Margaret Laurence: A Remembrance
by Timothy Findley

You never forgot where she came from. She had a western way of looking at things — of seeing things: places, people, ideas. Distance played a role in this: in how she saw and what she saw. Perhaps in what she didn’t see. Stuff up close didn’t loom as large as stuff along the horizon.... Portents were more important than what she didn’t see. Stuff up close didn’t loom.

Margaret Laurence’s writing was about stuff up close. Portents were more important than what she didn’t see. Stuff up close didn’t loom.

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Her contribution was invaluable. She urged us to be militant and proud. She urged us to “always — always think of the young in whatever we do.” She was greatly concerned about the vulnerability of writers and especially the vulnerability of those whose careers were just beginning. And it was there, in those founding meetings that she coined her now famous definition: “writers are a tribe.”

In the interim between our founding meetings and the meeting at which we struck our constitution, Margaret Laurence took on the role of Acting Chair. In accepting this honorary position, she smiled and said that she could not have accepted any other role — because she needed the chair to sit in!

This drew loud applause and cheers. Margaret Laurence sat.

I cannot close this without remarking on one other brief event.

During Margaret Laurence’s tenure as Chancellor of Trent University, I happened to receive an honorary degree one year. This meant that I was seated on the stage behind her as she conferred her blessing on each of the hundred-plus students who also received their degrees that day.

As each of the students approached the Chancellor, Margaret Laurence was on her feet to greet them: shaking hands with and speaking to every one. Many leaped forward to kiss her. All were enamoured of her. Not for her fame and not for her position. Only for herself.

How rare that is I need not even ask. As I said at the beginning, Margaret Laurence read the horizon. That convictions day at Trent, there were no clouds. No distant storms. Only the sky and the students. The portents were auspicious: joyful; positive.

She stood for that — in more ways than one.