

# The working-class writing of Janet Frame: Oral storytelling, community, and embodied knowledge

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## Abstract

This article positions the twentieth-century New Zealand author Janet Frame as a working-class writer, and as such addresses an absence within Frame criticism. Her works have invited feminist, postcolonial, and postmodernist readings, and in recent years her compositional approach has drawn much interest, issuing in the popular characterisation of her writing as prescriptive. This article intervenes in these debates by insisting on the importance of social class in shaping Frame's relationship to storytelling and her conceptualisation of authorship. It establishes the centrality of oral storytelling, song, and the recitation of poetry to the first of Frame's autobiographies *To the Is-Land* (1982), and identifies a connection between her working-class origins and the oral fabric of the Frame family home. It explores the operations of a domestic mythopoeic practice, which it defines as sociable, transcultural, and open-ended, and shows how this oral culture influenced Frame as she began to engage with processes of literary production and participate in the national literary culture. Close examination of her first publication *The Lagoon and Other Stories* (1951) reveals a writer uneasy with the associations of print authorship, namely, ownership and autonomy. Close reading of these early stories shows Frame to be intent on preserving their oral provenance and on conveying to the page their original bases in multiple authorship and transculturalism. This article uncovers an early resistance to the politics of individualism represented by the proprietary author, a resistance that proceeds from her classed experiences and which is implicated with her negotiation of the legacies of empire in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

## Keywords

authorship, autobiography, class, empire, oral storytelling

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In “Beginnings”, an autobiographical essay published in *Landfall* magazine, Janet Frame locates her reverence for words (“instruments of magic”) in the almost alchemical transformation of her family by educational mobility (Frame, 1965: 40). As this early essay makes clear, the enchantment of language was, for Frame and her relations, profoundly connected to social class: to access to education, and to the fissuring of the family along lines of language use, following “a revolution of literacy” (41). This article is interested in the revelation of this “sudden family literacy” in the home, and in the ways in which it shaped Frame’s relationship to storytelling (40). Scholars have examined Frame’s simulation of orality and her exploitation of the effects of speech within her short fiction (Birat, 2012). This article, differently, establishes a connection between the oral fabric of the family home, as represented in Frame’s early fiction and her autobiography, and the class position of the Frames, “a Railway Family” (Frame’s father was a railway worker) descended from emigrant Scots (Frame, 2010: 167). It explores the operations of a domestic mythopoeic practice, which it understands as a legacy of the recency of illiteracy within the family; and it establishes the centrality of oral stories, oral performance, and recitation to the first volume of the autobiography, published in 1982. This article asks to what extent the sociable oral storytelling practice that defined her early years influenced Frame as she began to produce stories for publication, to engage with processes of literary production, and, out of necessity, to embody the figure of the autonomous and proprietary author.

In the asking of these questions, this article challenges recent critical interventions that position Frame in opposition to her readership, characterising her as an author whose compositional processes restrict the freedom of her readers to read independently, spontaneously, and heterogeneously. Patrick Evans (2004), Jan Cronin (2011), and Andrew Dean (2021) have each contributed to this characterisation of her work and writerly temperament. This article establishes the disjunction between the set of attributes and attitudes accorded to Frame within the last two decades, namely, prescriptiveness and imperiousness, and the modalities of the oral storytelling practice in which Frame was immersed for the first twenty years of her life: a sociable mode of storytelling that was inclusive, transcultural, and open-ended. This article proposes that there is in operation, alongside an approach to writing that issues in the prescriptiveness described by Cronin, Evans, and others, a competing approach to composition, one informed by an understanding of storytelling and books, reading and readers, that was formed in childhood and in community. It will evidence this competing compositional approach by drawing out the influence of oral storytelling on Frame’s debut collection, *The Lagoon and Other Stories* (1951).

By centring the question of class, this article offers new readings of the first autobiography and the early short stories, and addresses an absence within Frame criticism. Frame scholarship has tended to marginalize the subject of class. Scholars agree that the Frames were “impoverished” (Parker, 2024: 15; Evans, 2004: unpaginated). The material hardships that marked Frame’s peripatetic upbringing and young adulthood on the South Island, as recalled in the first and second autobiographies, are not debated: class disparities within Pākehā communities charge Frame’s record of her school years; and the cramped conditions and lack of privacy (“for we girls slept altogether top and tail in one bed”) that followed the family from Ferry Street, Wyndham to Eden Street, Oamaru shape the sibling relationships central to the volume (Frame, 2010: 119).

However, scholars have yet to ask whether this poverty exercised an influence on Frame's conceptualisations of storytelling and authorship. Likewise, Frame's classed experiences have seldom been factored into assessments of her struggles with identity and belonging in post-settlement Aotearoa/New Zealand, though they had to have entered, along with her whiteness, into processes of self-understanding. Most notably, what has been missing from Frame criticism is an interest in her participation from an early age in a domestic mythopoeic practice. Naturally, there has been no recognition of the reciprocity between this domestic oral culture and the Frames' class of origin.

Enmeshed with the disadvantages Frame details in her autobiography and the experiences of her paternal grandparents, who escaped destitution in Scotland in the early nineteenth century, this English-language oral culture is markedly different from Māori oral culture, though it similarly entails the transmission of embodied knowledge, and extends to the re-telling in English of traditional Māori stories or pūrākau, introduced to the Frame children by non-Māori educators. This article makes the case that this domestic oral culture inspired in Frame a respect for unwritten literatures, and instructed her in the disagreements between oral storytelling and the processes of literary production. This tension, which I will elaborate in the later part of this article, has implications for postcolonial readings of Frame's work. As I will show, there are symmetries between Frame's fraught negotiations with print authorship in the first phase of her career, and her equally anxious negotiations with her own genealogy and what Emma Parker calls "the personal inheritances of empire" (Parker, 2024: 173).

## Recent criticism

In *The Frame Function*, Jan Cronin uncovers a "wilful authorial presence" at work within the novels, "controlling the terms of the text" (Cronin, 2011: 4, 5). Cronin traces "the operation of [this] prescriptive authorial presence", prescriptive in the sense of "laying down rules of usage", and reconciles this textual presence with the "flesh and blood writer" (6, 5). In characterizing Frame as prescriptive, Cronin builds on Patrick Evans's coinage, "the 'Frame effect'": "the sense that her writing conceals A Secret", a biographical master key ("some private fact or facts"), that unlocks the whole of her corpus (Evans, 2004: unpaginated). Evans ascribes "the 'Frame effect'" to "her control of [her] imago [...] and of how the writing was to be read" (Evans, 2004: unpaginated). This panoptic control and containment on Frame's part "involve[d] a fundamental contract with the reader which was always basically adversarial", and leads Evans to characterize Frame's temperament as "ruthless and efficient" (Evans, 2004: unpaginated). Cronin, in turn, finds evidence of prescriptiveness in some of Frame's earliest works: in the "didacticism" of *Owls Do Cry* and in the "blatant manipulation of the reader" in *Faces in the Water* (Cronin, 2011: 20, 16). More recently, Andrew Dean has explored Frame's "metafictional practices", and, echoing Cronin and Evans, suggests that these practices originate with "a desire to pre-empt and reorient the reception of [the] author and her works" (Dean, 2021: 73). With these recent interventions, then, we have seen the construction of an authorial sensibility founded on two principles: prescriptiveness and a deep suspicion of the reader.

While not denying Frame's tendencies to prescriptiveness and their evidence in the texts, this article asks that we situate these tendencies within a timeline; that we

introduce into this picture a temporal dimension and a sense of the journey or passage of the author: from young working-class writer at the periphery of a literary culture to the published author negotiating with what Dean calls “a coterie of literary nationalists”, who “held positions of influence in many of the organs that supported local publishing” (73, 76). Frame’s autobiographies and the earlier autobiographical writings establish the origins of her interest in language and literature, and these origins have been overlooked by the critics behind the articulation of the “prescriptive” authorial sensibility that dominates Frame scholarship. These readings are also limited by their focus on the long-form fiction at the expense of the short fiction, particularly the early stories, which, as I will show, reveal a faltering transition from undifferentiated *storyteller* to sovereign *author*. These stories wear the marks of Frame’s formative immersion in an oral culture, and show her to be determined in this early phase of her writing career to hold to the codes of this communal mythopoeic practice, and to convey to the printed page its bases in multiple authorship and transculturalism.

This article addresses itself to recent critical formulations of Frame’s authorial identity (Evans, 2004; Cronin, 2011; Dean, 2021), and asks that we question the inherency of the attributes and motivations accorded to Frame since her death, among them, coerciveness (“[we are] under her control whenever we read her and required to perform — to *solve*”), and *schadenfreude* (“manipulating both text and reader for kicks”) (Evans, 2004: n.p.; Cronin, 2011: 3). It suggests that we entertain the possibility that the “Frame function”, which is to say, “the dynamic between prescriptiveness and elusiveness” that is “fundamental [...] within Frame’s work”, was forged in response to the professional and institutional environments and expectations to which Frame was exposed and became acculturated as her career progressed (Cronin, 2011: 16). This article casts doubt on Frame’s supposed hostility toward her readership, and asks what satisfaction this could bring a writer whose early semi-autobiographical and late-career autobiographical works locate the enjoyment of stories in the *sharing* of them; and for whom recitation, singing, verse speaking, and the audiences and communities they presuppose and consolidate, were instrumental to her decision at a young age to become a writer of fiction and poetry. It argues that representations of Frame as a writer disposed from the outset to suspect and ensnare her reader are destabilized when we recognize the central position that oral storytelling occupies in her writings about her childhood, and contextualize the oral culture that defined her early years as related to her class status. This article prescribes a change of approach to the formulation of Frame’s authorial sensibility. It asks that we reorient the sensibility around the rootedness of Frame’s first engagements with literature in community and the social, and around her earliest understandings of what constitutes a book and the act of reading. In so doing, what becomes apparent is the incoherence between, on the one hand, the writing and reading environment of the working-class home, and, on the other hand, the world of letters Frame would enter in her twenties.

## An oral culture

Frame affords to oral narration and song a central place in her childhood and early adolescence. This section will establish the oral fabric of the Frame family home, as

represented in the first volume of Frame's autobiography (1982): the repertoire of stories, songs, and colloquialisms ("OK, chief") that sustained a mythopoeic practice in which all members of the family participated (Frame, 2010: 56). In what follows, I will examine the operations of this oral storytelling practice, focusing on the distinguishing features of oral stories, namely, their impermanence and their potential to exist in infinite variation. Frame herself is interested in the distinction between oral and material forms of storytelling, and foregrounds the modalities of oral storytelling in her first autobiography. Vis-à-vis the "invisible" oral tradition as an object of study, Ülo Valk maintains that "[o]ral tradition always implies going beyond the borders of individual creation and single performances" (Valk, 2003: 139). In *To the Is-Land*, Frame makes visible a domestic oral culture by bringing to the fore its distinctive modalities: collective creation and iterative performance, or repetition.

Repetition is fundamental to the mythopoeic practice through which the Frame family understands itself and draws itself together. As Frame writes in *To the Is-Land*, "Mother's memory of my birth always had two repeated references" (Frame, 2010: 7). Here, "memory" refers both to the memory and its enunciation. In other words, the memory-story "always had two repeated references", but was otherwise subject to change, every other element of the story and the memory a moving part (7). George Frame told fewer stories ("As children, we heard little of our father's ancestors"), and had a smaller share in the repertoire (4). As Frame recalls, "One of the few exceptions was his tales of 'the time we had the monkey'" (5–6). There is a disjunction, here, between the plural subject ("tales") and the singular past tense form ("was"), and that disjunction seems deliberately to call attention to the workings of oral tradition, wherein a single story exists in infinite variation. In this particular case, the story is invariably "told with remembered delight and some longing" (5–6). The feeling it rouses in their father every time he tells it is the reason the children clamour to hear this tale or "tales". What follows directly after this sentence appears at first to be a permutation of the "pet monkey" tale, but the telling is abruptly cut short:

When his family left Oamaru, where he was born, to live in Port Chalmers (where his mother, Grandma Frame, became known as midwife), Grandad Frame brought home from the pub a monkey left by one of the sailors. "Tell us," we used to say to Dad, "about the time you had a pet monkey." (Frame, 2010: 6)

Instead of recounting the whole story as it was told to her and her siblings, Frame circles back to the oft-repeated injunction, "Tell us". She affords six short clauses to context, but withholds the details and dialogue of the story that kindled in her father "remembered delight and some longing" (6). It is the *act* of telling and of being told that are important to this autobiography. First and foremost, Frame would have her reader remark the desire for stories (the exhortative "Tell us"), their place in the home, and their functioning as a medium through which the parent-child relationship is experienced.

The stuff of memory is speech in *To the Is-Land*, and this is especially the case with Frame's earliest memories. Frame remembers her first home as thrumming with activity, charged with the resonant talk of older relatives, who flowed through the open house like

an electric current: “there was much coming and going and talking and laughing, with words travelling like the wind along invisible wires, words full of meaning and importance describing the Great Dunedin and South Seas Exhibition and the visit of the Duke of York” (11). This was the way of the Frames, “an excitable family with a passion for detail and a love of home and hearth that helped to make the smallest expedition beyond the family home an occasion to recall in minute detail all the meetings, conversations, news, rumours, and actual events” (11). Theirs is a wide-ranging, inclusive storytelling practice that does not operate a distinction between “actual events” and invention, and owes its breadth to the appetite for stories it supports (11). The young Janet shares this enthusiasm for stories, never more exhilarated by this enveloping talk than when epochal incident and fiction converge, each one heightening the other:

and when the events were as important as royal visits and great exhibitions and floods and the sinking of unsinkable ships, mixed with dramatic details of books being read and poems remembered as if they, too, had been present occasions, then I can explain the sense of excitement I felt but could not understand as it moved to and fro in the travelling network of words. (Frame, 2010: 11)

The uncertain referent of “it” in this complex, breathless sentence (“as *it* moved to and fro”) only serves to accentuate what is unambiguous and the more important: the operations of this “meaning[ful]” speech. Such talk is constantly in motion, untethered (“travelling like the wind along invisible wires”), and it forms a moving meshwork, a complex of filaments ringing with words. What is captured in this phrase “the travelling network of words” is the sociability of oral culture. Perhaps inspired by the telephone lines that looped across the country’s landscape, following the instalment of its telephone network in the first decade of the twentieth century, the image calls up notions of connectivity, circuitry, and informal conversation. It is difficult to bolt onto this image (“the travelling network of words”) the principles of originality and origination that underpin the modern publishing industry. It is equally difficult to map onto its referent, a domestic oral culture, the fixity, formality, and perfectibility in which publishers and booksellers trade. Frame would begin transacting with this industry and an adjoining literary culture upon the acceptance for publication of her first book of stories, a development that would require her to become the modern author: separate, sovereign, and possessive. I will return to this development later on in the article, but one may easily anticipate the challenges that lay in store for Frame: how *would* this inexperienced and unsupported writer, immersed in a mode of storytelling she called a “travelling network of words”, cast off this early conditioning and remodel herself as the autonomous and proprietary author? More to the point, *why* should she?

Unquestionably, Frame’s delineation of this formative oral culture makes clear that intellectual property and autonomous creation are concepts extraneous to its operations. There is no place for territorial exclusivity in this system of storytelling, no possibility for exclusionary control. Alternative versions of the same story proliferate in this system, no one better than the other, each permutation functioning to recharge the story, rather than fix or finish it. Frame instructs her reader in the operations of this

storytelling practice in her description of the popular songs that entered the family repertoire upon moving to the new house in Wyndham:

There were the “new” songs, too, which suddenly everyone was singing, sometimes as if with a touch of daring, “Moonlight and Roses”, “It ain’t no sense sitting on the fence all by yourself in the moonlight”, which even then we children knew as “It ain’t no fun sitting on your bum all by yourself in the moonlight”. (Frame, 2010: 19)

We see a similar accommodation of multiple versions of the same song when Janet is introduced to “E pare ra”:

Then, one afternoon, when we had singing from the Dominion Song Book, a class I loved, we sang a haunting song, “Like to the tide moaning in grief by the shore, / mourn I for friends captured and warriors slain...” We sang the Maori words too: “E pare ra...” (Frame, 2010: 45)

Both the Māori and English lyrics of the song are sung on the day of its introduction to the children. The two sets of words “became part of [her] memories, like the wind in the telegraph wires”, and, wreathed together, purchased a place in the world of her imagination:

a world that seemed to have no boundaries [...] the world of Old Meg, the beggars and swaggers, angels, too, and Poppy and Hoppityou and the Twelve Dancing Princesses, and the playground songs, and like to the tide moaning in grief by the shore, E pare ra. (Frame, 2010: 84–85)

As these examples show, Frame is as much concerned to convey *how* song and poetry permeated the home as she is to name those songs and poems that delighted and remained with her. What is described in *To the Is-Land* are routines of telling, singing, and playing (“he played us to sleep each evening with his bagpipes”), and the fluency of transitions between items or performances that made up a regular programme (19). As Frame remembers:

And there was Dad’s special song, which he sang to Mum. They’d kiss and laugh together, and Mum would blush and smile [...] And from that song, Dad would start the one which began, “Underneath the gaslight’s glitter / stands a little orphan girl”, and our hearts would swell. (Frame, 2010: 19)

Through music and song, and the close-weft oral fabric to which they contributed, Frame recalls the contours of life at home in this period, “with our mother and father working all day and singing and playing the accordion and the bagpipes in the evening while we children played from waking till sleeping” (17). Just as the young Frame children could tell the time by this domestic oral culture, telling and being told functioned similarly as an index of one’s position in the family. The Frame children are enrolled in this practice of oral storytelling at birth, needing initially to borrow from older siblings, “who had already begun their store of experience”, and who knew and related in their own words “the record, always slightly different, of our mother and father” (7). With each new addition to the family, the repertoire is strengthened and replenished: “each [child], in a sense

with memories on loan, beg[ins] to supply the individual furnishings of each Was-Land”, to trace and retrace the “accumulating memories [they] had *not* shared”, as well as invent their present and thus populate “each Is-Land” (7, emphasis added). This mythopoeic practice in action occasionally bears resemblance to vaudeville, with popular literature giving rise to solo acts or sketches to be repeated, performed on cue, for as long as they amused the family:

The book that everyone was talking about in our house was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and I was being called Topsy because my hair was frizzy. “Who are you?” they’d ask me, and I learned to reply, “I’m the girl that never was born pras I grew up among the corn. Golly. Ain’t I wicked!” (Frame, 2010: 9)

Such sketches are practiced (“learned”) until perfected and become a part of the play-book (“they’d ask me”). Retrospectively, this call-and-response burlesque comes to connote a particular chapter in the life of the family, that is, the stretch of time in which Janet “was being called Topsy” on account of her hair (9). Moreover, these remembered sketches are among the clearest demonstrations of the importance of audience to storytelling within the family home, and at the time of their performance they modelled to the young Frame a positive author-audience relationship.

## Reading in community

I want now to expand on how written literature took up a place within this oral culture, alongside popular song, folklore, rumour, and family history; and to draw out the role of social class in the formation of habits of reading aloud and learning by heart, and in the circulation of print literature among members of a community with limited access to books. In *To the Is-Land*, Frame locates the enjoyment of stories in the sharing of them. Reading undertaken in privacy is shared at the soonest opportunity. We see this most clearly in the passing of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* from Poppy to Janet, and from Janet to her sisters:

one day Poppy asked me if I would like to borrow her special book that she kept in her washhouse among a clutter of treasures in an old beer barrel. “It’s *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*,” she said. I had never heard of such a book, but I said I’d like to borrow it. And that night I took *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* to bed and began to read, and suddenly the world of living and the world of reading became linked in a way I had not noticed before. “Listen to this,” I said to Myrtle and Dots and Chicks. They listened while I read “The Twelve Dancing Princesses”, and as I read and they listened, I knew and they knew, gloriously, that we were the Dancing Princesses. (Frame, 2010: 48)

The joy of reading aloud from a book resides in the potential to feel *together* the feelings and fantasies it touches off. The chiasmic structure of the last sentence of this passage (“They listened while I read [...] and as I read and they listened”) intensifies this simultaneity of feeling, which Frame calls knowledge: “I knew and they knew”. The sisters are transfigured by this mutual conviction, momentarily forming a unitary subject (“we”). Grammatically suspended, the word “gloriously” lends a eucharistic significance to this

transmutation of the emphatically separate “Myrtle and Dots and Chicks” and their sister into the “Dancing Princesses”. As represented in *To the Is-Land*, Frame’s earliest experiences of writing and her decision to become a writer are complicated by this pattern of encountering literature in community. Upon being “promoted to Standard Four” at school and becoming “the teacher’s ‘pet’”, Janet is tasked with writing a poem (75). When she shares “that first poem” at home, the family is “proud” and her “father promise[s] to bring home a railway notebook from the loco foreman’s office for [her] to write down more poems” (76). This individual success is soon assimilated into the communal activity of reading and writing that is commonplace in the Frame household:

The prospect of having a real notebook and being able to write poems, with numbered pages and an index, made us dizzy with delight, for the others would have notebooks too, under the rules of fair play. We were all hungry for words. (Frame, 2010: 77)

Linking these two passages, and effecting the transition from the “I” and “my” of “when I ‘shared’ my new triumph at home” to the “we” and “us” of the second quotation, is a meditation on the materiality of the “attractive” railway notebooks and of “Dad’s other books [which] were of equal fascination” (75, 76). This fascination occasions mock “readings”, which involve all of the Frame children and cause damage to the books:

the bagpipe music books with their peculiar heavy print and signs in code, which we “played”, reading or conducting from them until, as with almost every household item we touched, we “wore” them out or, in adult words, “ruined” them, leaving them torn, written on, with pages missing. (Frame, 2010: 76)

Only Dad’s “fly book with its leather cover salt-smelling and smeared with patches of fish scales, with the parchment pages, the bulk closed by an elastic band”, was spared this rough handling, entering into their “ritual of play” in name only: “‘I think I’ll get out m’ fly book’” (76). It is through this ritual of play that the “I” of Janet’s triumphal induction into poetical composition becomes lost in the congestion of the family home and a community united in its admiration for books.

A similar integration of personal achievement into the social organisation of the family takes place when at the end of the year Janet is awarded the Dux medal and, along with it, “a year’s subscription to the Oamaru Public Library” (80). As Frame recalls, “[m]y new library subscription was a family affair” (81). Inside the Athenaeum, Janet selects books for her parents and brothers and sisters, as well as books with shared appeal:

I brought home for Bruddie a “William” book, which we all read. I found *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, the same kind of red-covered book with the thin pages packed with black print that I’d borrowed from Poppy. I found a Western for Dad and a Dickens for Mum, who had no time to read it but who touched it and opened it and flipped the pages and read out striking descriptions, saying, “How wonderful, kiddies, Charles Dickens, born in poverty, growing up to be a great writer.” (Frame, 2010: 81)

Here again, there is the association of communal reading with the appreciation of the materiality of bound and printed books. More explicitly than in the previous passage, this

reading practice and reverence for books are, here, implicated with social class. Lottie Frame, who is overworked and has no leisure time in which to read the Dickens novel, takes pleasure in handling the book, which prompts her to marvel at the modest beginnings of the man whose name is blazoned on the cover. The family accustomed to owning books and to maintaining a private library grows indifferent, perhaps, to the makings of a book, to paper quality and the distribution of print across pages. For the Frames, the materiality of books is a key component of the reading experience, because of their scarcity in the home. As Frame relates in "Beginnings", "[t]he books in my life had once been few" (Frame, 1965: 43). The same is true of writing: writing and writing materials, which are not readily available at home, coalesce in Frame's reconstruction of her earliest experiences of writing, a merging that is enacted in the elision of the preposition *in* in the phrase, "I enjoyed writing my railway book" (Frame, 2010: 88). It is important to note, however, that the family-wide reverence for books and their scarcity does not engender within the family a sense of their superiority over oral stories, stories that simply cannot be fixed on the page or contained between covers, because they exist in variation and between people. Frame will wrestle with this incompatibility of the oral story and print publication in the writing of her first collection, as I will show in the final section.

## Recitation and class

Further complicating Frame's earliest experiences of reading and writing is recitation. Instances of the recitation of poetry are found throughout the first volume of the autobiography. At fifty-six Eden Street, Lottie amuses herself by "reciting poetry, making up humorous rhymes about Dad and the salmon he would catch and the ones that would get away" (96). At high school, "verse speaking" and the memorisation of "'set' pieces" are routine practice (106). Frame recalls how "Miss Lindsay used to read for hours from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*", and it was in this way that Frame was introduced to many texts that affected her: "One morning Miss Gibson came into the classroom and without any preliminary discussion sat at her table, opened a book, said in her 'announcing' voice, "'The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner'" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge' and began to read. She read the entire poem" (85, 120). What is stressed in these representations of encounters with poems is their delivery and its effects on Frame and her classmates. The feat of the reading of long narrative poems from beginning to end, and the spectacle of immersion in the diegeses of these epic poems, impressed the young Janet as powerfully as the poems themselves. In the case of Miss Lindsay, it was her "absorption in [the poem] that compelled [Janet] to listen and wonder" (85). When shared at home, such poems have a curious effect on those members of the family who heard them first in a similar context:

I brought home news of the poems, reciting them again and again, with Mother receiving them as an exile receives sight of a long-lost native land. "We had 'Ring out Wild Bells' today," I said, whereupon Mum, with a gasp of recognition, repeated, "Ring out wild bells to the wild sky, / The flying cloud, the frosty light..." to be joined by Myrtle, a most recent exile, saying in a homesick voice, "'The year is dying, let him die...' We had that." It was enough to remind

Myrtle of *The Minstrel Boy* and “I Met at Eve the Prince of Sleep” and *Un-deux-trois-quatre-cinq...*, the knowing of which gave her a power and satisfaction that she hadn’t found in her new life of growing up and arguing with Dad and going to dances and seeing Jack Dixon operate the projector at the Majestic. (Frame, 2010: 86)

For Lottie and her eldest daughter Myrtle, whose diagnosis with a heart condition hastens her withdrawal from junior high school, these poems are met with a mixture of excitement and regret (86). Cast out of the education system (“a most recent exile”) and working now as a companion to widowed neighbour Mrs McGimpsey, Myrtle is “homesick” for the “We” of her junior high school experience, and, while she finds that she can still recall the poems she learned in the classroom, they are a bitter reminder that her “new life”, notwithstanding its social and romantic scope, affords her no comparable opportunities to expand with the “power and satisfaction” that “knowing” and the sharing of knowledge can give. Lottie greets these “long-lost” poems with gregarious enthusiasm, but the past with which they are associated is remote to her, and they are consigned to “the ‘latter days’”, which conjure for her children a paradoxical impression: “opposite images of total darkness and loss with total light and revelation” (86).

Informing these responses are the material conditions in which the Frames live and the modest income of George Frame, which does not stretch to the purchase of books nor supports the indefinite continuation of the education of all of his children. The precarity of Janet’s education conditions her to hear and to understand the yearning in the reactions of her mother and sister to hearing these familiar verses. As Frame recalls,

[t]here might have been a time when the supply of crewel needles and stranded cotton, the pens, pencils, bins, blotters, compasses, set squares, protractors, rules, exercise books “ruled feint with margin” (at which Dad made his joke, “Faint all right, at the cost of all this”) [...] might have ceased had not that year, 1935, become the year of the first Labour Government. (Frame, 2010: 83)

The prosperity “promise[d]” by the newly elected Labour Government makes affordable the rolling costs of Janet’s junior high school education, just as the promise of upward mobility and international migration (“the new parental dream, ‘She’s going to be a teacher like Cousin Peg, who emigrated to Canada’”) secures her transition to senior high school, although not without the caution that “if times were hard, [she] might have to leave school or change to ‘commercial’” (83, 91–92). In *To the Is-Land*, recitation functions as a synecdoche for education and, as such, illuminates the relationship between social class and access to education, and offers a window onto the many ramifying realities into which one might step from school, some attractive, some seeming to Janet “a betrayal of anyone’s dearest dreams” (92).

This association of recitation with education is never more pronounced than in the chapter titled “The Hungry Generations”, in which Frame relates the circumstances of her reunion with an estranged friend. Simultaneously, this chapter dismantles the young Frame’s idle assumption that the social and imaginative life ends with the end of non-vocational education. Approaching the fork in the road of senior high school, Janet is relieved at being encouraged by her parents to choose the “professional and academic”

course (91). In contrast, her friend Poppy has enrolled on the “commercial” course, condemning herself, as Janet imagines, to a fate worse than death: “working in an office” (92). After making their choices, the girls meet by chance and, in the course of their conversation, Poppy breaks into a recitation of “Ode to a Nightingale” (112). This particular recitation, unsolicited and unselfconscious, affects Janet more profoundly than any other recounted in the autobiography, and for several reasons. To begin with, it “took [her] by surprise” (113). Janet had assumed that Poppy’s engagement with imaginative literature had ended with her “‘taking commercial’” (112). On top of this, the recitation is affecting because of its bewildering intensity: “the words swept out of Poppy like a cry of panic. Why?” (113). Over and above these reasons, the recitation stays with Frame on account of the change it wrought in her friend. Though the poem, recited at the corner of Glen Street, had seemed to Janet out of place, she saw at the time how naturally it came to Poppy to share poems and stories with other people, and how her friend was transformed in the process, not in the sense of becoming other or greater, but rather more like herself:

Then, suddenly, Poppy seemed to come to life, the same old Poppy who defiantly insisted that other people’s flowers growing through the fence belonged to us, we had a right to “cadge” them, the Poppy who showed me geraniums, their stain and smell, the *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* Poppy. (Frame, 2010: 113)

It is significant that this description of Poppy’s animation *precedes* Frame’s narration of the recitation itself, the cause of her “com[ing] to life” (113). Only after relating this ‘sudden’ alteration does Frame account for it: “‘We’re having “Ode to a Nightingale,”’ [Poppy] said. ‘It’s in our *Mount Helicon*’” (113). Frame’s organisation of this episode is important: Poppy is restored to herself before “beginning to recite”, for it is the *thought* of sharing “Ode to a Nightingale” that quickens her and makes her familiar (113). Buried at the middle of this meeting, which proves to be their last, is the realization that their friendship has always consisted in the exchange of “treasure[d]” wisdom and literature (48). At the end of this episode, Frame uses the phrase “literary works” to refer to Keats’s poem and other material forms of literature they are given at school to learn by heart: “‘We haven’t had [“Ode to the Nightingale”] yet,’ I said, talking, as we did, of literary works as if they were a disease” (114). In *To the Is-Land*, literary works are orally communicated, passing from body to body, and, as such, are nearer forms of oral tradition than they are the typeset and printed stories stocked in libraries accessible only to those with a subscription.

This episode and this friendship, as recorded in *To the Is-Land*, are important to any discussion of Frame’s relationship to storytelling and her emergence as an author. Most instructive are the versions of Poppy that Frame reconciles in the sentence excerpted above. Frame sets side by side, and thus suggests an equivalence between, the friend who lent her “her special book” without fear of never having it returned; the friend whose knowledge of plants and their medicinal applications was considerable and lightly worn; and the friend who disdained boundary markers, not doubting her rights of access or entitlement “to suck honey from the periwinkle flower and to eat and enjoy the sweet floury berries of hawthorn” anywhere they were found to grow (48, 47). Poppy represents the commons of poetry, and embodied knowledge. Both poetry and embodied

knowledge are miraculous in the transformations they perform. Poppy's recitation casts a "spell", and her knowledge, the kind handed down from generation to generation, makes an alchemical laboratory of their neighbourhood in Oamaru: "Poppy taught me how to cure warts by squeezing the juice of the ice plant over them [...] we'd squeeze the juice of the stems over our warts, and, miraculously, within a few days our warts disappeared" (114, 47). Constants of the first volume, and combined in the figure of Poppy, are oral narration, community, and embodied knowledge. At the time of her composing her autobiography, when in her fifties, Frame located the interest and the power of written and unwritten stories in the sharing of them. Recent formulations of her authorial identity have ignored this fact, neglecting also to take into account the obvious influence of oral performance, embodied knowledge, and community on Frame's first collection, published in 1951. In the writing and distribution of *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, Frame had to have negotiated the intersection of these constants of her childhood and adolescence with the complex process of literary production and what Mark Rose calls the "discourse of proprietary authorship" (Rose, 1993: 39).

### *The Lagoon and Other Stories*

Oral storytelling, embodied knowledge, and community each has a part to play in Frame's debut collection, both appearing within the diegeses of the stories and shaping their construction. The title story, "The Lagoon", begins thus: "At low tide the water is sucked back into the harbour and there is no lagoon" (Frame, 1991: 1). The lagoon that gives its name to the collection is a tidal estuary, but, as the title of the collection suggests (*The Lagoon and Other Stories*), it is also a story. As "there is no lagoon", only the mudflats where the sea water has been and will be again at high tide, there is no story, or, at least, no *one* story. The lagoon, filling and emptying, doubles as the oral story, renewed with each telling, never fixed, never identical. The tidal flats, "the dirty grey sand shaded with dark pools of sea water", yield different proofs of story every ebb tide: "a baby octopus if you are lucky, or the spotted orange of an old house of a crab or the drowned wreckage of a child's toy boat" (1). The story's narrator tentatively locates herself in this environment: "There is a bridge over the lagoon where you may look down into the little pools and see your image tangled up with sea water and rushes and bits of cloud" (1). This braiding of their "image" with the locality and its reflection effects, here, an identification of the storyteller *with* the story and the materials of storytelling. In these ways, this opening is suggestive of the provisionality of oral storytelling and its implication with community and place, and sets up the possibility that all of the stories in this collection, though the reader finds them typeset and printed, may be equally provisional, subject to the same ebb and flow as the lagoon and "The Lagoon".

No less than the first, the second paragraph compounds this impression that what is before the reader is a story suspended between written and oral forms of storytelling. The tone of the opening paragraph, along with the word "sometimes" and the conditional "may look" and "may find", which together suggest an intimacy between the narrator and this place, leads the reader to assume that, underpinning this detailed description, is understanding resulting from close observation over multiple visits. This assumption is destabilized by the opening sentence of the second paragraph: "All this my grandmother

told me” (1). With this statement, a new and different storyteller is introduced, and in such a way as encourages the reader to attend closely to narrative perspective, and to question the appositeness of notions of origination and ownership to this story and other stories in the collection. With this clause (“All this my grandmother told me”), not only are the impressions of the opening paragraph attributed to another storyteller, but these details (“a baby octopus... an old house of a crab”) that seemed sensitively observed and personal, and, therefore, authoritative, are changed into re-telling: indirect, unoriginal.

As this opening story unfolds, it becomes apparent that if the lagoon “has” a story, then it exists in multiplicity, as a living story. Moreover, its imbricated variants resist any evaluative organisation or valorisation. The narrator yearns to hear the “proper story” (“if it had a proper story my grandmother never told me”), or, as she also terms it, “the real story” (2, 3). But when the narrator hears it from her aunt, it is threadbare and disappointing: “Your great-grandmother was a murderess. She drowned her husband, pushed him in the lagoon. I suppose the tide was high, I don’t know [...] But then nobody knew” (5–6). These aporias and the plainness of her aunt’s narration are partly to blame for its being received by the narrator as merely “an interesting story” (“the moment wasn’t emotional”), but by now it has also become clear that the lagoon has many “real” stories and continues to accrue them. Some of these stories, more recent, but no “real[er]”, reside in the narrator’s own experience of the lagoon and the memories generated by successive visits. These more immediate stories assert themselves, even pushing up between her aunt’s reporting of “the real story” and the narrator’s muted response:

— It’s an interesting story, she said. I prefer Dostoevsky to *Truth*.

The water was brown and shining and to the right lay the dark shadow of the Domain Hill. There were kids playing on the edge, Christopher Robins with sand between the toes, sailing toy warships and paddling with bare feet in the pools.

— Grandmother never told me, I said. (Frame, 1991: 6)

Obedying the repeated invitations of her female relations to “[s]ee the lagoon” and “[s]ee the water”, the narrator has become a part of a network of storytellers, nodes in a moving meshwork of stories about the lagoon: coincident heterogeneities that share a basis in embodied knowledge. The narrator comes later to this realization than the reader, who sees sooner how she gradually and diffidently perceives the storytelling potential in her own experiences (“Perhaps I liked the new Picton, I don’t know”), which feed back into and sustain a relational and open-ended storytelling (4). The operations of oral storytelling are at work in this title story: there is more than one version of the story of the lagoon, and there is more than one storyteller equipped to tell it. In the same way that Frame associates oral narration with embodied knowledge in *To the Is-Land* through the figure of Poppy, she enmeshes the story of the lagoon with ancestral indigenous knowledge: “All of this my grandmother told me, my Picton grandmother who could cut supple-jack and find kidney fern and make a track through the thickest part of the bush” (1). In these ways, something of the oral story, which is neither closed nor whole, is transplanted into the printed story.

Oral tradition, community, and embodied knowledge are threaded throughout the collection. Vanessa Guignery (2010) has written insightfully of the early short fiction, identifying two features of the stories that are important to my own discussion. She explores the equivocations and hesitations of Frame's writer-narrators, and the secondary or tributary stories into which they drift and soon after abandon. And she examines the merging of subjectivities within the stories, the fusion and confusion of different identities in "Jan Godfrey", "Snap-Dragons" and "A Beautiful Nature". Whereas Guignery reads these features as expressive of a modern sensibility and a rejection of monadism, I understand these properties of the stories differently: as revealing of a desire to reflect the operations of oral storytelling, and to reject certain associations of print authorship that are not easily reconciled with oral culture, namely, originality, ownership, and exclusionary control. When Frame's narrators start and abort stories ("I have wandered from my story"), they reveal an uneasy relationship with the rules that govern what Guignery calls "conventional story-telling" (Frame, 1991: 121; Guignery, 2010: 307). These writer-narrators experience a momentary loss of control over storytelling within a context in which successful, that is, commercial and profitable storytelling is thought to be achieved through distillation and synthesis. These enactments of writing for the first time for a print readership are intended to highlight the disjunction between the storytelling instinct shaped within an oral culture and the storytelling conventions enshrined within the contemporary print culture. Through her construction of self-conscious first-person narrators, who negotiate openly and gauchely the demands of "conventional story-telling", Frame stages a possibly unresolvable conflict between the operations of oral storytelling, which is sustained by repetition, variation, and multiple storytellers, and the national literary culture that celebrates the individual author and the singular closed text. By their frequent interpolations ("You see I have wandered again"), Frame's erring narrators demonstrate an awareness of these demands and a desire to meet them in the writing of their own stories (Frame, 1991: 122). But, as they also demonstrate, they are not yet fully assimilated into the receiving literary environment that sets and regulates these expectations.

If her writer-narrators acquiesce to the expectations of the literary marketplace, Frame does not. Through the digressions of her narrators and their "metafictional remarks", she reproduces the discursiveness of oral storytelling and lends to these printed stories the instability of the story that is orally communicated (Guignery, 2010: 307). By dramatising the incongruity of these distinct forms of storytelling, and by bringing within the textual frame of these printed stories the unbounded-ness of the oral story, Frame insists on the legitimacy of unwritten literature. Guignery argues that the "self-reflexive dimension" of these early stories prompts the reader "to reconsider [their] own conception of story-telling" (Guignery: 306, 305). I would be more specific: Frame desires the reader to remark, not only the conditioning of her writer-narrators by oral storytelling, but their adoption of terms and premises ("I have wandered again") inapplicable to the practice of oral storytelling, the moving meshwork of gossip and poetry, rumour and myth to which Frame was exposed and playfully contributed as a child and adolescent (Frame, 1991: 122, 124). Frame stages a confrontation between oral and material forms, between incoherence and cohesion, because she would make space for provisionality within a literary print culture that imposes control and closure on the act of storytelling.

Frame's refusal to impose on these early stories a unidirectional flow and cohesion, even as her tractable narrators profess to want their stories to, in Guignery's phrase, "fit within the boundaries and 'picket-fences' of conventional story-telling", corresponds to a second refusal (Guignery, 2010: 313). The "proliferation of selves" Guignery identifies as a recurrent feature of the stories, and the correspondent merging of subjectivities, are two expressions of the same dynamic (310). They signal, I think, a desire on Frame's part to locate these printed stories within community, and at the same time to resist embodying attributes traditionally accorded to the modern figure of the author. As I have shown, the domestic mythopoeic practice in which Frame and her family were engaged was inclusive, collaborative, and transcultural. By obscuring the "origin of the voice" and entangling textual personae and perspectives through ambiguous use of pronouns, devices that, as Guignery indicates, extend far beyond the first collection and into later novels, including *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963), *Living in the Maniototo* (1979), and *The Carpathians* (1988), Frame obscures the originary source of her stories, dispersing it among multiple subjectivities, and complicates the individualization of authorship that attends commercial publication (309). Writing for a print readership for the first time, Frame came up against what Mark Rose calls the "discourse of literary property", the origins of which he charts in his study *Authors and Owners* (Rose, 1993: 128). Concerning developments to the literary-property question in the late eighteenth century, specifically, interventions in the *Donaldson v. Becket* case, which is "conventionally regarded as having established the statutory basis of copyright", Rose writes: "distinctive property was said to reside in the particularity of the text [...] and this was underwritten by the notion of originality, which was in turn guaranteed by the notion of personality" (112, 128). This "chain of deferrals" lies behind what Rose calls "the modern notion of the author as an autonomous creator, the producer and first proprietor of original works" (128, 25). It is my contention that Frame, on producing her first book, was troubled by these imperatives of property and personality, and the equation of writing with the "imprinting of the author's personality on [her] work" (114). This unease is discernible in the debut collection. In "Jan Godfrey", the eponymous narrator queries the idea of an integrated and autonomous self: "Alison Hendry. Margaret Burt. Nancy Smith. We cling to our names because we think they emphasize our separateness and completeness and importance" (Frame, 1991: 122). At the end of the story, Jan Godfrey casts off individuality: "I am neither separate nor complete nor important" (127).

What is being worked through, here, is Frame's discomfort with becoming an autonomous author and operating within a literary culture that depended on notions of intellectual property for "the profitable manufacture and distribution of books" (Rose, 1993: 1-2). According to Rose, "[t]he distinguishing characteristic of the modern author [...] is proprietorship", and it was precisely this that disquieted Frame at the outset of her career (1). Authorship as she experienced it in the writing of these first stories, which had a basis in biographical fact and, by extension, in shared experience, entailed the annexation of stories that were not hers alone to tell. Of the "story of copyright", Rose asserts that "the narrative is one of steady expansion, of the enclosure of new territories", and, as he explains, "the real-estate trope remains a vital part of contemporary thought about literary property" (133). Citing Jessica Litman (1990), he continues: "We 'cast the author's rights in the mold of exclusive rights of control,' [...] and we treat invasion of

these rights as ‘actionable on a strict liability basis, akin to the traditional formulation of trespass to land’” (133). One can easily imagine Frame’s distaste at the idea of acquiring, in Peter Jaszi’s phrase, “a general dominion over the imaginative territory” of her work, not least when we recall her association of pleasurable encounters with literary works, through the figure of Poppy in *To the Is-Land*, with the commons and the sharing of ancestral knowledge and practices (Jaszi, 1991: 478).

Although this article is interested in an English-language oral culture, rather than Māori oral culture, its readings of Frame’s early work as resistant to the impositions of a commodifying print culture have implications for postcolonial appraisals of her work. Frame’s eschewal of control and closure in the writing of her debut collection corresponds to another refusal, identified by Emma Parker in her study of “white life writing at the end of empire” (Parker, 2024: 6). Engaging with Frame’s three autobiographies, Parker highlights the writer’s attempts to distance herself from “the legacies of land theft in Aotearoa/New Zealand”, and advances that “[Frame’s] reluctance to tether herself to specific geographical sites or locales in her second autobiography responds to [...] still-unfolding legacies of empire” (Parker, 2024: 137, 136). Concerning the indeterminacy of Frame’s genealogy, as narrated in the opening pages of *To the Is-Land*, Parker speculates that, by refusing to differentiate between “the reality or the myth of [her] ancestors”, Frame “seeks to avoid the trappings of settler family history” (Frame, 2010: 1; Parker, 2024: 130). Such is Frame’s aversion to “becoming the successor of settlement in Aotearoa/New Zealand” that she “prefers to dismantle her own ancestral origins” (131). This unwillingness to associate herself with white settlement lies behind what Parker identifies as a lasting “interest in temporary accommodations” (123). Parker reads this preoccupation “as the rejection of a particular kind of property ownership, one which was instrumental to British imperialism” (123). It is my sense that Frame’s endeavour to reflect the provenance of the stories collected in *The Lagoon* constitutes an equivalent rejection. It seems to me plausible that Frame was responding to certain correspondences between, on the one hand, the literary market, which turned stories into “distinct literary object[s], unitary, closed, and caught up in relations of ownership”, and, on the other hand, the “land market [that] was crucial to the country’s colonization”, transforming Māori ancestral land “‘into a series of bounded, abstracted, static identities” (Rose, 1993: 1; Parker, 2024: 123). It is conceivable that Frame drew a connection between literary property and authorial rights, concepts and their legal realities that she had suddenly to understand, and the processes and permissions by which the land holdings of Māori communities were, in Parker’s words, “transformed into private property, becoming a commodity available for purchase and sale” (123). I would venture, then, that Frame’s subversion of “the idea of permanent dwelling places” corresponds to her inscribing on her first publication the antithetical operations of an oral culture (15). In both instances, Frame displays “resistan[ce] to the possessive politics of individualism” (124). Both imply a broader “rejection” of the British imperial project. Together, they suggest a continuity of thought about authorship and identity that extends from her earliest publication to the late-career autobiographies.

On entering the world of letters in her twenties and engaging for the first time with processes and discourses of literary production, Frame was confronted with a series of challenges to her early conceptualisations of storytelling, storyteller, reading, and books,

impressions formed within a working-class home, shaped by the recency of illiteracy within the family, and reinforced through participation in a domestic mythopoetic practice. In the writing of her first collection, Frame was intent on conserving something of the provenance of her stories, both in the sense of their oral beginnings, and in the sense of their reciprocity with community. The recent characterisation of her texts as defensive enclosures is radically at odds with, or in any case suggests a desertion of, the principles of storytelling that distinguished the oral culture in which she was immersed in her early years, and which she reaffirmed as significant in the first of her autobiographies. Alongside the “mandarin Jamesian author standing above us watching our helpless struggles as she pares her nails”, to borrow from Patrick Evans, there must be recognition of that other Frame, the younger writer, who balked at the discourse of proprietary authorship and notions of imaginative territory and exclusive rights of control, and who sought in response to these conventions to suspend her first published stories between oral and material forms; to resist the imprinting of her personality on her work; and to disrupt commercial and institutionalized conceptions of the book as “unitary, closed, and caught up in relations of ownership” (Evans, 2004: unpaginated; Rose, 1993: 1). Frame’s resistance to embodying the autonomous and proprietary author was not sustainable. But such was its influence on her first publication that this *instinct*, and the environment in which it was cultivated, warrant incorporation into formulations of the authorial sensibility.

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