



The Frame Function: An Inside-Out Guide to the Novels of Janet Frame by Jan Cronin. Auckland: AUP (2011). RRP \$49.99. Pb, 220pp. ISBN: 1869404866. Reviewed by Cassandra Fusco.

The Frame Function: An Inside-Out Guide to the Novels of Janet Frame, “is cracker,” says scholar Peter Simpson (UA) and he attributes this in large part to the young author’s insightful and intelligent handling of her subject, Janet Frame.

Jan Cronin, in her preface, explains that she first met the work of Janet Frame on a course at Trinity College Dublin. *Living in the Maniototo*, she says, “lured (her) away from medieval literature,” and, when Paul Millar invited her to teach *Intensive Care* Victoria University, she became “permanently hooked.”

Cronin¹ offers a study that is cumulative and clear. Concepts are clearly introduced and extrapolated. Each chapter considers one or more novels, not chronologically and sometimes pairing titles, *Scented Gardens* with *Daughter Buffalo*, for example, or *Living in the Maniototo* and *Towards another Summer*. She dissects how they work, how Frame writes and the impact that these fundamentals have on readers’ interpretation of and engagement with the writing. She starts with a chapter on *The Adaptable Man* (Frame’s 5th novel) and uses this to set up her major paradigms and terminology.²

Cronin’s framework draws upon Janet Frame’s personal and professional correspondence and the dynamic between their author and the author of the novels. This leads Cronin to, ‘My sense is that the prescriptive and elusive properties of Frame’s work are inextricably linked, not as oppositional and irreconcilable facets of the one text, but that they have a more intimate relationship; and this



relationship is bound up in what I am terming the Frame function.’ Cronin analyses Frame’s authorial presence as prescriptive, implicitly laying down rules for the reader to follow and she argues that it is the ‘how’ of a text than the ‘what’ that fuels Frame’s writing.³ There is, Cronin suggests, sometimes tension between these two aspects. But, she asserts, this only adds to and distinguishes Frame’s writing - rich, complex and elusive.

Cronin delves. She detects. Ultimately her framework (like her subtitle) is seen to be hooked deep in the novels *and* their author’s living context (in particular her correspondence). Thus, from a position of total immersion, Cronin reveals much about the complex literary architecture of her subject. And it is to Cronin’s credit that she does not attempt to re-produce the subject or her writing ‘in easy-to-swallow capsules.’ This critical insight, coupled with solid and extensive research, makes *The Frame Function* a cracker, a worthwhile study for anyone who has ever been stimulated, intrigued and/or mystified by the writing of Janet Frame.

- ¹: Dr Jan Cronin is a senior lecturer in the Department of English at The University of Auckland. She has a PhD on Janet Frame’s novels, has published articles on Frame and co-edited the collection of essays, *Frameworks: Contemporary Criticism on Janet Frame* (Rodopi, 2009). She has also done extensive research in Frame archives held in the Australia and US.
- ²: Introduction -- Chapter 1: “The Frame Function: An Inside/Out Guide - *The Adaptable Man*,” Chapter 2: “Birth of the Frame Function - *Owls Do Cry & Faces in the Water*,” Chapter 3: “Frame’s Reader/Reading Frame(s) - *A State of Siege & The Rainbirds*,” Chapter 4: “Nameless Sorts of Books?” - *Scented Gardens for the Blind & Daughter Buffalo* -- Chapter 5: “Self-sufficient Systems? - *The Edge of the Alphabet*,” Chapter 6: “Intentional fallacies? - *Intensive Care*,” Chapter 7: “Who’s Afraid of Janet Frame? - ‘Difficulty’ in *The Carpathians*,” Chapter 8: “The final Frame - *Living in the Maniototo* and *Towards Another Summer*,” Notes, Bibliography and a very useful Index.
- ³: Frame often professed to be anti the idea of authorial intentionality and Cronin’s use of her correspondence with Bill Brown regarding this is a classic and telling example. See: pp135-6.