Natasha Moor 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 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
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 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 sorrowful 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 - religious 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 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-revelations. Sequence is interrupted, 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