

# Reading Margaret Laurence in England

By Coral Ann Howells

The image Margaret Laurence leaves behind her is of a tough and compassionate woman who recognised the multiplicities within experience where everything (not just time and the rather special river in *The Diviners*) flows both ways, "into the past, and back into the future, until the silence." For many of us (and I speak from across the Atlantic) this image of hardy vitality must derive entirely from reading her fiction. It is a quality which makes her women very attractive on the page and raises fascinating questions about the presence of the writer in her own work. What connections may be made between Laurence's women narrators and Laurence herself? By presenting her Manawaka fictions as variants of the confessional novel Laurence provokes such questions, and though we know the answers must remain indeterminate we cannot stop ourselves trying to relate fabrication to reality. The question — or the quest — becomes even more interesting for readers in Britain who see Laurence's fiction through a different cultural perspective from Canadians, and it is the British image of Margaret Laurence I wish to investigate.

The Manawaka novels were originally published in Britain during the 1960s and 70s at the same time as they appeared in Canada and the USA. Indeed Laurence wrote a substantial part of the Manawaka cycle while she was living in England between 1962 and 1973. So it is ironic that her fiction should need to be reintroduced in 1987 to British readers by the Virago Press Modern Classics, with *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God* appearing in May to be followed by *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners* in 1988. Laurence's novels had disappeared from bookshops in this country and only on a few public library shelves were they still available. (I am happy to report that I have seen them in the libraries of the London Borough of Camden where Laurence herself and

Morag Gunn lived for part of their time in England). By some peculiar grace, Laurence lived long enough to be assured that the Virago reprints were under way and to read the new Afterwords to two of her novels written by English critics. [Editor's Note: both of these new Afterwords are reprinted following this article]. What is so striking is that the comments made about Hagar Shipley by Sara Maitland in her Afterword suggest the same closeness of identification as Canadian readers' responses. Maitland describes Hagar as "a woman as fearfully horrendous as we ourselves are... she is frighteningly like I am — not at my worst or at my best — but at my daily-est." Laurence reported to Michel Fabre, "Many readers wrote to me and said she was exactly like their grandmother or aunt or someone in the family" [themselves?].<sup>1</sup> All of which suggests that Laurence's novels will appeal to British readers not only, and indeed not mainly, as Canadian prairie novels but rather by their combination of familiarity and strangeness — which is always an important part of the imaginative appeal of literature.

Teaching Canadian fiction at a British university after teaching similar courses in Ontario, I have been fascinated to observe what happens to Canadian texts when they are read in a different cultural and literary context. My students come to the Manawaka novels directly after reading George Eliot, Hardy, Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, for my Canadian course begins with Margaret Laurence, who pioneered so many of the themes and narrative techniques of contemporary English Canadian women's writing. In this context students have no trouble whatever appreciating her as a regional novelist, and it is also inevitable that they should discern her affinities with Virginia Woolf as a modernist and feminist writer. As a traditionalist Laurence acknowledged her relation to her British literary

heritage: "Anyone who writes in the English language is in some way an inheritor of Shakespeare and Milton, of Fielding and Jane Austen, of Dickens and Thackeray." Then she adds (and this is where British students start having difficulty): "Our task is not to reject the past but to assimilate it, to take the language and make it truly ours, to write out of our own familiar idiom and out of our deepest observations of our people and our place on this planet."<sup>2</sup> For British students it is a question of learning to hear the distinctive tones of this Canadian voice and to appreciate an attitude which views their own cultural inheritance from a different angle.

Laurence's sharp sense of the colonial mentality and her resistance to it combines the two issues of nationality and gender, as she points out in the same essay where she draws an analogy between Third World writers and women writers. Most frequently it is via Laurence's presentation of women's relation to their cultural inheritances that non-Canadian readers begin to understand the complexities that correlate with issues of Canadian national identity. It is plain that all the Manawaka novels are concerned with women's attempts to come to terms with the past as they create acceptable fictions within which to assume their own individual identities. Traditions are outlined, rejected or revised, but never presented as static, as these narrators track back through personal memory, legend and myth to reconstruct a past. For them it is an effort of imagination rather than a project of historical research. Just as these women need links with their ancestors as part of their definition, so they also need to perceive their differences from their ancestors. As one of my students remarked of Vanessa's situation in *A Bird in the House*, "When Vanessa says of the Brick House 'I carry it with me' she makes the house sound like a burden or an

identity card, and really it is a bit of both." The double process of identification and necessary repudiation presents a strongly persuasive analogy with the Canadian search for an independent identity.

Whichever way we look at the Manawaka novels, it is Laurence's women narrators who seize our attention. Their personalities are of prime importance. Arguably the power of these women comes from Laurence's skill as a novelist, the result of her finding time and again "a form through which the characters can breathe."<sup>3</sup> This remark highlights her concern with female subjectivity and what being the subject of one's own story means. It is interesting to have that rare essay about her craft, for the novels themselves do not dwell ostentatiously on fictionmaking any more than they do on feminist issues, though only an obtuse reader would fail to see them.

To return to my original speculation on how reliably we might discern Margaret Laurence's presence in her own work, or in other words how readers might create an image of Margaret Laurence from the creatures of her novelistic imagination, I think there are several elements to consider. I mentioned the engaging vitality of her women; but there is another quality

which they all share and which makes them, paradoxically enough, both more authentic and more fictional. Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, Vanessa and Morag are convincing as characters because of their contradictoriness and their unreliability as narrators. They are unreliable in their accounts of their own lives as they themselves discover when reinventing their memories; they are unreliable in their readings of other people for they are always in the position of diviners; and they are unreliable as personifications of Margaret Laurence. In all their varied individuality they are after all only fictive personas, each with her own idioms and private memories and different versions of Manawaka. Yet there is an intermeshing of idioms and ways of seeing which creates from these multiple voices one consistent tone which is unlikely Margaret Laurence's own as we recognise it in her novels, her essays and her recorded interviews, highlighting contradiction, deflating pomposity, deeply humanistic with its insistence on indeterminacy and therefore multiple future possibilities. So there is an image of Laurence that breathes from her fiction, though it is not a personality but her voice.

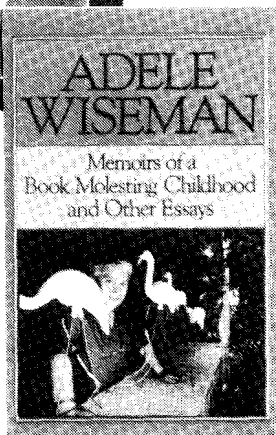
It is that voice speaking at the end of

*The Diviners* which gave me the title for my book on Canadian women novelists, *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 80s*. In describing Morag as a woman writing in full recognition of the doubleness of her activity, that final image expands beyond Morag Gunn and Margaret Laurence herself in its inclusive celebration of women's literary creativity. Having been given her fictional words, we are all her inheritors.

<sup>1</sup> Michel Fabre, "From *The Stone Angel* to *The Diviners*: An Interview with Margaret Laurence," in *A Place to Stand On: Essays By and About Margaret Laurence*, ed. George Woodcock (Edmonton: Ne West Press, 1983), pp. 193-209.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Ivory Tower or Grassroots? The Novelist as Socio-Political Being," in *Canadian Novelists and the Novel*, eds. D. Daymond and L. Monkman (Ottawa: Borealis 1981), pp. 251-59.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Gadgetry and Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel," in *A Place to Stand On*, pp. 80-89.



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