The writing of twentieth-century New Zealand author Janet Frame has done more than that of any other writer to disrupt the dominant discourses—both popular and medical—of schizophrenia. Like Gregory Bateson, she wrote about schizophrenia during the late 1950s and early 1960s, a crucial period in the development of psychiatry marked by a respect for the diverse capabilities of the human psyche on the one hand and a consolidation of psychiatric authority and expertise on the other. The work of psychologists such as Bateson and R.D. Laing, who saw psychosis as a manifestation of the psyche’s ability to survive, found a following—short-lived as it may have been—among both popular reading audiences and fellow psychologists and psychiatrists. Their writings helped provide fertile ground for the reception of Janet Frame’s fictional and autobiographical treatments of schizophrenia.

Read together, Janet Frame’s autobiographical writings and early novels deconstruct both official diagnostic narratives and commonly held perceptions of sanity and psychosis. Frame’s work in these two genres rewrites both the popular and medical narratives of her history as a mental patient, illuminating the ways that psychiatric diagnosis and treatment can create life stories that do violence to identity and personhood.

In Janet Frame’s novel *Faces In the Water*, published in 1961, two years after Frame’s own release from a mental institution, the main character
Mary Elene Wood

Istina Mavet shows an acute awareness of the attitude of ‘outsiders’ towards those who, like her, have been institutionalized for schizophrenia. At one point, when Istina leaves one institution to visit her sister, she crafts a set of stories and attitudes to help manage the expectations of family members:

The family talked jokingly of my having been in the ‘nuthouse’, and I gave them what they seemed to want—amusing descriptions of patients whose symptoms corresponded to the popular idea of the insane; and I described myself as if, by misfortune, I had been put among people who, unlike myself, were truly ill. This image that I presented of myself as a sane person caught unwillingly in the revolving doors of insanity when there was no justification for my being anywhere near the building, helped to soothe my ruffled conceit and to lessen my family’s concern which was real and disturbing though it stayed beneath their surface and was revealed only in split-second gestures and expressions which nevertheless had the sustained and detailed power of slow motion.¹

For Istina, ‘split-second gestures and expressions’ reveal the ways family members show their fear of her illness and of the institution with which she has become associated. Istina counters these assumptions by trying to portray herself ‘as a sane person caught unwillingly in the revolving doors of insanity’ and to distance herself from her diagnosis of schizophrenia and thus from popular conceptions of this condition.

Frame reports in her autobiography that while on the one hand family and friends saw her as fragile and odd, on the other, within the blossoming literary community of New Zealand, her madness continued to be seen as essential to her literary personality. According to her autobiographical writings, this latter reading of her ‘condition’ gave her work a certain charisma, but it also limited expectations of her as a writer and restricted interpretations of her work. Readers repeatedly connected Frame to her mentally ill characters, seeing them as entirely autobiographical. Her history of institutionalizations was made public and connected to her writing persona after the 1960 US publication of Owls Do Cry, in which one of the main characters, Daphne Withers, is described as mentally ill.² This connection was underscored in responses to two subsequent novels, Faces...