Mother of Manawaka: Margaret Laurence as Author of Children's Stories

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With the recent publication of *The Christmas Birthday Story*,[1] *Six Darn Cows*,[2] and *The Olden Days Coat*,[3] added to her previously published *Jason's Quest*,[4] Margaret Laurence has become one of our prolific authors of children's fiction. More important her work is fiction which all our children should read or have read to them. Not only is it artful and entertaining literature, but it is also instructive. The social virtues it espouses are the ones Canadians have traditionally agreed ought to be taught to our youth: a sense of obligation both to duty and to others, a conviction that goodness and badness are not linked to one race or sex, a belief in the importance of sharing and cooperation, an appreciation of the ties which unite one generation to the next, and a reverence for the sanctity of human love. Above all, Margaret Laurence emphasizes the sanctity of the family (a timely theme at the outset of a decade which many have predicted will witness the demise of the nuclear family as we know it).

These social virtues and the humanity with which they are inspired have no doubt been part of Margaret Laurence's perceptual awareness at least since her socially active undergraduate days in Winnipeg and formed part of her literary vision from the time of her earliest writings. They are evidently at the heart of *The Prophet's Camel Bell*.[5] This book recounts the Laurences' experience and travels in Africa, travels which Margaret Laurence concludes were "so much more than a geographical journey" (p. 237) because in looking at others she learned, surprisingly, about herself (p. 1). We have here an early example of Laurence's penchant for reflective insight, a habit which was to form the basis for her point-of-view in the Manawaka stories as well as in several of her children's books. Laurence's strong sense of individual worth is present throughout, and so is her sensitivity for the suffering of others, her admiration for those who thirst for life, and her praise of those able to express love openly.

This Side Jordan[6] adds to our sense of Margaret Laurence's sympathies. This first novel shows that in Africa she was more interested in the native blacks than in the imperialist whites, more interested in humanity and tribal values than in profit-motivated imperialism – themes apparent also in *The Tomorrow-Tamer*.[7] Similar attitudes are evident throughout this collection of short stories; "The Drummer of All the World" probably provides the

best overall example. (In this same short story the use of flashback evolves - a device which was to become structurally significant in the Manawaka novels as well as in *The Olden Days Coat.*) What is particularly impressive about Margaret Laurence's liberalism is her own capacity for self-evaluation and self-awareness. In *Heart of a Stranger* she discusses those "white liberals who went around collecting African acquaintances as though they were rare postage stamps," and she wonders if she too "was not doing precisely that."[8] The question as to the real intent of the white liberal is often raised in *The Tomorrow Tamer* and is one sign of Laurence's truly humane sensibilities.

In 1964 Margaret Laurence "came home", imaginatively, and began creating the novels set in "Manawaka" on the Canadian prairies. Vanessa, Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, and Morag as literary fictions provide us with several generations of Western people in search of love and joy, a sense of self and a sense of family.

Midway through her Manawaka cycle, Laurence turned, quite naturally, to children's literature. In "Upon a Midnight Clear" she has stated that she has "always liked children's books" and added that she and her children "frequently gave them to one another" as Christmas presents.[9] When one considers also that Laurence has pointed to the need for more good children's literature,[10] one ought to anticipate her acceptance of the challenge to write some herself. It is to be expected too that Laurence should continue to bring her own background to her writing, so that the principles of human behaviour and the key to happiness presented in her adult literature should remain unchanged and should re-emerge in her children's stories.

In *Jason's Quest* Margaret Laurence produced a social allegory for the pre-teen. Its heroes are a mole, an owl, and two cats, all of whom set off in quest of a cure for an invisible sickness which plagues the mole people; the quest becomes a search for wisdom and self-esteem. This common goal establishes a sense of community, of friendship, amongst natural enemies and makes it clear that there are good cats and bad cats, good moles and bad moles, wise owls and foolish owls. The story develops the theses that even the tiniest mole is capable of good deeds if only he will try, that truly great deeds are performed selflessly for one's friends, and that wisdom without charity is ignorance. The literary heroes whose activities entertainingly unfold this social lesson are both male and female, with the female characters displaying both charm and insight. Wisdom and ignorance are neither socially nor sexually determined. Ultimately, the questers discover that the invisible disease which is destroying the colony of moles results not from a germ, but from a state of mind, from an unthinking glorification of the past without trying to better one's future and

to expand one's horizons. The story is entertaining and the allegory easily adapted to Canadians in a Canadian setting.

This literary search for friendship, love, and active fulfillment is familiar to Laurence's adult audience, to observers of Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, and Morag. Moreover, the theme of universal good and evil recalls Laurence's African literature, especially short stories like "Godman's Master" or "The Pure Diamond Man". The concept of social paralysis as a result of the stifling presence of the past is at the root of Laurence's view of herself and her country; this sense of paralysis is perhaps most persistent in the case of Rachel whose fantasies run freely through romantic natural settings but whose reality is the funeral parlour and an inability to act naturally. (One cannot help but comment in this context that Marian Engel's Lou in *Bear* as an analysis of an archival researcher who "lived like a mole, buried deep in her office" and eager to break her hibernation shows similarity of image and idea to part of *Jason's Quest*.)

On a more specific level, the motto of the mole kingdom, *Festina Lente*, reflects the mental confusion and nagging concern over a propriety which is paralytic for many of Laurence's major characters; Hagar, for example, is attracted to Bram because she sees in his bad grammar and natural sensual expression a liberation she cannot experience, whereas Rachel frets over underwear, smoking in bed, and above all, the possibility of playing the fool. *Festina Lente* also recalls Laurence's family motto, *Je Pense*, which she describes as being both "tame and boastful." To that observation she adds, "I would have preferred the gruesomely ferocious war cry of the Camerons – 'Sons of the hound, come here and get flesh!' "[11] Laurence's writing argues for thoughtful action, but it also advocates the ultimate daring of Hagar; as a result, the youthful Vanessa in search of her background finds no assurance in conservative family mottos.[12] In her writings Laurence glorifies the doer, not the brooder; her heroes are people who act, like Mahamed 'Abdille Hasan who "fought a good fight . . . finished his course . . . kept the faith,"[13] or Mammii Ama, whose quest for freedom is a precursor of Rachel's, Stacey's, and especially Hagar's.

Laurence's personal sense of the humane is nowhere more clear than in *Heart of a Stranger*, especially in "Upon A Midnight Clear," an essay in which she provides a sentimental reflection on the kindly ghosts of Christmases past and present. In doing so, Margaret Laurence indirectly presents her readers with her credentials as a writer of children's literature. The author who conceived the fictional characters of Manawaka becomes for us the flesh and blood mother, the loving teacher of her own children. As a result, when Laurence concludes "Upon A Midnight Clear" with her belief that Christmas is all about "the sense of God's grace, and the sense of our own family and extended family, the sense of human community

(p. 199)'' one might observe that her literary expression of this visio embraces the family of Manawaka as the family of man.

Now that the Manawaka cycle is complete,[14] Margaret Laurence ha returned to her work in children's books. In *The Olden Days Coat* we mee a ten-year-old girl, Sal, who is to spend Christmas with her recentl widowed grandmother. It is Sal's first Christmas away from home and sh does not want to go even though she is told that a family Christmas at th maternal home would be the best way for the bereaved grandmother to fee close to her lost husband. Magically, however, an old coat amongst he grandmother's memorabilia takes Sal back to her grandmother's youth During the flashback Sal meets her grandmother as a ten-year-old frien and establishes an empathy which culminates in a new insight for Sal int her heritage and into herself – for the first time she recognizes th significance of her own name, a name borrowed from her grandmother. I this way Laurence explores the ties one generation has with another, th generation gap is exploded, and Laurence creates a Christmas story whic provides a lesson in love and rebirth.

The narrative technique of *The Olden Days Coat* is reminiscent of ''Th Drummer of All the World'', *The Stone Angel, The Fire-Dwellers,* and th Manawaka series in general. The quest for a better understanding of th present by searching the past is Laurence's perennial journey, one which ha taken her personally to Scotland in search of her own roots, and one th import of which is epitomized in Vanessa's ultimate conclusion o grandfather Connor that, dislike him as she may, she can never leave him i the past for he is ever-present, ''he proclaimed himself in my veins.''[15]

Laurence's use of an artifact, the carved wooden box, as a symboli connector with the past is familiar to readers of *The Stone Angel* and *Th Diviners* where she uses ancestral objects – a plaid-pin traded for a knife – as a means of linking one generation to the next. The detail of the referenc in *The Olden Days Coat* is, however, reminiscent of Vanessa:

> I had been hoping for her cairngorm brooch on my tenth birthday, and had received instead the plaid-bound volume entitled *The Clans and Tartans of Scotland.*[16]

Laurence constantly reminds us that it is in an appreciation for where w have been that we come to understand where we are, and that the bond which unite us are inbred. The Métis ballads and Piquette's Song are fitting conclusion to the Manawaka series.

Six Darn Cows is a children's book with a story which in itself will b appealing to the young, but with a lesson which ought also to be attractiv to their parents. While sharing their family chores, two farm children ignor

a gate and subsequently undertake a search for six cows which wander through the open gate and into the fearsome dark woods. As constant threads, Laurence weaves throughout this realistic story lessons on those family ties which bind its members one to the other, on the responsibility which comes with sharing, on the security which accompanies love, and on the joy of family.

Laurence's most recent children's book, *The Christmas Birthday Story*, repeats many of these themes and is a welcome addition to her children's stories. The text radiates the warmth, the familial love, and the humanity of the mother in and the author of "Upon A Midnight Clear." (Christmas is not only an obvious favourite of children, but also of Margaret Laurence.) In "Upon A Midnight Clear" Laurence explains:

> My background and heritage are strongly Christian, although I reserve the right to interpret things in my own way. In my interpretation, what Christmas celebrates is grace, a gift from God to man, not because deserved, just because given. The birth of every wanted and loved child in this world is the same, a gift. The birth of *every* child should be this way.[17]

As a result, *The Christmas Birthday Story* is a celebration of love and family. There is no complicating theology, just a stress on the love of parents and the humanity of the Christ Child who, in a sense, is an every-child. He is a child who possesses those characteristics philosophically sacred to Western society, and because of the stress on his humanity Laurence's Christ Child is representative of social virtues potentially attainable by all of us. In "Good Morning to the Grandson of Ramesses the Second," in *Heart of a Stranger*, Laurence had dismissed as human exemplars the pharaohs and the builders of their memorials because, she reasoned, "They must have rejected their own frail humanity utterly, for they strove to be supermen."[18] Laurence constantly turns to history for personal insights, but she wants people with whom we can identify; Vanessa, Hagar, Stacey, Rachel, and Morag become such people. Her Christ Child is such a person. He is potentially all of us; in fact, to stress this humanity Laurence states matter of factly that both Mary and Joseph will be as content with a girl child as with a boy child. There is no sexual bias within the family of man. The Three Kings sagely prophesy that the Child will mature to become, like Joseph, strong and hardworking (a male stereotype in our society and a reflection of that which was best in grandfather Connor); like Mary, he will be gentle and kind (the female stereotype and an image of that which was best in Vanessa's grandmothers); in sum, he will be a wise teacher and a friend to all (an ecumenical image of Christ involving the totality of man, and perhaps a statement of Laurence's own ambition as a social commentator).

Helen Lucas' art work blends perfectly with Laurence's theme. The style is appropriately reminiscent of manuscript illustration, though clearly adapted for a modern audience of children. The pen strokes which etch Mary and Joseph often fuse or are simply a single common line so that it becomes difficult to delineate one person from the other; husband and wife, father and mother are one in love, inseparable. It is the bond of love which unites Mary and Joseph with the created universe so that there is a hierarchy in the art often beginning visually with the smallest creature, rising to Mary and Joseph, and focussing on the Christ Child. The visible contentment of the animals reflects the mutual human contentment of Mary and Joseph. Visual art and the written word combine. Significantly, Laurence has a sheep console its confused offspring with the assurance that "Everything is all right . . . ."

The lessons of *The Christmas Birthday Story* seem to embody Laurence's philosophical objectives as a writer. In "A Place to Stand On" she outlines her perception of the message contained in her writing:

> The theme of survival – not just physical survival, but the preservation of some human dignity and in the end some human warmth and ability to reach out and touch others – this is, I have come to think, an almost inevitable theme for a writer such as I, who came from a Scots-Irish background of stern values and hard work and puritanism, and who grew up during the drought and depression of the thirties and then the war.[19]

In the same essay she had noted of the pioneers, the "pillars of the nation" as Vanessa romanticizes them, "how difficult they were to live with, how authoritarian, how unbending, how afraid to show love, many of them, and how willing to show anger (p. 16)." These character traits are, of course, clear in the black side of Grandfather Connor, of Hagar, Rachel, and, to a lesser extent, Stacey. These same social vices represent the antithesis of the virtues embodied in the words and actions of both Mary and Joseph.

The Christmas Birthday Story reflects its origins as a story told by Margaret Laurence to her own children; it reads like a caring mother speaking to her children. Onomatopoeic sounds associated with the animals and their trappings and maternal interpolations such as the explaining of the nature of the camel provide for potential interchange between the parent as reader and the child as audience. There is here entertainment for the young but artful entertainment with a moving lesson. It is a story of love, lovingly told and sensitively illustrated.

In all her children's stories Laurence provides for our children the potential for insights which Hagar and Stacey gain only through suffering –

the joy to be found in bringing happiness to others and the universal ties which bind a family. The lessons are presented in simple terms for the young and without the complications of the mental baggage which comes with adulthood. Laurence's focussing on the sanctity of the family in both its nuclear and all embracing sense begins with the writings of a young white liberal who composed *The Prophet's Camel Bell, The Tomorrow-Tamer* and *This Side Jordan*, analyses of the African tribal family and its relationship to the world community; later explorations extend Laurence's focus more identifiably onto the Canadian family in *A Bird in the House, The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers,* and *The Diviners.* All of her principal characters yearn for love and understanding, for friendship and self-discovery, and always there is the stress on the ultimate happiness to be found in the family of man. Hagar gives to Marvin her maternal blessing (be it lie or truth, it is certainly love), thus apparently accepting him finally as her beloved Jacob; Rachel, her mental tumor now excised, assumes the maternal role and flees the mortuary of Manawaka taking her infanticized mother with her; Stacey, like Vanessa's father and Grandfather Connor, having sought the pleasures of life elsewhere, returns a wiser person to her home and family to seek her fulfillment; Morag, her divining done, her family roots explored and herself at peace, returns home "to set down her title" as an act of literary finality.

Had they been reared on Margaret Laurence's children's literature those questers from Manawaka would have been saved some of the pain involved in the process of self-discovery, for they would have had a better understanding of love, joy, friendship, and the family of man. The Manawaka novels provide a sensitive understanding of Margaret Laurence's generation and its ancestors; the four children's stories to date present entertaining and instructive stories which may help to move today's youth into a more joyful, less restricted, but more sharing society.

NOTES

[1]Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980.

[2]Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1979.

[3]Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979.

[4]Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970.

[5]Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963.

[6]Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960; rpt. 1976.

[7]Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963; rpt. 1970.

[8]Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976, p. 34.

[9]*Heart of a Stranger*, p. 198.

[10]See "Literature and Canadian Culture: An Interview with Margaret Laurence," Bernice Lever, in *Margaret Laurence*, William New, ed., (Toronto: McGraw-Hil Ryerson, 1977), p. 32.

[11]*Heart of a Stranger*, p. 146.

[12]*A Bird in the House*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974, pp. 46-7.

[13]*Heart of a Stranger*, p. 76.

[14]See "Face to Face" by Margaret Atwood in *Margaret Laurence*, William New ed., p. 40.

[15]*A Bird in the House*, p. 207.

[16]*A Bird in the House*, p. 46.

[17]*Heart of a Stranger*, p. 193.

[18]*Heart of a Stranger*, p. 90.

[19]*Heart of a Stranger*, p. 17.

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