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| Sargeson, Frank (1903-1982) |
| Davey, Norris Frank |
| Along with Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame, Frank Sargeson is one of New Zealand’s most widely recognised writers. In a career spanning nearly sixty years, he wrote short stories, novels, plays, autobiography, and criticism, and was published in Britain, Australia, Europe, and the United States as well as his own country. He is popularly seen as founder and sentinel of the terse, masculine, and essentially realist prose tradition that dominated New Zealand literature for much of his lifetime. However, particularly since the 1980s, readers and critics have attended to qualities other than the apparently authentic ‘New Zealandness’ of Sargeson’s fiction: the narrative subtlety and stylistic sophistication that lies beneath the deceptively plain stories of the 1930s and 40s, the savagery and compassion of his social vision, his heavily-encoded critique of conventional sexual morality, and the artistic reinvention that enabled his late-career flourishing. |
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File: Sargeson in 1964.jpg  Sargeson in 1964  Source: Portrait of Frank Sargeson seated in a chair beside a bookcase in his bach home at 14 Esmonde Road, Takapuna. Photograph taken in July 1964 by John Reece Cole. Original resides at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Image can be found at <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22891020>  Born Norris Frank Davey in the provincial town of Hamilton, Frank Sargeson was the second child of a middle-class family. His father was the town clerk and both parents were stalwarts of the Methodist Church; family life was circumscribed by church, school and social propriety. Following high school, Sargeson worked in an office and studied law in the evenings, eventually qualifying as a solicitor.  But he felt increasingly constricted. Visits to the backblocks farm of his maternal uncle Oakley Sargeson – a humane, intelligent and quietly subversive man – had revealed something hitherto unattainable: a freer, more vital existence unconstrained by social convention and his parents’ joyless puritanism. In 1927, Sargeson travelled to Britain; from there, he visited Europe and wrote an (unpublished) autobiographical novel. But having gone to the Old World in search of high culture, he was dismayed to find the weight of the European tradition ‘intolerable’. Instead, he discovered there ‘that I was truly a New Zealander’, and found opportunities to express for the first time the homosexual desires that had so troubled him since adolescence (*Once is Enough*, 1973, pp. 111-115). Returning to New Zealand, Sargeson worked in a dreary government office and continued writing in his spare time. In 1929 a homosexual encounter led to his arrest; he avoided prison only by agreeing to live on his uncle’s farm. He stayed until mid-1931, writing prolifically. With the Depression underway and now wholly committed to a writing career, Sargeson moved back to Auckland. He abandoned his birth name, thus distancing himself from his past while also acknowledging his much-admired uncle (King, 1995, p. 111).  Apart from occasional relief work, Sargeson devoted himself to short fiction. His breakthrough came in 1935 when he claimed to have ‘discovered a new way of writing’ (*More than Enough*, 1975, p. 51). Influenced particularly by American vernacular modernists such as Sherwood Anderson, his new prose style had the apparent plainness and directness of journalism. But it also offered discerning readers ‘a good deal of poetic quality. A kind of disguised poetry’ (*More than Enough,* p. 92). This was the premise behind the 40-odd stories and sketches he published over the next decade in the radical local journal *Tomorrow* and other periodicals in New Zealand, Britain, Australia and the USA. Most were republished in three collectionsthat appeared in 1936, 1940 and 1946.  Terse, compressed and suggestive, these stories express Sargeson’s vision of the material and spiritual poverty of Depression-era New Zealand. The narrators are predominantly male: farm workers, labourers, and drifters. Semi-articulate and limited in understanding, they spin inconclusive yarns about apparently commonplace experiences. But their laconic accounts also yield glimpses of suppressed emotion, brutality, confused yearnings and acute loneliness in a society regulated by convention and hypocritical morality. There is rough-and-ready mateship, but no idiom for love, understanding, or genuine intimacy. The stories demand close reading; faced with narrative inadequacy and evasion, we must attend to ‘the story that the author implied behind the narrator writes’ (During, October 1983, p. 79).  Although some readers considered Sargeson’s stories distasteful, others found an unprecedented authenticity perfectly attuned to the awakening consciousness of an indigenous national culture. Never before had serious fiction legitimised ordinary local speech, or so searchingly challenged the prevailing myth of New Zealand as a progressive and prosperous paradise, Britain’s outpost. Aspiring writers, some of whom Sargeson mentored, mimicked his style and concerns so faithfully they were dubbed ‘Sons of Sargeson’ (King, 1995, p. 238). His unswerving dedication to the writing life, rare in an era lacking supportive cultural infrastructure, was much admired.  File: Sargeson at home 1947.jpg  Sargeson at home 1947  Source: Frank Sargeson sitting inside his house at 14 Esmond Road, Takapuna, Auckland, in 1947. Photographer unidentified. A note on the back of the file print states he lived here from 1947 until his death. Author notes: Frank Sargeson at home, c. 1947. Until his death, he lived frugally in a modest bach on Auckland's North Shore, growing his own vegetables and dispensing hospitality to scores of visitors. From the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Image can be found at <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23058502>  By 1945, Sargeson was recognised as New Zealand’s foremost living prose writer, ‘the exponent of a local tradition that has hitherto been inarticulate’ (McCormick, 1940, p. 82). But he felt increasingly frustrated by the austere material, form, and idiom he had made his own – disappointed too that his fiction was acclaimed chiefly for its fidelity to the ‘real’ New Zealand, rather than its skilful manipulation of narrative and language, subversive social critique, and coded undercurrents. Intent on reinvention, his stories became more discursive and enigmatic, their idiom more literary and characters more expressive. He dedicated himself to writing a novel. His first attempt, ‘That Summer’ (1943), took four years and, disappointingly, was seen as a long short story. *When the Wind Blows* (1945) was criticised as too episodic; it then became the first part of a longer work, *I Saw In My Dream* (1949). All three books received mixed responses, both locally and in Britain. A new generation of writers rejected what they saw as the drabness and parochialism of the ‘Sargeson tradition’; to some, it seemed his best work was behind him (Jones, FS, 2007).  Throughout the 1950s, he published little apart from a novella, criticism and two plays. He continued supporting emerging writers, notably Janet Frame who wrote her first novel in a shed on his property. But in the 1960s, Sargeson’s career revived. His *Collected Stories* (1964) was published in New Zealand and Britain, and the novel *Memoirs of a Peon* appeared a year later (A. Calder). More soon followed. Picaresque and loose, these second-career novels brimmed with exuberant language, sexual adventure, violence, and dark comedy. The settings were largely urban and the characters often outrageously grandiloquent. Although the repressive puritanism of the early stories is never far away, Sargeson was concerned less with reproducing local reality than with imaginatively transfiguring it through language.  In the 1970s, Sargeson also published a three-volume autobiography and new short stories, and received literary and academic accolades. However, his health was faltering, and he reluctantly abandoned writing shortly before he died in March 1982.  Since his death, Sargeson’s work has been re-evaluated (see, for example, During, Murray, and Newton). He has been recognised as more than the helmsman of literary nationalism, chronicler of the ‘real’ New Zealand. There is growing interest in the complicating (and perhaps surprising) presence of modernist, cosmopolitan, gay, gothic, and other strands within his fiction and within the nationalist tradition in general.   Selected List of WorksCollected stories Sargeson, F. (1936). *Conversation with My Uncle and Other Stories.* Auckland: Unicorn Press.  Sargeson, F. (1940). *A Man and His Wife.* Christchurch: Caxton Press.  Sargeson, F. (1946). *That Summer and Other Stories.* London: John Lehmann.  Sargeson, F. (1964). *Collected Stories 1935-1963.* Auckland: Blackwood & Janet Paul.  Sargeson, F. (2010). *Frank Sargeson's Stories.* Auckland: Cape Catley. Novels and Novellas Sargeson, F. (1945). *When the Wind Blows .* Christchurch: Caxton Press.  Sargeson, F. (1949). *I Saw in My Dream.* London: John Lehmann.  Sargeson, F. (1954). *'I for One ...'.* Christchurch: Caxton Press.  Sargeson, F. (1965). *Memoirs of a Peon.* London: MacGibbon & Kee.  Sargeson, F. 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| Further reading:  (Calder)  (Dudding)  (During)  (Jones)  (Jones, Picking Up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture 1932-1945)  (King)  (McCormick)  (Murray)  (Newton)  (Shieff) |