

Letters from Gabrielle Roy to Margaret Laurence

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We are grateful to M. François Ricard, Administrative Director of the Fonds Gabrielle Roy, for permission to publish these letters from Gabrielle Roy to Margaret Laurence (John Lennox).

Quebec, March 27, 1976

Dear Margaret,

I received your letter and book yesterday. I was made very happy by the gift of the book, but remain confused. The moment my letter to you had left, confessing that I had not as yet read *The Diviners*, I felt that I had been maladroit, that a woman as generous as you would seize on the occasion to offer it to me. I cannot help feeling happy just the same over the book and its precious inscription.

I read the first chapter last night in bed before sleep. As always with your books, I right away felt immersed in a strong, sure element, and let myself be borne away with an acquiescence which comes only, I suppose, with perfect trust. How is it that starting on one of your books, one knows instantly that one is not to be imposed upon or let down? I shall write soon to tell you more of my pleasure in reading you. Also to answer some of your questions.

I wouldn't let the attack from the school board worry me too much if I were you. After all, it places you in the company of Flaubert, Lawrence and several others among the greatest. It is true that the attack in their case did not come from school boards. Perhaps — and I dwell on *perhaps*, having not read yet — we offer books of too vast an experience to young

people as yet too young. I know that I always feel a little embarrassed when I hear of adolescents of fifteen or sixteen reading and studying *The Tin Flute* at school. I don't think we had them in mind — do you? — when we wrote our books. But there are no reasons for attacking you so vilely. To speak of your books as "muck" shows where the muck is: in the mind of the vilifier. I can understand how painful it must be to you to be attacked, as it were, by your neighbours.

The good news in your letter is that Claire Martin will translate *The Stone Angel*. She has a wonderful style of her own, incisive, terse, brilliant — not at all yours which is far more resonant of sorrow and compassion — but she must be quite able — artist as she is — to bend her talent to fully capture your own.

By all means stick to "Where the World Began" [the title of one of the essays in *Heart of a Stranger* (1976)] which to me sounds right, looks good, and, furthermore, is inviting.

You are so good as to inquire about my health. Well, for months the cold was my worst enemy. Now the thaw is. In a little while the new foliage will be my undoing. The solution might be to live atop a column in the midst of the desert such as Simon the Stylite. But no, I love my friends too much to perch myself beyond their reach. As a matter of fact I am quite well sometimes in the summer when at Petite-Rivière-St. François, my country retreat. I am visited by those lovely southwest winds blowing across most of the continent straight from our native prairie. Their amiable softness neither too damp nor too dry, do me so much good that I think myself cured for ever — during twenty-four hours. Or is it their flow of remembrances which brings back for an instant the well-being of youth?

Dear Margaret, please do not feel too unhappy over the misunderstanding

about *The Diviners*. Instead try to think of the so numerous creatures to whom you have given the incredible joy of feeling, at last, understood and seen soul to soul.

Yours,
Gabrielle

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Quebec, March 31, 1976

Dear Margaret,

I have not been able to lay down *The Diviners* till I had finished reading the book. Then I agreed completely with you. It is — and not only at its deepest level but quite clearly so — a book about the grace of God. The wonderfully apt title applies fully in every sense. It is a search for water, truth, identity, words, but, beyond all that, for whoever or whatever compels us to the endless search. It is a strong and beautiful book. Your characters are stronger, if possible, than any you have created so far. Christie, Prin, Morag of course, Jules, Pique, all stand out memorably, even lesser people such as McRaith and the unfortunate Birdie, or Brooke, but are there secondary characters in this book? Only, I suppose, in the sense that some take less place. Otherwise they are all fully present, even the long gone Catharine Parr Traill whose voice rises so naturally in the wilds of weeds and times. I wouldn't be surprised if I remembered them all quite distinctly in six months, in a year, the test that establishes in the end that a book will last.

As for the misunderstanding that flared up about it, I can't say that it really surprises me. How many readers are there, here or elsewhere, to see that sex scenes are not put in a book just for the lure but to point at the ambiguity and sadness and greatness of the human condition, not many as yet, you must agree. And the kind that you describe in your letter are cer-

tainly not that type of reader, through no fault of theirs in a sense, therein lies the misery of it all. It is a very mature book and few people are, one must face the truth.

One thing troubled me some as I read, it is your apparent rejection of pathetic fallacy. I who use it as I breathe! Well, maybe it is right for you to shun it and right for me to give in to it. I still think of *I wandered as lonely as a cloud* as a much truer echo of the plaintive human heart than most lines from Browning, however strong he is.

Yet, without pathetic fallacy, you achieve a perfect accord with nature. I shall not soon forget your description of swallows — perhaps because I myself have watched them endlessly but your observations, I see, are more accurate than mine. Which makes me a little envious.

I hope things will straighten up with the school trustee.

Thanks again so very much for the gift of the book.

With affectionate wishes,
Gabrielle

Quebec, November 15, 1976

Your archeological tour in Greece resembles mine, about twelve years ago, to the smallest detail.

Dear Margaret,

This morning of election day in Quebec I feel very nervous, nevertheless wish to "converse" with you... in a sense I, too, had been waiting to read your very rich collection of essays before writing to say my thanks for the gift of the book and for the warm dedication. I am not quite finished yet, not from lack of interest, far from it, but I have had too much to do lately and have begun to feel very tired. I was very much taken by your African stories or essays — I notice that you built your essays with character, background... very much in the same way as one writes a good story; I proceeded almost in the same way, when, years and years ago, I wrote feature articles for *le Bulletin des Agriculteurs*. I knew little yet about your African experience so this was all very interesting to me. How quickly and early you became a good writer. One might almost say that you have always been a good writer, from the moment you started. I remember such groping, in my case. You are also, as it seems, equally at

ease in this genre as in fiction.

Your lovely letter, like the preceding ones, pleased me greatly. What I particularly enjoy in your letter-writing is that it reveals you in your most natural self, in your daily behaviour, one might say. I am glad to hear that you and your close-knit little tribe will journey to England and spend Christmas there. I spent two Christmas days in England in my life, and although I was wretchedly lonely — this being a time of my life when I was very much alone — I remember a sort of atmosphere of childlike wonder around me, as if Christmas in a way belongs particularly to the English. And maybe it does. I wish you all a very pleasant stay in the "sceptered isles". But return without fail to this country which would miss you terribly if you should stay away too long. I read your words of appreciation of *Enchanted Summer* with joy.

With fond regards,
Gabrielle

Petite Rivière Saint-François
June 4, 1977

Dear Margaret,

I'm thoroughly ashamed for not having answered before your so very good letter of many months ago. I moved early, this year, to my summer cottage and trouble just about rained on me without pause. I lacked water three or four times, my telephone was continually out of order — they don't care about little country lines such as ours — I had an invasion of flying ants — the worst possible creatures. I do believe that the last creatures to remain alive on this Earth, should there be an cataclysm, will be insects. They have a will to live that I find terrifying. Anyhow I had to send for an exterminator from Quebec, empty all the closets, the cupboards, leave the house, settle at my neighbor's for two days, while the exterminator, a young man on high heels, was to go over the house. Well, in two hours he had spread a little powdered poison all along the plinths, which I could have done myself easily, and held his hand for a cheque for \$250.00. And there are still ants about. Not quite as much. Perhaps they are the last survivors. In the midst of all this I received the last proofs of my next book, *Garden in the Wind*, translated by Alan Brown, (by the way, isn't [it] wonderful that Joyce Marshall won the great prize for translation this

year!) and by then I was so stupefied and overtired that I could have thrown the old [whole] batch in my wood stove.

Still, is it not strange, when evening comes, when dusk is falling and the last robins are looking for another worm yet on my lawn, when I sit at my bay window and see the peace and harmony and quiet joy of living all around me, would you believe it, for a while I forget all my troubles at keeping house, I rock slowly as I look at the powerful river, the superb hills and the frail silhouette of my robin all alone in the gathering dark. Ah, such beauty! How is it that our hearts are so seldom free to take it all in! So much of our life is fight, fight, fight.

And I dare not mention to you — not yet — what is the most painful point to me at this time: the politics of Quebec. Yes, of course, some of it is good. We had to have a change. But I detect such arrogance, such tyranny already and, worst of all, the intolerance which often goes with a certain form of incorruptibility. I detect so much of the wrongs I have known all too well in my childhood and youth, I detect too much of this to live now in hope and fervent expectation, as one should. Of course, the ship can still straighten itself. But words now, I'm afraid, are of no avail. Except, coming from you and the generous group you adhere to and from our English-speaking brothers and allies. There you see: "English" has come under my pen instead of, as it should be, "Canadian friends."

Besides, just now, I can do no more than try to recuperate and meditate in silence.

Please excuse my long delay in writing to you. There is much more, much more that I would like to say. Perhaps I'll come back to you again one of these days, soon. Meantime, enjoy your cabin, your delightful river which you have shared so lovingly with us all in your great *Diviners*.

With fond regards,
Gabrielle

