

Speaking Frankly

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Speaking Frankly: The Frank Sargeson Memorial Lectures 2003–2010, ed. by Sarah Shieff (Devonport: Cape Catley Ltd., 2011).

Speaking Frankly represents the collected texts for The Frank Sargeson Memorial Lectures, convened by Sarah Shieff, each of which was delivered at The University of Waikato in Hamilton between 2003 and 2010. The lectures included in this volume cover a range of perspectives on Sargeson as a writer, a mentor and a friend; as Shieff observes, these talks ‘allow us to celebrate New Zealand writing’, of which Sargeson’s contribution is a ‘signal, laconic, glorious example’ (p. 8).

In the first lecture, ‘A Conversation with my Uncle: Frank Sargeson and Hamilton’ (2003), Michael King explores the influence of the city of Hamilton on Sargeson. He notes the ‘suffocating Puritanism’ (p. 18) of Sargeson’s upbringing; his change of name in 1931 from Norris Davey and his subsequent emergence as a ‘would-be writer’ (p. 16); he considers Sargeson’s conscious rejection of Hamilton, but also his use of his early experiences in the city as the imaginative basis of a number of his short stories (p. 18).

The importance of place is also acknowledged in Kevin Ireland’s lecture, ‘Mr Sargeson at Home: A Glimpse at the Domestic Arrangements and Literary Carry-on at 14 Esmonde Road, Takapuna’ (2005), as well as in that of Peter Wells, ‘The Hole in the Hedge: Landscape and the Fragility of Memory’ (2006). Ireland evokes the ‘literary oasis’ that was Sargeson’s residence at Takapuna, and also recalls ‘several very different Sargesons’, including childhood memories of when Sargeson was

a neighbour (pp. 49 and 50). Ireland says that he never met the 'Secret Sargeson' (Norris Davey), but he does share anecdotes about the often difficult relationship between Sargeson and Janet Frame, and he remembers the many forms of kindness that Sargeson bestowed on his visitors and friends.

Peter Wells uses the hole in Sargeson's hedge as the starting point for his celebration of 14 Esmonde Road, and his dismay about the threat of the encroaching motorway to Sargeson's former home. While his lecture is grounded in the materiality of the house and its surrounds, Wells is sensitive to the 'felt ephemerality of our lives'; as the physical location of Sargeson's house is subject to alteration, so the 'fragile ecosystem of memory' is likewise endangered (pp. 74 and 94). To enter the house, he observes, is to be 'plunged into a cave of memory', in which the rooms have 'all the patina of a lived life', but which also 'feel-like a mirage' (pp. 89 and 90).

Elizabeth Aitken Rose questions further the importance of the house-as-museum, in 'Do Frank's Ashes Matter? The Significance of New Zealand's Literary House Museums' (2009). As other writers in this volume remember Sargeson with fondness and a bittersweet sense of nostalgia, Rose observes of Sargeson's cottage that 'it remains to be seen whether successive generations will cherish this past as his friends have, especially when they are no longer there to vivify the place with their own reminiscences' (p. 170). She considers 'the "ancillary truths" projected onto the relics of writers' lives and the multiple meanings evolving over time', as well as 'the significance of such sites as narratives of broader urban transformation' (p. 144). Rose compares 14 Esmonde Road with the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace / Te Puakitanga, the Ngaio Marsh house and the Janet Frame house, and acknowledges the role of Sargeson's friends in preserving his 'life's leavings' through 'conservation of his property', just as his 'spirit' is kept alive 'through a writers' fellowship and his literature through new editions of his work' (p. 170). She argues that these locations have the potential to

both empower visitors to ‘create their own meanings’, and to encourage an interest in literature (p. 171).

Christine Cole Catley, in ‘Frank the Bank: The Unending Generosity of Frank Sargeson’ (2007), draws in the reader with her evocative flashbacks which recall her friendship and literary connections with Sargeson. Toward the end of her lecture, Cole Catley says she realises ‘that I am thanking him, too, on behalf of all those who have yet to meet the Frank Sargeson whom some of us were so very fortunate to know and love.’ She adds, ‘Not so very many of us left now. But others keep coming along, reading him, looking to him, learning, and—best of all—writing in their turn’ (p. 114).

Lawrence Jones turns to the legacy of Sargeson the writer, in ‘The Wrong Bus: The “Sons of Sargeson”, Dan Davin and the Search for the Great New Zealand Novel, 1943-56’ (2004). He discusses the lives and works of the ‘five most promising’ young candidates for writing the Great New Zealand novel during the forties and fifties, including Maurice Duggan, A.P. Gaskell, G.R. Gilbert, David Ballantyne and John Reece Cole, and concludes with a section on Dan Davin. Jones observes that Sargeson hoped for a ‘definitive New Zealand novel’, and quotes Sargeson’s claim that such a novel would “‘seek out the threads of our lives, and show us all where they lead to’”, thus representing a ‘kind of critical truth-telling’ (pp. 28 and 27).

Graeme Lay also emphasises the importance of ‘truth’, in his ‘Affairs of the Heart’ (2008). He recalls his own history as a promising writer of short stories, and the letter of encouragement he received from Sargeson, which included the advice that a short story ‘should remain for all time imaginatively truthful’ (p. 125). Lay acknowledges Sargeson’s commitment and support to so many people, identifying himself as ‘merely the latest in a long line of aspiring writers whom Frank had mentored, over a period of 40 years’ (p. 133). He also celebrates the continuance of this spirit of mentorship through the Frank Sargeson Trust and the Buddle Findlay Sargeson Fellowship.

The final text in the volume is Owen Marshall's lecture, 'The True Reader' (2010). Marshall shifts the focus from the writer to the 'true' reader, whom he fancifully describes as 'a time lord in the parallel universe of literature' (p. 175). More seriously, he points out that a 'book worth reading is worth our full attention, all our mental energy' (p. 178). For those of us who never met Sargeson, this functions in part as a reminder—outside of time and place, and beyond our multiple awarenesses of Sargeson as a person and a writer—that what is of ultimate importance, as readers, is our individual connection with the literary text, and the personal, very intimate relationship each of us establishes with the characters and settings of the stories we venture into.

The lectures in this collection celebrate Sargeson's status as an iconic New Zealand writer, whose legacy combines an enduring contribution to the nation's literature and a continuing spirit of commitment to mentoring a generation of younger writers. This volume is distinguished, however, by the vivid glimpses of Sargeson that the reader is afforded, and the great affection, warmth and gratitude with which the speakers share their stories and memories of Sargeson.