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Book Reviews

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Abstract

Shirley Walker, ed., *Who Is She? Images of Woman in Australian Fiction*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983. 219 pages (hardcover and paper).

Carole Ferrier, ed., *Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women's Novels*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985. 262 pages (hardcover and paper).

Ellen Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman*. London: The Women's Press, 1985, 266 pp.

Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly, Qd&., *Jean Rhys Letters, 1931-W66*. London: André Deutsch Limited, 1984. £9.95.

Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly, eds., *The Letters of Jean Rhys*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984. \$22.50.

Janet Frame, *An Angel at My Table. An Autobiography: Volume Two*. New York: George Braziller, 1984. 195 pp. US\$12.95.

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Asked to review each of these publications, I found the temptation to consider them together irresistible. They should, I felt, have much to tell us about the state of literary criticism and of feminist theory in Australia; while also inviting speculation about their publishing economy, and the cultural situation which produced them and to which they are addressed. But the questions raised in relation to both collections of feminist literary criticism of Australian fiction (specifically women's novels in the Ferrier collection) became too numerous and complex for a review to address and they increased in complexity when the volumes were placed against one another. I must, therefore, be content with very introductory comments here.

That these collections have been published in Australia — *Who Is She?* in 1983 and *Gender, Politics and Fiction* in 1985 — at this particular time is significant. They are the first of their kind; written out of and in response to a burgeoning interest and awareness in Australia of questions of gender. As this concern is institutionalised such publications will proliferate. A number of small feminist publishers in Australia have begun the task of reclaiming disregarded or forgotten Australian women writers and publishing collections of women's writing. By now, too, the field of feminist theory seems well established in Australian academic life. Courses in women's and gender studies, research centres, a new feminist journal (*Australian Feminist Studies*), and one, *Hecate* (established and edited by Carole Ferrier) that is ten years old, a women writers' conference in Melbourne in 1985, and the august Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University naming feminism as the research focus for visiting fellows for 1986, all testify to changing beliefs and attitudes. However, despite the individual and collective strength of this movement, despite too social changes like the recent, belated introduction of equal opportunity legislation at Federal and State level in Australia, there is a fragility, a tenuousness about this activity that doubtless comes from a history of embattlement and marginalisation of women and an actively hostile or subtly patronising masculine cultural milieu.

These, then, are landmark publications in their field. Sharing a publisher and a concern with feminism and fiction, they nevertheless differ significantly from one another. Their titles are revealing. *Who Is She?* indicates woman as a problematic area. Unknown, absent, 'she' is a site to be investigated. *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, on the other hand, is assertive. It acknowledges an ideological and theoretical perspective: gender, politics and fiction are inextricably related. Shirley Walker's brief Preface and Carole Ferrier's longer Introductory Commentary consolidate these differences. At the same time, Ferrier estab-

lishes a relationship between the collections. She describes, albeit questionably, a linked, three-stage development of feminist literary criticism. From its emergence in the late sixties in the form of images of women criticism from the standpoint of the female reader, it moves to the recuperative activity of rediscovering lost works by women authors and establishing a woman-centred criticism, then to the stage that attempts to go beyond 'the methodological problems' (p. 4) of the first two into a range of theoretical possibilities, including post structuralism and French feminist theories. This is where Ferrier places the writings in her collection, while she assigns Walker's volume to an historically earlier more conservative area: 'In most contributions to Shirley Walker's recent anthology *Who Is She?*, the influence of the work associated with these two developments [Ferrier's first two stages of feminist literary criticism] is clearly visible' (p. 3).

Consciously connected in this way, the collections diverge in others. The essays in *Who Is She?* ponder and explicate, sometimes whimsically, the feminine principle, placed as always in Australian society and culture outside the masculine hegemony and its concerns and comprehension. Ferrier, however, looks for alternatives to traditional critical methodologies and argues for those that politicise literary criticism. The 'real issue' (p. 21) for her in the vexed question of the proper role and methodology for feminist literary criticism lies not in asserting a challenge to the authority of the patriarchy, but in challenging the ultimate authority of the State. Feminist literary criticism is thus a political weapon, not only part of the struggle for women's liberation, but also part of a wider struggle: 'If our reading of literature is not informed by a much more adequate theory of reading, of «literature» and, always, by a consideration of class and economic questions, then the practice of literary theory will be able to play little part in our overall struggle for liberation' (p. 21). With this call to specific action, Ferrier concludes her Introductory Commentary.

In her very brief Preface, utterly unlike Ferrier's prescriptive polemic, Shirley Walker argues for the primacy of an aesthetic: 'the essays are concerned with literature as an art form and attempt to come to terms with the writer's use of women figures and of the feminine as an integral part of the art form which the texts represent' (x). The volume is not intentionally feminist, and any 'judgement' of the essays and their approach is innocently 'left to the reader'. The two years that separate the publication of these collections widens in critical terms, and Walker's retrospectively naïve expectation that critical pluralism needs no apology and will encompass the 'individual literary manifestations (of the feminine) in the works under consideration' (x) is matched by Ferrier's oppositionally narrow demand for a specifically political critical framework.

The contributors and contents of each volume reinforce its editor's critical impulse. *Who Is She?* presents a chronology of writers' work, most of which belongs to that cannon accepted as an Australian literary tradition. An equally predominantly mainstream group of academics explore the way woman is presented in these works. Their essays are scholarly, elegant, witty and sometimes critically challenging, presenting a great deal of useful information about the writers and the texts they engage with and sometimes provocatively opening up questions of the identity of woman in Australian fiction. These questions are answered in most of the essays in one of two ways; through textual explication, and by way of an exploration of the author's subjectivity. In the only two avowedly feminist essays, Francis McInherny re-replaces Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, shifting it out of its familiar literary and social context in the bush ethos of the nineties and arguing for its place in a female literary tradition, using Elaine Showalter's structure, while Carole Ferrier investigates possible feminist methodologies to read Elizabeth Harrower's *The Watch Tower*.

Alternatively, Ferrier's volume offers a more radical range of writers' work and topics, and the contributors are less firmly established in the mainstream of Australian academic life. (Jaded readers can enliven their response to this volume by playing 'spot the male critic' among the contributors.) 'Nettie Palmer as Critic', 'Migrant Writers' and 'The Reviewing Reception of Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus*' indicate that range of concerns, while the work of writers such as Eve Langley and Jean Devanny is considered as well as those like Franklin and Stead whom the two collections have in common. *Gender, Politics and Fiction* moves away from literary criticism towards a transdisciplinary, women's studies approach. It also includes an invaluable bibliography in two parts; one a selective list of Australian women's novels from 1900 to 1983 and the other a list of Australian literary and cultural criticism and history as well as Ferrier's selection of books on Marxist, feminist and sociological approaches to literary theory.

Who Is She? celebrates unquestioningly the achievement of mainstream literary studies while *Gender, Politics and Fiction* offers an explicit challenge to that activity and its assumptions. Each of these collections forms a valuable resource text for students, teachers and readers of Australian fiction with an interest in or commitment to gender and writing.

DELYS BIRD

Ellen Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman*. London: The Women's Press, 1985. 266 pp.

Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography reads like a miniature history of South Africa. Four propositions give the work this unique quality. She was born during the first quarter of this century, a period when the whole world had hopes of a bright future, based on newly discovered technologies. She has been around long enough (seventy one to date) to witness the birth of many dreams and the stifling of many more. Her experiences are varied; from mother to actress, to civil rights leader. The unassuming style of her prose is the fourth quality which elevates Ms Kuzwayo's story from being merely a personal record to being the story of a nation.

The author's recollection of life in South Africa of the 1920s is that of beautiful landscapes, and a culturally integrated society. In that society black people played a dignified role in the scheme of things. Some were successful farmers like her family who owned acres of farmland, and produced food for their own consumption, and who also sold crops for cash. In addition to the family's economic success, her grandfather was active in the political life of his community and became the Secretary to the Native National Congress (now the African National Congress (ANC)). Her grandmother was an outspoken and industrious woman who was a match for any avant garde of the age.

With the coming of the 'Group Areas' legislation, South Africa underwent a rapid change from a society which provided equal opportunity for its citizens to one in which increasingly discriminatory legislation was levelled against its black population. In 1913, the 'Native Land Act' left ownership of the land in the hands of the whites. When this Act failed in its desired effect to drive the black country folk to the city, the 'Poll Tax' was

introduced. Faced with the prospects of going to jail for failure to pay tax, and unable to raise money in the country, black men were forced into the mines. In the 1930s community land in the countryside was declared 'Trust Land' and removed from the control of black people. Farm lands were declared 'black spot' areas, and blacks prohibited from even living there. 'The Group Areas Act' denied black people the right to trade within the city of Johannesburg. And to monitor their movement and ensure that they are employed only in areas of the economy which best suits the ruling class, black people have by law to carry a pass. With one callous legislation after another, attempts are made to render black people homeless, landless, stateless wanderers in the land of their birth. When one considers that these beleaguered people who form 75% of the population cannot even vote at elections, it becomes quite clear that white South Africa has decided to make itself the graveyard of the democratic process.

Ms Kuzwayo informs us that although cornered by law, constricted by regulation and trapped by legislation, black people in South Africa have refused to turn the other cheek. Their methods of protest have included direct confrontation with state police, sit ins and strikes. The women especially have been adept at combating South Africa's climate of fear. They have habitually made burn-fire of their passes. And the Skokian queens with their secret market strategies have in their unique way undermined the racist government's economic system.

With the departure of the men to the mines, the burden of looking after the family became that of the women. As Ms Kuzwayo puts it, the woman 'became overnight, mother, father, family administrator, counsellor, child-minder, old age caretaker and overall overseer of both family and neighbourhood affairs in a community which had been totally deprived of its active male population' (p. 13). Ellen Kuzwayo's story is the proof that some of the women met this awesome challenge admirably. She has been a teacher, secretary of the Youth League of the African National Congress (ANC), social worker, youth worker, General Secretary of the Young Women Christian Association, member of self-help groups, member of community economic projects, and head of a single parent family following the death of her husband.

The protests of the past, such as the 16 June 1976 unrest in Soweto, the author reminds us have taken a new and sharper focus. The African National Congress (ANC) has stepped up its attack against South Africa's economic life-lines. Children are once more taking to the streets and embarrassing government. Black stooges of South Africa's apartheid have become ostracized by their own people. All indication implies Kuzwayo is that the tinder box is about to explode.

Ellen Kuzwayo tells her story through the narration of communal experience, and is eager to share the limelight with others; Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, Steve Biko and her own colleagues who are not such famous public figures are equally commended. The title of the book, *Call Me Woman* suggests an assertion of womanhood and all that it entails; mother, custodian of tradition, defender of human rights, victim in a male-dominated world, one most able to turn a deficit into an asset. The book ends with the type of selfless concern which characterizes this sensitive work: a prayer for mother Africa: 'Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika. God Bless Africa.' All we can add is our gratitude to the writer for giving us this autobiography of hope. 'Re leboga Ramasedi go bo o re fi'le Basadi ba bashedi le Ellen Kuzwayo. Thank God for women like Ellen Kuzwayo.'

ADETOKUNBO PEARSE

Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly, eds., *Jean Rhys Letters, 1931-1966*. London: André Deutsch Limited, 1984. £9.95.

Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly, eds., *The Letters of Jean Rhys*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984. \$22.50.

The texts of the first American edition of *The Letters of Jean Rhys* and the first British edition of *Jean Rhys Letters* are identical although the covers are slightly different. The front cover of the Deutsch edition features a photograph of the young Jean Rhys that juxtaposes with the rear jacket photograph of Rhys in old age. The American edition, however, relegates these important photographs to small back cover insets. In addition, the Deutsch edition includes a slightly blurry but compositionally superb photograph of Rhys in what might have been her thirties. The three photographs represent a triumph in recording the physical maturity of a beautiful, talented woman.

The series of photographs reflects the structure of the collection, representing as they do Rhys's life phases. But before discussing the book's structure, it would be well to consider the intention of its editors. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly are editors of both editions, but it is evident from more than the arrangement of names that Wyndham is the principal editor and that it is his intention that governs the selection of letters. As Rhys's literary executor, Wyndham has scrupulously honoured Rhys's wish that 'no biography of her ... be written unless authorised in her lifetime'. (No such biography was ever authorised.)

Approached after Rhys's death by authors wishing to write a biography, Wyndham realized that eventually someone would undertake such a biography despite her wish to the contrary, and he was concerned that her worst fear might be realized: the record would be mangled. Consequently, he and Melly, a friend of Rhys's from the last years of her life, attempted to resolve the dilemma by letting Rhys speak for herself through her own letters.

Expecting a difficult search, the editors were surprised and pleased to discover that there were so many letters extant that the present volume had to be limited. As they continued their collecting, they noted that the letters formed 'first ... a sequence and then a shape'. Here, of course, is where the editorial function enters: detecting and encouraging the shape of the volume. Using considerable discretion, the editors used the *dramatis personae* of Rhys's life to organize the shape and the sequence. The organization forms around Rhys's second husband, Leslie; her third husband, Max; her daughter, Maryvonne; a friend, Selma; the village where she lived until her death, Cheriton Fitzpaine; and, finally, her best-known novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

But above and beyond sequence and shape emerges Rhys's voice. It has often been described as youthful and undated, and, indeed, the letters from these thirty-five years exhibit just those qualities. The letters also display the irony, the pessimism, the self-pity, and the passivity that colour her fiction, but at the same time they display the wit, the sarcastic bite, the affection, the anger, and the endurance. After reading the letters, a thoughtful critic must reject as simplistic the popular critical notion of Rhys as the creator of helpless heroines who are mere extensions of her own passivity.

Indeed, the dry wit and tart commentary expressed over and over in the letters invalidate such critical response as Anne Taylor's in *The New Republic*: 'Whining, raging, rationalizing, self-deprecating, she emerges from these pages as a charter member of the «of course it rained» school.' Such fashionably negative criticism chooses to ignore Rhys's wonderfully wry commentary on the literal-mindedness of her neighbours in Cornwall, or

her splendidly underplayed view of human behaviour. 'I wish people had not got rid of God — they seem to be getting along badly by themselves.'

The complexity of Rhys's ambivalence about her own life and about the human condition is reflected in her comment to her daughter:

As to the human race, yes they are devils — but poor devils most of them.... Still one is left with all sorts of problems. How to explain away music, painting, poetry, courage, self sacrifice of *any* sort, flowers, gardens, good acting or writing. Grace or any beauty at all??

(22 September [1959] letter to Maryvonne Moerman)

For teachers of literature and for writers of literary criticism, a record of the artist's thoughts on the creation of a work of art is more important than autobiographical information or even insights into an artist's temperament. It is Rhys's passing reflections — always passing, never ponderously delivered — on the creation of a literary text that deliver the greatest value of the collected letters. For example, in November 1949 Rhys wrote to Selma Vaz Dias, 'I know it seems stupid to fuss over a few lines or words, but I've never got over my longing for clarity, and a smooth firm foundation underneath the sound and the fury. I've learnt one generally gets this by cutting, or by very slight shifts and changes.'

About the act of inspiration, she wrote to novelist Morchard Bishop in January 1953:

The worst of the lot though is the mood when the unfortunate — Me in this case — starts off full of self confidence, bursting with ideas — too many, rather incoherent and words come so fast that they can't be caught and an interruption drives one into a frenzy of rage, and it all ends in a horrible cafard ... so I tell myself Softly softly cathee monkey.

Most revelatory are Rhys's letters to Wyndham while she was working on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. These letters provide glimpses into her philosophy of writing combined with her awareness of the mechanics of the craft, the elusive elements of the art, and her own passionate involvement with her work of the moment. Among many similar letters is one dated 22 August [1962] when she sends Wyndham parts one and two of what she calls 'that heart breaking novel'. 'I've tried and tried and this is all I can do at present.' In May 1963 she is cutting up part two, and in August 1963 she expresses her concern for such structural problems as how to insert an episode.

In letter after letter to Wyndham, Rhys worries her way through the composition of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Surely, these glimpses into the soul of the artist at work are worth far more than any book reviewer's impatience with Rhys's problematic personality.

ELAINE CAMPBELL

Janet Frame, *An Angel at My Table. An Autobiography: Volume Two*. New York: George Braziller, 1984. 195 pp. US\$12.95.

An Angel at My Table, the middle volume of Janet Frame's autobiography, covers the years from her entry into Teachers' Training College in Dunedin to her departure for Europe on a grant to broaden her experience — that is, from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s. These were years Frame spent mostly in a series of mental homes, but years too that determined her career as a writer. As she now sees this period, it was a time when an Angel appeared at her table. The allusion is to a passage in Rilke's 'Vergers', which is quoted as an epigraph to explain the title of the book:

Reste tranquille, si soudain
L'Ange à ta table se décide;
Efface doucement les quelques rides
Que fait la nappe sous ton pain.

The Angel evidently represents both the gift of creativity and the affliction of great mental insecurity; under either aspect his appearance signals the removal from common existence of the mortal who is visited. Fundamentally the Angel evokes the Angel of the Annunciation, bringing a gift that also entails suffering, an association that suggests that Frame's attitude has ended as the Virgin's began, in calm acceptance. Thirty years later, after a long series of writing successes and the acquisition of an international reputation, Frame is calming the fears of a younger Janet Frame facing a situation that was to overwhelm her.

An Angel at My Table is more assured than *To the Is-land* (1982), the first volume of the autobiography, and becomes increasingly assured as it progresses. Her account of her friendship with Frank Sargeson in Part Two is the most interesting part of the book (she wrote *Owls Do Cry* while living in a hut at the back of Sargeson's house). Sargeson was the first professional writer in New Zealand able to live from his writings, but that was only because his lifestyle was so modest. Dedicated to the cause of New Zealand literature, he was as generous in helping others as his limited means allowed and was quite free from jealousy. Frame's portrait of Sargeson is the most vivid in the book — more vivid than her self-portrait, for she presents herself with more detachment than that with which she portrays the fictional Istina Mavet (in *Faces in the Water*), who also spends years in mental homes and will probably return to one permanently after the novel ends. Frame's mother and father, too, are paler and tired figures in this volume, further along their path to a quiet, unobtrusive death.

Part Two of *An Angel at My Table* is interesting also because it expresses Frame's growing awareness, shared by other educated New Zealanders of that time, of the emergence and quick growth of a national literature. During her own maturing years, New Zealanders' attitude to their literature changed from a derisive ignoring of it to a lively interest tempered by a diffidence about its merits. New Zealand literature was the illegitimate child who was quickly making good, an Edmond who was becoming an Edgar.

This personal account of Frame's life in a series of mental hospitals does not involve one as intensely as does her fictionalized account in *Faces in the Water*: it somewhat repeats the earlier book without rising to the same heights, especially of style. The chapter 'The Pine Trees in the Cool of the Evening', however, telling of Frame's final visit to her parents'

home in Oamaru, is one of her most lyrical altogether, a delicate compound of delight in present beauty and nostalgia for what she knows cannot come again. But *An Angel at My Table* must have been the most difficult of Frame's three volumes to write, simply because it deals with her stays in various mental homes, a subject that is painful to her while arousing curiosity in her readers. Presumably, like anyone writing an autobiography, she has selected and represented facts and events to portray herself sympathetically. If she has not told everything about those painful years, she has no obligation to do so; the important thing is that she has made the necessary adjustments to living an independent existence while pursuing the career of a writer. And what a comeback she has made! — after breaking the silence that followed her first two works, *The Lagoon* and *Owls Do Cry*, she has written another nine novels, two books of short stories, a children's story, a book of poetry, and a long autobiography. (Volume Three has been completed, and should appear in 1985.) Janet Frame has lived two lives, both of them extraordinary, and at the age of 60 can look back upon them with some equanimity. When the Angel appears at her table now, he no longer disturbs her: she merely inclines her head and smooths the wrinkles in the cloth beneath her piece of bread.

JOHN BESTON