

mourning—to a recognition of the task of self-healing. This is an integrative analysis which brings into focus the great arc of Margaret's life work. Because Laurence has given us women of all ages and because she has placed them in the social situations we all find ourselves in—married, single (and undecided—opting in and out) the very scope of the Manawaka cycle seems to resist a single thematic interpretation. But even while exploring these disparities, Riegel traces the link running through them all, pointing out the significance and particularity of each woman's movement into full self-hood through her active involvement in the work of mourning.

These two books, written from very different perspectives, are a "must read" for Laurence fans and scholars alike. Christian Riegel and Lyall Powers have added immensely to our appreciation and understanding of Margaret Laurence, as woman and as writer demonstrating her great gift of "writing the self into being."

ETHEL WILSON: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

David Stouck.
Toronto: University of Toronto
Press, 2003

CONSTANCE LINDSAY SKINNER: WRITING ON THE FRONTIER.

Jean Barma.
Toronto: University of Toronto
Press, 2003

REVIEWED BY CLARA THOMAS

Among women writers of British Columbia Ethel Wilson and Constance Lindsay Skinner provide stark

contrasts in manner and methods. Skinner, born in 1877, the older by eleven years, wrote of the frontier of her youth when her father was factor of the Hudson's Bay trading post at Quesnel, the northern terminus of the Cariboo Wagon road and a distribution centre for miners and settlers. Her burning desire to be a writer, and a self-supporting one at that, had manifested itself very early. By hook and by crook she achieved her goal, but its cost was high in terms of personal relations and financial security. Emigrants from England and Scotland, both her paternal and maternal grandparents had hoped for financial success and stability in Canada. Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful in the businesses they had chosen and when Annie Lindsay and Robert Skinner, their children, were married in 1877, their only security rested in his employment at Quesnel. There he was a figure of authority and importance and Connie, an only child, was very much a part of both parents' lives. She particularly relished her status as "the little princess" of the trading post, where all the men who came to do business with her father, trappers, traders, Chinese from a village up the river, voyageurs and Métis, spoiled her and brought her gifts. Her gorgeous snowshoes, black frames embellished with tufts of scarlet, blue, white and yellow wool, were a favourite gift from "the old canoeman, her almost dearest friend." As she wrote of her childhood later, and she did so many times, she described herself as "home-taught and self-educated." As an adult, she romanticized her frontier childhood and as a writer she learned very early that it was her most successful stock in trade: "I can recall a small child scraping the thick frost off the window pane in a far northern log fur trading post, to see the sleds, the huge Hudson-Bay dogs with bells on, swinging in with the mail."

Ethel Wilson, like Skinner, is a special case. Born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 1888, she was the

daughter of Lila and Robert Bryant, Methodist missionaries. Her mother, always fragile, died when Ethel was just over a year old and in 1890, her father yielded to the advice of the many relatives who had urged him to bring his daughter home, and returned to England. When Ethel was nine, he died of pneumonia and so began for her a long saga of being passed around among relatives who were kind and generous, but who could not possibly take the place of the father whom she idolized for the rest of her life.

Her maternal grandmother, Annie Malkin, made a trip to England especially to collect her granddaughter and bring her back to Vancouver. Unlike the Skinners, the Malkins were financially successful in Canada. They were also strict Methodists. Ethel shone at Miss Gordon's elite school in Vancouver but for her high school years it was decided that she should go back to England, to Trinity Hall School, founded in 1878 mainly for the daughters of Wesleyan Methodist clergy. Its regime was a strict one and the girls were trained, first and foremost, to grow up as godly women in the Methodist tradition. Though Ethel never suffered from the insecurity poverty brings, she did suffer all her life from the upheavals that had been such a part of her childhood as well as from the conflict set up between her gratitude for the care and kindness of her relatives and the suffocating piety of their way of life. Two of her father's sisters, Aunts Hannah and Margaret Bryant, became her lifeline during her years at Trinity Hall. They lived what seemed to her to be a glamorous life in London and they took her to concerts, art galleries, theatre, and restaurants, all of them quite outside the acceptable Methodist norm. Back in Vancouver in the Malkin household, her schooling over, she began teacher training in 1906 at the recently established Normal School. Thereafter, she taught in several Vancouver schools until her marriage in 1931. She conformed to the rigidly

observed routines of the family and only many years later admitted to the stifling effects of its many prohibitions—no dancing, card-playing, games of chance, theatre, circuses: “it was almost impossible to be young in such a household.”

When Connie was ten the Skinner family moved from Quesnel to Victoria, was sent to Dunthwaite School, where some twenty daughters of prominent citizens were educated. She had begun to write fairy stories as a much younger child, but here her powers of invention had far more scope and her compositions, “The Fraser River” for instance, stood out among the staid works of her companions: “The H.B.C. boats ascend it (the river) by means of a towing line, bound over the shoulders of a strong crew. The men, usually half-casts and Indians have to climb over rocks and cliffs, sometimes clinging to the face of the high banks and sometimes wading the stream, with the waters to their waists, for hours and even days at a time.” That short excerpt displays the core of Connie’s writing for all the decades of her future career: she wrote of the north, its glamour, and its danger and of the men whose strength and determination she admired, romanticized and idealized. Her ever-active imagination found it easy to spin yarns of the frontier and equally easy to judiciously embroider her own reminiscences. Her compulsion to write, already well established in her teens, stayed with her for her lifetime, as did the deep rooted prejudices of her time and place. She never got beyond her conflicted feelings for “half-breeds, Indians and Malays” (Chinese), nor did her readers, similarly prejudiced, who provided an eager audience for her tales.

Initially because of a bout of pneumonia and the advice of her doctor to go south, she went to California where her burgeoning journalism found ready employment. The move from Vancouver turned out to be a permanent one as she went first to Chicago in search of publishing op-

portunities and then, finally, to New York, the goal of all aspiring writers. After her father’s death, her mother joined her in New York for a few years, but Connie was stifled by her mother’s careful, conservative lifestyle and Alice was horrified by what she considered to be Connie’s rackety, Bohemian disregard of all the conventions by which “a lady” lived. She went back to Vancouver where she died some years later, her support having strained Connie’s already meagre income. As a hardworking free-lance, Connie’s output in many genres was stupendous. She wrote poetry, plays, short stories, novels, and history. At her most successful she was employed as both writer and editor by the Yale University Press. She wrote two of its *Chronicles of America Series* and had an important hand in several more. Frederick Jackson Turner, Harvard’s frontier historian, was an admirer and a keen correspondent. She never devoted herself to one genre, however, tossing off short stories, plays and poetry in her scant bits of leisure time. Her output and the quantity of her writing that was published is even more astonishing to contemplate considering that she had to act as her own agent, tirelessly submitting her manuscripts to likely publishers and eagerly searching out useful connections to the publishing world.

The love of her life was Vilhjalmur Stefansson, already a famous explorer of the north when she met him, financially secure because of his various popular speaking tours and like Connie herself, possessed of an imagination that readily added colour to his accounts of his travels. Unfortunately Stefansson was all too used to women’s adoration and pursuit and though he did respond somewhat to Connie adoring letters, she was one of many. In her forties, at a low point mentally and financially, Connie was forced to beg him for financial help. Though he probably lent her sums of money when she was desperate for them, her begging letters were enormously wounding to

her pride. They make sad reading. Essentially Connie was alone and remained so, living as frugally as she possibly could, scraping together money to send back to her mother, though she would never return to Vancouver herself, even for her mother’s funeral. Her works today are not memorable for their literary quality, but they open many windows on the popular culture of the early decades of the twentieth century.

Ethel Wilson’s writing life is radically different in its circumstances and appeal from Constance Lindsay Skinner’s. It presents a strange conundrum to her many admirers, for she insisted always that she was simply a doctor’s wife who wrote as a hobby. The truth is very different. Though she did not publish her first novel until she was nearly sixty she had been writing for decades before that, trying to place her work with publishers and working patiently to perfect the style for which she is now admired. It may well be that her misleading statements were lingering results of her strict Methodist upbringing—in the Malkin household of her grandmother writing fiction was not countenanced. It is certainly true that her marriage to Dr. Wallace Wilson brought joyful liberation to Ethel. It also brought her the confidence she needed to admit to her writing preoccupations and to pursue them with confidence.

From early middle age Ethel suffered from osteoarthritis, wheel-chair bound for most of her days, but still working and above all still rejoicing in her deep marital happiness.

In 1944 she submitted a collection of short stories to the Macmillan Company and thus began yet another immensely liberating relationship. John Gray, Macmillan’s Canadian editor-in-chief, recognized both Wilson’s unusual talent and her extreme uncertainty about her writing. He patiently encouraged her to engage in substantial revisions. They became firm friends and essentially Gray acted as a combination friendly critic and patient writing coach

through the slow process of bringing the book to publication. In 1949 nineteen years after she had begun to write of Topaz, the story's central figure, *The Innocent Traveller* was published. It was preceded by *Hetty Dorval* in 1947, the first of a total of six books as well as many published short stories. All of them are memorable for her distinguished style, perfected by years of painstaking rewriting and revision. Collectively and individually her works are unique in their display of a keenly observant eye for people and place and a compelling combination of humour and irony. Among her contemporary writers only Gabrielle Roy's work has a comparable grace and humanity.

Both Ethel Wilson and Constance Lindsay Skinner are well served by their biographers. In his Preface David Stouck traces his interest in Wilson, her life and work, to 1966 when he read her novels in preparation for joining the English Department of Simon Fraser University. When he first tried to see her she was in seclusion and unapproachable because of her intense mourning for her husband, recently deceased. He did not meet her until 1976 when she was already in a nursing home and plagued by the gradual decline of her mental powers.

Meanwhile he had become well known in academic circles as a sensitive critic of her work. He has given us a wonderfully complete study of a woman who became one of our finest writers almost in spite of herself and certainly in spite of the very real traumas and repressions of her early years and the crippling arthritis of her maturity. Until she was completely disabled she continued to be, as Stouck terms her, a "grande dame," although she avoided centre stage and the well-deserved recognition that her constantly growing reputation offered. To a very few young writers, especially Margaret Laurence, she was a revered mentor and encouraging advocate.

Jean Barman is a Professor in the Department of Educational Studies

at the University of British Columbia. She is a sociological investigator, not a literary critic, and her work centres on Skinner's career in the light of her time and place as well as her gender. Barman found a wealth of material, both biographical and literary, on Skinner, especially in the mass of papers stored after her death by her publisher in the New York Public Library. The delineation of Skinner's life and work is meticulous. Barman writes with a sympathetic honesty that readily acknowledges the limitations of Skinner's work but also vividly sketches her circumstances: "There was no family money, no spouse, no patron to smooth over the rough patches ... Constance always had to direct her energies to the marketplace." She is a powerful advocate, persuasively linking Skinner with multitudes of others whose careers perforce followed the same path, a path that was so radically different from Ethel Wilson's. She deserves respect and remembrance as a foremother of women writers today.

SHE WHO CHANGES: RE-IMAGING THE DIVINE IN THE WORLD

Carol P. Christ
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003

REVIEWED BY JOHANNA H. STUCKEY

Carol Christ has done it again! Her recent book, *She Who Changes*, is yet another exciting examination of our understanding the divine as female. In it Christ explicates the works of

process philosophers, primarily Charles Hartshorne, to produce "a feminist philosophy of religion." In the introduction, she professes herself surprised to be "waxing eloquent about a male philosopher, white and dead, old enough to have been [her] grandfather." So am I, since, for most of her career, Christ has been firm in rejecting male-dominated religions and philosophies. However, this new book, which Christ sees as "the fruit of a love affair" with Hartshorne, shows why the latter's work so entranced her.

According to Christ, process philosophy regards life as "in process, changing and developing, growing and dying," and, as feminists like Carol Gilligan have tried to show about the female self, it sees the self "as relational, social, embodied, and embedded in the world." Not only that but the divine is "the whole world." No wonder theologian Christ finds this philosophy both satisfying and implicitly feminist!

In Chapter One, Christ outlines six "problems with God": absolute perfection and immutability, unsympathetic goodness, omnipotence, omniscience, immortality after death, and infallible revelation—all of which contribute to the creation of the gods of patriarchal monotheisms. In the rest of the chapters, she discusses process philosophy's solutions and demonstrates that, in the main, they are compatible with feminist theology. Indeed, process philosophy agrees with most "feminist theologies and theologies" in validating "change and embodiment, touch and relationship, power with, not power over, the world as co-created, this life rather than hope for another, and the fragmentariness of all knowledge." Still, Christ points out that the process philosophers she cites did not name their philosophy as feminist, a "rather serious oversight," but "no other way of putting things occurred to them." It is significant that, in a collection of Hartshorne's earlier essays published when he was almost one hundred