

Janet Frame



In the
Memorial
Room

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Harry Gill, a moderately successful writer of historical fiction, has been awarded the annual Watercress-Armstrong Fellowship—a 'living memorial' to the poet, Margaret Rose Hurndell. He arrives in the small French village of Menton, where Hurndell once lived and worked, to write. But the Memorial Room is not suitable—it has no electricity or water. Hurndell never wrote here, though it is expected of Harry.

Janet Frame's previously unpublished novel draws on her own experiences in Menton, France as a Katherine Mansfield Fellow. It is a wonderful social satire, a send-up of the cult of the dead author, and—in the best tradition of Frame—a fascinating exploration of the complexity and the beauty of language.

In the Memorial Room Details

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From Reader Review In the Memorial Room for online ebook

Emma Sea says

Look, I'm just going to say it: I found this excruciating.

If someone heard that a nationally-worshipped writer was worth reading, and checked out this book as representative of her work, they'd never read another. And they would doubt our collective sanity.

Yes, I get that it's a satirical roman a clef.

But divorced from the name, honestly, you think this is up there with *Faces in the Water*? The poignant richness of *The Bull Calf*? Seriously?

I'd like to refer you to Christopher Sullivan's review, which is more, um, properly respectful.

Bettie? says

Review: <http://bettie.booklikes.com/>

Sandee says

For as many books as she has written, it has been such a long time since I have read Janet Frame. Way back when, I was once a vagabond. I was taken in/adopted by a pack of bookstore intellectuals who made a great and immeasurable impression upon my developing intellect. Thanks to them, I sometimes appear smarter than I actually am. One of those wonderful people spent every Friday night at my apartment - he made me new fancy cocktail every week (Brandy Alexander's anyone?) and we watched cult movies, foreign movies, indie movies etc. He says "I think you would like Janet Frame" and has me watch "An Angel at My Table" with a suggested reading in hand. (love you Chadwick)

Although the story itself, satirical in nature, witty at times, depressing at others, is not what is captivating here it is her use of language. So poetic in its fluency. So moving in its depth. It is the kind of book that makes you want to highlight everything.

One of my favorite moments - on being a novelist - "Have you sensed the nothingness of my nature, that I am as empty as the carriages of the trains that pass, dusty, used, in the morning sun?... You see I have returned to the myth of the journey or rather to the myth that the frenzied molecular journey begins, goes somewhere, and ends, and vanishes; that metaphorical order must be imposed on the original invisible pattern of chaos. I must intrude language wherever I look and breathe, like the obsessive, trained resuscitator who seizes the inanimate to breathe life into it; or like the God who possessed this talent and supposedly, used it."

Another favorite moment - " you are at the point of bisection of circumstances, opportunity, characters, time; everything is favourable for your obliteration. You have been stifled, muffled, silenced. You cannot cry out because you cannot hear the cries of others."

This book is worth it for the wit and the language.

Sue says

In the Memorial Room is a sly, witty, blackly humorous tale of Harry Gill, a 33 year old New Zealander, writer of historical fiction (whose books have actually sold) who has been awarded the annual Watercress-Armstrong Fellowship in honor of the deceased poet, Margaret Rose Hurndell. With the Fellowship comes a six month sabbatical in Menton, France, once home to the poet and the site of the Memorial Room. Unknown to Gill, this room, in spite of its title, is open to the elements, has no electricity, no facilities but must be visited regularly as part of the Fellowship.

Janet Frame requested this book be published posthumously as she also went to Menton...as a Katherine Mansfield Fellow. What she created in this novel is a satirical picture of family and friends living off of memories of the famous dead. Time and language and their place and use are major constructs in the story and in the individuals' lives. Harry has wandered into a land of the past.

In speaking to the reader about the Memorial Room itself, Harry states: "Here, I thought, if one were a spirit or dead, is a sanctuary." or "A unique memorial, to pay a writer to work within a tomb."

In describing the lives of those who are seeing to his needs and to the memory of Rose, primarily relocated English or New Zealanders, he reports: "Menton is a city of innumerable retirement dreams quietly being wrecked by reality." (p 75)

There is much to enjoy here, much that is also confusing, entertaining, a bit bizarre at times, as Harry tries to unlock his writing and his place in Menton and among these people. One can only imagine what it must have been like for Frame during her stay to result in her writing In the Memorial Room.

Recommended for all who enjoy novels about writing, language, and books with sly wit.

Ebook received from publisher through NetGalley for review purposes.

Ian says

A minor work from one of my all-time favorite writers of prose, it tells the story of a man who fears he is going blind, only to wake up one day completely deaf. More like a sketch than an actual novel, I still found it a pleasure to read.

Lisa says

There's a real irony implicit in this amusing book by New Zealand author Janet Frame (1924-2004). She

wrote it to satirise the fetishisation of another Kiwi author, Katherine Mansfield, but now Frame herself is on a similar kind of pedestal ...

Released posthumously in accordance with Frame's instructions, *In the Memorial Room* is a wicked black comedy. Written in the 1970s, it was withheld from publication because it's so obviously based on Frame's own experience in Menton, France, as a recipient of the Katherine Mansfield Fellowship. It's very witty, but as is obvious from the Sensational Snippet I posted a day or so ago, it's not hard to see how it would have ruffled feathers if it had been published 40 years ago.

Frame, however, is too good an author to pen just an everyday satire. It's easy to poke fun at people who take themselves and their devotion to the object of their admiration too seriously. But Frame also explores some serious undercurrents: what kind of identity does an author have when she is inhabiting her characters with intensity? And what is lost by agreeable people when they adapt themselves too slavishly to the demands of others because they fear revealing their true selves?

Harry Gill, 33 years old and the author of two moderately successful novels, is the recipient of the Watercress-Armstrong Fellowship, a scholarship set up in memory of the revered New Zealand poet, Margaret Rose Hurndell. Her devotees have (much like the devotees of Katherine Mansfield, who also died young) set up a 'memorial room' in the former larder of the house where she stayed in Menton. The room is cold, bleak, dark and desolate, and to Harry it feels like a tomb.

To read the rest of my review please visit <http://anzlitlovers.com/2013/06/18/in...>

Nancy Groves says

This short, satirical novel was published posthumously at the author's request, not released until roughly 40 years after it was written. Apparently she suspected a negative reaction for the satirical, not particularly favorable depiction of a novelist's experience as a writer in residence after winning an international literary fellowship. She set it in the city where she, too, had a similar experience, and her sponsors would not have been pleased at her depiction of the "cult of the dead writer" and the dreadful, tomb-like room in which her author is expected to produce a masterpiece. There's not a complicated plot, as what we're reading is the author's journal from the first few months of his fellowship, his observations of his patrons and a small group of retired British ex-pats in the coastal French town, his own obsession with his poor eyesight, which may be more a psychosomatic illness than a condition that could be diagnosed and treated, and then with the sudden onset of deafness, which also may be something he "caused," although in this case there is a legitimate family history. While Frame's rather insecure author bumbles along, through him she offers some fascinating reflections on books, words, and death.

Kate says

It's a surprise to read a new Frame and this slender book is no less spare and clever with words than the rest of her oeuvre.

The reason Frame banned publication of this manuscript in her lifetime becomes clear as you begin reading of the people who guard the memory of the famous New Zealand writer in whose memory the "Watercress

Armstrong" Fellowship has been set up.

The Fellowship includes the six months at Menton in South France but such are the poor conditions for writing in the actual Memorial Room, one of the four guardian couples insists the writer, Harry, the protagonist, stay with them for the period. The others enviously vie over the privilege of hosting "the Fellow" and begin to preside over aspects of Harry's life . For them the writing must not only befit the honour and standing of the KM figure, here called Margaret Rose Hurndell, but be controlled as the writer himself must be controlled. As a result Harry begins to lose his senses.

I take the last part of the book to mean that to maintain creative and artistic integrity Harry had to block out the destructive force of the do-gooders and interferers. Was Harry beginning to feel he was going mad?

The writing is excruciatingly witty and the little book a most satisfying read,

Tony Nielsen says

I live in Oamaru NZ which is the hometown of renowned Kiwi author, Janet Frame. Janet's position as one of our greats is locked in forever, and In the Memorial Room is another one of her work's which has been discovered and published posthumously. In it we share the experience of Harry Gill, who has been selected as the latest recipient of the Watercress-Armstrong Fellowship, which takes him to the small town of Menton on the Cote D'Azur. Ant that's where things get really strange. Harry is lacking in self confidence, and the local ex patriots don't do anything to redeem his outlook. Frame's observations of human behaviour are outstanding, and Harry's supposed sojourn in Menton goes pear-shaped big time when he suffers a sudden deafness, placing him even further on the outer. I wonder if there are any more gems from Ms Frame to surprise us with.

Jessica says

An odd little novel by Janet Frame, published 40 years after her death. Supposedly a roman-a-clef and based on her stay in Menton, France as a writing fellow, with a 33-yr-old male New Zealand novelist as protagonist. But any novel by Frame is of interest, furthering as she does the literature of language and consciousness, in the most original of ways.

Nadine says

Deceptively simple. Every book of hers I pick up is like a jewel.

Tuck says

my very first janet frame book, in the memorial room has popped my janet frame cherry! and i couldn't be more thrilled. harry gill wins an in-residence prize to stay in menton france for some months, to write. and though it is not a super big monetary prize, it seems adequate to house and feed him. he even has a new

novel he's working on, but then, his patrons and other expats keep hemming him in, closer closer. and while harry thought he is surly slowly going blind, he all the sudden is stone deaf. hysterical? perhaps.

a weird and postmodern novel on the art and craft of creation, and the perceptions of artists trying to do art, and art lovers trying to capture and eat artists.

this novel was intentionally held back from its 1973 birth, as i guess she didn't want to piss off the 'cognoscenti' too much while she could still maybe get another prize.

i want to read more janet frame. her wit, humor, and intelligence is thought provoking and a pleasure to read. i wonder if she's like to come stay at our house (we have an extra room :))

Jim says

I wonder what the 'typical' writer is like. He won't be Ian Rankin I'm sure. There are of course enough writers out there to ensure that a fair number will be outgoing, photogenic and publicity-savvy. I suspect most writers are not since the primary requirements for a writer are their willingness to spend extended periods of time alone and absorbed with imaginary (if not downright fantastical) things. They don't stand out in the queue at the butchers or if they do it's possibly because they look a little untidy and even uncared for and have a distracted air about them; most people would probably assume they have Alzheimer's before thinking, *That looks like a writer.*

The protagonist of Janet Frame's book is a writer. He's published two historical novels and is looking to do something a little different this time lest he get pigeonholed although it does look as if the damage has been done in that regard. He comes from New Zealand but most of the action in the book takes place in France near the border with Italy where he's travelled to take up a writing fellowship, Watercress-Armstrong Fellowship:

The money from the Fellowship ... will give me a chance to write a different kind of novel from my first two which have given me the reputation of being an 'historical' novelist.

[...]

I'd rather like to write a comic novel in the picaresque tradition, a desire which is perhaps strongly proportionate to the lack of picaresque qualities in myself, for I am a dull personality, almost humdrum, a plodder from day to day with only an occasional glimpse of light...

Is this necessarily a bad thing? Henry Gill thinks not:

Have you sensed the nothingness of my nature, that I am as empty as the carriages of the trains that pass, dusty, used, in the morning sun? A novelist must be that way, I think, and not complain of it, otherwise how shall the characters accommodate themselves in his mind? To this you reply that it is he who must enter the minds of his characters? Certainly, but where shall he house them while he enters their minds, but in those empty used trains that pass and pass forever before his gaze? You see I have returned to the myth of the journey or rather to the myth that the frenzied molecular journey begins, goes somewhere, and ends, and vanishes; that

metaphorical order must be imposed on the original invisible pattern of chaos. I must intrude language wherever I look and breathe, like the obsessive, trained resuscitator who seizes the inanimate to breathe life into it; or like the God who possessed this talent and, supposedly, used it.

The Fellowship has been endowed as a living memorial to the writer Margaret Rose Hurndell whose death at the age of thirty cut short a brilliant career. One of the conditions that come with winning the award is that the winner live for six months working in one of the rooms of the Villa Florita, occupied during her lifetime by Hurndell. Probably not too much to ask since most writers despite what non-writers imagine can work pretty much anywhere anytime and the only tools they usually require are a flat surface, pen and paper or a keyboard of some description.

Menton, which is where he ends up, is not the most inspiring of places but it is home to a small ex-pat community of English speakers most of whom have some connection to or affection for the late Rose Hurndell. Everyone expects him to make a study of Hurndell—all the other recipients seem to have wanted to—but Henry isn't too keen. If anything he finds the author's presence—she even appears in his dreams—a bit wearisome. And he has enough problems to worry about. His poor eyesight for starters. It looks like he's going blind. While there Henry consults Dr Rumor whose diagnosis is an interesting one:

—You display, he said, —the incipient signs of intentional invisibility.

—You mean I want to be blind?

—No, no. No, no. You are trying to make yourself invisible, on the childlike theory that if you can't see, then you can't be seen. Like a child who shuts his eyes and thinks no one can see him.

—I don't believe it, I said, indignantly. —I'm not neurotic, hysterical, or whatever you call it. I'm a matter-of-fact person, my feet on the earth.

—A *pied-à-terre* only? He smiled. —Monsieur Gill, this disease is real. One would scarcely call it a disease, though. It is what is known as a collaborative condition.

[...]

—Monsieur Gill, I know nothing of your life but what you have told me. I can do nothing for you. You are not ill, you are not going blind, you are a sane man, I believe. But through a combination of circumstances, through being in a certain place — which must be here, this city, at a certain time, and in the company of certain people, you are on the point of vanishing.

Henry takes this news rather well. I was reminded of the French writer Marcel Aymé and his short story 'The Man Who Walked Through Walls' in which the protagonist of that story also accepts his diagnosis as if he'd been told he had a summer cold. I half-expected Henry to vanish before our eyes or at least begin to fade away or become blurry like the writer Harry in Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry* who literally slides out of focus. This doesn't happen, not exactly anyway. Like the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* Henry becomes—or at least feels he's becoming—less and less visible to those around him. Towards the end of the book he notes:

It occurred to me that my removal was as complete, or seemed so, as if I were invisible...

This he writes after he wakes up to find he's lost his hearing too. And this is when we really start to realise how little people see *him*, Henry. In truth he could be anyone. He's a placeholder. They need a Fellow. He's the fellow. It doesn't need to be him and soon there's talk about him returning to New Zealand for treatment; they already have a potential replacement in mind.

The supporting cast are well-drawn if a bit two-dimensional but I suspect their stereotypicalness is deliberate. Having such a weak-willed character as the book's protagonist is a bit of a risk because he really isn't a very exciting person and little happens in the book apart from visits with people and him thinking about writing. We learn that he *is* working on a novel but never find out any of the details. I can see why people might not like this novel, the vulnerable and somewhat fatalistic protagonist, the leisurely pace and lack of action and, yes, the ending does sort of disintegrate but maybe this is him finally "vanishing" from view; I'm not sure. It's an odd ending to be honest.

I suspect writers will enjoy this book more than non-writers. We look in the mirror and wonder if a writer is looking back at us; Henry looks in the paper and sees Michael Watercress—who from all accounts does look a little like Ernest Hemingway—identified as the new Fellow even though Henry's standing right next to him.

From what I've read this isn't Frame's best work. If that's the case I look forward to seeing what crosses my path next.

Michael says

I chewed through this delightful book in two sittings. Janet Frame is truly a *creative* writer. *In the Memorial Room* doesn't have much in the way of plot or character, though there are some brilliant caricatures, like Dr Rumor the mystical physician and George Lee of the unintelligibly posh British accent. What is really creative about the book is its language. Frame is a master stylist and parodist. There are passages of striking description, curly sarcasm, philosophical introspection and amusing send-ups of conventional speech. Each chapter virtually has its own style, and yet the book manages to maintain its unity and elegance and keeps one turning the page.

In the Memorial Room is, at its heart, that rarest of books, a genuine novel of ideas. Every scene, every sentence, hovers around the problematic question of identity. What is it makes me *me*, rather than somebody else? Is there anything of *me* that is truly mine, that survives more than a moment and that I can hold without risk of losing it? Frame is an amusing writer, but her answers to these questions are unamusingly mordant, indeed quite terrifying. Her protagonist, Harry Gill, essentially has his entire being stolen from him by the most mundane and ingratiating villains imaginable. Everyone in the novel except for Harry is a kind of social vampire, leeching everyone else's identity in a vain effort to maintain the integrity of their own. Poor Harry lacks self-confidence. He is a natural victim, and of course we see things from his perspective, so perhaps Frame does leave us with a modicum of hope—we needn't be so nice and pathetic as the dissolving protagonist of this gem of a novel.

Laura J. W. says

Simply, *In the Memorial Room* is a story about a writer, Harry Gill, and how he became disassembled because he won the Watercress Armstrong Fellowship—but it's not that simple.

...I believe a writer is not 'known' until his grocer and barber have read his works without astonishment...
(From p. 21)

I found this fragment highly hysterical at the time—‘without astonishment’ in particular. It’s such a peculiar sensation when ones writing is read—to have it read ‘without astonishment’ is honestly a relief. Writing is just so...so...oh, dang damn—what am I trying to say here? Well, writing is incredibly personal and can cause huge misunderstandings, emotional dust-ups, senseless jealousies, wary paranoia, and a collection of troubles that can send a writer into an oppressed oblivion and spiraling into depression. Something like that.

As I read the book, I occasionally felt this one was not quite as polished or as fully realized as her other books—there are several sparkles of gems and plenty of potential complexities that were not fully developed, and I immediately thought perhaps it is troubled by its personal nature. Sometimes when one attempts to “veil the truth” that’s when a writer stumbles and stubs their toes. (Ouch.) When I say “It’s not my favorite Janet Frame book” doesn’t mean that I’m foaming at the mouth raving that I want the hours spent reading it back, or that I’m disappointed in some way—not at all. I come to every book with the knowledge that each one will be different—expectations bedevil experiences every time—I enjoy the reading experience too much to spoil it with expectations. In fact, I have gone back through it so many times since, noting all the dog-eared pages of interest, I’m loving it more—that’s part of the magic of Janet Frame, it’s hard to put down the book after you’re done reading it. I always catch myself starting over again...

Funny thing, sometimes a creative person’s undoing is caused by being recognized. *Now that I've done well for myself, what if I can't do it anymore?* (A frightening thought.) Suddenly the joy is sucked right out of the act of writing, writer’s block sets in, and then the writer starts drinking and...ugh. Between you, me, and the computer screen, I know I’ve turned into an “Aw shucks, it’s just what I do,” shrinking violet as soon as someone turns their praise in my direction. Sometimes I’m so embarrassed, I become almost combative, say “tsk” or “shit” and roll my eyes with the expressed “*What's the big deal? It's not like I just pulled a rabbit out of my ass, I wrote a book, so what?*” (Of course, only moments before I was lurking around Goodreads agonizing that no one has added my book to their To-Read list. Boo fucking hoo.) It’s a see-saw of emotions to be sure. I think Doris Lessing’s initial response when she was told that she won the Nobel Prize was—“*Oh Christ*”—that sums it up in a teacup. (That’s great, go away, leave me alone.)

—*You display, he said, the incipient signs of intentional invisibility.*

—*You mean I want to be blind?*

—*No, no, no. You are trying to make yourself invisible, on the childlike theory that if you can't see, then you can't be seen. Like a child who shuts his eyes and thinks no one can see him.*

—*I don't believe it, I said, indignantly. —I'm not neurotic, hysterical, or whatever you call it. I'm a matter-of-fact person, my feet on the earth.*

—*A pied-à-terre only? He smiled. —Monsieur Gill, this disease is real. One would scarcely call it a disease, though. It is what is known as a collaborative condition.* (from page60-61)

—*Monsieur Gill, I know nothing of your life but what you have told me. I can do nothing for you. You are not ill, you are not going blind, you are a sane man, I believe. But through a combination of circumstances, through being in a certain place – which must be here, this city, at a certain time, and in the company of certain people, you are on the point of vanishing.* (From page 63)

Going blind; going deaf; becoming invisible. Vanishing.

It is a book about being a writer—the discomfort of being a writer and the baggage of being noticed. The status or stature of a writer—what a writer “looks like” (a young Hemingway, of course!)—and the pressure

to “perform” as a duty or fulfillment. Being recognized and under the scrutiny of even the most well-meaning person or institution can cause just as much anxiety as remaining undiscovered. The invisibility and uncertainty of belonging is familiar (not quite fitting in.) Then being treated like an object on exhibition, and the plague of expectations that others have for you. These ‘outside others’ who want to possess you and your time in a game of tug o’ war amongst themselves, and then your efforts are scrutinized nearly to the point of being censored as more expectations are imposed “*Is it about....?*” Then there’s that one person who has to say “*I don’t like the name you picked for my character...*” (Huh? Who said it was about you? Seriously.) Really, people get weird around writers—

“*You should put that in your book.*”

“*You could write a book about that.*”

I know it’s harmless banter, but sorry, when I hear that shit start, I cringe.

Have you sensed the nothingness of my nature, that I am as empty as the carriages of the trains that pass, dusty, used, in the morning sun? A novelist must be that way, I think, and not complain of it, otherwise how shall the characters accommodate themselves in his mind? To this you reply that it is he who must enter the minds of his characters? Certainly, but where shall he house them while he enters their minds, but in those empty used trains that pass and pass forever before his gaze? (Page 116)

The Memorial Room itself is a tomb—the cult of the dead writer—the worship culture that society has cultivated is ridiculous at best—there are those of us who create and those who worship the creators, and then bring their baggage of expectations. Meeting someone you admire can be horribly disappointing—what is it that they say? Meeting your favorite author is like wanting to meet a goose because you love pâté...

With that said—Janet Frame’s sly sense of humor is deadpan dry—goodness knows if you take her seriously, you will find yourself scratching your head and thinking “Huh?” She always has such an interesting way of looking at everything, each of her books have a twist that sends the reader down the rabbit hole in a manner of speaking. Thankfully, I still have more, older works by Janet Frame to read; I’m slowly building my library collection and will be happy to journey through them all.

6/20/2015 Laura J. W. Ryan
