Letters from Gabrielle Roy to Margaret Laurence

Editor’s Note: CWS/SfC gratefully acknowledges the assistance of John Lennox, Director of the Graduate Program in English and Director of the Robert Centre for Canadian Studies, York University, in providing us with these letters.

We are grateful to M. François Ricard, Administrative Director of the Fonds Gabrielle Roy, for permission to publish these letters from Gabrielle Roy to Margaret Laurence (John Lennox).

Quebec, March 27, 1976

Dear Margaret,

I received your letter and book yesterday. I was made very happy by the gift of the book, but remain confused. The moment my letter to you had left, confessing that I had not as yet read The Diviners, I felt that I had been maladroit, that a woman as generous as you would seize on the occasion to offer it to me. I cannot help feeling happy just the same over the book and its precious inscription.

I read the first chapter last night in bed before sleep. As always with your books, I right away felt immersed in a strong, sure element, and let myself be borne away with an acquiescence which comes only, I suppose, with perfect trust. How is it that starting on one of your books, one knows instantly that one is not to be imposed upon or let down? I shall write soon to tell you more of my pleasure in reading you. Also to answer some of your questions.

I wouldn’t let the attack from the school board worry me too much if I were you. After all, it places you in the company of Flaubert, Lawrence and several others among the greatest. It is true that the attack in their case did not come from school boards. Perhaps — and I dwell on perhaps, having not read yet — we offer books of too vast an experience to young people as yet too young. I know that I always feel a little embarrassed when I hear of adolescents of fifteen or sixteen reading and studying The Tin Flute at school. I don’t think we had them in mind — do you? — when we wrote our books. But there are no reasons for attacking you so vilely. To speak of your books as “muck” shows where the muck is: in the mind of the vilifender. I can understand how painful it must be to you to be attacked, as it were, by your neighbours.

The good news in your letter is that Claire Martin will translate The Stone Angel. She has a wonderful style of her own, incisive, terse, brilliant — not at all yours which is far more resonant of sorrow and compassion — but she must be quite able — artist as she is — to bend her talent to fully capture your own.

By all means stick to “Where the World Began” [the title of one of the essays in Heart of a Stranger (1976)] which to me sounds right, looks good, and, furthermore, is inviting.

You are so good as to inquire about my health. Well, for months the cold was my worst enemy. Now the thaw is. In a little while the new foliage will be my undoing. The solution might be to live atop a column in the midst of the desert such as Simon the Stylite. But no, I love my friends too much to perch myself beyond their reach. As a matter of fact I am quite well sometimes in the summer when at Petite-Rivières St. François, my country retreat. I am visited by those lovely southwest winds blowing across most of the continent straight from our native prairie. Their amiable softness neither too damp nor too dry, do me so much good that I think myself cured for ever — during twenty-four hours. Or is it their flow of remembrances which brings back for an instant the well-being of youth?

Dear Margaret, please do not feel too unhappy over the misunderstanding about The Diviners. Instead try to think of the so numerous creatures to whom you have given the incredible joy of feeling, at last, understood and seen soul to soul.

Yours,

Gabrielle

* * * * *

Quebec, March 31, 1976

Dear Margaret,

I have not been able to lay down The Diviners till I had finished reading the book. Then I agreed completely with you. It is — and not only at its deepest level but quite clearly so — a book about the grace of God. The wonderfully apt title applies fully in every sense. It is a search for water, truth, identity, words, but, beyond all that, for whoever or whatever compels us to the endless search. It is a strong and beautiful book. Your characters are stronger, if possible, than any you have created so far. Christie, Prin, Morag of course, Jules, Pique, all stand out memorably, even lesser people such as McRaith and the unfortunate Birdie, or Brooke, but are there secondary characters in this book? Only, I suppose, in the sense that some take less place. Otherwise they are all fully present, even the long gone Catharine Parr Trail whose voice rises so naturally in the wilds of weeds and times.

I wouldn’t be surprised if I remembered them all quite distinctly in six months, in a year, the test that establishes in the end that a book will last.

As for the misunderstanding that flared up about it, I can’t say that it really surprises me. How many readers are there, here or elsewhere, to see that sex scenes are not put in a book just for the lure but to point at the ambiguity and sadness and greatness of the human condition, not many as yet, you must agree. And the kind that you describe in your letter are cer-
tainty not that type of reader, through no fault of theirs in a sense, therein lies the misery of it all. It is a very mature book and few people are, one must face the truth.

One thing troubled me some as I read, it is your apparent rejection of pathetic fallacy. I who use it as I breathe! Well, maybe it is right for you to shun it and for me to give in to it. I still think of I wandered as lonely as a cloud as a much truer echo of the plaintive human heart than most lines from Browning, however strong he is.

Yet, without pathetic fallacy, you achieve a perfect accord with nature. I shall not soon forget your description of the smallest detail. I read your words of appreciation of Enchanted Summer with joy.

With fond regards,
Gabrielle

* * * * *

Petite Rivière Saint-François
June 4, 1977

Dear Margaret,

I’m thoroughly ashamed for not having answered before your so very good letter of many months ago. I moved early, this year, to my summer cottage and trouble just about rained on me without pause. I lacked water three or four times, my telephone was continually out of order — they don’t care about little country lines such as ours — I had an invasion of flying ants — the worst possible creatures. I do believe that the last creatures to remain alive on this Earth, should there be an cataclysm, will be insects. They have a will to live that I find terrifying. Anyhow I had to send for an exterminator from Quebec, empty all the closets, the cupboards, leave the house, settle at my neighbor’s for two days, while the exterminator, a young man on high heels, was to go over the house. Well, in two hours he had spread a little powdered poison all along the plinths, which I could have done myself easily, and held his hand for a cheque for $250.00. And there are still ants about. Not quite as much. Perhaps they are the last survivors. In the midst of all this I received the last proofs of my next book, Garden in the Wind, translated by Alan Brown, (by the way, isn’t [it] wonderful that Joyce Marshall won the great prize for translation this year!) and by then I was so stupefied and overtired that I could have thrown the old [whole] batch in my wood stove.

Still, is it not strange, when evening comes, when dusk is falling and the last robins are looking for another worm yet on my lawn, when I sit at my bay window and see the peace and harmony and quiet joy of living all around me, would you believe it, for a while I forget all my troubles at keeping house, I rock slowly as I look at the powerful river, the superb hills and the frail silhouette of my robin alone in the gathering dark. Ah, such beauty! How is it that our hearts are so seldom free to take it all in! So much of our life is fight, fight, fight.

And I dare not mention to you — not yet — what is the most painful point to me at this time: the politics of Quebec. Yes, of course, some of it is good. We had to have a change. But I detect such arrogance, such tyranny already and, worst of all, the intolerance which often goes with a certain form of incorruptibility. I detect too much of this to live now in hope and fervent expectation, as one should. Of course, the ship can still straighten itself. But words now, I’m afraid, are of no avail. Except, coming from you and the generous group you adhere to and from our English-speaking brothers and allies. There you see: “English” has come under my pen instead of, as it should be, “Canadian friends.”

Besides, just now, I can do no more than try to recuperate and meditate in silence.

Please excuse my long delay in writing to you. There is much more, much more that I would like to say. Perhaps I’ll come back to you again one of these days, soon. Meantime, enjoy your cabin, your delightful river which you have shared so lovingly with us all in your great Diviners.