

**Introduction to ‘The Fly’ by Katherine Mansfield**  
**Read at Unity Books Wellington by Peter Hambleton, 21 June 2023**

Kia ora koutou, it’s so lovely to be here at Unity Books for this lunchtime session! My name is Cherie Jacobson and I’m the Director at Katherine Mansfield House & Garden. I’m going to start with a short introduction to Katherine Mansfield and the story we’re about to hear, then I’ll introduce our wonderful reader, Peter Hambleton.

Today’s session is being recorded for broadcast on Wellington Access Radio and will be made available on the Katherine Mansfield House & Garden website – I know a few people who are very happy about this because they weren’t able to make it today. So I’d just ask you if you could put your phones on silent or turn them off so that halfway through ‘The Fly’ we don’t get interrupted by the modern world.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Kate and the Unity Books team for being so enthusiastic about this event and so great to work with organising it. I can’t imagine Wellington without Unity Books and whenever I come in it seems to be quietly humming, so long live the independent bookstore!

Some of you here today will be familiar with Katherine Mansfield’s life and work - some very familiar even, but to make sure we’re all on the same page, here’s a quick overview.

Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp was born in 1888 in a house on Tinakori Road in Thorndon. The house is now open to the public as a museum, Katherine Mansfield House & Garden, which is where I spend my days. As well as caring for the house and its collection, we have changing exhibitions and run a variety of events and activities aimed at celebrating and encouraging creativity. If you haven’t visited before or it’s been a while, please do come and see us - the house underwent a bit of a refresh in 2019, so if you haven’t visited since then, it’s definitely time to come back! We’re open six days a week all year round and entry is free for under 18s.

Back to Mansfield. The third daughter of Harold and Annie Beauchamp, Mansfield spent her childhood in Wellington, living in Karori and Thorndon, then travelled to London as a teenager with her two older sisters to attend Queen’s College. When she returned home three years later, she had discovered the work of Oscar Wilde, was exploring her sexuality, and wanted to pursue a creative life. She felt stifled by colonial Wellington and her respectable, upper-class family and longed to escape.

A writer from an early age, Mansfield had stories published in newspapers and magazines while still a teenager. After her time at Queen’s College, she was determined to make a career from her writing, especially once her initial dream of becoming a professional cellist

was met with disapproval from her parents. In 1908, she convinced her father to let her return to London and left New Zealand aged 19 for what would be the last time. Mansfield went on to become an internationally acclaimed writer best known for her Modernist short stories that revolutionised the form.

Her work was admired by fellow 20th-century writers, including Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence. She spent time living in England, Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland and mixed with many progressive and well-known writers, artists, intellectuals and philosophers. Her European travels have inspired a newly released book by Wellington historian Redmer Yska, *Katherine Mansfield's Europe: Station to Station*, in which he follows in Mansfield's footsteps. It's full of beautiful images and incredibly well researched, so I recommend checking it out while you're in store today if you haven't seen it already.

Mansfield published three collections of short stories during her lifetime and after her death her husband published more of her work, including her journals and letters. These evoke a passionate individual, dedicated to her craft, whose life was tragically cut short by tuberculosis aged 34.

This year is the centenary of her death, so we've been working with different organisations to celebrate 100 years of her creative legacy. NZ Post have released a set of stamps and a Garden Party pin (which I'm modelling now), Te Papa held a day of talks and a film screening, a new ballet inspired by her life was premiered at the Wanaka Festival of Colour by the Royal NZ Ballet, writers festivals have featured Mansfield sessions, and coming up on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July there is an evening in Days Bay with a screening of a new short video with excerpts from the story 'At the Bay' - featuring none other than the newly knighted Sir Ashley Bloomfield, and on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of July there will be a symposium led by Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, followed by a concert at Queen Margaret College. And there'll be more come before the year is over!

Helpfully, we've created a special centenary website where you can find out what's happening – [www.km23.co.nz](http://www.km23.co.nz).

Some beautiful new editions of Mansfield's work have been published by Penguin Books this year (and two of them are up there – *Wild Places* and the soft cloth-covered hardback *Bliss*) and a new biography by Claire Harman, *All Sorts of Lives*, which takes ten of Mansfield's stories and looks at her life in relation to each of them. Again, take a look while you're here today if you haven't seen them.

Now, onto the story we're about to hear. 'The Fly' is one of Mansfield's last completed stories. She wrote it over about three weeks in February 1922, while in Paris undergoing painful X-ray treatment she had been told could cure her tuberculosis. The treatment left

her exhausted and she spent most of the time resting in her hotel room, struggling to even put on her stockings.

On 14 February she wrote to her friend Dorothy Brett, “I must begin work. Seven stories sit on the doorstep. One has its foot inside. It is called ‘The Fly.’ I must finish it today. This is a hard moment for work - don’t you feel? It’s hard to get life into it. The bud is not yet up. Oh spring, hurry, hurry! Every year I long more for spring.” I think we can relate to that!

The story was first published on 18 March 1922 in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, a British cultural publication formed by the merger of the literary magazine *The Athenaeum*, of which Mansfield’s husband John Middleton Murry had been editor, and *The Nation*, a political newspaper with a liberal perspective.

Fellow writer William Gerhardi must have written to tell Mansfield his opinion of the story as in a reply to him on 14 June she wrote, “I am sorry you did not like *The Fly* and glad you told me. I *hated* writing it.” But it has since become one of Mansfield’s classics.

I don’t want to give too much away for anyone hearing the story for the first time, but I will say that it draws on some of Mansfield’s own personal experiences. Her father, Harold Beauchamp, was a successful businessman in Wellington with an importing company. He served as Chair of the Harbour Board and the Board of the Bank of New Zealand. His only son, Mansfield’s younger brother Leslie, died in the First World War which devastated Mansfield and her family. In fact, Leslie’s death prompted Mansfield to begin writing about their childhood as a tribute to him and as a result we have some of her best-loved stories like ‘Prelude’. There is a photo of Leslie in uniform taken in a photographer’s studio with an outdoor backdrop behind him, including wispy clouds, so listen out for a reference to a photo like that.

It’s interesting to note that when Mansfield reviewed Virginia Woolf’s 1919 novel *Night and Day*, she critiqued the way it ignored the First World War, writing in a letter “My private opinion is that it is a lie in the soul. ‘The war never has been’; that is what it’s message is. I don’t want G. forbid mobilization and the violation of Belgium – but the novel can’t just leave the war out. ...I feel in the *profoundest* sense that nothing can ever be the same – that, as artists, we are traitors if we feel otherwise; we have to take it into account and find new expressions, new moulds for our new thoughts and feelings.”

Mansfield definitely doesn’t ignore the First World War and its effects in this story, but it’s also surely informed by her own personal struggle with her health. She remained hopeful that the new X-ray treatment would make a difference after spending time in warm climates and high mountain air hadn’t, but she also suffered periods of despair. The image of a struggling insect, or a fly caught in the milk jug, had appeared in Mansfield’s notebooks

before. With ink spots on letters or in her notebook she often drew little legs on them to make them look like an insect. And perhaps by the time she wrote this story, she really identified with the struggling fly, at the mercy of forces much greater than its little self.

As I mentioned earlier, after Mansfield died on 9 January 1923 in France, her husband published two more collections of her work, along with edited letters and journals – despite her asking him to publish as little as possible and burn as much as possible. Some of her friends felt he was ‘boiling her bones to make soup.’ He felt he was honouring her talents and it’s true that his efforts contributed to her legacy, although perhaps unhelpfully to begin with thanks to his careful editing that tried to paint her as an angelic genius.

The first posthumous collection he published was called *The Doves’ Nest and Other Stories*, which included stories that had been published during Mansfield’s lifetime, including ‘The Doll’s House’, along with unpublished and even unfinished works.

*The Doves’ Nest and Other Stories* was published in June 1923 and included ‘The Fly’. So this reading is a nod to the 100 year anniversary of Mansfield’s fourth published collection, during the centenary year of her death.

So now I’d like to introduce our reader, Peter Hambleton. Peter is an esteemed, award-winning Wellington actor, having appeared on stage and screen in too many productions to name here. His big screen credits include the dwarf Gloin in *The Hobbit*, and he was on stage earlier this year at Circa Theatre in *The Coven on Grey Street*. He’ll be back treading the boards at Circa in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* in October. The publicity promises a season of “blistering wit, mistaken identities, and human hypocrisy so keenly observed you’d think it was written yesterday. A troupe of Wellington’s finest comic actors take the stage like a jazz band tearing through a bop classic.” Sounds like one not to miss!

The reading will take about 20 minutes. If you have any burning questions once it’s finished, please feel free to wave your hand about and we can try to answer them, otherwise, Peter and I will be happy to chat informally with you afterwards about what it all means!

But I’ll now hand over to Peter for our reading, thank you.