

Margaret Laurence:

A Remembrance

by Timothy Findley

You never forgot where she came from. She had a western way of looking at things — of seeing things: places, people, ideas. Distance played a role in this: in how she saw and what she saw. Perhaps in what she didn't see. Stuff up close didn't loom as large as stuff along the horizon.... Portents were more important than events. During events, a person is occupied — wheeling and dealing: coping — or not. Portents imply that something can still be done to ward off disaster. Much of Margaret Laurence's writing was about just this: people attempting to ward off disaster: maybe not always succeeding. Hagar — Rachel — Stacey — even Vanessa — certainly Morag: all of them are watching the horizon: worried — sometimes tormented by it, but all of them imbued with the guts and the ingenuity to thwart what is looming there. None of them is foolish enough to turn away and say *I'll think about that tomorrow*. Margaret Laurence was the same. She lived her life with a sense of the consequence of what was still to be. And she urged — through her writing, through herself — the rest of us to go and do likewise.

I live with a westerner myself, and I'm sure there are special strengths that accrue in those who grow up with the prairie in their eye. Those of us born and raised in the east have other strengths — (and weaknesses: it isn't, after all, a contest). But there is something unique in westerners — aside from their strengths — that others cannot acquire. And I really do think that "something" has to do with reading the horizon. Margaret Laurence read the horizon with a calm, professional appraisal. "There's going to be a storm," she would say, walking into the house and starting to close all the windows. The rest of us — out on the lawn — would go on sitting in the current sunshine, dubious and smiling. Then the storm would come and soak us to the skin. Margaret never said: "I told you so." She'd laugh it off and hand us each a towel. But I think she got bored with the rain in other people's

clothes. If you see what I mean... Saying things twice was not her *métier*. What alarmed her most — what she coped with least successfully — was that other portent on the horizon: *some things may never be understood*.

I think we make a dreadful mistake in assuming Margaret Laurence always coped. She didn't always cope and she would have been deeply offended by the mere suggestion she did. She lacked a certain kind of patience required in order to cope with certain situations. She couldn't cope, for instance, with "serious" people. I think it would be fair to say she distrusted them. Distrusted them because their "seriousness" was stated and stressed. So far as writing was concerned — writing and everything to do with writing — if it wasn't a serious concern, a serious endeavour to begin with, why the hell would you bother talking about it in the first place? Therefore, on the subject of writing, serious conversation was anathema. "Are you going to tell me the sky is seriously blue, kiddo?" she'd say. "What's this: you hope I understand the birds are seriously flying today? This is news? You want me to talk about serious birds...?" Oh, yes. She hated it. On the other hand: "If you want to seriously gossip... trash the government... If you want to tell me one or two seriously outrageous jokes, I'm all ears." All ears for laughter. The one sure sign of a serious writer.

Back in the days when The Writers' Union of Canada was about to become a reality, Margaret Laurence was there at its founding. Crazy, I can't remember where that meeting was. It may have been Ottawa. It may have been Toronto. I do remember the lecture amphitheatre in which we held those early sessions. I can

still see Margaret Laurence where she sat in juxtaposition to others — and I still recall the appalling nervousness that overcame her, every time she rose to speak. She had what can only be called a debilitating shyness, when it came to public speaking. Who knows why? She was not a shy, inverted person. Still — her nerves tormented her. Thus, when she rose to speak, she very often said: "I hope you don't mind if I sit down." After which — seated — she would put her question: state her case: define her position or declare her opposition.

Her contribution was invaluable. She urged us to be militant and proud. She urged us to "always — always think of the young in whatever we do." She was greatly concerned about the vulnerability of writers and especially the vulnerability of those whose careers were just beginning. And it was there, in those founding meetings that she coined her now famous definition: "*writers are a tribe*."

In the interim between our founding meetings and the meeting at which we struck our constitution, Margaret Laurence took on the role of Acting Chair. In accepting this honorary position, she smiled and said that she could not have accepted any other role — because she needed the chair to sit in!

This drew loud applause and cheers.
Margaret Laurence sat.
We stood.

I cannot close this without remarking on one other brief event.

During Margaret Laurence's tenure as Chancellor of Trent University, I happened to receive an honorary degree one year. This meant that I was seated on the stage behind her as she conferred her blessing on each of the hundred-plus students who also received their degrees that day.

As each of the students approached the Chancellor, Margaret Laurence was on her feet to greet them: shaking hands with and speaking to every one. Many leaned forward to kiss her. All were enamoured of her. Not for her fame and not for her position. Only for herself.

How rare that is I need not even ask.

As I said at the beginning, Margaret Laurence read the horizon. That convocation day at Trent, there were no clouds. No distant storms. Only the sky and the students. The portents were auspicious: joyous: positive.

She stood for that — in more ways than one.