

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**As I write this editorial, New Zealand writers and publishers are preparing to attend the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Aotearoa/New Zealand is to be the 2012 Guest of Honour. This recognition is both a privilege and an opportunity. A coming of age, perhaps. It certainly places NZ writing and writers centre stage on the world scene.**

Recently I have been reading *Janet Frame: In her Own Words*, eds. Denis Harold & Pamela Gordon (Penguin, 2011), a collection of essays, letters, interviews etc which provide an insight into Frame as a person, her ideas and attitudes, her passions, her sense of humour. Some of her comments, as well as the course she pursued in her adult life to facilitate her writing, set me thinking about the identity of NZ writers and writing and the means our authors have employed over the years to validate their work, achieve confidence and a sense of worth as writers.

Perhaps as a colonial legacy, there has been a sense that to acquire a secure identity as a writer one must become established and accepted overseas. From Katherine Mansfield to the present day, there has been a continual migration of writers (and artists) principally to Britain and Europe. Some return, others do not. This parallels the Big OE in general life, underpinned not only by the idea that we must escape insularity, but also that there can be little of value in the Antipodes. Many booksellers and the reading public support this myth by giving priority to books by international authors in preference to those by local writers, the growing body of our own Aotearoa/NZ literature.

Many writers, too, continue to perpetuate this colonial attitude by looking to Britain to set the standard and the literary aesthetic, and by locating their stories overseas to make them more acceptable to the global market, when I would suggest that our literary contribution on the world stage might better focus on the dramas, large and small, of the Antipodes, and the interface between NZ / New Zealanders and the world.

What we have to contribute here in Aotearoa/NZ is unique; it is ours, and we know it in minute detail. Why should we try to be other?

Aotearoa/NZ is a multicultural society, the world in microcosm. There is a wealth of material to be explored within our islands, and between us and those in the South Pacific and Asia with whom we rub shoulders on a regular and vital basis. These are human stories; many transcend cultural boundaries and have world-wide relevance. Essentially the human race is psychologically one and the major life events impinging on one culture are known and experienced by others. Even our political issues have relevance for many in other parts of the world. Literature can speak across cultural boundaries.

Of course, stepping away, experiencing other cultures, environments and ways of life provide perspective, and looking at ourselves from outside enables a measure of objectivity which can enrich our writing. Everything we write has its genesis in experience, even if set in a world of the writer's own creation.

The best fiction is about good characters in an interesting philosophical or psychological context and is engaging across cultures. The most memorable, the ones that draw the reader in from the start, are those characters who come across as having

a distinct cultural identity that shows in their language, behaviour and customs. Not insipid people. In stories about our multicultural Aotearoa/NZ, they are the people with strong voices that sound characteristically Maori or Irish or Chinese or Pacific Island or English or American, etc. They may be at home in their current social and physical environment, or they may be pitted against it.

However, one could argue that while *we* may come to value our NZ literature it does not mean that those in other parts of the world will do so, or, perhaps more pertinently, publish or distribute or market it; it may not be seen as commercial – certainly it will not succeed commercially unless it is available and actively marketed.

But publishing as we have known it is changing and the impact of publishing already making itself felt. The costs of publishing are substantially less than traditional publishing; there is no expensive stock to be warehoused; access for the reading public is more direct and immediate; distribution is easier, faster and cheaper; the 'bookshops' are global. The barriers to getting NZ writing to potential buyers/readers on the other side of the world are crashing down.

The opportunity for our writers to become established members of a global family has arrived. The challenge is to retain our identity as NZ writers within that family, with something special to offer: an Aotearoa/New Zealand literary aesthetic; not a mud-coloured homogenous facsimile, but something distinctive, perhaps raw and audacious?

**Karen Zelas**