Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*

by Sara Maitland

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Several years ago I read, in an eminently respectable daily newspaper, a review of a novel which began by saying that there were three serious marks against the book before it was even opened: its author was first a poet, second a woman and third a Canadian. The reviewer went on to say that all things considered it was not such a bad novel, indeed he rather deigned to approve it. When I tell you that the novelist under consideration was Margaret Atwood the depth of his literary and moral depravity will be clear to most readers!

But... BUT... well the point of this moral tale is: how many contemporary 'provincial' or 'post-colonial' women writers can *you* name off the top of your head? Narrow it down: how many Canadian women writers in either language can you name off the top of your head, apart, of course, from Margaret Atwood? Or, to underline the point, of the other sex either?

We no longer, thank goodness, have to defend the concept that women, as women, can write novels — indeed thanks to considerable detailed work, by publishers, academics and library users we should all have become aware that *most* novels, numerically, and the most read novels, statistically, have been written by women (and also read by women, but that is another story). But the provincialism of our reading habits goes very deep and after I had thought for some time about the review I mentioned, I was obliged to recognize that his prejudice was shared — at least at the real and practical level of what I had read and liked and talked about with my friends — by me: I did not read Canadian writers, I did not know the writing of Canadian women and I did not see any reason, literary or political, why I should have. And here of course is one of the reasons: Margaret Laurence is a wonderful novelist, and also a novelist of particular importance both for women and for those concerned with women's writing.

She has, very wisely in my opinion, particularly requested that this 'appreciation' of *The Stone Angel* should appear as an afterword, rather than as an introduction to her novel; as a writer of novels I am sure she is right, and as a writer of this appreciation I am grateful: it means structurally that I am preaching to the converted — or at the very least, talking with those people who have shared an experience rather than trying to persuade anyone to undertake it. So I do not need to tell you that this is a wonderful novel. Nonetheless it does seem worthwhile to look again at why it is wonderful, and what is wonderful about it, partly to struggle with the prejudices that I mentioned at the beginning of this piece and partly to extend and develop something that has given me real pleasure.

In her own country Margaret Laurence has not suffered the neglect she has received here — in Canada she is both respected and well-read, a combination frequently described as 'distinguished.' In 1972 she was made a Companion of the Order of Canada, the highest award given by the Canadian Government: in that sense she is recognized as offering something that is particularly and creditably Canadian. Whether or not this is a literary commendation is a sensible question — not every writer honoured by the British Government is someone I would recommend unreservedly to the curious reader, and many writers not so honoured are of the first rank in importance and 'distinction' — but it does suggest that people seriously concerned with the limited range of their own reading can glean from her work some sense of what it is that Canadians officially value about their own literary tradition.

Laurence was born in 1926. Her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, set in Ghana, was published in 1960; but after her next work of fiction, based in West Africa, she returned to her native terrain, the small towns of the Canadian Prairies. She created the fictional township of Manawaka and used it as the setting for her next five books: *The Stone Angel* (1964); *A Jest of God* (1966); *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969); *A Bird in the House* (1970), and finally *The Diviners* (1974). In all of these she creates, as her central characters, women who are, in their different ways, struggling to expand the limits of possibility for determining their own lives which a small town — certainly in literary convention and often in life itself — imposes. The whole sequence illuminates the choices and conditions faced by contemporary women with extraordinary perception and depth. At the time that these novels were being written and published, young British women of my generation (I was born in 1950) were being 'educated' through an extraordinary flowering of intelligent 'women's novels,' which showed us new sorts of heroines and new sorts of moral dilemmas. These novels, which perhaps began with Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, and included writers like Fay Weldon, Margaret Drabble, and Beryl Bainbridge, were not particularly innovative formally — they were chiefly in the mainstream social realist tradition, but with that tradition put to a use that had been neglected since George Eliot. There was, almost magically, a new subject matter: the moral and social condition of (which turned out, as though unexpectedly, to mean the restraints imposed upon) intelligent women. This batch of novels have since been described as 'pre-feminist' in a spe-

cific way: they helped to form the emotional climate in which the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain was to flourish. I have no particular desire to denigrate any of these books or their writers here; what I am pointing towards is a limitation from which they suffered: they were predominantly about women 'like us' — the young urban middle-classes of Great Britain.

A little dose of Margaret Laurence would have done us all good; she observed and reported the same dilemmas, conditions and concerns from a very different place, not just far across the ocean, but from a totally different class, different background, a different age range and a different type. It is of course useless to speculate now what influence any single writer might have had, but I am convinced that the parochialism of British publishing and its consuming readership did deprive us then of a wider vision which might have been invaluable. I do not of course mean just Margaret Laurence, but her sequence of proud, cranky and engaged characters, all wrestling with a single shared context, with different versions of the same problem — how is it possible to be 'one's own woman?' — seems to me now an extraordinary and powerful example of something we could have enjoyed and used so much sooner and that our own prejudice deprived us of.

However, this is not meant to be a lament for lost opportunities, or a little weep for an author who missed her time — a literary curiosity of a quaint and grown-out-of-sort — because that is not in any way how I feel about any of Margaret Laurence's novels, and particularly not about *The Stone Angel* which, as it happens, is my favourite of the Manawaka series. The novel was produced in a certain historical context but it transcends that context and remains, over twenty years later, a novel of major standing.

What then is this quality? First, and also finally, the quality of *The Stone Angel* is the quality of Hagar Shipley, its central character, herself: in the last count she is what Margaret Laurence has given us — a woman as fearfully horrendous as we ourselves are. There is a part of me which finds it hard to forgive Margaret Laurence for exposing us (surely a 'pre-feminist' freedom, born in the time when there was not that consciousness that we should not betray each other, or even ourselves to Them) in all our dreadful power — destructive and self-destructive — and then having done so, to proclaim boldly that this is not a negation but an affirmation of what it is to be 'human of the female kind.' In almost any other imaginable hand Hagar Shipley would be a classic, male-defined model of the domineering woman, but Laurence transforms her, not into saint but into ME — or you or us, so that one ends pitying any woman that cannot, or dare not, identify herself and her aspirations with this woman who is, on all the unshirked evidence, a 'shrew', a 'nagging' or even a 'castrating bitch' — everything that we fear most, even while we desire it most, in our free selves. I made reference earlier to George Eliot: it seems to me that, in what I still believe to be the greatest English language novel, we pity Dorothea Casaubon even as we admire her; but we fear Hagar Shipley even as we empathize with her. I have never had this reaction to a fictional woman before — that I hate her precisely because she is frighteningly like I am — not at my worst or at my best, but at my daily-est. May God in her mercy have mercy on my soul! Not because of her sins but because of her redemption. And one of the most interesting things about Hagar is that her terrible triumph comes not out of some external crisis or out of some specialness of destiny but out of her daily choices. Margaret Laurence, like George Eliot, creates Hagar Shipley's life transforming potential not out of some extraordinary freak of luck — like her later Rachel in *A Jest of God* — nor like the heroine of *The Diviners* who has the excuse of artistic excellence, but out of essentially *nothing* very special. Hagar Shipley is not brilliant, beautiful or bizarre; and little happens to her that is not the consequence of her own self and her own choices. There are not many social realist novels that depend so little on external chance or coincidence. This is why she is accessible to and demanding of every woman who engages with her; it is not beauty, or virtue, or unique talent, but simply a bloody-minded determination, based only on pride and self-love, to survive and be who she is that distinguishes Hagar Shipley and enables us to identify with her. In this sense *The Stone Angel* is nearer to *The Color Purple* than to most novels about 'strong women.' Hagar Shipley, like Celie, is everywoman, in the sense that we cannot deny that what she chooses we all choose; and if not, then why not?

But even beyond this extraordinarily powerful single characterization, it seems to me that in the creation of *The Stone Angel* Laurence has pulled off a number of remarkable literary effects — I am tempted almost to call them 'stunts' were it not for the derogatory and superficial meaning that this word can too often have. Hagar Shipley may be a paradigm of 'the three-dimensional character' that the aspiring novelist is supposed to aim for, but nonetheless she is *never* allowed to escape from, get out of, Laurence's complete control. She is not merely an exercise in novelistic skills and is always subsumed into the structure of the novel and its own important theme — what it is to have been young and struggling for self-definition and autonomy, and to have become old and dependent. I do not know, anywhere in literature, a more convincing or more moving account of old age; of the anger and the fear and the humiliation, coupled with a completely unsentimental recognition of the manipulation and the craziness and the meanness of a dangerous old woman.

Laurence has, it seems to me, achieved this balance between the complexity and depth of characterization and the pursuit of a large and profound general theme by two narrative devices, both of which are extremely high-risk and difficult technically, but which she makes look obvious and easy. The first of these is that dodgy and dangerous grammatical construct: the present-tense, first-person singular narrative; and the second is the over-exploited device of the flashback.

The problem with the first-person present-tense narrative is that it gives the writer very little room for manoeuvre; there is no place for distance or judgement (unless of course the narrator is a secondary character in the structure of the plot, which is not the case here), the authorial voice and the subjective voice of the character become totally united. With horrible frequency this leads either to a great deal of self-indulgence for an author who cannot help but over-identify with her own creation, or to a thinness of background where there is no sense of other ways of observing the character: her perceptions have to be the whole. Laurence has solved this problem probably the only way it can be solved. In the creation of Hagar Shipley she has given us a character with exactly the right degree of self-knowledge to make this form work — a character who is not, by her nature, either self-indulgent or easily fooled, not even by herself, but who is also not so self-knowing that the reader has to take her every observation as the ultimate and perfect truth. Indeed she is a character of such obtuse cruelty, whose life has been so badly managed at times, that one is never tempted to feel that her view of the universe is the only possible one. Laurence too has created secondary charac-

ters of such solidity that even though they are seen only through the eyes of her narrator, they take on an independence of their own, a justice and conviction that gives them autonomy even against the weight of the single focus of the narrator. The characterization of Marvin, the younger son, for example, is impressive — his mother does not like him, everything we know of him comes from her and still he stands before us credible and 'well rounded,' pathetic, solid, deprived, unjustly unloved, and completely authentic. The final scene in the hospital when Hagar lies to him for her own sake and hears his exchange with the nurse outside the room is a remarkably economical but powerful piece of writing.

A pause, and then Marvin replies.
'She's a holy terror,' he says.
Listening, I feel like it is more than I could now reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness.

Only a writer with enormous self-control, and who had already totally established Hagar's identity could get away with this blend of observation and subjectivity. But it is the sort of thing that Laurence pulls off over and over again in this novel.

And having overcome the difficulties inherent in first-person narration of this sort Laurence is left with all the considerable advantages — not just in terms of intensity and physical immediacy, but in the context of this book an irreplaceable way of showing the decline in coherence and physical capacity which are essential to her theme.

Laurence's use of flashbacks is every bit as subtle. The aged or dying character looking back over the span of her/his life is at first sight hardly an original approach to the structural problems of writing a 'whole-life-story' type of novel, but Laurence creates such a dynamic relationship between those parts of the novel that are happening 'in the present' and those that are remembered from the past (another advantage she has gained by creating a characterization which permits her boldly to use the present tense) that the weight of the book is shifted from merely being a narrative to describe a whole long life, into being an immediate adventure story. The wonderful sequence in which the aged Hagar runs away from home and the threat of the nursing home, is a flight even more adventurous and determined than was her flight from her marriage so long before. Her final struggles — to fetch the bed-pan for the girl she shares the ward with, to release Marvin, and ultimately to drink a glass of water, are events in the present every bit as central and demanding as her youth, as her engagements with her social world, her husband, her father and her sons in her 'prime.' The flashbacks are not the meat of the novel, they are the incidentals, illuminating, crucial even to its understanding, but they are not allowed to take over from what is really important, only to serve the principal thrust of the whole book — the primacy of the need to claim autonomy and determine the manner of one's own dying.

Such is the authority of Margaret Laurence's writing that *The Stone Angel* reads like a simple straightforward provincial tale. It is not. It is a magnificient forward looking book, which in 1964 raised questions not just about the nature, but also about the price, of autonomy, independence, and pride, not in the context of love or romance (though it is important to realize that Laurence does not duck the issue of sexual desire) but in the context of dignity and personal identity over a whole life-span. Laurence's particular gift to an audience is that combination of specificity — this place, the Canadian Midwest; this experience, female in the twentieth century; this woman, Hagar Shipley — and the general and serious concerns of everybody sane.

Hagar Shipley is truly dreadful and truly magnificent, and the two are brought together in a book which is extraordinarily well-crafted and tough while appearing to be inevitable in its simplicity and accessibility.

Author's Note: After this essay was written and typeset, we learned, with sadness, of the death of Margaret Laurence in Canada, on 6 January 1987. I chose not to change the text at a late stage because I felt strongly that I did not want to historicize or distance Margaret Laurence from a new British readership. If you have read *The Stone Angel* you will probably understand why.