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Katherine and the Flying Wheel

by Vincent O'Sullivan

Kathleen Jones takes two extraordinary gambles that pay off amply in her richly detailed and compelling new biography of Katherine Mansfield.

Kathleen Jones wrote several highly regarded biographies – of Christina Rossetti, of the women who lived with the Lake Poets, of Catherine Cookson – before she turned to her expansive account of Katherine Mansfield, the fourth since Antony Alpers's judicious benchmark in 1980.

Jones has produced by far the biggest book, and the most challenging. She writes with insight and verve, and an intelligent sympathy not only for Mansfield, but for that entire cast who are now familiar players, as her story is set out against those overlapping literary and social worlds the writer passes through, rather than being deeply part of.

A mass of new material unavailable to earlier biographers makes this new telling richly detailed and compelling. Jones revises and expands on what was known about Mansfield's health, and leads the reader through what it was like, often week by week, for a brilliant young woman dying over several years.

To see Mansfield more clearly means to see her more starkly. The woman who now appears is rather more troubled, more constantly baffled by choice and circumstance, than we may have thought. She is also gutsier, more resilient, more defiant, as she moves towards the razor-sharp clarity of facing the end on her own terms.

If one assesses a life by how it realises what it aimed for, this is a chastening story, apart from that glowing haul of prose that survived it. To tell it both - accurately and fully, with its spread of intricacies and confusion, Jones makes two crucial decisions.

A hundred and fifty pages into Mansfield's life, at the point when she meets the man who will mean more to her than anyone else, the book becomes a biography of another kind, as you are taken into a long account of what happens to John Middleton Murry after Mansfield's death. You realise that the misleadingly titled *Katherine Mansfield: The Story-Teller* might have been something rather closer to *Mansfield and Murry: The Unending Story*.

The Mansfield narrative is again picked up, but similar leaps to other lives, to other times, occur later in the book. You will read about Murry's last years and his death before Mansfield has decided on joining George Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau.

It is a bold move to fracture the conventions most of us so firmly have in mind when it comes to biography. Jones is far too serious a writer to play at what by now are rather faded postmodernist games with genre and technique. What she intends is that the entire span of Murry's life, with its macabre hauntings and flaunted wretchedness once Mansfield died, is drawn back to *her*, the abiding ghost in the more than 30 years her husband survives her. What the biographer does, narratively speaking, is a hell of a risk to take. But it comes off. *Everything* is backlit by Mansfield, alive or dead. "We are like the wings of one bird," she had once written to Murry, with rather less Gothic intent than turned out to be so.

This wide-angle account of Murry makes gruesome reading. For a long time, in the face of those commentators who so readily put their righteous boots into the man, I would counter that think what you like, Mansfield loved him, married him, thought of him constantly, and in her last weeks was planning how they could spend more of their lives together. That is the relevant point when considering her life. One of the ironies of the Mansfield scholarly marketplace is that Murry so conscientiously provided the ammunition that was fired at him. Whatever writing of hers he did not publish, or edited out, or rearranged, he carefully preserved for others to sift, and so level their charge against him. I believe that defence of him still holds. But that said, it is near impossible to warm to a personality that was so relentlessly self-absorbed, obtuse about others, swamped in sentimentality, and a truly dreadful parent.

I don't know where you would easily find anything to touch the awfulness of his second marriage, with another consumptive to play out his fantasy of an

enduring Mansfield; or as horrific as his third, which was rotten before it began. I suppose I would pull up short of describing Murry as loathsome, and Jones works admirably to understand why he behaved as he did. But I doubt one could make much of a case against anyone who thought that the appropriate word.

Jones's other extraordinary gamble is that although the Murry sections are conventionally related in the past tense, a story that is over and done with and looked back on, the telling of Mansfield's life is continuously in the present. This at first may seem a distraction, a too unexpected narrative tack. Until its cunning and its effect strikes home.

In a sense, there is something lapidary in most biographies, the feeling that, now a life has ended and is up for scrutiny, "over" implies "completeness", which in turn sets a shape and pattern, a clear cut-out figure against the background of its time. The reality, of course, is that in most cases that apparent shape was not there in the first place, as life ticked away. Even if the pattern imposed after death may seem an accurate one, the living mind was unaware of it. The past tense is the seal on the cooled wax.

What Jones has brought off by using the voice of life as it occurs is to record the details of Mansfield's experience with their ringing sense of immediacy, with the force of an almost constant confusion and disappointment and discomfort. Mansfield for the most part was on the verge of happiness, rather than achieving it, and then she faced the abyss square on. Yet a constant, delighting vividness

is what one so predominantly is faced with as one reads her letters, stories, notebooks – the prose that carries a living pulse.

One of Mansfield's late stories concludes with a young girl caught up in "the beautiful flying wheel" of her first ball, the elation of the moment, just after she dances with a dismal partner who warns her "you can't hope to last". This new biography tells you, accurately and sympathetically, the story of what you might call Katherine and the Flying Wheel, and a man with an almost inexhaustible gift for saying – and doing – the wrong thing.

KATHERINE MANSFIELD: THE STORY-TELLER, by Kathleen Jones (Penguin/Viking, \$65); Jones is a guest at the Christchurch Writers Festival, September 9-12.

Vincent O'Sullivan is co-editor of the five-volume Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield.

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Book Review

Kathleen Jones, *Katherine Mansfield The Story Teller* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 528 pp., £25. ISBN 9780748643547

As its title suggests, 'story-telling' is a central concept in Kathleen Jones's impressive new biography of Katherine Mansfield: Mansfield as the creator of stories, and Mansfield as the subject of stories. Jones recognizes the essential paradox at the heart of any attempt at biography: the impossibility of ever telling the 'whole story'. The biographer is herself, foremost, a 'story-teller'. The more she amasses the 'facts', diligently scours the archives, tracks down informants, and discovers previously unknown sources--diaries, letters, manuscripts--the more difficult the task of illumination, the search for the right method to make all this become 'alive'.

As a skilled and successful author of four biographies of women writers, Kathleen Jones undoubtedly has absorbed and refined the traditional conventions of the genre. Such long experience appears to have led her to question those very same conventions. In this way, she seems to parallel the creative process of Mansfield herself, struggling to discover the right technique to convey her unique vision, and breaking with established narrative conventions to do so. Consequently, in an implicitly meta-critical turn, the seemingly fractured structure of this book makes its own comment on the problematic nature of the genre itself. Jones thus juxtaposes two 'stories': one about Katherine Mansfield, the other about John Middleton Murry. She tells one story (Mansfield's) partially in the reverse: beginning with her death at Fontainebleau and circling back to Fontainebleau at the very end, all the while presenting Mansfield's story through a present-tense point of view. The juxtaposed Murry story moves in a

traditionally linear fashion, taking up Murry's life after Mansfield's death and examining the persistence of his obsessive interest in her throughout his three later marriages. That story is presented in the past-tense. Although I was a bit disconcerted by this structure at first, I soon began to appreciate Jones's method. Katherine Mansfield is 'alive' for us throughout the years Jones describes; her *after*-life, as depicted in the Murry sections becomes more remote, more 'finished'. She remains there a presence that is *used* by others: Murry, his second wife who tried to make herself a double of Mansfield, his children who suffered the effects of Murry's fixation on Mansfield, not to mention the biographers, critics, and friends who perpetrated the often-conflicting and partial views of 'their' Katherine Mansfield.

The circularity of the book's structure allows for an interweaving of past and present that ultimately makes it a book without an ending, as Kathleen Jones's own search for the 'story' and the numerous people--scholars and critics--who have become absorbed in its unfolding also figure in that circularity. In situating herself boldly within the book's parameters, Jones can make it a study of both the search and the discovery, both the physical objects which remain and their textual representations. In her lovely, evocative introduction, we find Jones walking through the streets of present-day Wellington, simultaneously absorbing the city's ambiance and superimposing Mansfield's responses to the same objects in view. She gives us a glimpse of her scholarly expertise here as well, such as her extensive research at the Turnbull Library, and her conversations with Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, the latter 'one of the few people still alive to have known Katherine's surviving family and friends' (20). She draws our attention to the overwhelming significance of New Zealand in any attempt to understand Mansfield's life and work: 'To go to New Zealand in search of Katherine Mansfield is to be aware of the heart of her duality'. (21)

Among its many strengths, this biography goes further than earlier ones in exploring the complexities of Mansfield's relationship with Ida Baker, who now emerges as a far more intelligent and sympathetic figure, a woman whose talent for writing was largely suppressed, but is apparent in the passages Jones quotes from her diary and other papers housed in the Turnbull Library. Jones's skill as a writer is apparent in her depiction of Mansfield's personality during adolescence: her fears and faints, her impulsiveness, her nervous excitement. (Here is a biographer who fully understands the psychology of teen-age girls!) Such imaginative sympathy is evident also in her wise analysis of Mansfield's involvement with Garnett Trowell and the tragic loss of their baby during Mansfield's stay in Bavaria, a traumatic event that would continue to torment her for the rest of her life. Equally impressive is the care Jones has taken to study the medical history and come to new conclusions about the various diagnoses and treatments Mansfield endured.

Most Mansfield biographers have been hard on Murry, but Jones approaches him with greater sympathy. While noting that his diaries 'are a harrowing record of emotional inadequacy', she still comes away from them finding herself 'more compassionate and better able to understand why he had behaved as he did, and why Katherine went on loving him "in spite of all"' (21). She is able to base her interpretation of Murry on a far greater range of sources than were available to her predecessors. Her extensive use of Murry's unpublished writings enhances this book immensely, and she is the only biographer, to my knowledge, who has been able to see the diaries of his daughter, Katherine Middleton Murry. Although Murry's 'official' biographer, F. A. Lea, had access to Murry's journals, he used them very cautiously, suppressing some details in order to protect people who were still alive in 1959, when his book appeared. Moreover, he would not have had access to the harrowing accounts of domestic strife revealed in

the books published by two of Murry's children many years later. Less than a third of Lea's biography concerns Murry's relationship with Katherine Mansfield, however, and Jones makes up for that deficiency many times over.

Sydney Janet Kaplan

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A SHORT STORY

Katherine Mansfield: The Story-Teller

By *Kathleen Jones* (Edinburgh University Press 524pp £25)

The writer known as Katherine Mansfield died of tuberculosis in January 1923. She was only thirty-four, and her work had been interrupted by lack of money and a settled home, and increasingly by illness. Despite these impediments, she published several collections of short stories, and left other stories, poems, reviews, notebooks and letters, which were edited for publication over the next thirty years by her husband, the critic and writer John Middleton Murry. Often praised for her modernist approach, Mansfield's aim as a writer was to record her observations of life as truthfully as possible, drawing freely on her New Zealand childhood, her travels in Europe and her emotional attachments to both men and women. Detail fascinated her, whether of landscape, interiors or the nuances of personal relationships, and she developed a technique of allowing a story to unfold through the private thoughts and actions of her characters, often cunningly shifting perspective by moving from one character's consciousness to another's. Particularly striking is her ability to expand some apparently minor scene or incident into universal significance, whether the deception of an innocent girl in 'The Little Governess' or the humiliation of an impoverished teacher in 'Miss Brill'.

Like Sylvia Plath (whose husband also edited her work for posthumous publication), Mansfield's output, although distinctive, was slender, and it is the details of her life, as much as her literary achievements, that have kept her in the public eye. Like Plath, she was a sexually active young woman, with an appetite for experience which she recorded frankly in notebooks and letters. Mansfield's experiments in life and literature have been explored in a series of biographies, most notably Antony Alpers's monumental *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*, Jeffrey Meyers's study of Mansfield's 'darker' aspects, and Claire Tomalin's empathetic *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life*. Is there anything else to be learned about Katherine Mansfield? One justification for a new book is the expansion of accessible sources. Kathleen Jones, an experienced and gifted biographer, further enhances the impact of her ten-year delvings into Mansfield's papers, Murry's archive, and records of family and friends by two novel approaches. She tells Mansfield's story in the present tense, and she interleaves the events of her life with chapters describing Murry's efforts to publish Mansfield after her death, giving disturbing details of his three subsequent marriages and their progeny, all to some extent haunted by the spectre of his first wife.

The use of the present tense in the sections that deal with Mansfield's life, combined with many quotations from her writings, is effective. 'Not everyone can become the artist of his own life, or have the courage to go his own way,' Mansfield once noted, but it was a dream she was determined to fulfil, and the reader is invited to share the vicissitudes of the young writer, attempting to find her place in competitive literary London, where she seems to have met everyone from D H Lawrence to Ottoline Morrell. There is the problem of living on the scarcely adequate allowance paid by her wealthy father, and the search for a home in a succession of squalid lodgings, the horrors of which include poor sanitation and cockroaches. There is the battle to write, which Mansfield at times finds almost impossible, and there is, too, the quest for a loving partner, and dealing with the unwanted consequences of sex. At that time, there were few resources available to women for advice on contraception, abortion and venereal disease, and an unmarried mother was socially ostracised. Mansfield's response to a suspected pregnancy was to marry the nearest available man and abandon her husband on their wedding night. Told as an unfolding drama, her panic makes sense. Similarly, the conflict and anxiety of Katherine's on-off relationship with Murry are highlighted by experiencing it in action; and her descent into serious illness and desperate quest for a cure, illustrated by her passionate, poignant words, are vivid and moving.

Jones's blow-by-blow account does invite the question of why Mansfield led such a rickety life. Her commitment to writing and her abilities were recognised by Virginia Woolf, whose half-unwilling admiration and jealousy are well documented. Woolf was similarly a woman aiming high in a male-dominated profession, but her credentials as a founding member of the avant-garde 'Blooms Berries', as Mansfield mockingly called them, allowed her to take risks within a critical but also protective environment, and marriage to Leonard provided stability. The outsider Katherine never achieved this productive framework. She seemed fatally programmed to make poor choices, in partners and living accommodation, and to keep moving on.

Jones's second innovation, to interpolate the later life of John Middleton Murry between the events of Mansfield's life, is disconcerting. There is at times a sense of disjuncture. Murry's marriage to his second wife, Violet le Maistre, a young writer who modelled herself on Mansfield and also died prematurely of tuberculosis, is inserted at the point where Murry first moves in with Mansfield as a lodger. The hell of his third marriage to the violent Betty Cockbayne punctuates the narrative of his volatile relationship with Mansfield, as does his final happy union with Mary Gamble. Overall, though, the effect of this extended biography is to give a more rounded account of Murry's character and emotional difficulties, helping to explain his ineptitude as Mansfield's husband, and the pain he caused her. Murry's obtuseness had its roots in an appalling childhood, a misfortune he tragically passed on to his four children.

Similarly, Murry's efforts to publish Mansfield's work are fruitfully traced in the context of his life after her death rather than being bundled into an afterword. Mansfield left him all her manuscripts 'to do what you like with', but asked him to destroy anything he didn't want to keep. 'Have a clean sweep, Bogey, and leave all fair - will you?' There is a wistful note in that final question, as if she doubted her instructions would be fulfilled quite as she hoped. On her death, Murry bustled to make available further collections of her stories. Throughout his life, he laboured to produce editions of her writings, reworking sections of the notebooks to provide a coherent (and censored) 'writer's journal', and publishing material that Mansfield herself would probably have regarded as substandard or deeply private - 'boiling Katherine's bones' for financial gain, in the view of some critics. Jones writes astutely about Murry's over-publication of Mansfield's works, but also points out that 'without his obsession, she would [probably] have been forgotten'.

Some mysteries remain for later biographers to chew over. Tomalin's theory that Mansfield had gonorrhoea in 1910, necessitating the removal of a fallopian tube and accounting for many of her subsequent health problems, is disregarded by Jones, who attributes the surgery to an ectopic pregnancy and the troubling symptoms to tuberculosis. Such debates are intriguing, but may never be resolved. What does emerge with indisputable clarity from Jones's skilful use of her sources is a portrait of Mansfield, stylish and febrile, cigarette in one hand, pen in the other, relishing life, scrutinising it with her keen intelligence, and recording her perceptions in a voice that continues to unsettle and surprise.

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Pamela Norris's most recent book is *Words of Love* (HarperPress).



Mansfield: stylish and febrile

Lifestyle

Katherine Mansfield: The Story-teller - Book review



Reviewed by tvnz.co.nz's Steph Zajkowski

At over 500 pages, the first major new biography of Katherine Mansfield for more than 25 years is a weighty tome.

But with **Katherine Mansfield: The Story-teller**, author Kathleen Jones paints a vivid and detailed picture of a New Zealand literary legend.

In fact, the minutia of detail in this biography is testament to what I imagine was painstaking and probably at times tedious research.

But with access to new material including unseen letters, journal entries and information from the family of Mansfield's husband, John Middleton Murry, the resulting book goes beyond biography.

It becomes part autobiography as Jones skilfully weaves in Mansfield's own words and feelings.

I have to confess I knew little of Mansfield's personal history before I read the book, and this one taunted me from the bedside table for a month before I picked it up.

But once I started I was hooked by the power of the story within.

Unusually, the biography opens with Mansfield's death in Fontainebleau at age 34.

From there it traces a somewhat choppy chronology - zipping backwards to Mansfield's youth in New Zealand, forward past Mansfield's death to her husband's subsequent marriages and back again as Katherine sets out to England as a young woman, full of dreams and promise.

It's a no-holds barred portrait of a brilliant and very complicated woman, one whose unconventional attitude polarised her family and alienated her friends.

My only small critique would be of the chapters and chapters dedicated to Middleton-Murry's "life after Katherine."

Still fascinating to read, it did feel as if another biography was muscling in on Katherine's story.

And I was grateful for the photographs which illustrated the book, although many were dedicated to key players in Katherine's life and few to the author herself.

All in all, this is a wonderful biography, both intimate and informative.

If, like me, you know little about Katherine Mansfield, start here with **Katherine Mansfield: The Story-teller** - you won't be disappointed.

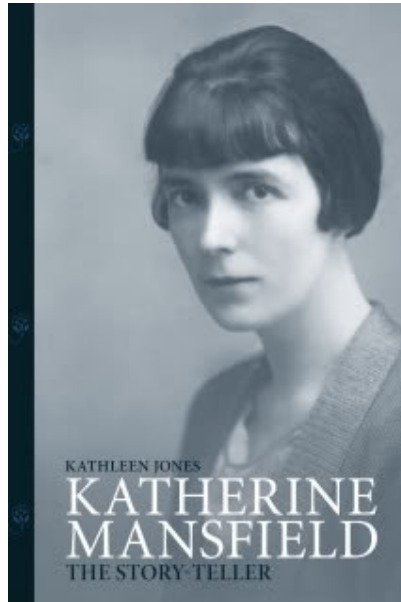
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Katherine Mansfield: The Story-teller

Publisher: [Penguin NZ](#)

RRP: \$65.00

Available: Now



Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller by Kathleen Jones (2010, 524 pages)

[The Reading Life Katherine Mansfield Project](#)

I feel very privileged to have been given the opportunity to read shortly after its publication what I am sure will be the definitive biography of Katherine Mansfield, *Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller* by Kathleen Jones. There have been four other major biographies of Katherine Mansfield (the last one was [Kathleen Mansfield: A Secret Life](#) by Claire Tomalin published in 1989.) Only Kathleen Jones has had full access to the vast correspondence that has been published since 1989 as well as the full notebooks of Katherine Mansfield.

Kathleen Jones spent more than ten years working on *Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller* during which she spent a great deal of time in New Zealand studying archives there and meeting with people who had actually known Katherine Mansfield or her family. She traveled extensively in England and France visiting the places where Mansfield lived out her life. She has also written highly regarded biographies of Margaret Cavendish, The Duchess of Newcastle (*A Glorious Fame*), Christina Rossetti (*Learning Not to Be First*); and an account of the lives of women who lived with the English Lake Country Poets (*Passionate Sisterhood*).. More information on the background and career of Professor Jones can be found at her [web page](#).)

My history with Mansfield began in May of this year when I read her story "Miss Brill" when it was selected as the classic short story of the day on a web page I follow. I confess I had never heard of Katherine Mansfield prior to that day. I was very taken by "Miss Brill". I thought it was a brilliantly illuminating look into a sad and lonely life. I did a bit of research and read a few more of her stories.

I like to know something of the lives and import of the writers that matter to me and I soon discovered many consider Katherine Mansfield the best ever female writer of short stories. She is considered to have radically altered the nature of the short story. I then decided I wanted to read and post on each of her 85 or so short stories individually. As I posted on the stories I tried to gradually learn something about Mansfield and her life and background. Virginia Woolf famously

said of Mansfield that she was the only writer that ever made her jealous. Mansfield has clear ties to Joyce and Woolf but unlike them she is also a writer for lonely people who never quite fit in anywhere, for people who retreat into visions of beauty, for those happy to sit for hours alone in a cafe watching people walk by with no hope of understanding them. I think Woolf was also a bit afraid Mansfield saw into the roots of her madness. Anyway, I thought I should explain a bit why I am interested in Mansfield. I will talk more on it when I shortly post my *The Reading Life Guide* to getting into Katherine Mansfield.

When I first received my copy of *Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller* I was very impressed by the very high production values of the book (published by Penguin/Viking). It includes a lot of wonderful photographs of Mansfield, her parents and siblings, her husband John Middleton Murry, and others that were close to Mansfield.

One of the dominant themes of *Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller* is the acknowledgement of the very deep impact of the beauty of New Zealand on Mansfield's mind and sensibility. As I read Mansfield's stories I tried to get to know at least a little the person behind them, to see beyond the mask. I saw a woman caught up in an ugly time in England and France. I saw a woman used to being taken care of (her father was the chairman of the Bank of New Zealand) reduced to trying on occasion to figure out how to pay for her meals. I also saw a woman with a very powerful sensuous nature. She liked beautiful exotic to her women and handsome near fey young men. Mansfield is considered to have had affairs and brief encounters with both men and women. As she lived in the days before people felt comfortable disclosing their full sex lives in public on talk shows, the Internet, and in tabloids and tell it all autobiographies we have no precise knowledge of her exact sexual preferences and proclivities.

Jones gives us beautiful descriptions of the natural beauty of New Zealand. Unlike any other writer I am aware of, Jones talks about the influence of the Maoris on Mansfield. Mansfield had a relationship with a Maori princess that many felt was a romantic one. We do not know if this was simply a school girl crush or if it was an intimate relationship. I confess I did not know much concerning the culture of the Maoris in early 20 century New Zealand and was a bit surprised to learn that one of the cousins of Mansfield's father married a rich Maori woman. Jones writes in a very interesting way about the colonial roots of Mansfield. She made me see what a backwater New Zealand must have seemed like to people in London and Paris and how much Mansfield felt initially liberated when she moved to London. Later Jones made us see how Mansfield often seemed to long to return to New Zealand.

Jones gives us a good look at the day- to- day struggles of Mansfield to feed and house herself. Mansfield got a modest allowance from her father that she could have lived on if she lived very modestly. Jones tells us in a very clear fashion of all the various men and women with whom Mansfield was linked with romantically. Jones spends a lot of time talking about D. H. Lawrence's and Frieda Lawrence's relationship to Mansfield and her husband. Jones also helped us understand Mansfield's relationship with Virginia Woolf but does not exaggerate it. The relationship was close but there was no real intimacy and their times together were more like meetings than two friends spending time together. We learn a bit about various Bloomsbury figures (Mansfield was not for a number of reasons a member of the Bloomsbury set). The general atmosphere of the set Mansfield moved in can be described as erotically charged. Mansfield was attracted to guru - like men ranging from her second husband John Middleton Murry to D. H. Lawrence. Mansfield went through a "Russian phase" also. Jones deals with the issue of the claim that Mansfield plagiarized a

Chekhov story. Basically Jones says the whole matter is much ado about nothing and I agree completely.

Jones goes into enough details about the terrible effects of tuberculosis on Mansfield so that we understand it. We see how an effort to cure it while at the same time ignoring it dominated the last few years of Mansfield's short life.

Jones also spend a lot of time helping us understand the role of Ida Baker in Mansfield's life. I would say I still do not quite understand fully the relationship of Baker and Mansfield but I understand a good bit more than I did before I read *Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller*. This relationship shows us an ugly side of Mansfield where she would use Ida when she needed her and push her away when she did not.

Jones takes two risks in *Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller*. One of the risks is a stylistic one. Most of the book is written in the present tense as if it were happening now. Some reviewers of the book have not liked this. To me it is brilliant touch on the part of Jones to let us live in the present with Mansfield, not see her as remote long -dead woman from an era we can barely relate to. Jones brought Mansfield very much to life for me. Many of the backgrounds and autobiographical nature of the most important stories are explicated in a very illuminating fashion by Jones.

The second risk is her treatment of the life of John Middleton Murry (1889 to 1957) who lived on long after Mansfield died. Mansfield and Murry had an odd at times difficult relationship. Mansfield was not nearly as good a husband as Leonard Woolf. I think Jones has seen that one of the keys to understanding Mansfield may be in trying to understand why Murry meant so much to her. Jones deals in sort of interlude chapters in *Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller* with each of Murry's three post Mansfield marriages. One of the wives looked very much like Katherine and I admit I got chills when that wife, Violet, was happy to learn that she had Tuberculosis just like Katherine Mansfield did. Each of the three other women seemed to embody a part of the full psyche of Mansfield. We can decide for ourselves how we feel about the way Murry handled the literary estate of Mansfield and the wealth it brought him.

Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller will be the definitive Mansfield biography for a long time, I think. Jones knows Mansfield well and has read deeply and widely in her work and era. *Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller* is not just about Mansfield. It has a lot to teach us of the historical period it deals with and the diverse set literary figures in Mansfield's world. It tells us a lot about the state of relations between the sexes in the period. We get look at life in Edwardian England from the ground up through the eyes of an outsider who never really fit in anywhere. Jones also lets us understand a lot about how the creative process works by letting us see the struggles of Mansfield.

Review of Kathleen Jones, "Katherine Mansfield."

Roger Robinson

Katherine Mansfield. The Story-Teller

Kathleen Jones

Penguin/Viking, \$???, ISBN 9780670074358

Let's hear Katherine Mansfield speak first:

The cleanliness of Switzerland! Darling, it is frightening. The chastity of my lily-white bed! The waxy-fine floors! The huge bouquet of white lilac, fresh crisp from the laundry, in my little salon. Every daisy in the grass below has a starched frill – the very bird droppings are dazzling.

That funny, inventive, wickedly observant letter to John Middleton Murry was written shortly after she had a swollen tubercular gland in her neck pierced, while another swelling pressed on her lung. She was in Switzerland to escape entering a sanatorium. The roguish joke about the chaste bed linen was shared with a husband whom she was too ill to sleep with, despite strong desire, and who was supposedly preoccupied with prestigious lectures and the demands of another woman. She had recently burned some of his letters, some of her manuscripts, and her letters to an earlier lover who was blackmailing her. She was short of money for food and medical bills. She recorded despair, "strangling by the throat a helpless exhausted little black silk bag," and she recorded ebulliently witty impressions like those about Switzerland. She was working on short stories that never satisfied her and would include some of the best and most original in all literature, several of them set affectionately in New Zealand, which she had contemptuously abandoned.

The biography of Katherine Mansfield, to put it mildly, poses a challenge. Her life and work were characterized by elusiveness and inconsistency. For that one short period in Switzerland in 1921, the evidence is as perplexing as a late cubist collage. There is now a great deal of it, available in the letters, journals and confessional works of that compulsively literate generation, and much of it is sensational, to do with sex, violence, rage, war, trauma, disease, and death. It is tempting to exploit it for effect, as I have already risked doing, and as some earlier Mansfield biographers have devotedly done.

Kathleen Jones meets the challenge head on. She resolves this complicated biography into a masterpiece of narrative reconstruction. She weaves all the fugitive, contradictory, and potentially lurid evidence into a story of her own that is coherent, lucid, responsible, dramatic, and utterly convincing.

Those who will be jerking their knees about the self-perpetuating "Mansfield industry" will find Jones a sturdy opponent. Her book is in every sentence knowledgeable and intelligent, and irrefutably original in at least three ways.

First and simplest, it assembles and elucidates a great deal of new material, much of which is available thanks to skilled New Zealand beaver-workers in the "industry." Jones is quick to give them credit, especially Margaret Scott for the complete notebooks, Vincent O'Sullivan and Scott for the letters, Scott again for a life's work of transcription, and Antony Alpers for the pioneering biography. To this she adds vivid material from other observers, especially Murry and his family, which has either been restricted or never previously cited. So as biography, much is new.

Second, she extends her narrative well beyond Mansfield, intercalating into Mansfield's life-story several chapters on the later life of Murry, with close-up footage about his work, wives and children, and whole chapters on Ida Baker and Violet Le Maistre (Murry's second wife). The effect surprisingly is to add both variety and coherence. We see Baker and Murry (for the first time, surely) in an utterly fair-minded way, often from their own points of view, with their merits and difficulties acknowledged, before and after they knew Mansfield, yet we also witness how compelling and long-lasting she was as a force in their lives, as if her role as "story-teller" (the book's sub-title) continued in her effect on others' stories after her death. The fragmented chronology demands attentiveness (scarcely unusual, with Mansfield), since Mansfield appears as a ghost while still in good health, and Violet her self-created clone dies before she does. But a conventional sequence would risk anti-climax, and legions of Murry-slayers would stop reading the moment Katherine dies.

Don't skip those Murry chapters, even if, like Waterlow and Kotieliansky, and despite the account here of his appalling childhood, you prefer to "never have anything to do with him again." They include some of the best things Jones says about Mansfield, and anyway you will get to watch Wife 3 break a tea-table on Murry's head.

The third and best new thing about this book is Jones herself. Her narrative voice is calm, knowing and non-judgmental, a relief after the shrill partisanship of many writers on Mansfield and Co. She stays unflappable while the wild young Mansfield gets herself into more trouble than Tess of the d'Urbervilles. She is wise and all-seeing as she assesses the talents and follies of the mature Mansfield's friends. With the horrific medical details her bedside manner is expert, informative, and compassionate. At last she brings modern medical knowledge to bear and cuts the century-old clutter of moralizing and sensationalism. With her characters, even the most messily complicated (like Murry), even those who insist on behaving like caricatures (like Lawrence or Beatrice Hastings) she is utterly fair-minded, seeing all round them and summing them up with clarity and vigour.

She reminds us, for instance, that Baker was a top scholar, had "a talent for words," capable of prose that "sings" when she wrote of Rhodesia, suppressed tragedy when her father killed himself, and sustained a devotion to Mansfield that was "never subservient; it was a willed act requiring considerable strength...underneath a surface of calm and sweetness she was a powerful woman with the tenacity of a bulldog."

Similarly George Bowden becomes much more than a Labrador-retriever stooge Mansfield married in a panic. Before the wedding he is good company, intelligently interested in books and music, and with an engaging sense of the absurd. After she flees, he is considerate and discreet, even while "suffering, psychologically and emotionally, from the trauma of their relationship," even on a "surreal" evening they spend together to discuss divorce that ends with him singing at her piano.

To say that this biography is fair-minded and sensible is high praise, given the Desperate Housewives nature of much of the story-line. It is sensible in summarizing the likelihood that Mansfield's mother Annie Beauchamp knew about her pregnancy when she dumped her in Germany. It sensibly accepts gaps in our knowledge – "Whether [an abortion story] is written from personal experience is something only Katherine can know." It sensibly considers and dismisses things like the gonorrhoea theory: "If you suspect that you have venereal disease...you go to a doctor, not to a husband you left ten months earlier because you couldn't bear to sleep with him...It simply isn't credible."

The voice you hear there is typical. Jones is sensible but never bland. On the fatally premature birth in Bad Wörishofen, after adroitly compiling a complex of materials from letters, notebooks, stories, even a poem published later by Murry, she sums it up with an older woman's wise compassion:

To lose a baby, after all the trauma of childbirth, is one of the worst things that can happen to any woman. For a young girl to endure this alone in a foreign country surrounded by strangers is unimaginable.

The straight-talking vigour of Jones's summaries sometimes reminds me of Nelly Dean commenting on the passionate shenanigans at Wuthering Heights. Jones comes from Cumbria, next to North Yorkshire, and though I have never heard her speak, that is the voice I hear in her prose - honest, strong, and full-vowelled. Mansfield's sexual precocity is "a dangerous mixture of ignorance and desire." The teenager at home in Wellington "has made herself thoroughly obnoxious with her rebellious moods and obvious contempt." When a Feilding journalist claims to have a scoop about blackmail, "Such a story is hard to believe. Harold Beauchamp was quite capable of sorting out any importuning individuals himself without involving a journalist." On Murry's abused childhood, "It is the underlying damage, the sense that he is a hurt child, that is so appealing to women." The toilet facilities at posh Garsington are "ramshackle."

She never overtly finds fault, but her understatement and negatives can hint at judgment. Mansfield's addiction to Veronal is "not calculated to benefit her unborn child." On Lawrence and Frieda in Cornwall, "Their explosive quarrels do not make for a peaceful existence." When Murry and Carco carry off furniture borrowed from Baker and sell it to a Paris brothel, "No thought was given to Ida's feelings." Murry, she says twice, was "emotionally illiterate," and Mansfield "cast him in a role for which he was totally unfitted."

Diametrically different as a writer from the oblique and enigmatic Mansfield, Jones nevertheless can "risk everything." She denies herself the ready-made ending of Mansfield's final

hemorrhage and famous last cry, "I think I am going to die!" (used so dramatically by Brian McNeill in "The Two Tigers," and others). In another fragmentation of chronology, Jones takes that for her opening scene, so that Mansfield has in a way already died throughout the telling of her life. Jones finds - and makes us wait for - an ending of her own that is new, scholarly, moving, beautifully cadenced, and that I will not reveal. It suggests that death came to Mansfield more as an unexpected interruption than a curtain-closer.

Mansfield the writer is always central. Her artistic commitment was astonishing. Few writers have ever worked so persistently under such ill-health, not even Stevenson. But Jones falls short in (to risk a sadly outmoded term) literary criticism. It is revealing that the best book of Mansfield criticism, "Reading Mansfield and Metaphors of Form," by W.H. New, is missing from her bibliography. She offers a few literary judgments that are plain wrong, like saying that "An Indiscreet Journey" is "a verbatim account of [Mansfield's] visit to Gray." On the contrary, the changes from journal to fiction in that episode reveal how creatively Mansfield re-imagined her own experiences for her stories.

We learn from Jones better than ever how the stories came to be written, and she intersperses astute general comments like "Katherine always writes well on trains and in strange locations...These places of transition provide a creative space for observation and memory to collide." We also learn how the stories draw on the life. But there is no attempt to show how knowing about the life can enhance the stories, which ultimately is why literary biography matters. (Note I said "enhance," not "explain.")

So I returned to the stories. One thing I found I had gained from reading Jones, to choose just one, was that from all those fluctuations of mood, the passionate friendships and selfish betrayals, the swings between anger and affection with Murry, and between irritation and gratitude with Baker, between those comic dazzling bird droppings and the tragic strangling throat, Mansfield was forging a new kind of fiction that above all makes and asks the effort of sympathy. She tilts the angle to take us within outcasts and exiles, not only spinsters, servants, and the untouchable little Kelveys, but men like Stanley Burnell, the husband in "The Stranger" and the Boss in "The Fly," for they, too, may be forlorn. "A Man without a Temperament" imagines disconcertingly what it is like to care for the sick, who can be demanding and unintentionally critical ("'You're late,' she cried gaily, 'you're three minutes late.'"). The flash-backs show us a man who very much used to have a temperament, and the ending seems not a "lie," as Jones calls it, but a loving suppression in a situation (like Murry's) when the truth simply cannot be stated.

The effort to see people, even the despised and the faulty, with careful sympathy - in that essential thing, the young New Zealander, in her short, oblique, impressionistic stories, and the mature north-country Englishwoman, in her compendious, expert, forthright biography, are perfectly in accord.

Roger Robinson edited and introduced "Katherine Mansfield: in from the Margin."

Book Review: Katherine Mansfield: The story tellers

By Dr Sarah Sandley

Katherine Mansfield: The story tellers by Kathleen Jones
Penguin, \$65.00



***Katherine Mansfield: The Story Teller* by Kathleen Jones.**

The publication of a major new biography of Katherine Mansfield, more than 20 years after Claire Tomalin's *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life*, is especially significant because, in the intervening years, new material has become available: not just letters and journal entries, but also previously unseen material from the family of Mansfield's husband, John Middleton Murry. The result is a recast of the writer's life, from her marriages to her miscarriage and the question of her sexual health.

This new biography intersperses present tense chapters about Mansfield with a past-tense account of 34 years of Murry's life after her death, during which his determination to make a saint of Mansfield wreaked havoc on the lives of those around him.

The present tense sections allow the reader to live and breathe with Mansfield in an imaginative proximity. We see how she faced and mastered her fears through tremendous anguish: as a young woman she was left by her mother in Bavaria, where at six months' pregnant she had a stillbirth; she suffered an agonising death from TB and was betrayed by her husband while terminally ill.

Mansfield was renowned for her wit and brio.

This is a woman who claimed to have fallen out of love with the father of the child she later miscarried because of the inelegant way he ate an egg.

This is a woman who, in the Cafe Royal overhearing disloyal acolytes of her erstwhile friend DH Lawrence mocking his new book of poems, asked if she could look at the volume, then stood up bearing it aloft and strode from the cafe straight into a cab.

And who penned the following put-down to Princess Elizabeth Bibesco, who was seducing her husband:

"I am afraid you must stop writing these little love letters to my husband while he and I live together. It is one of the things which is not done in our world.

You are very young. Won't you ask your husband to explain to you the impossibility of such a situation.

Please do not make me have to write to you again. I do not like scolding people and I simply hate having to teach them manners."

Murry is exposed as emotionally myopic where Mansfield was clear-sighted, timid where she was fearless, and weak where she was strong.

But Jones also humanises a young man who was suffering the trauma of loving a woman who was dying, and who was living in a celibate marriage, such was Mansfield's appalling physical frailty.

Jones has brought to the work a scholar's regard for fact, a novelist's regard for form, and a poet's regard for cadence.

The test of a good literary biography is whether it makes you want to reacquaint yourself with the author's writing. This biography does just that.

** Dr Sarah Sandley is Honorary Chair of the Katherine Mansfield Society*

By Dr Sarah Sandley



Bibliofile

Peta Stavelli



Katherine Mansfield: The Story-teller

Kathleen Jones
Penguin New Zealand
\$55

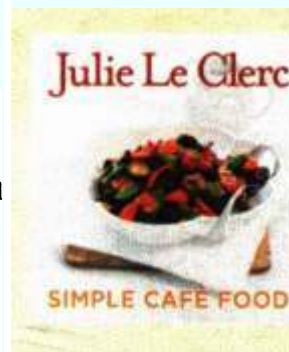
Katherine Mansfield is widely acknowledged as one of New Zealand's finest writers and one of the best of her time. She was a contemporary of, and held in high esteem by, D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Indeed Woolf boldly proclaimed 'I was jealous of her writing – the only writing I

have been jealous of.'

The last biography of Mansfield was published in 1988 and for a time it seemed as if there could be no more new material to warrant the publication of a new book. However Kathleen Jones's meticulous research, together with the lifting of an embargo on previously unavailable material and the death of key contacts reveals much new and unpublished material through letters, journals and diaries.

Jones relentlessly scrutinises the perplexing relationship

between Mansfield and her long-term companion, Ida Baker. It delves into the reasons behind her first marriage and thoroughly analyses her subsequent tortuous relationship with John Middleton Murray. The book also settles with authority the truth of previous controversial assumptions about Mansfield's promiscuity and health. And it provides an outstanding and inspiring historical context for her writing and unforgettable glimpses into the lives of her literary contemporaries. This is an outstanding biography; one you will find hard to put down and to which you will return again and again.



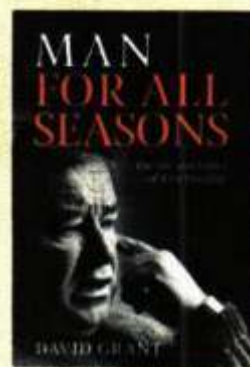
Simple Café Food

Julie Le Clerc
Penguin New Zealand
\$32

All who value delicious, simple food that is easy to prepare and looks fabulous on the plate will welcome the re-issue of Simple Café Food. The book is a stunning collection of Julie's favourite café-style recipes.

Originally printed in 1999, this book has been reprinted many

times and is now revised and updated for 2011. From antipasti, salads, breads and soups right through to delectable preserves and sweets, this book is a necessity for every home cook. And the images by Shaun Cato-Symonds are an equally delicious accompaniment to the recipes.



Man for All Seasons – the life and times of Ken Douglas

David Grant
Random House NZ
\$45

Wellington historian David Grant was given free access by Douglas to all biographical material. The result is a candid portrait of a tough talking trade unionist who rose to be the most powerful in the nation.

Douglas rose above a rough and alcohol tormented childhood to avow undying loyalty to the Communist ideology and to subsequently participate in the most revolutionary changes to New Zealand's labour law. Never afraid of a scrap, he went head to head with Muldoon and the Labour Government and ultimately faced the emasculation of all he spent a lifetime fighting for. ✽

Book Review: Katherine Mansfield The Story-Teller



By C.K. Stead 5:30 AM Tuesday Nov 30, 2010

Katherine Mansfield The Story-Teller by Kathleen Jones Penguin/Viking, \$65

Kathleen Jones presents Mansfield's life, with its wide swings between hope and despair, principally in her own words. Photo / Supplied

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment-reviews/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502967&objec...

This is the first full biography written since the publication of the two-volume edition of *Mansfield's Notebooks* (2002), transcribed by Margaret Scott, and the final (fifth) volume in 2008 of her *Collected Letters*, edited by Scott and Vincent O'Sullivan. It also draws on all the previous scholarly work, including especially biographers Anthony Alpers and Claire Tomalin, and further back the work of Ruth Mantz, Mansfield's friend Ida Baker, and her husband and first editor, John Middleton Murry. A huge amount of the work had been done, but much of it was scattered. What was needed was diligence in pulling it all together, and Kathleen Jones has been diligent. She has a problem, however. Like every Mansfield scholar, she faces the question of what to do about Murry, and Murry's subsequent families who lived, in one way or another, in Mansfield's shadow and with her ghost. Four of these (Murry himself, his son Colin and daughter Katherine to his second wife, and his fourth wife Mary) all wrote personal memoirs. Colin and Katherine suffered life-long consequences of being, so to speak, inheritors of the Mansfield legend, or the Mansfield curse. So, no doubt, did the two children of Murry's third marriage; but one of these died young and the other has remained silent. Murry's second marriage, to Violet le Maistre, who modelled herself on Mansfield, wrote similar short stories and died young of tuberculosis, is like a bad dream. His third marriage, to an extremely jealous, angry and violent woman, Betty Cockbayne, was a nightmare. After all of that the fourth marriage had to be idyllic, if only because it was peaceful; and that – idyllic – is how he and Mary both represented it. This, then, is the scope of the present book's material – not only the 34 years from Mansfield's birth until her death in 1923, but (with strange mathematical symmetry) a further 34 until Murry's death in 1957. It is, therefore, quite wrongly named. Insofar as its

subject is Mansfield, it is about her not only as "story-teller" but as ghost. It is about a figure who meant no harm to those who came after, but who was sufficiently a force to be an occasional blessing and a frequent curse in their lives. Murry she made prosperous but left him obsessed. She also made him publicly conspicuous. Without her in his life it's likely he would have been quickly forgotten, and the records he kept of his own life forgotten too. As the beneficiary and promoter of her literary remains, however, he has been exposed in all his ghastly well-meaning duplicity, weakness, woolly idealism and self-deception. How to organise all this material in one book? If it had been arranged chronologically a good third of the book would have happened after Mansfield's death and the post-mortem tail might have seemed to be the life of the dog. The tail at the very least would have had the long last word. The method Jones uses to avoid this is odd, and not, I think, completely successful. The Mansfield story, the one which many of us, to some greater or lesser degree, know, is told in the present tense, while the Murry (and Murry family) story is told as a series of past-tense interludes in the gaps between sections of the main story. I suppose the intention of the present tense narrative is to represent it as somehow the foreground, the principal story, more vivid and immediate than the Murry story, which is background. At times the continuous present tense creates verbal difficulties, even for an experienced writer such as Jones undoubtedly is; and the chronological leaps produce strange unintended effects – so that, for example, Murry's death in 1957 comes before the account of Mansfield's final moments in 1923. There are details which scholars will quarrel over. Jones decides that the diagnosis of gonorrhoea, which Tomalin made so much of, is wrong and that the symptoms which were taken to indicate it can all be explained by TB. Her dating of one or two items is contentious. She follows fashion in making too much of Mansfield's teenage devotion to Wilde with its consequent girl-crush raptures in her notebooks. But the Mansfield story is all there, and for the most part it is well-told, vivid in representing her life, with its wide swings between hope and despair, principally in her own words. Giving Murry such a large part in the story, however, has the effect of making it all seem grimmer than it need have been. As I read the book I felt that Mansfield's heroism and literary brilliance were being needlessly tarnished by association. *C.K. Stead is an Auckland writer.*

20/01/2011