Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*

By Coral Ann Howells

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To be introducing Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels to non-Canadian readers in 1987 looks in many ways like the kind of ironical joke that Margaret Laurence herself so much appreciates. These novels have all been published before in Britain and the United States during the 1960s and '70s at the same time as they were first published in Canada, and in 1968 *A Jest of God* was made into a film directed by Paul Newman and starring Joanne Woodward. However, its title was changed to *Racher, Rachel* and its locale from the Canadian prairies to the American midwest; the novels have long since gone out of print in Britain and in the States Margaret Laurence is read as a prairie writer along with Willa Cather and Carl Sandburg. Such invisibility has been the fate of Canadian novels abroad till quite recently, mainly because through accidents of history and geography they look so similar to British and American fictions that their subtle differences have been overlooked. It is to Margaret Laurence's credit that by writing about the Manitoba community of Manawaka she has managed to show how its history and geography, shape, life and fiction in ways that are distinctively Canadian. At the same time these novels all told by female narrators engage with the question central to women's writing of how female protagonists find the appropriate language and narrative forms to write about themselves and their own experiences, so that the Manawaka cycle offers a variety of models for women's stories. The themes they treat are in no way culturally or gender specific, though through local details of weather or landscape and through certain turns of phrase they are identifiably western Canadian and unmistakably written in the feminine gender. Morag Gunn in *The Diviners* speaks for Margaret Laurence and all her protagonists when in answer to her husband's challenge that none of her themes are original, she replies, "Well, it is important that I, as a woman, say them."

In Canada Margaret Laurence is regarded as one of its most authoritative writers and her novels have assumed a pioneer status within contemporary Canadian women's fiction written in English. She was born in Manitoba in 1926, of Scots-Irish parents whose families had arrived as immigrants in the 1870s and she grew up in the same prairie town to which her paternal grandfather had come as a lawyer in 1881. As a writer within the tradition of Canadian prairie fiction, she is a regional and historical novelist who is peculiarly conscious of a personal need for history and also for its imaginative revision. As she says in an essay entitled "A Place to Stand On:"

> *My writing has been my own attempt to come to terms with the past. I see this process as the gradual one of freeing oneself from the stultifying aspect of the past, while at the same time beginning to see its true value—which in the case of my own people (by which I mean the total community, not just my particular family), was a determination to survive against whatever odds.*

Given her strong feelings about herself as a small-town prairie person, it may seem ironical that Margaret Laurence did not start writing about her own place or her own history until she had been away from Manitoba for over fifteen years. She left her hometown at the age of eighteen to go to university in Winnipeg, then at twenty-one she married a Canadian civil engineer. They went first to England, then to Africa in 1950 where they lived for seven years in Somaliland, now Somalia, and on the Gold Coast, now Ghana. During that time their two children were born and Margaret Laurence began writing not about Canada but about Africa. Her first book, *A Tree for Poverty*, was a translation of Somali poetry and folk tales which were gathered together under all manner of living conditions — in a resthouse near Djibouti or by firelight while the Laurences were living in tents and mud huts out on the desert plains or the Haud. Her book, which was the first collection of Somali poetry to appear in English, was finally published in 1954 in Nairobi under the auspices of the British Protectorate in Somaliland. Over the next nine years out of her Africa experiences Margaret Laurence wrote a collection of short stories, *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963), a novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960) and a travel book, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963), while in 1968 *Long Drums and Cannons*, her study of new West African literature in English appeared. Margaret Laurence has since suggested that it was only through her years in Africa that she became aware of herself as a Canadian writer and a Commonwealth writer, for she shared with the emergent African nations the same sense of resistance to colonialism while at the same time she always felt like a stranger in a strange land. Separated from the Africans by linguistic and cultural differences so that she was forever "viewing the whole of life through different eyes," she became gradually aware of a need to go home to Canada: "People always want to get out, and yet profoundly want to return."

Though the Laurences did return to Vancouver in 1957, Margaret Laurence left Canada again in 1962 with her two children to live in England. She stayed until 1973 and during that time she wrote much of her Manawaka fiction. Indeed, *A Jest of God* was written in Buckinghamshire in 1964 and 1965. As she remarked in 1970:

Whether or not I ever lived in the prairies again was really unimportant. The return is not necessarily in the physical sense, but it really is a coming back in the mind, a coming to some kind of terms with your roots and your ancestors and, if you like, with your gods.

In fact she has not lived in the prairies again, but when she returned to Canada in 1973 she settled in the east in a small town near Peterborough, Ontario. Like James Joyce's Dublin or William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, her prairie town of Manawaka which is presented with such detail in the series of linked novels and stories known as the Manawaka cycle is really a remembered place that has been reinvented in fiction. In "A Place to Stand On" Margaret Laurence said:

The name Manawaka is an invented one. Manawaka is not my hometown of Neepawa — it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the hill or the Wachakwa valley through which ran the small brown river of my childhood. In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world... which one hopes will ultimately relate to the other world which we all share.

Margaret Laurence's spiritual return to the prairies in her fiction makes her a regional novelist in the same way that Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence are regional novelists. For all of them writing is set firmly, as Margaret Laurence puts it, "in some soil, some place, some outer and inner territory which might be described in anthropological terms as cultural background," where the sense of local identity becomes an imaginative strength as fact is transformed into fiction.

Manawaka is structured through the stories the characters tell, and though their realism makes it possible to construct from them a map of the town and a detailed account of its history from settlement in the 1880s through the Depression and droughts of the 1930s up till the 1970s, what strikes the reader is the multiplicity of viewpoints presented. There are as many different Manawakas as there are narrators, for Manawaka is successively reinvented by every teller in her own idiom out of her own experiences, from ninety-two year old Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* through Rachel Cameron in *A Jest of God*, her sister Stacey MacAindra in *The Fire-Dwellers*, Vanessa MacLeod in the story sequence *A Bird in the House*, to Morag Gunn in *The Diviners*. All these women are engaged in coming to terms with the past, frequently by recalling the childhood place from which (like Margaret Laurence) they have moved away, revising their stories about themselves in order to create acceptable fictions within which to assume their own separate identities as they face the future somewhere else. Rachel's coming to terms with the past gives her the necessary strength to leave Manawaka as the others have already done. What they all need to recognise is that everybody is an inheritor, and Margaret Laurence's fiction investigates how far every individual exists separately, yet also as part of a wider historical continuum that goes beyond an individual life span back into the past and forward into the future. The Canadian multicultural inheritance is focussed through the history and population of Manawaka, where as Rachel says, "Half the town is Scots descent, and the other half is Ukrainian... The Ukrainians knew how to be the better grain farmers but the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God." Because *A Jest of God* is told by Rachel who speaks out of her own genteel Scots background, Manawaka's history and social geography is more lightly sketched here than in any of the other novels. There is no mention at all for example of the Tonnerres who figure so importantly in *The Diviners* as the last remaining family of the indigenous Métis population, whose colonial inheritance of dispossession is the other side of the history of prairie settlement. However, Rachel knows nothing of them, for she rarely goes beyond the boundaries of town — except with Nick Kazlik when they go down to the 'neutral territory' beside the Manawaka River to make love. This is Rachel's wilderness experience which is so emblematic a feature of Canadian fiction. *A Jest of God* is no less obsessed with the past than the other Manawaka novels, but in Rachel's narrative it is all driven underground, for this is a novel about interiors rather than a looking outward at the community.

Rachel Cameron is not an immediately attractive protagonist for a novel any more than Jane Austen's Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. It is all the more difficult for readers of a novel set in the 1960s to find that Rachel shares Fanny's feminine insecurities while lacking her youth or moral certainty and then going without the conventional reward of marriage at the end. Yet oddly, Rachel does find a strength to resist the social pressures upon her which is commensurate with Fanny's and through which she gains a moral victory at the end together with the promise of a future for herself. In many ways Rachel's career moves in the opposite direction from Fanny's, for this is not a homecoming but a homeleaving. Rachel's story of resistance is a late twentieth century woman's narrative which struggles to unwrite the old inherited romantic fantasies in a way that is at odds with cultural conventions just as it is at odds with plot closures. As she boards the bus for Vancouver with her mother (for she cannot leave her past entirely behind her), Rachel commits herself to the unknown. She has walked out of the culturally conditioned tale of her upbringing and faces a new uncertain future where "Anything may happen. Nothing may happen... What will happen? What will happen." There is no return to Mansfield Park here, but instead a slipping away from inheritance into a new openness for the future, as Rachel approaching middle age recognises the necessity for her change of life.

What makes Rachel's story compelling is her own narrative voice, for the novel is told mainly in the present tense through her interior monologue. In one of her rare essays on the craft of fiction Margaret Laurence said, "I am concerned mainly I think with finding a form through which the characters can breathe," emphasising the importance of the subject and what being the subject of one's own story means. Defining the self, or rather creating images of the self through a continuous process of revision as traditional stories break down, is one of the recurrent themes in contemporary women's writing. It may well be that women's experience highlights the unstable nature of human subjectivity and that this perception affects the way women write about themselves in narratives that emphasize discontinuity, disruption and self-division. It is certainly true of Rachel that, though she appears to be confined and defined by the social mores of Manawaka, she insistently contradicts her own self image — as a school teacher, as a dutiful daughter, and as a decorous unmarried woman of thirty-four. Her silent monologue questions and criticises inherited codes of thinking and feeling, while at the same time it registers her fears and fantasies and her gradual evolution into a limited kind of freedom by the end, "I will be different. I will remain the same."

We would misread the novel, however, if we overlooked the fact that Rachel's dissenting voice is not always repressed

into silence. The most dramatic moments are when she speaks out uninhibitedly, once unwittingly in the tabernacle, once in full confidence during what turns out to be her last conversation with her lover Nick Kazlik, and once under anaesthetic. These are the times when Rachel's deepest feelings surface, and in every case they are the expression of her frustrated maternal feelings as a childless woman. Like her words in the tabernacle and like the tumour inside her womb, they relate to the mysteries of life and death which are at the centre of the novel. Rachel is always aware of the coexistence of her familiar world and of forbidden secret worlds beneath the surfaces of everyday life, symbolised for her by a "crypt" and suggesting the mortal fears which she carries within herself. There is a strong undertow towards death in Rachel's psyche which is surely a feature of her inheritance (for she is the daughter of Manawaka's late undertaker) and also a feature of her environment (for she and her mother continue to live above the Japonica Funeral Chapel). Realism of action should not blind us to either the Biblical or the mythic echoes of Rachel's story, which is a gradual coming to terms with her death instinct as much as with her maternal instinct. What is Rachel's midnight visit to the funeral chapel but a descent into the place of the dead and a being freed from her father's ghost? And what is Dr. Raven (of ominous name) but a secularised version of the priest who effects Rachel's exorcism by his medical diagnosis of the tumour which is growing inside her? Her operation is a kind of delivery — not indeed what she had bargained for when she thought she might be pregnant, but a delivery all the same — from her unacknowledged obsession with death. This is surely the Jest of God with its multiple ironies signalled in the title: not a child but a tumour, yet what looks like a brutal joke is also a life-giving joke for it releases Rachel from fear into new hope. After her midsummer love affair and her autumn operation (for both events are in their ambiguous ways beneficial) she finds that she can leave Manawaka, taking her mother away from the funeral chapel to a new place, transformed into her "elderly child."

Though the novel ends quietly with Rachel sitting in the bus and her mother asleep beside her, this is not a story about silences. It is more like the Tower of Babel for it is filled with voices crying out in confusion — the voices of Rachel, her mother, Nick, Calla, Willard Siddeley — "no one hearing anyone else, no one able to know what anyone else was saying." No doubt living in Africa heightened Margaret Laurence's awareness of the dimensions of non-communication between people, and in *A Jest of God* she explores limits of comprehension among the inhabitants of a prairie town. The speaking in tongues at the Manawaka Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn is only an extreme manifestation of the commonest human dilemma, for as it appears to Rachel this is one of God's jests, "God's irony — that we should for so long believe it is only the few who speak in tongues." As Calla reminds her, "St. Paul says there should be somebody there to interpret," and in this novel there never is anyone to do so. Yet perhaps there is again a merciful twist to God's jest. Just as the gap between language and meaning is emphasized by the nonsense words spoken by Rachel in the tabernacle where "the forbidden is transformed cryptically to nonsense," so too is the truth that the words conceal. Alice Munro remarked in one of her stories that "translation is difficult, dangerous as well," as Rachel discovers to her cost in her one attempt at partial translation of her feelings to Nick, "If I had a child, I would like it to be yours." Confronted with her statement of need, Nick, like Jacob in the Old Testament story of Rachel begging for children, protests that he is not God. Rachel's words have brought them to the limits of mutual incomprehension — and Nick leaves her and Manawaka. Out of this human failure Rachel has only God to turn to, yet the voice of God is even further beyond her powers of comprehension than Nick's words were: "If You have spoken, I am not aware of having heard. If You have a voice, it is not comprehensible to me. No omens. No burning bush." Rachel refuses to believe in revelation or divine possession even after the episode of speaking in tongues so that to her God is never anything more than antithesis, a concept that scarcely transcends her own self contradictions. Yet she invokes God and thereby unconsciously affirms the creative power of language; words may not be easily translatable but still it is only through words that Rachel can invent a God to pray to in her own desperate need. Religion and humanism, mystery and scepticism, incomprehension and insight are closely interwoven in the language of this novel, which is not about redemption or dramatic self transformation but about the acknowledgement of human limits and undreamed-of human capacities.

A Jest of God might be seen as a feminised version of Auden's misanthropic "Miss Gee. A Ballad," told from the childless woman's point of view. Yet its resonances are wider than simply gynaecological, for it is also the story of a woman's ambivalent relation to the cultural traditions which she has inherited and about her power to revise these in her own life. At a more abstract level it might be seen as a novel about the untranslatability of human desire or as Margaret Laurence so optimistically put it, "a coming to some kind of terms with your gods." Rachel's departure from Manawaka confirms her in her role of reluctant jester as she privately celebrates another irony, "I like it better that way. It's more fitting." The ironies go on being generated both inside and outside *A Jest of God* as the Manawaka cycle is republished twenty years later in the country where much of it was originally written.

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ON EARLY CANADIAN WOMEN WRITERS

With the support of a grant for the SSHRCC Strategic Grants Program on Women and Work, I am compiling a biographical / bibliographical research guide on English-Canadian women authors of fiction and poetry active before 1939.

I would like to hear about obscure resources relating to the life and work of any woman writer of the period, such as unlisted archival holdings, papers or correspondence in private hands, materials held by local historical societies or foreign repositories, and significant student research projects or theses. I would also be interested in hearing from other researchers in the area, with a view to coordinating our efforts. All replies and assistance will be gratefully acknowledged. **Carole Gerson, 911 West 22nd Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5Z 2A2**