

# Margaret Laurence, Listener

by Budge Wilson

*Budge Wilson, a Peterborough writer and friend of Margaret's, delivered this memorial talk at the Wenjack Theatre, Trent University, on 2 February 1987.*

During the past month, much has been said about Margaret Laurence as a communicator. We think of her as writing stories, giving speeches, counselling students, talking to editors, agents, friends. We think of her in this role of *telling*. And of course she did this superbly — keeping ever in mind the interests and needs of her readers, her audiences, those with whom she conversed.

But she also listened. And in her role as writer and as friend, this listening was as important as the telling. It was because she was such a skilled and sensitive listener, that her relationships were so rich. When you sat across from her at the round oak table in her kitchen and told her something, she did not look out the window, or doodle on a scratch pad, or jump up to plug in the kettle. She leaned forward across the table and met your eyes — truly listening.

Looking for a passage to illustrate this listening quality in Margaret, I opened a copy of *A Jest of God* at random. There, on page 234, was the exchange between Rachel and her mother, following Rachel's announcement that she plans to take her mother to live in Vancouver. Here is the passage. Mrs. Cameron is speaking:

*"Rachel, you're not yourself. You're not talking a bit sensibly, dear. I can hardly follow you. I just don't see what you're getting at. You're talking so disjointedly."*

*"I'm sor—I mean try. Try to listen."*

*"That's terribly unfair of you, Rachel."*

*"Unfair?"*

*"You know I always listen, dear, to*

*everything you want to say. I have, ever since you were a small girl. I've always listened."*

*"But have you heard?"*

Well — Margaret heard. And what's more, she did not forget. If a subject under discussion came up five years later, she recalled the smallest details of what had been said. It was because she listened with her ears and with her attentive heart, that she heard and remembered things that enabled her to reach into the core of people and to know them well.

And so it was, of course, with the characters — no, the *people* — in her novels and short stories.

A writer of fiction, if he or she is to write with conviction and authenticity, must be a gifted listener. She must keep her ears ever open to the spoken expressions of feeling — of joy, frustration, pain, confusion, regret. She must be tuned into the sounds of speech — emphasis, regional differences, class peculiarities, marks of age, dialect. Only when she has listened to these and assimilated them, can she write convincing dialogue. And as the story starts to grow, she has to do another kind of subtle and mysterious listening. She has to listen to the voices and spirits of her own characters, because once they take form, these people start to speak and to move on their own. If the writer does not listen carefully, her people will begin to do and to feel things that are out of character. In this as in all things, Margaret was alert and consistent and true to her friends — real and imaginary.

There is another form of listening, and it is the kind that Vanessa does in *A Bird in the House* — ear pressed to the register, absorbing the conversations of the grown-ups in the kitchen. Watching and eavesdropping on life were crucial ingredients in Margaret's apprenticeship. Vanessa is, after all, the character most essentially Margaret of all her heroines. Notice what

Vanessa picks up, at the age of ten, after a single day of watching and listening:

*"I put my head down very close to the earth and looked at what was going on there..."*

*"I thought of the accidents that might easily happen to a person — or, of course, might not happen, might happen to somebody else. I thought of the dead baby, my sister who might as easily have been I. Would she, then, have been lying here in my place, the sharp grass making its small tooth marks on her brown arms, the sun warming her to the heart? I thought of the leather-bound volumes of Greek, and the six different kinds of iced cakes that used to be offered always in the MacLeod house, and the pictures of my leopards and green seas. I thought of my brother, who had been born alive after all, and now had been given his life's name."*

*"I could not really comprehend these things, but I sensed their strangeness, their disarray. I felt that whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order."*

And Vanessa, like Rachel, knows that there are different levels of listening. After Chris returns from war, she admits, "I had listened to his words, but I had not really heard them until now" — and she adds, with a terrible regret, "I wished it were not too late to let him know."

These kinds of perceptive listening — which are of a giving quality, open to the needs of others — lead to knowing. And knowing leads to the kind of caring that Margaret said should be our principle aim in life. She didn't incorporate 1 Corinthians 13, into her Memorial Service by accident. She felt profoundly that "The greatest of these is love."

It was this caring for her characters and her deep knowledge of them that makes them so vivid, so real. One day, after reading *The Diviners*, I said to her, "Oh Margaret — I cried when Christie Logan died." To which she replied, "Oh Budge! So did I!"

Margaret Laurence cried for and with those she knew and loved well. And now we cry for ourselves, because she is gone. But because she thought of death as a second birth — a *delivery* into a second unknown territory — and because she did not fear that birth, let us try not to weep for her. Let us instead reread her books, listening very carefully, most attentively, to what she is still saying to us.

In tribute to a beloved writer, a woman whose celebration of the human spirit – in her life and in her work – continues to enrich the lives of us all.



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