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Abstract

New Zealand women's writing, gathering momentum since the late '70s, shows no sign of abating. Pre-eminent is Janet Frame, 70 this year, doyen of New Zealand letters since the publication of *Living in the Maniototo* (1979) and *Carpathians* (1988) and her autobiography. Frame's contemporaries and co-survivors of pre-feminist Aotearoa like poet and children's writer Ruth Dallas, and novelist Ruth Park have also published their autobiographies. Most distinctive is that by Lauris Edmond, known also for her prodigious output: ten volumes of poetry, two plays and a novel since 1975. Edmond came to writing late in life and so did novelist and short story writer Barbera Anderson, whose prose, since her first publication in 1989, has been widely praised for its Flaubertian elegance. Still flourishing are novelist Joy Cowley who now writes short fiction including acclaimed stories for children, poet Fleur Adcock, whose continued attachment to New Zealand, despite living in London, makes her somewhat more than an ex-patriate, and Elizabeth Smither, whose poetry is admired for its linguistic precision and enigmatic flavour, qualities which her recent short stories also display.

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Women no longer have the same anxieties about publishing and status that pervaded the more restrictive social climate of the '50s and '60s. Culturally and ethically sensitive anthologists like Cathie Dunsford (*Me and Marilyn Monroe*, 1994), and Wendy Harrex (New Women's Press) and the 1985 and 1989 Penguin anthologies of *Contemporary New Zealand Poetry* which include both English and Maori, have increased publishing opportunities. Relaxation of formal constraints in literary practice since the 1960s has allowed women to be more assertive, to experiment with fictional techniques, and develop more informal relationships with readers. Crucial to this transition has been the biculturalism of Maori writers such as Keri Hulme, whose *The bone people* is a quasi-nostalgic revisioning of Maori-Pakeha relationships, and Patricia Grace, whose short stories and novels (*Potiki*, *Cousins*) about the tangata whenua use the dualities of biculturalism to explore the condition of marginality generally. The political nuances of gender and ethnicity constitute the ideology of dramatist Renee, whose classic, minimalist dramas of working-class life (*Pass It On*, *Jeannie Once*) are now recognised as a distinct subgenre. But the full implications of the Maori Renaissance will emerge only in time.

Poetry thrives both in oral and in written forms, and the preoccupations of women poets have contributed significantly to post-'60s revisions of the canon. Michelle Leggott, influenced by the American poet Zukofsky, inscribes an indigenous post-modernism, a position shared in a less technically adventurous, but more sexually and culturally enigmatic way by Janet Charman. Others like Dinah Hawken and Jenny Bornholdt have variously adapted their ideas and world views to contemporary literary fashions. Cilla McQueen delivers a distinctive style of performance poetry, blending image and synaesthesia into a tonal aesthetic, while Bernadette Hall specialises in the deft turn of phrase and the protean image. Anne French, whose *All Cretans Are Liars*

(1987) was a prizewinning debut, combines realism with linguistic innuendo and technical innovation.

Most exciting, however, is the upsurge in fiction and especially in the short story. For the new writers today a short story collection almost inevitably precedes writing in other genres, whereas previously only established novelists – Joy Cowley, Margaret Sutherland, Fiona Kidman, Patricia Grace, Yvonne du Fresne – produced collections. A proliferation of anthologies has enhanced women's visibility, given the genre greater status, and provided outlets for newer writers like Margaret Blay. Among the finest practitioners today are Barbara Anderson, Joy Cowley, Shonagh Koea, Stephanie Johnson, Fiona Farrell, Anne Kennedy, Kate Flannery, Sheridan Keith, and Sarah Delahunty. Ranging from naturalism, to fantasy, to postmodern fictiveness, and conscious of the genre's potential for self reflexivity, social satire, comedy, ellipsis and teasing puzzles, they uniformly avoid the domestic realism of the '50s and '60s. Also healthy is the novella or long short story, a potent form for women ever since Katherine Mansfield. Jean Watson writes consistently in this genre and Elizabeth Knox's fictionalised recreations of her childhood (*Paremata, Pomare*) have demarcated new territory. But the biggest explosion in women's writing today is undoubtedly in children's literature. The classic stories of Margaret Mahy, recognised internationally before they were in New Zealand, remain unsurpassed. Young teenage fiction is also developing an attentive readership due to the very considerable accomplishment of writers like Tessa Duder, Diana Noonan, Caroline McDonald, Joan de Hamel, writer of children's adventure fiction since 1973 and, most recently, Paula Boock.

Perhaps because the short story now approaches the novel in stature and is an acceptable outlet for experimental writing, women's fiction since *The Bone People* (1983) has been diverse rather than sensational. Output since 1990 has increased by almost half again with many new writers. Yet recent novelists like Christine Johnston, Barbara Anderson, Anne Kennedy, Fiona Farrell, Patricia Grace, Renee, Stephanie Johnson, Gaelyn Gordon are usually better known for short fiction or drama. Among significant publications are Elizabeth Knox's *After Z-Hour* (1987), Fiona Farrell's *The Skinny Louie Book* (1991), Colleen Reilly's *Christine* (1988), Sue McCauley's *Other Halves* (1982), poet Rachel Alpine's *Farewell Speech* (1990), Christine Johnston's *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* (1991) and those by Australian-based Rosie Scott: *Glory Days* (1988), *Feral City* (1992), *Lives on Fire* (1993). Established novelists like Marilyn Duckworth and Fiona Kidman have consolidated their reputations for conventional social realism by thematising contemporary issues rather than transforming them into metafictional games or linguistic conundrums as Janet Frame does.

Contemporary New Zealand women writers are in general more experimental, witty and urbane than their predecessors. Borrowing from diverse models for their literary practices, they reveal hidden dimensions in familiar genres, and revitalise those which previously had limited indigenous representation: Maori literature, children's fiction, the novella, autobiography.