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‘ Introduction’ : A Century of New Zealand Short Stories

The short story is a genre that has held a prominent place in New Zealand’s cultural landscape through the past century. Katherine Mansfield conferred international prestige on the form with her unsurpassed portraits of a Wellington childhood, written towards the end of her life. Barely a decade after her early death in 1923, the short story became the preeminent prose form of the national literary tradition that emerged from the depression of the 1930s, notably in the terse sketches and yarns of Frank Sargeson, with his capture of the local idiom and ‘voice’ of the working class Kiwi bloke.

The fragmented experience of colonial settler society in the early decades of the twentieth century was ideally suited to artistic expression in short fiction with its potential for indirection, its fractured, discontinuous narrative forms and its capacity to exploit detail, incident and voice for aesthetic effect. Yet the auspicious beginnings of the national short story, due to the supreme artistry of Mansfield and the skilled craftsmanship of Sargeson, suggest that early on this kind of writing was not merely a response to the colony’s evolving identity but became artistically metonymic of its determining features: isolation and distance from Europe, smallness, and the tenuous, often fragile character of its Anglo-Saxon settlement. These powerful forces and the heavy burden of representation that the early writers carried have demanded reevaluations: Mansfield is now seen as the ‘great ghost’ of New Zealand literature, while Sargeson’s influence over an entire generation has subsequently waned. Certainly it is by now a critical commonplace that their different styles and orientations laid the foundations for local prose traditions. On the one hand

there is the Sargesonian style and voice, reinforcing the bedrock of realism that dominated the first stirrings of cultural nationalism and is discernible in the work of later exponents known as 'the sons of Sargeson' (here represented by the stories of Roderick Finlayson, Dan Davin and Owen Marshall). On the other, is the orientation toward subjectivity and interiority, with alternative states such as dream, fantasy and the unconscious (so-called 'feminine' traits) as found in the work of women writers as different as Mansfield, Janet Frame and Fiona Farrell: the latter's experimentation with magical realism in 'A Story about Skinny Louie' suggests the rennovative power of this genre for postcolonial writing in general. Yet, as this collection illustrates, these apparently gendered contrasts are not distinct procrustean beds of literary practice and preference. Many New Zealand stories, including some written by Sargeson and Mansfield, blur these distinctions, positioning themselves liminally in a form of literary hybridization and demonstrate overlapping thematic, stylistic and generic features.

This anthology of 20 stories has been compiled with the aim of representing some of the best short fiction written in New Zealand over the last century, dating from 1912 (when Katherine Mansfield's story 'The Woman at the Store' was first published in John Middleton Murry's literary magazine, *Rhythm*) to the present, represented by the most recent story, Sue Orr's 'Velocity', published in 2008. As well as the criterion of excellence, we have based our selection on stories that give voice to changing social parameters and values, and hence articulate and reflect changes in the national literary tradition. We have also aimed for a broad representation with respect to region, age, gender and ethnicity. In acknowledging the diversification and expanded range of the

genre throughout a century in a nation that has doubled in population -- from less than two million in 1912 to over four million in 2012 -- we have responded to the vitality and exuberance of writing by women and Maori since the 1960s, groups that were under-represented in the first half of the twentieth century, to differences between urban and rural locations (Grace and Ihimaera's rural homescapes, Duggan's provincial outsiders, Sargeson's urban male drifters), and to the diversity of regional settings (Protestant areas of Auckland and the north represented in stories by Frank Sargeson, Maurice Duggan, Roderick Finlayson and Sue Orr, compared with the Irish Catholic Southland of Dan Davin, the Picton setting of Janet Frame's story 'The Lagoon', the west coast terrain of Keri Hulme, the North Island Urewera mountain range of Katherine Mansfield's story 'The Woman at the Store', and the generalized South Island locale of Owen Marshall's stories).

Although the early cultural nationalism of the 1930 to 1960s was homogeneous and monocultural, stories from this provincial period reveal diverse and oppositional strands that were potential sources of new literary currents. White settler preoccupations emanating from the core Anglo-Saxon culture are counterpointed in the stories about race relations by Roderick Finlayson and Maurice Shadbolt that demonstrate marked sympathy, even a preference, for Maori customs and practices. As early as 1952, writing from a different position in the social spectrum to these male writers, Janet Frame in her earliest stories published in *The Lagoon* points to the extension and enrichment that would come. By the 1970s authors like Maurice Gee and Vincent O'Sullivan were following Sargeson in writing against the assumptions of their

times, critiquing the puritanism and materialism of New Zealand society from more urbanised perspectives, and developing his model of critical realism.

In the 1970s and 80s the push against the bourgeois values of the 'Establishment', following a growing need to recognise difference, unlocked the provincial parameters that had dominated the literary horizon since the 1930s. From the 1990s to the present the picture has been one of proliferating diversity and variety of voice and style, as the polarizations of male/female, Europe/New Zealand, metropolitan centre/colonial periphery, realism/impressionism have been challenged and overturned. The efflorescence of indigenous writing in English from the 1970s, known as the 'Maori Renaissance', is here represented by stories by its three most eminent practitioners: Patricia Grace, Keri Hulme and Witi Ihimaera. Grace and Ihimaera relocate Maori life at the centre of national experience, drawing on myth and oral traditions to invoke its distinctive forms of intimacy and belonging, its registering of moments of life and death, while Hulme's portrait in 'Hooks and Feelers' of a mixed race family whose relationships are stretched to breaking point anticipates the new bicultural society of the 1980s and beyond. Pacific writing, stemming from several indigenous diasporic subcultures, like other Pacifika arts such as music, television and film, is increasingly dominant. Written by people from the Cook Islands, Tonga, Samoa, Fiji and Niue, it often reflects societies in permanent transition, migrants undergoing frequent rites of passage. It is here represented by 'Robocop in Long Bay', written by the distinguished Samoan novelist and short story writer, Albert Wendt, a story whose distinctive fusion and reinterpretation of oral and written traditions epitomises the urbanisation of Pacific culture and the problems of the second generation migrant. But as the

editors of the recently published *Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature* point out, the multiculturalism that distinguishes Australian and Canadian writing is not yet so evident in New Zealand-Aotearoa where biculturalism has been the official policy for race relations since the 1980s. Chinese diaspora writing in particular lacks any significant representation in this volume despite having gained a foothold in the national culture. Nevertheless, a compelling representation of the East, which emphasises the healing properties of its valued products, appears in Joy Cowley's story written in 1965, 'The Silk'.

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From the beginning of the twentieth century, the New Zealand short story has betrayed the settler preoccupation with place. The unease inherent in the individual's relationship with the local environment gives rise to numerous articulations of social and individual marginalisation. Mansfield's regional story, 'The Woman at the Store', offers more than a chronological starting point: her focus on the extreme dispossession of a woman due to her marital circumstances and the inhospitality of the environment, and the undercurrent of destructive sexual relations, might be read as a significant *zeitgeist* of the national tradition. Certainly the skewed sexual relations of the white settler in this gothic outback story, correlated to the brooding hostility of the landscape, represents an advance on nineteenth century short fictions by significant writers like A.G. Grace and Lady Barker; it is suggestive of a powerfully imagined, specifically New Zealand experience, as stated in the narrator's memorable comment:

There is no twilight in our New Zealand days, but a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque—it frightens—as though the savage spirit of the country walked abroad and sneered at what it saw.

Similar preoccupations with the unaccounted-for, darker side of human nature appear in the stories by Sargeson and Hulme, for example; but the once dominant thread of Sargesonian realism has since slowed, giving way to more experimental and playful fiction, while Hulme's blend of modernist allusion and Maori mythology remains a high point of the 1980s. Realism has been rennovated in the work of Vincent O'Sullivan, it achieves a greater linguistic density in the work of Owen Marshall, successor to Sargeson in his mastery of the genre, and it is adapted to new discourses, as found, for example, in the feminist consciousness of Fiona Kidman's 'The Hat'. The diversification of the literary base over the last fifty years, due to increased urbanization, mobility and expanded cosmopolitan affiliations, apparent in plural literary forms and wide-ranging influences, has also included extension and reinterpretation of the earlier traditions. Sue Orr's 'Velocity', for example, is an updated version of the outback yarn as produced by Sargeson's raconteur narrators, here jauntily embellished with contemporary idiom and allusion. Feminist writing which emerged in the 1970s and 80s marked a new awareness of family relationships and the formation of identity. The stories by Fiona Kidman and Barbara Anderson show an energizing of social dialogue and relationships with a sensitive ear, both being attuned to social rituals and their destructive potential, and acutely conscious of the distinctions of class and generation; Anderson uses memory to probe the savage impulses behind the veneer of genteel women in 'Discontinuous Lives'. Shonagh Keogh's mercurial and idiosyncratic take on the social role and subjectivity of the spinster and/or widow develops a singular

angle of vision that bears productive comparison with Mansfield's metropolitan stories of *la femme seule*.

The short story revels in fragmented narrative formats and rapid switches of perspective, an aesthetic which projects the confusing welter of sensations of life as it is lived and as the individual might experience it; yet simultaneously it encourages a more deterministic pattern through variation of time frames, alternative viewpoints, implication, memory and reflection. The changes in the New Zealand short story over the last century suggest a similar contrast between the immediate, turbulent present and the greater certainties of the distanced, historical past. From its 'postcolonial' beginnings in Mansfield's distanced return through memory from Europe to her childhood, to local animations provided by the laconic voices of Sargeson's protagonists (who are read as fitting exemplars of provincial culture of the 1930s and 40s), to the consolidation of Sargesonian raw realism through to the 1960s, to the explosion of new voices, alternative narrative techniques and a kaleidoscopic stylistic range from the 1970s and 80s, the genre has both kept pace with literary fashion and been a dynamic source of literary growth. The 'vigorous uncertainty' of this most recent phase, confirms that the short story continues to flourish and expand in a receptive local and global environment. It is sustained by the recognition of tradition, and its foundations in the provincial era; it is energized by imported literary traditions and enlivened by regional and national short story competitions developed in honour of masters like Dan Davin and Katherine Mansfield, as well as a wealth of increasingly cosmopolitan readers and audiences. We hope that this collection, selective though it is, will give

some indication of the changing currents and rapid developments of the genre in New Zealand over the last century.

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