



Janet Frame – ASD, Asperger Syndrome - or not?

She was one of New Zealand's most famous writers yet she was also private, reclusive and "different".

Janet Frame was wrongly diagnosed with schizophrenia and spent some years in mental institutions. Now studies suggest she may instead have had high-functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome.

Three speakers addressed this possibility at the 2010 Autism New Zealand annual conference in Wellington. Two were academics, one also the mother of an autistic son and the third was a niece of Janet Frame, herself with Asperger tendencies.

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While the topic remains sensitive in some areas, Hilary Stace, Sarah Abrahamson and Janet Frame-Cutmore all believe that analysis of the author's writing and life lead to a clear diagnosis of ASD or Asperger Syndrome.

Victoria University Research Fellow Hilary Stace referred in her address to a "lightbulb moment" in 2000 when reading Michael King's biography of Janet Frame, *Wrestling with the Angel*.

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She wrote an essay as part of her studies, questioning whether Janet Frame had Asperger Syndrome rather than the schizophrenia she was misdiagnosed with in the 1940s.

Hilary continued to analyse Frame's writing and life and published a paper in 2007 entitled "Was Janet Frame on the Autism Spectrum?"

Sarah Abrahamson is a New Zealand-educated Autism Spectrum Disorder

researcher and rehabilitation physician in Australia who shared Hilary Stace's opinion and was also familiar with other diagnoses of ASD in historical figures, including Albert Einstein and Hans Christian Anderson.

Signs of ASD in Janet Frame included limited social skills, difficulty making appropriate friends, difficulty coping with basic daily tasks while living alone, a strong interest in literature and she had early language difficulties. Both academics quoted numerous examples of ASD thinking and behaviours in her writing.

Janet Frame-Cutmore was the daughter of Janet Frame's brother George and named after her aunt. Having studied the research of Hilary and Sarah, Janet Frame-Cutmore now wonders whether her epileptic father also had a form of autism.

"Everything makes sense to me now. This is the importance of analysing famous people through their writings. Yes, some things are fictitious but where the author subjectively describes year after year and in many different books, I feel it is a way of communicating to others what it is like to be autistic. Is not autism a lack of communication? Writing is like the autistic person's voice. Janet Frame describes through her writing how she felt and what she wanted to say."

For further information, see:

Hilary Stace;
<http://humans.org.nz/2007/11/08/was-janet-frame-on-the-autistic-spectrum/>
<http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/120-1264/2791/>

Sarah Abrahamson;
<http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/120-1263/2747/>