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Short Stories

Prizes: The Selected Stories of Janet Frame
Janet Frame
Counterpoint
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Janet Frame preferred her solitude to mingling with the literati, but by the time she died in 2004 she had long since secured her reputation as an author of import. Frame was regarded by many as the best New Zealand writer of her generation, and the stories in this collection only underscore the fact of her unique talent-one endorsed by her numerous fellowships, honorary doctorates, and literary prizes both at home and abroad; at one point she was even rumored to have been short-listed for a Nobel Prize in Literature.

Prizes is a posthumous roundup of more than forty of Frame's best stories from multiple volumes. It begins where she began, in 1952 with selections from Lagoon and Other Stories. This breakout collection about life in New Zealand was made more notable by the fact that it won the prestigious Hubert Church Award, thus bringing Frame's remarkable talents to the attention of doctors who soon called off a scheduled lobotomy. Frame's pathological shyness and occasional anxiety attacks had been misunderstood by psychiatrists and she was thought to be schizophrenic. Frame had already endured over 200 rounds of electroshock therapy and many years in asylums; those early stories saved her mind-quite literally-and began her long and prolific career. In all, four decades of writing are represented in Prizes, including five stories previously unavailable in book form.

Over time, Frame's stories do shift in style, though less in tone. Her early stories are like finely made dioramas into which one can peer and see lives unfolding with all the fear, sadness, and alienation of real life. In the stories from her second collection, released in 1963, an allegorical vein emerges and the fable-like atmosphere of magical realism becomes more evident. A city is overwhelmed by terrible screaming that no one wants to admit hearing for fear of being thought anything but normal; a Minister of Mythmaking is compelled to outlaw death or any mention of the word. The death that is or the death that hovers is perhaps Frame's most discernible literary theme; yet these are not grim tales. They are simply stories that seem very,

very true; the reader’s urge is to underline long passages and to loan the book to every fiction-loving friend or colleague.

Frame’s stories are like little cut crystal glasses holding just the right amount of liquor; the rich liquid laps the fine lines of leaves carved here and there. They are thickly concentrated observations woven throughout with quiet insight and achingly beautiful yet unprepossessing prose. You might pour yourself just such a beverage while you read Prizes, while you swish them around inside your mouth before swallowing their amber dark color, their fermented and fortified flavor. (December) Holly Wren Spaulding