

Gifted

It is an honour to be asked to launch Patrick's novel...and slightly absurd to my mind that I should be given this privilege... feeling as I do that the relative tyro has no place ushering in the mentor's masterpiece. But it is true that I would never have had the bottle (a very Patrick word) to start writing stories 20 odd years ago, but for, firstly, Dr Evans' electric – and life-changing - course on New Zealand literature...which gave such crucial lessons in how one recognises and writes from one's own place; and secondly, his kindly readings and comments on my early efforts – a chore, the thanklessness of which I recognised only much later. So I'm grateful for the chance to acknowledge, in this small way, not just this marvellous book, but the *beaut* (another Patrick word, I've learned to cherish), the *beaut* man and *beaut* mind behind the book.

I read *Gifted* twice in manuscript, the second reading coming hard on the first, because it is that kind of book...so pleasurable, one can't quite bear for it to be over, and must repeat the experience instantly...but so artful and freighted that it rewards many readings, and probably readings over many years.

Of course, the title – *Gifted* - points up the rewards to come. As befits a good title – and a fiction with the nuance and possibility and almost *corporeal* life of language at its heart – the title echoes in all sorts of ways - gifts galore: Janet Frame's gift of genius, Sargeson's literary pioneering and deep humanity; Frame's and Sargeson's reciprocal literary and personal gifts, their gifts to us, a young country, learning to understand itself through its literature.

But right now, the gifts to acknowledge are Patrick's. Firstly, the gift of his silence.... and by that - she asserts swiftly - I don't mean that we couldn't bear to have a novel from him these last years. Rather, that a great novel takes much time, and so, (as Richard Ford has said somewhere), it is often fruitful for a serious writer *not* to produce...Patrick, as his friends and colleagues know well, has maintained utter clarity about the difference between book production and literature. He has reminded us all from time to time – in some of the best essays ever written on New Zealand literature – and with mordant humour, that the book market and the cult of the writer are not literature's best friends.

There is no point writing unless you have something to say, and when you do have something to say it will often take years.

You could say this book has taken Patrick's whole life, in the sense it is the book he was born to write. Another gift: Dr Evans' profound understanding of the story of New Zealand literature, and within that, his fascination with, and devotion to that literature's brightest star, Janet Frame. Patrick's portrait of this artist has always – wonderfully - resisted the mythologies and hagiographies that append to her - and that has been another gift, because here in the novel we have – not a portrait 'afflicted' by a personal relationship with the nascent artist, culled from inevitably defective and self-serving memory (as in some other literary outings), or from the accrual of collective myth... but a portrait derived from *the work* itself, a corpus of language and story that Patrick has read and read and read over the decades, ingested, *channelled*, you could say.

As with Frame's work, so with Sargeson's – brilliant pieces of ventriloquism, indeed, as Bill Manhire has written. And, of course, *Gifted* hums with so much else. There is Patrick's characteristic attention to, and affection for, the everyday rituals and materiality of our lives, his gift for the comic, his preternatural awareness of language's sinuous, subterranean life...

But perhaps the best gift of all, and what has stayed with me above all else, is the sense of one writer bearing immensely loving witness - to two other, very significant writers, *yes* - but two human beings, also: spirited, frail, venal, generous, driven, despairing...triumphant human beings. PDE has honoured most beautifully, quite magically and movingly, that drawn out moment in our cultural history and the two remarkable people who enacted it.

Years ago, a very cross Janet Frame accused the Doctor of Literature rummaging round in her life and writing, of being 'a person from Porlock...' With luck, her shade – and Uncle Frank's – appreciates now, as we speak and celebrate, how that person interrupting her muse, came, nevertheless, bearing gifts...

Kate De Goldi, October 114, 2010