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Peter F Alexander Annotation

This enjoyable article by Peter Alexander, biographer of William Plomer (novelist and ‘reader’ at London publishing house Jonathan Cape), explores the correspondence between New Zealand literary icon Frank Sargeson and Plomer over a thirty year period, with particular reference to Sargeson’s relationship with Janet Frame. The remarkable friendship of these two men of letters, both born in 1903, both homosexual, was based entirely on this correspondence (since they never met), initiated via a mutual friend, Denis Glover, in 1941, and continuing until Plomer’s death in 1973. Frame famously spent 18 months living in Sargeson’s garden in an old army hut in 1955/6, following ten years in mental institutions. The correspondence reveals how his life was irrevocably altered by the strain of this relationship with Frame. Her schizophrenia and instability during the time she lived in his garden hut was such that he feared for his own life, though his generosity of spirit meant that he continued to help her both as a writer and as a friend, often at the expense of his own needs. Plomer never regarded Frame’s work as highly as Sargeson, and indeed turned down the manuscript of her first novel, *Owls do Cry* in 1957, telling Sargeson: ‘It doesn’t appeal enough to common appetites’ (p.34). As Frame’s fame grew, Alexander notes that she became ‘too successful for either of them to feel quite comfortable about’ (p.39). In addition, the openness and relish with which both men regaled each other with literary gossip during the course of this correspondence, makes one wish for a book-length version of this truly fascinating article.