

Film review

An Angel at My Table (1990. Director: Jane Campion)

This film is based on the three volumes of autobiography by New Zealand writer Janet Frame.

Part I: To the Is-land: Janet, the survivor of twins, is a chubby red-headed child, living in a house full of children – four to a bed; she has to earn the affection of her peers by buying them sweets. To this end she steals money from her father. She is befriended by Poppy who, slightly more street-wise than Janet, wears with pride the cuts, bruises and scars of her most recent beating. Together they play “school” and reap back what the day has taken from them. With the help of her siblings Janet effectively re-creates illustrations from volumes of fairytales into moving tableaux.

The film portrays a character who has a remarkable memory – remembering the poems that are learnt at school. For her, fairy tales are fantasy and reality. The words that she uses and chooses to use are like a prison that she builds around herself. Her older sister, to whom she is attached, drowns in an accident and she has to take on her role. The feelings of anger and guilt are conveyed beautifully. Sudden onset of menarche only adds to the stresses.

Part II: An Angel at my Table: Janet leaves her home town to go to a teacher training college. She becomes increasingly withdrawn and relies even more on her loneliness and imagination. Looking at images in the clouds and faking to be a vegetarian keep her occupied; she comes across as an outsider always looking in and never really getting there. There is a remarkable degree of ambivalence about her teaching course.

When the school inspector arrives to observe, she has a panic attack and has to flee the class to wander

among the woods crying at her own insecurities. She gives up teaching and becomes a waitress. When she takes an overdose, her old college lecturer whom she adores, brings two visitors to her boarding house where they declare that she needs rest and “to be looked after”. In hospital, she discovers that she is in a psychiatric ward. A response of anger on her part leads to the immediate assumption by the staff that she is mad. She spends the next eight years in a psychiatric hospital and over this period receives 200 unmodified ECTs, each one received with “a fear of an execution”. The effects of institutionalisation are strikingly obvious. Leucotomy is recommended with, “It’s not the question that you have to (have it) but of what is best”. The news of her winning a major literary award comes just in time to prevent a leucotomy happening and she is allowed to go home.

Part III: Envoy from Mirror City: Janet comes to Europe on a literary grant. First to London and then to Paris where she realises a small dream, “to cross the sea to the Queen of France”, a line from the melancholic New Zealand folk melody which she used to sing as a child. Her first sexual encounter leads to pregnancy followed by miscarriage while in Spain. She returns to Camberwell and another suicide attempt leads to her admission to the Maudsley Hospital. The emphasis on the therapeutic relationship with her psychiatrist is obvious and when she is told that the earlier diagnosis of schizophrenia was incorrect she feels let down.

Cinematically the film is a pleasure. The photography is exquisite. The brightness of New Zealand, the greyness of London and the summer light of Spain are well illustrated.

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