

Natasha Moar on the storytellers

## Little Angels

When *The Lagoon And Other Stories* (Bloomsbury, hbk £9.95) was first published in 1951, its author, Janet Frame, was a mental patient, diagnosed wrongly as schizophrenic. As the film *An Angel At My Table*, by fellow New Zealander Jane Campion, revealed, Frame's collection not only won her a prestigious literary prize; but in doing so it dissuaded her doctors from going ahead with a frontal leucotomy.

It is apt that writing should have, in effect, saved Frame's life, when life and fantasy constantly overtake each other in this enchanting and moving collection. The little girls that feature so strongly in these stories, drawn, one suspects, directly from Frame's childhood, are caught up in wishful fantasies of how they would dearly like to be. The watchful and witty eye of the author sustains a child's view of selfhood, school and family life, more



Frame: A charmed benevolence

readily than that of an adult. On the one hand their imaginative play; on the other their recognition and frequent rejection of the adult world.

Two stories about the death of sisters (Frame herself lost

two sisters) typically show childish hope and optimism in conflict with loss and grief. In 'The Secret', Nini shares an absorbing make-believe world with her beloved sister Myrtle. When Mum tells Nini that the doctor told her Myrtle would die, she refuses to admit the logic of a child dying and we are almost taken in by her happy assurances that nothing will change.

'Keel And Kool' traces a little girl's realisation of the terrible loneliness created by her sister Eva's death. She is playing with her dead sister's best friend when the desolate cry of seagulls cannot but bring her loss home to her.

Frame's short stories are rich and satisfying because their conclusions create a flowering, rather than a closure. Change is evident in the slightest shift of emphasis; detail that is at once subtle and crystal clear. Most of the stories are cast as prose poetry, a lyrical stream of consciousness tempered by the charmed benevolence of Frame's outlook. Her more 'sanely' written accounts of the sadness of mental home life are written with terrifying lucidity, the world that could easily have destroyed Frame seeming not frightening but small and sad.

Where Frame leads us gently to her tales' end, Fay Weldon, in her latest collection of short stories **Noon Over Minneapolis, Or Why She Couldn't Stay** (*Harper Collins, hbk £12.99*) forces us to accept unconvincing changes of mind and character. Her writing rests uneasily between two stools. It accommodates the conventions of women's magazine fiction, yet contains a streak of liberalism which characterises her misleadingly as a woman's - even feminist - writer.

Weldon's stories are heavy-handed and written to formula. Businesswoman Oriole Green attends a private abortion clinic and has her mind changed at the last minute by a pro-life receptionist. A smile from a Yugoslavian waiter is sufficient to

make a young woman realise that her professor lover is too pompous and too old for her, and to leave him immediately. These stories can be read as glibly as they are written, and perhaps with some enjoyment, but little feeling.



## Don Roamin'

Don Juan is alive and well and living in Greenwich Village. As a lesbian. And her story is exactly what you would expect, if you looked at it with lacerating honesty rather than through the rosy glow of pink triangular spectacles. There are male confessional books written now by ex-Casanovas about their 'Don Juan complex', which present it as an obsessive, unhappy and unpleasurable addiction. From what would seem at first glance to be a very different point of view, Jane DeLynn's novel, **Don Juan In The Village** (*Serpent's Tail, pbk £7.99*), reaches an identical conclusion.

Thus, its heroine has sex not because of overpowering desire, but as a kind of duty. Constantly in motion - from Morocco to Ibiza, from Padua to Iowa, the list of stopping-points on her journey is, perhaps deliberately, interminable - her sexual encounters, despite the varied cultures of her surroundings, are curiously similar, if not often identical. The women she sleeps with are treated as status symbols; one, picked up in a bar, is made to walk a few paces in her wake, being considered too ugly to be seen next to her on the street. She keeps her eyes closed during sex with another because she doesn't want to acknowledge that she's having sex with a fat woman. Others are not

even allowed names.

Forever in quest of the perfect thin, 'slightly trashy' blonde, this Don Juanita never experiences a moment of real pleasure, being trapped and held fast by her own narcissism. Besides, it's harder for the Don as a woman. Italian whores won't sleep with you, Puerto Rican teenagers won't even dance with you, men in cars force you to masturbate them as the price of a lift. She is fully aware that behaving like a man doesn't automatically give her a man's power, but even her sharp self-knowledge won't allow her to alter her behaviour to compensate.

*Don Juan In The Village* deals, ultimately, with the way sex works when it is forcibly detached from emotion, and the sadness of the womaniser eternally hovering in limbo between the two, hardly able to experience either one. In the way that fiction works best, the specificity of its story has a universal message; as uneasy, uncomfortable and sordid as bad sex itself.

Lauren Milne Henderson



## Mystery Plays

Anyone who reads Juan Goytisolo's latest work, **The Virtues Of The Solitary Bird** (*Serpent's Tail, pbk £8.99*) and finds themselves in the dark, should not be deterred. For Goytisolo is committed to obscurity. The hallucinatory monologue flickers theatrically across eras and cultures - religiose sensuality, imperial pomp, baroque elaboration - but the scene shifts are barely visible. His prose, now arid, now cloying, gathers like a cloud of incense; a heady concoction of Spanish intensity; with the fumes of Velasquez, Goya,

and Dali.

The author is witness to a strange calamity - a vision of an allegorical sower of discord, who annihilates victims, rendering their bodies to a pulp. From a hospital bed, where the atmosphere slips between the ennui of a seaside convalescence and the paranoia of supervision, the author attempts to preserve what he has seen. His impulse is to narrate the liberties lost in the destruction; but the disaster he struggles with in his memory is also the process of control - of accountability - that such narration involves. The story itself creates the conditions of mental control which the author seeks to escape.

Rebellion against any and every natural form of control and authority is the order of the day. The title is an allusion to St John, forced by the Inquisition to swallow his 'Treatise On The Qualities Of The Solitary Bird'. The writer must protect the vision he unfolds, so the narrative takes shape through hints and half-recollections. Sequence is interrupted, lies mixed with truth, the flow of the tale bearing an occult relation to the ordering of text on the page - blank spaces or chapter breaks seeming to cut arbitrarily across the narrative.

One fragment challenges, 'Was it possible to decipher the obscurities of the text, find a universal explanatory key... circumscribe its linguistic ambiguities...'. The difficulties of the text are radical. However the transgressions of convention are not merely iconoclastic, or a strategy of seduction, as with Jean Genet. Instead, obscurity becomes the book's *raison d'être* - 'wouldn't it be better to plunge once and for all into the infinitude of the poem, accept the impenetrability of its mysteries and opacities, free your own language from the shackles of rationality...'. Like St John finding his true love in the dark night of the soul, Goytisolo searches for political and psychological redemption in mystery.

Kieran Gallagher