

CRONIN, JAN. *The Frame Function: An Inside-Out Guide to the Novels of Janet Frame*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2011. 222 pp. \$35.00.

Published in May 2011, Jan Cronin's *The Frame Function* is, if I count well, the tenth monograph to be entirely dedicated to the study of New Zealand's best-known author Janet Frame (1924-2004). Aside from constituting a significant contribution to Janet Frame scholarship, Cronin's study is, as its title indicates, a helpful inside-out guide for students and teachers alike insofar as it delineates the author's system of "privileged stagings or enactments" (13) and in so doing facilitates the navigation across or around Frame's sea of ideas. To anyone unfamiliar with Frame but wishing to apply a similar inside-out approach to another author, Cronin's work is certainly

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a first-rate starting point. Amateurs will also relish the inclusion of an important segment of the Framean paratext—i.e. reviews of the novels, interviews with Frame and, courtesy of the Janet Frame Literary Trust, fragments from Frame’s unpublished correspondence with Bill Brown—which Cronin utilizes to circumscribe Frame’s artistic intentions and measure the effects of “the frame function” on readers and reviewers.

Within the ambit of Janet Frame scholarship, the specificity of Cronin’s contribution resides in its postulating that the Framean text is characterized by the “operation of a prescriptive authorial presence” (19) and that the resulting tension between discourse and story or, as she expresses it, between “*how* a text works and *what it says*” (13), determines the tenor, and reception, of a text. *Faces in the Water* (1961) for instance is polarized around Frame’s desire to trigger off a compassionate response to madness and her commitment to the “notion of madness as inviolable and inscrutable” (31). To preserve and advance both agendas, the author has no choice but to “deflect the reader’s attention away from that [inviolable] otherness” (35). A similar tension between the *how* and the *what* underpins *A State of Siege* (1966) where “Frame tempts the reader into replicating Malfred’s [the main protagonist] reading practices” (46) although, this time, the text itself is geared *against* Malfred’s “Neoplatonist” (41) interpretations, her “pursuit of ideals” (41) beyond the shadow world.

To enact a privileged scheme, Frame is quite prepared, then, to interrupt any attempt at “creative collaboration” (50) on the reader’s part—“the reader,” Cronin explains, “is very much marshaled by Frame whether s/he realises it or not” (50). In the same vein, the author displays a surprising propensity in *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1961), *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1964) or *Intensive Care* (1970) for using her characters as “vehicles” for the enactment of “central preoccupations” (67)—at the cost, sometimes, of their credibility as human beings. As such, the image that emerges from Cronin’s work of Frame as a manipulating demiurge dangling characters and readers alike at the other hand of the authorial umbilical cord is not flattering for her audience. Yet, in granting Frame both a tyrannical agency and a voice of her own (through the inclusion of her letters and interviews), Cronin goes some way towards contravening a well-worn tendency among ‘experts’—be they doctors or critics—to maintain the erroneous diagnosis of Frame as a schizophrenic or to re-diagnose her, posthumously, with autism in order perhaps to explain away the complexities of her art.

A corollary achievement of *The Frame Function* is that it shows the process through which Frame herself flouts the authority of some characters but also, even more daringly, of entire narratives. Admittedly, *The Rainbirds* (1969) is one of Frame’s least successful novels but, according to Cronin, the text is a failure on its own terms given that it sets about relating a grand biblical narrative in a cultural context too narrow and claustrophobic to accommodate it. The result is that Frame’s Lazarus is eventually thwarted by his rebirth in the New Zealand garden of prejudices. Similarly orchestrated by a “prescriptive authorial presence” (19) which, in this case, is too didactic, Frame’s début novel, *Owls Do Cry* (1957), also contains in seminal form the germs of its author’s subsequent preference for plural values in its advocacy of “true treasure” (21) as “fluid” and “subjective” (23). “The problem,” Cronin argues, “is that this fluid version of true treasure is incompatible with the dualistic framework in which Frame initially inscribes it” (26) so that the tension between the *what* and the *how* comes “perilously close to sabotaging the text” (20). I could multiply the examples of the working of “the frame function” and of *The Frame Function*, but the arresting point is that all through her work, Cronin buttresses her impression that

the “autonomy” of Frame’s novels is “corroded by [an] authorial presence” and that this “empirical presence” (3) complicates the notion that Frame’s texts are “closed systems” (100), the product, so to speak, of a genius locked in an ivory tower.

From her examination of a number of “key enactments” (93), Cronin finally comes to the conclusion that Frame, like Kristeva, writes “theoretical fiction” (80) rather than traditional novels, and she adds that “no one...will raise an eyebrow at the idea that Julia Kristeva intentionally writes novels that engage with and function as critical and cultural theory or that this theoretical dimension might involve a ‘self-indulgence’ that is not necessarily concerned with or oriented towards the reader’s response” (98). This is true, and yet one does raise an eyebrow at Cronin’s parallel assertion that the “meditative maze” formed by each of Frame’s novels “doesn’t, ultimately, advance its subject” (79). In demoting Frame’s work from the rank of “theoretical fiction” to a fiction of enactments from which “no stable theoretical position is distillable” (149), Cronin is, on her own admission, aligning herself with the conclusions of other scholars (Drichel and Delrez) who, like her, believe that Frame’s interest in a transcendental beyond limits the scope of her explorations because “one cannot explore *beyond*” (195). At this juncture, however, one remembers Cronin’s earlier affirmation that Frame’s *The Adaptable Man* (1965) “threatens to efface the original—the transcendental that lies beyond” (10), and her relentless demonstration that, whether or not one belongs with Frame’s ‘saved’, the pursuit of a Platonist trajectory perpetuates “eternal patterns that will doom mankind” (134) or her suggestion that the author forces the reader to adopt limited interpretative practices the better to deconstruct them. Is Frame, in other words, indeed valorizing a beyond that would be transcendental or is it the case that her enactments, in writing Plato against himself, posit something of, as Cronin intuits, “a subversiveness beyond what we’ve formerly imaged” (138)? Despite the incisiveness of Cronin’s examination of the *how* in *The Frame Function*, the nagging impression remains that Janet Frame studies is still in need of yet another installment, one that will tackle the *why*.

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