

Interview:

Margaret Laurence — First Lady of Can Lit

by Viga Boland

Photos by John Boland

Late last fall, CA&B asked Viga Boland and her photographer-husband John to seek out Margaret Laurence at her home in

Lakefield, Ontario. They did and brought back the following detailed impressions for the first

in a planned series of interviews with leading figures in the Canadian literary community.

“When the chips are down, you learn to write by doing it, and by trying to develop your own powers of self-criticism,” Margaret Laurence tells me earnestly across the kitchen table in her beautiful old home in Lakefield.

It is a crisp Sunday afternoon and most of southern Ontario is digging itself out from under the first heavy snowfall of the year. White light streaks through the window and plays across the spotlessly clean hardwood floors. Margaret—she insists that I call her by her first name—is dressed simply in a tan corduroy shirt dress.

Patting unconsciously at her recently trimmed hair, a gesture which belies the calmness in her voice, she responds to a statement by McKinlay Kantor that “Good writing can’t be taught by anyone, anytime, anyplace; the author is his own and only schoolmaster.”

Margaret agrees with Kantor, but she qualifies:

“I think there are certain creative writing classes which under some circumstances can be helpful if it’s the sort of set-up where young writers can get criticism of their work. . . . I mean creative and helpful criticism.”

Young writers are of great concern to Margaret because of their extreme vulnerability. In fact, “. . . no matter how many years you have been writing,

everytime you show your work to people or have it published, you are vulnerable.”

That’s why Margaret asserts that a person running a creative writing class has a tremendous responsibility to “ensure that criticism given is helpful,



but not hurtful, because some just don’t realize that if you’re going to criticize someone’s work, you don’t have to actually knife them to the heart!”

Margaret reaches for a cigarette, one of the many she will smoke during the next hour.

She is nervous, even though the

detested tape-recorder works soundlessly near my feet.

Her hearty welcome some half-hour ago and her friendly chatter during lunch and a tour of her house have long ago dissipated my own tension, and I wish I could do the same for her.

But one thing is helping: we are discussing the love of her life—writing—her medium of expressing “what in fact everybody knows but doesn’t say.”

It’s a precept she has followed diligently and successfully in her novels and continues now, as she confides what she felt as a beginning writer:

“Well I did know from a very early age that I was a writer, but I didn’t know for many years if anybody else knew this interesting fact!”

She chuckles at her own candidness. I ask her whether writing at an early age is a necessary sign of a writer.

“I don’t think so. I have known writers who didn’t start writing until they were. . . . oh. . . middle-aged. Take Ethel Wilson, one of our finest writers of fiction. She told me years ago in Vancouver that she didn’t feel any need to write until she was well into her forties. But then, of course, she started writing books which appeared to be absolutely professionally finished. Writers vary very much in this way. They are very

individual people and writing is a very individual process."

Margaret looks thoughtful and then adds that one thing is certain:

"Whatever age one starts, there is still a certain amount of very hard work in apprenticeship."

Margaret herself started writing around Grade 2 or 3, then worked on papers in high school and college. By the time her first novel came out, she had only had a few short stories published—and she was around 34! She laughs now recalling one critic who stated "Margaret Laurence is a late starter."

"Late starter—*nothing!*"

Margaret exclaims fervently.

"I'd been working at this for years before anything appeared in print."

But still, it was a long time before Margaret could actually earn a living by writing. She plugged away at book reviews, articles; some commissioned; others merely ones she wanted to write.

"The ones in 'Heart of a Stranger' only represent a small number of those I wrote."

Margaret lights another cigarette and glances self-consciously toward the microphone.

I recall momentarily her study upstairs, the shelves of books, the divining stick hanging near them, the architectural-type drawings of the brick house of her maternal grandfather (immortalized in *A BIRD IN THE HOUSE*) on the adjacent wall.

The setting is perfect for a writer; it should be easy to get down to work. Is it?

"It's very hard! But it also gives me great pleasure as well. I tend to start out slowly—2 to 3 hours a day—but usually, when I'm working on a novel, I will begin right after breakfast and probably work 4-6 hours a day, 5 days a week. *And I never work on weekends!*"

Laughing, I ask her if she's ever gone beyond this.

"I used to in past years. But then I found that if I extended the period too long beyond 4-6 hours the work would deteriorate because I was tired. And that's particularly true when writing a novel. It's a very long haul and you have to pace yourself. And

even if the writing didn't deteriorate, if I stayed up, say, till 2 a.m., I found I'd be no good for the next 2 or 3 days. It's extremely hard work and it's psychically exhausting, because what you're trying to do is make that direct contact with your characters—to really feel how they would respond to this particular situation and to life—and it's a great psychic drain. At the end of the day, I'm very tired, but then again, it's the only kind of work I really love doing."



A great many writers set word limits for themselves.

Not Margaret.

Not a word limit, not even a page limit:

"But my normal output for a day would probably be somewhere between 6 and 10 typescript pages, because once I start writing, I do write fairly rapidly. The detail simply comes along."

The detail simply comes along... and yet such simpleness has produced Hagar, Stacey, Rachel, Vanessa—ordinary people made extraordinary—and Morag—an extraordinary person made ordinary—from the pen of Margaret Laurence; a fact pointed out by Clara Thomas in her study *THE MANAWAKA WORLD OF MARGARET LAURENCE*.

Where do these characters come from, and how does Margaret know they are worthwhile?

"Well really, when you begin a novel, you really don't know who else, if anyone, is going to be interested in it. What you hope is that it will strike a chord in some readers. Like when I started 'The Stone Angel,' I wondered if anyone was going to be interested in this old lady. And then I decided 'Well I don't care. I'm interested in her.' And of course,

as it went, at least in Canada, she turned out to be everyone's grandmother."

And how does one get inside an old lady's head?

"Well I really don't know.

That's one of those mysterious processes that take place sometimes in fiction, where you make that leap of the imagination into the mind of someone else who is very different from yourself in character and age. But how I felt when I was writing about Hagar was that she existed in some other dimension, and was simply telling me her story. You don't know what the people are going to say until they actually say it. James Thurber said: 'How do I know what I think until I write it down?' What seems to happen is: I've probably imagined the main character in relationships with other characters for quite a long time, and I may not use all the scenes—that doesn't matter—I've planned it all in my skeletal outline, usually about a page of where I think I'll be going—but a lot of the detail, I really don't know. It doesn't work for me to plan out too much detail in advance. It's better for me to discover it when I come to it. I just usually know where it's going to end up, and another thing, I almost always have the title in advance!"

Sound like automatic writing? Margaret chuckles:

"Well it does. And yet, at the same time, what one is bringing to bear is not only a great deal of one's emotions at that level, but also one's intelligence. Because it has to come from both the heart and the guts—and the head. It's a combination of all three."

Now that we are on firmer ground, Margaret is beginning to relax, and this is good for both of us.

She is chatting easily, answering questions without my asking them, and I'm happy to let her go on:

"I don't really rewrite at all while I'm going through the first draft—lots of people do—but my particular work method is to go through that first draft and then go back and rewrite. I always write longhand, occasionally going back and re-reading at the

end of a day, making comments in the margin like 'rewrite this scene' or 'this is garbage' or 'repetitious'. But it's when I put it into typescript that I do a lot of rewriting and cutting, because I generally tend to overwrite rather than underwrite."

Anyone who has read Margaret Laurence's novels would probably find this last statement hard to believe, for her books are the epitome of compactness.

There is nothing there that shouldn't be there.

"Well I hope that's true," Margaret says modestly.

"It's partly because the process of rewriting and revising is very important to me, and it's very seldom that a scene will come exactly right the first time. Sometimes this happens, but that usually comes with a major scene that has sort of been playing for some time like a film in my mind."

Margaret is often asked by young writers whether so much rewriting doesn't spoil the spontaneity.

It would appear however, that for her, rewriting, to use a simple analogy, is almost like kneading bread:

"You *can* rewrite too much.

You have to judge when it's the right time to stop. And as I've always said, the novel which is in the mind is always much better than the one that appears on the printed page. But I do think I get to the point when I say 'O.K. I've worked with this as much as I can. It certainly is by no means perfect, and I can probably see the flaws in it better than anyone else. But at the same time, I have done everything I know I'm capable of doing with it.' So now, it's time to let it go to someone else."

That decision to let it go—that moment so close to the writer's heart—that time when we become most vulnerable is the point at which we send it to an editor or publisher as the case may be.

Even for Margaret, with twelve books published, three president's medals, and several awards behind her, even for her this is the hardest time.

As she tells me about it, her eyes grow wide in a mixture of



apprehension and amusement.:

"*I pace the floor!* I remember with my first novel: one publisher I submitted it to sat on the manuscript for 8 months. I was distraught—beside myself! But of course, now my publishers know that I'm absolutely nervous as a cat when I submit a manuscript and they do try to read it fairly quickly and at least put me out of my agony. They phone up and say 'We'll give you a detailed report later on, but it's O.K. We like it.' And as long as I know that basically they like it, even if I have to go back and do work on it, it's all right."

This agony that a writer goes through, watching for the postman, waiting for some kind of word, prompts Margaret to speak out on the whole publisher-writer situation which she avers "has always gone the publisher's way in the past and none of it has gone the writer's."

"It's really too bad people can't submit to more than one publisher at a time. Now the Writers' Union is thinking about doing something about it, like sounding out publishers to see what they think. It seems to me it would be perfectly legit if you simply took the best offer that came along. It just doesn't seem right to me that a writer should have to sit there cooling his heels while a publisher takes 8 months to decide."

The phone rings.

A little hesitant, Margaret goes to answer it, and returns shortly telling me she has taken the phone off the hook.

For some inexplicable reason, I suddenly ask her who the caller was.

"Marian Engel" replies Margaret without a hint of annoyance at my having asked something which was none of my business.

"I said I'd phone her later as I was having an interview" she good-naturedly informs me further.

I am embarrassed, but then it occurs to me why I have taken such a liberty: Margaret is so genuine, candid, and modest that she has allowed me to forget that I am speaking with a well-known and highly praised author. She speaks to me as a friend.

Recovering, and encouraged, I ply her with further questions about her art, which she regards, like her heroine Morag, as a "trade":

"Well of course, it is art. But what one feels is that one's not going to go around saying 'Hey look! I'm writing literature.' That sounds incredibly pretentious. Fact is, I do regard it as a kind of trade: I'm a story-teller, and I try to write a novel as best I can."

Laughing, she confides how it was only after her first novel had been published and she was re-applying for a passport in 1962, that for the first time she wrote "writer" instead of "housewife" under occupation.

Margaret lights another cigarette as we get back to the nitty-gritty of the publishing world.

Her brow furrowed in concentration, she tells me "sometimes one is just not the best judge of one's work."

"For instance, when I've finished a novel and I've been at it for a long time, I'm so close to it that I realize my judgment's not so hot. I will probably have gone through three drafts by that time, and all I want to do then is get an outside opinion."

Margaret never talks about a novel during the first draft, though she may

during the second or third, but even then, she never lets anyone see it.

But what happens when the editor finally does see it?

“Well my editor will probably make a number of suggestions—she’ll never tell me exactly what to do—but she will give me a long list of her responses, both positive and negative, and in cases where she says ‘I think this chapter can be tightened up’, if I agree, I go back and work on it. And if I don’t agree, then I feel I should be able to say why and stand behind my work.”

Her saying this again brings Morag to mind, Morag who first became frustrated and angry, then thicker-skinned, and finally able to defend herself.

Margaret elaborates:

“The process of exchange between editor and writer is a very subtle one. I’ve been extremely fortunate in the editors I’ve had, but I will not make changes to suit someone else. And no reputable editor will ever make changes on his own without consulting with the writer.”

Ah! the headaches of being a writer . . . the writing, the rewriting, the long hours, the waiting, the exhilaration of a publisher’s “yes” and the despondency at his “no” . . . and if and when publication does take place, then there’s the next thing to worry about: the reviewers and the general public.

Or should a writer worry about it?

“I think this: any writer who tells me he doesn’t read the reviews is lying. I, of course, read them with great interest, but on the other hand, I don’t think a writer can afford to be too ecstatic about the good ones, or too depressed by the bad ones. You just have to try and be kind of cool about it. I’ll tell you another thing: what means more to me than the reviews is the letters I get from the readers who tell me (like with ‘The Diviners’) that that novel meant a great deal to them, has spoken to their own lives. That is very touching, and I’m grateful for that kind of feedback.”



Margaret has mentioned *THE DIVINERS* in terms of public reaction, and although I know it is a sad subject for her, I am compelled to ask her about the recent controversy surrounding the book in nearby Peterborough.

Concerning Margaret’s tale of Morag, some people had taken exception to her use of “explicit” language and sexually-graphic description, especially when it was proposed by a teacher that the novel be added to a Grade 13 course.

As I bring up the topic, there is a sadness in Margaret’s eyes, but in her voice there is something else — conviction and belief in oneself:

“If I had that book to write over again, I wouldn’t change a word of it. Because that’s the way it had to be written.”

How much then should a writer be influenced by such adverse publicity?

Margaret is emphatic in her response:

“I don’t think a writer should be influenced at all! Fact is, of course, I felt rather hurt and depressed, but I must make absolutely clear that in no way do I doubt the sincerity of the opponents of the book; I know they’re sincere. I do think, however, that they misunderstood the book and I’m sorry about that. I find Grade 13’s have no problem with it. When I talk with them about it, we discuss the characters, the

theme, the form, and they see what it’s all about.”

The truth is, anyone involved in teaching high school English can tell you that students are reading far more explicit books, not just in Grade 13, but in Grades 9 and 10.

From my own teaching days I recall the many times I spoke to my students about the books I found on their desks—those picked up in a drugstore or the library, like *SUMMER OF ’42* or *THE EXORCIST*—books whose diction and description make *THE DIVINERS* look positively puritanical.

But, as Margaret happily tells me now: “What was very heartening was that, at the time, there were a great number of expressions of support for the book. And now, it’s back on the course.”

Hearing this pleases me immensely, and since we have been talking, at least indirectly, about education, it seems a good time, with so much discussion of late about student illiteracy, to seek Margaret out on the importance of teaching correct language usage and grammar in the schools along with the inherent implications this has for writers.

“I think it’s terribly important,” Margaret states forcefully. “Sure, young children should be encouraged to tell stories, etc., but I think the teaching of grammar, punctuation, and spelling is essential. I often tell young writers that if you send a manuscript to a publisher and you don’t know the rules of writing, there’s a very good chance you’ll get that manuscript bounced right back to you—even if you’re Dostoevsky—because no publisher is going to wade through something that’s illiterate. I still use a dictionary for spelling even though I’m one of the old breed who learned how to spell. It’s not going to ruin spontaneity—these things are the tools of our trade and *can’t* be ignored.”

When I ask her then about the great number of books by well-known

authors being published today where grammar rules are often broken, she has more to say:

"Well one is extremely fortunate if one has a good copy editor to look after these things. But mind you, when we talk about rules of grammar, you *can* break them—when you know what you're doing; but you have to know them first. However, I don't think one should say to a young student these are immutable rules—just that one should learn them."

Another cigarette alight, and Margaret is ready to talk a little about style, or what she prefers to call "form":

"Form is very important to me and I do a lot of thinking about it before I start. You can't think of it in isolation. You must think of it in terms of your character and find a form that best conveys that character. This is often difficult to work out."

The form used by Margaret in each of her Manawaka novels differs in relation to her characters.

There are similarities of course: in each case, the narrator is a woman looking back over her life, slipping in and out of the past.

But there are differences: the "memory-bank movies" and snapshots used in *THE DIVINERS* seem more complex than the flashes of Hagar in *THE STONE ANGEL*—though not that the latter was any easier to handle.

And even more complex seem the five different voices of the narrator, Stacey, in *THE FIRE-DWELLERS*.

As to which was the best, or the most effective, Margaret really can't say:

"That's up to others to decide. And people sometimes ask me which is my favourite character. I always say that's like asking which of your children do you prefer. Well I prefer both of mine for different reasons!"

Margaret glances at her watch, and I at mine.

She has requested that this interview be no longer than an hour, because like her writing, this kind of brain-picking is exhausting.

Yet, I have yet to see any signs of weariness or impatience in her; she has shown me nothing but a warm willingness to share her knowledge

(and it is considerable) with me.

So I query her now about the situation for young Canadian writers today.

Margaret is optimistic:

"I think the chances for new writers today are really quite good. For one thing, there are the little mags—but mind you, our publishing industry is in deep trouble financially, partly because they do not operate in what one can call a fair marketplace with so many



books being brought in and sold more cheaply from the U.S. and Britain. And also, because smaller print runs are being done here, the books cost more than in the U.S."

(In The U.S., *THE DIVINERS* sold for \$7.95; in Canada, for \$8.95).

"But despite all this, things have never been better for Canadian writers, because now we have an audience."

As she says this, Margaret's eyes light up and there is a warmth and excitement in her voice:

"Someone said at one time 'the surest way to obscurity is to be a Canadian writer'. This was at the time when without the seal of approval in London or New York, a Canadian writer just couldn't get to first base. These books just wouldn't get reviewed or read. But I'm happy to say this is not the case now."

I have to agree with her that Canadians are reading Canadian books more than ever before.

In a recent trip to two local libraries in an effort to obtain a copy of *THE DIVINERS*, out of fifteen copies

stocked by the libraries (and mine is a small town) I was unable to get one. Margaret is pleased to hear it, but humble:

"Well it warms my heart to hear you say that . . . but I think also another thing that has been a great, great change in the past ten years is that more Canadians books are being taught in Canadian schools (even though we still have a long way to go) and I think that is very important. I go around evangelizing like this all the time . . ."

She smiles in self-amusement.

" . . . but young people must have some knowledge of their Canadian background and heritage while they're in school. If they don't, they may never! I have talked to literally thousands of students in high school and find the ones who are interested in reading—and there are many despite gloomy prognostications to the contrary—are reading at a higher level than my generation did at a comparable age. And they're also extremely keen on having more Canadian books on Canadian courses."

Encouraging words . . . but for a moment I hesitate, recalling a statement made by Jack McClelland in an interview with *The Canadian Review*.

Jack had said "We publish authors, not books."

I had been troubled by the statement on reading it, but Margaret clears it up for me:

"That doesn't mean what it seems to mean. That's a term used in the publishing industry. What it means is that a publisher will stick with one writer—not necessarily accepting everything he writes—but if they have been publishing that writer, if they feel his book is worth publishing, they'll go ahead and do it, even though they may not make a mint on it."

Only a few minutes of our hour are left, but there is still time to get at Margaret's philosophy on writing.

In the preface to *LONG DRUMS*

AND CANNONS (published in 1968)
Margaret wrote:

Literature must be planted firmly in some soil. Even works on non-realism make use of spiritual landscapes which have been at least partially inherited by the writer. Despite current fashions . . . the main concern of the writer remains that of somehow creating the individual on the printed page, of catching the tones and accents of human speech, of setting down the conflicts of people who are as real to him as himself. If he does this well, as truthfully as he can, his writing may sometimes reach out beyond any national boundary.

Is this still her philosophy in 1976?

“You can take that as a statement of faith on my part, and I do think that the thing that is most important to me is to write about characters who will become as alive in the mind of the reader as possible.”

Those familiar with Margaret’s books know how closely she has come to achieving this goal, and how her own desire that a novel “reach out beyond geographical boundaries, and hopefully, express something that is common to the human dilemma in the wider sense” has been fulfilled.

With this, our focus shifts, one last time, to the new writer.

What does Margaret have to say to him or her?

“Given a certain amount of talent, what one really has to have is a certain amount of determination and hard work. It is also very important to do a lot of reading in your particular genre, whether you’re writing poetry or fiction, not in order to imitate of course, because one wants to try and find one’s own voice, but in order to see what other people are doing. If you want to write fiction, then read novels, read short stories by good writers.”

When it comes to poetry, Margaret “doesn’t feel as nearly on solid



Margaret Laurence's river . . .

ground” but she does have a word of encouragement about showing your work to others, and about living with those miserable rejection slips:

“Look, this is only one person’s response. Somebody else may tell you something completely different. It *all* comes down to individual response.”

For many unpublished writers, after the writing itself, rejection may well be the greatest frustration.

By the same token, publication may be thought to be the greatest joy.

For Margaret Laurence, neither is true.

Her frustration is greatest before starting a novel, because she is “fearful of making a false start.” She finds herself evading it, until “the tension becomes such that I really have to



. . . and her beautiful old home in Lakefield, Ontario.

begin, and once I’m into it, well then, it’s very much easier.”

But as for the joy in writing, the feeling of elation, *that* for Margaret lies “in doing it.”

“I used to think that seeing it in print would be the best part—well, of course, it is exciting; it’s a splendid moment—but the real joy is in doing it. I think that even if I had never seen print, I still would have had to go on writing.”

The hour is up.

I switch off the tape and lean back feeling exhilarated and grateful.

I have learned much from this gentle, unassuming woman who now jumps up and empties the overloaded ashtray and wipes invisible dust from the table. Cigarette in hand once again, she checks her hair in the mirror, and laughs off the photographer’s remark on her nervousness during the interview.

After all, who wouldn’t be nervous when one person is firing questions at you, while another tip-toes around snapping pictures?!

Robert Fulford has said of Margaret Laurence: “No-one has more anxiously and carefully promoted the work of fellow Canadian writers. She is without question a part of the movement of cultural nationalism in Canada during this period.” (*Toronto Star* Sept. 1976)

Her words during this interview—from those on her own methodology to those on the writing scene in general—give full credence to Fulford’s statement.

Margaret Laurence has spoken honestly and reassuringly to Canadian writers, and despite her nervousness, one feels in her presence a peace that is almost tangible.

Quick in her responses, but not careless, outspoken about her feelings, but not inconsiderate, she has been informative and patient.

But above all, Margaret Laurence has been generous—with her knowledge, with her time, and most important, with herself.