

# A CONSTANT HOPE: WOMEN IN THE NOW AND FUTURE HIGH TECH AGE

*Margaret Laurence*

*Avant d'aborder le sujet de la femme dans le futur, il faut s'interroger sur l'avenir de la planète elle-même. La course aux armes nucléaires rend indispensable l'engagement des femmes dans les mouvements pour la paix et pour le désarmement. L'auteure examine l'effet de la technologie avancée, sous la dominance mâle, sur les femmes et elle nous encourage à faire face aux problèmes créés par la nouvelle technologie avant qu'ils nous submergent. Elle pèse l'impact éventuel des appareils de la nouvelle technologie sur l'expérience de donner naissance, l'impact de la télé et des jeux vidéo sur l'élevage des enfants, et des ordinateurs pour traitement de textes sur les écrivaines. Peu importe les bienfaits de cette technologie, elle ne peut pas remplacer la sagesse, la compassion, le bon sens et la conscience.*

Any speculation about women in the future must be preceded by a question. Will there be a future, not only for women but for everyone, for the planet itself? Unless the nuclear arms race can be halted, unless the nations that possess nuclear weapons, and especially the two super-powers, can be persuaded to make genuine efforts to end this lunacy, the prospects do not look promising. Women have taken a large part in the growing peace and disarmament movement, and I believe we must take an even greater part in the future and on behalf of the future. For this article, I am assuming there will be a future for life itself, and this is no longer something we can take for granted.

We are living in an age of high technology, an age in which computers and other intricate machines are seen as humankind's salvation. The new religion comes to us complete with its own priesthood and even its own language. Those who have not yet learned this language, and who do not own or have access to

these pieces of sophisticated equipment, are made to feel inadequate and threatened. If we do not have a computer, or cannot afford one, will we not become obsolete, irrelevant? This issue affects women deeply now, and will continue to do so, as does the use to which a lot of the high-tech stuff is being put and will be put in the future. The new technology can do some marvellous things, but it cannot take the place of human wisdom, compassion, common sense and conscience, and these values now seem to be at risk in the face of the ubiquitous machines. The technology is still largely male-dominated. I believe that women must take a very level look at the problems of the new technology before they overwhelm us. We must not be intimidated by the sales pitches that imply that everyone must buy a home computer or be left far behind. On the other hand, as many women are realizing, we need to be informed about these tools, because otherwise we will be at an even greater disadvantage in the work force than we are now, and the machines will be used to control us, our bodies and lives, and the minds of our children. In cases where possession of machinery isn't the question, and learning their use isn't possible for most women, as with much hospital equipment, we must familiarize ourselves with procedures, so we can have much more of a voice in the use of these wonderful but by no means miraculous or infallible machines.

Women have already learned, to their sorrow, that a pregnant woman's prolonged exposure to video display terminals may damage her unborn child. Women of all ages must not look passively on while even a few of our sisters and daughters run the risk of either losing their jobs or bearing damaged babies. Nothing has yet been conclusively proved, but any risk is outrageous if it is preventable. Another and related area of risk is

the enormous array of high tech devices now routinely used during childbirth, by doctors who often seem to put more faith in machinery than in the mother's ability and right to deliver her own child, with as much encouragement and human help as medical staff can provide, and as little mechanical intervention as possible. "Labour" means hard work. Too often, now, in childbirth, it means passivity and even total unconsciousness. Male doctors, especially, have long tried, with much success, alas, to make the birth of children *their* achievement, as though the mother were simply a vessel, full of child but soon to be emptied efficiently by the doctor and his machinery, instead of an active participant in what can be one of the most awesome experiences of life. When the Caesarian section is necessary, obviously it saves the lives of children and mothers. No one would deny or fail to be grateful for the magnificent accomplishments of modern medical science. But there are many occasions now when the C-section is not necessary and is performed more for the convenience (and monetary reward) of the doctor than for the safety and well-being, physical and emotional, of mother and child. This will continue and even escalate in the future unless women take a very active part in informing themselves and in proclaiming their rights. The thought of routinely monitoring the foetal heart by fancy machinery, in normal deliveries, or putting electrodes into the newly-born infant's skull, fills me with doubts and questions. Not all women want to have their children by natural childbirth, of course, but in cases where the pregnancy has been normal and the delivery promises to be so, mothers must surely have the option of a natural delivery, with the child's father supposedly present if both parents wish it. More women are now opting for a home delivery, with a trained midwife, but the medical profession is still overwhelmingly hostile to this practise, although these

births are known to be, on an average, as safe as hospital births with all the machinery.

What about bringing up children in the future? That future is now with us, and its effect, in terms of certain aspects of technology, can only increase in a negative way unless women (and more and more men, it is to be hoped and prayed) take a strong stand. In an article in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (August 9, 1984) entitled "The Awful Price Of The Computer Age," Marian Kester, a freelance journalist based in Washington, said: "If children are separated from their parents by hours of TV, from their playmates by video games and from their teachers by teaching machines, where are they supposed to learn how to be human? Maybe that's just it. There's no percentage in being human any more." I understand her feelings of dismay, and yet I believe that we must not now or in the future give way to this awful feeling of helplessness. There was a time when TV was regarded (and still is, by some parents) as a handy baby-sitter. We are beginning to know just how dire can be the effect of children's growing up watching countless hours of TV violence. We have yet fully to see the effects of countless hours of their playing video war and violence games. These games don't make children smarter, and certainly not kinder and wiser. They tend to make kids (and the games are said to be more popular with male children) oriented towards winning at the expense of everything else. They encourage an attitude of "good guys" and "bad guys" in an absolute sense, and often the so-called good guys are performing acts of horrendous brutality. The war games encourage and sanctify cruelty, especially towards women and minority groups. They separate a child from the real world of family and friends, of beauty and tragedy. What appears to be action is really passivity. Hit all those little buttons and save the world from the monsters! Advertising, of course, is making these games super-popular among the young. Meantime, outside, the powers are preparing for war. If it happens, it will not be the first time in our era for the young to stride off to war, whistling a merry tune, in the belief that it's all happening on the screen, and they can't get hurt because they're the good guys. Later, they learn otherwise, when it's too late. This softening-up process of the young, in preparing them to accept

readily the idea of war, will not cease until and unless we do something about it. Of course, if nuclear war happens, our children won't be conscripted or recruited. There will be no time or need. For both sides it will be game over. Forever.

Many young people have resisted and will resist being turned into zombies in the glitzy world of the video games and films, and are only too aware of the terrible possibility of nuclear destruction. Sometimes I think that many kids are more aware than their parents. Doesn't anyone wonder why the suicide rate among *children* is now so high? Counsellors and commentators speak about broken homes, worry over studies, unhappy loves. But another factor must be that many kids don't feel there will be a future. If they feel despair, we must tell them we understand and are afraid, too, but have to struggle for the survival of the world and all of us.

Vileness and violence threaten women and children in much of the media. As with pornography, so with the really bad video games or whatever, we must now and in the future take legal action and fight these things openly in the courts, not by censorship boards operating without sufficient accountability. Above all, the alienation from other people, fostered by these machines that make billions of bucks for their producers and distributors, must be countered by the human values of love, tolerance, individual worth, compassion, responsibility.

I ponder the situation of women writers in the future. Marian Kester's article also said: "... a boom in word processor sales has been occurring among writers. Some say they couldn't function without their Apple II. The belief seems to be that the machine, if it will not actually write the material, is at least conducive to writing. That's like saying a crutch is conducive to walking." The point is well taken. Nevertheless, I don't think it's correct. I know a number of writers, including women writers, who have word processors. I don't think they feel that the machines making *writing* easier but rather that they make *copying and inserting revisions* a less arduous task. For women writers, with all too often a limited time to spend on their work, this could be a godsend. Over some thirty years, I have typed many books and stories and articles and lectures and book reviews, in manuscript, many times over, on a manual typewriter,

doing revisions and ending up by doing two or more fair copies with carbons, in the days when the xerox machine was not widely present, or even if it was, when I couldn't afford xerox copies. A long and laborious job. I don't have a word processor now, although I have an electric typewriter. I don't feel that at this point in my professional life I really need a word processor, but I welcome their use by my younger sisters. All I hope is that in the future women writers will be able to afford such technical aids as they need.

Home computers may, at least in the near future, be another matter for women writers. In an article by Ann Silversides, entitled "Literature Goes Electronic From Coast To Coast", in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (July 13, 1984), we were told that "about 35 Canadian writers who own their own home computers will begin sending their work electronically across the country to be criticized, revised or simply read by other members of the new network." Based at York University, Toronto, and founded by Professor Frank Davey, the venture is called "Swift Current" and it is "described variously as a Canadian literary data base or an electronic literary magazine." There will be some writing available to subscribers, for public viewing and print-outs, and subscribers will be mainly libraries and universities. This seems to me to be an interesting experiment, although I would question some of its aims (*revising* other writers' work? Can this really be what is intended?). The comment that specially interested me, however, was this: "... there already is one group of writers - women writers - who are almost entirely absent from the project. Davey said he approached a number of women 'who just couldn't see themselves in the project.' He offered the explanation that most women writers are more privately focussed on their writing, have less money and hence can't afford home computers, and also are 'conditioned not to participate in the machinery of a culture.'" I was one of the women writers who was approached, and I declined for a variety of reasons, one of which was certainly my lack of familiarity with computers. There were other reasons, however, and perhaps I can make a guess about the reasons other women had.

I don't think women writers are any more "privately focussed" on their writing



sisters will be able to solve that persistent problem – lack of time. A more equitable distribution of housework and child care may ultimately be a partial solution, but it won't help single mothers and won't take care of the domestic work or business work for women writers living alone, who can't afford secretarial or domestic help. More and better day care centres, at affordable prices, are of course a top priority for women with young children, anywhere in the work force. We need not deceive ourselves that this is a top priority for men in our society. Perhaps in the future men may really come to understand that child care is their responsibility, too, and that good child care is important because children are important, as well as the fact that mothers working at other jobs not only need help but have a *right* to it.

Quite apart from the electronic experiment I've been discussing, I want to take another look at the statement that women writers are "conditioned not to participate in the machinery of a culture." I am certainly not taking issue with Professor Davey here. Indeed, when I first read those words, I thought, sadly, *how true*. The statement is thought-provoking because it is almost universally believed, not only about women writers but about women in general, all women, and it is believed both by men and by women themselves. In an abstract sense, women have all too often had a self-image of being a *klutz* as far as machinery is concerned, and men have all too often believed that women just aren't very good at learning any kind of technology. A quick look at history and reality shows otherwise. For a long time, and even now, the operation of such machines as typewriters, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, has been seen as "women's work," as have the jobs of telephone operators and many other jobs involving complex machinery. What people operate the computers in your neighbourhood bank? Not the (male) manager. The tellers, who are almost all women. Women have operated machinery in factories since the industrial revolution. For many years, it was difficult for women to get into medical schools, but it was acceptable for them to become lab technicians, working with highly sophisticated machines. During World Wars I and II, women in their tens of thousands went into heavy industries and also into work involving an understanding of the

most intricate technology, and at the end of those wars, were told to get back into the kitchen (which they'd never left, having done, as usual, more than one full-time job). The prairie farm women of my generation and older worked alongside their men and were no strangers to the operation of machines. What is the common denominator here? It is, I believe, that women have always operated machinery of all kinds, *when it was to the advantage of society for them to do so*, while at the same time believing in the abstract, a myth (women aren't much good with machinery) that in particular ways *they knew to be untrue*. Secondly, the jobs women have done, involving machinery, have almost always been *lower paid and of lower prestige than those held by men*.

I hope in the future this situation will change radically, as it is already beginning to do, although not rapidly enough. I hope women will have the confidence and the strength of purpose to learn the operation of whatever kinds of technical equipment they choose, and will assert vigorously their right to whatever opportunities the technology may offer. Finally, and most of all, I hope that women will take a decisive part in choosing how and when the machinery of the future is to be used, and for what purposes, in order that machines of increasing intricacy may be used for human benefit and convenience but never seen as gods, and in order that the human values of caring and compassion and conscience will prevail. I am not in any way excluding men from this difficult struggle, but men, whatever their stances or philosophies, are already involved with the new technology, at higher levels and in greater numbers than women are at the present time. I hope for a greater balance in the future.

Who will teach our children what it means to be human? Humans will.

In my novel, *The Diviners*, the protagonist, Morag, receives a symbol of her ancestors, a symbol that also points to the future, a Scots plaid pin with the motto: "My Hope Is Constant In Thee."

To women in the future, I have to say: *My Hope Is Constant In Thee*.

*Margaret Laurence in the author of five novels (including The Stone Angel and The Diviners, two short story collections, three books of essays and criticism, and children's books. A distinguished recipient of many awards and honours, for several years she has worked actively in the peace and disarmament movement.*

## ELEGIE FEM-ELLE

Toutes naissantes, certaines sans corps  
D'autres les coeur étouffé et parfois  
presque mort  
Toutes les forces nous ont  
immuablement  
écrasées  
Et cependant vivantes, nous savons  
du moins créer

Retrouver ce qui ne nous fut jamais  
offert  
Le rendre meilleur parce que nous  
l'avons découvert  
Sachant que la Vie est notre unique  
moitié  
Offrons-la intacte à chaque mutilée.

Nicole Durand

## LE TEMPS

Chaque chose en son temps, répétait ma mère devant mes tentatives d'affranchissement. Tu es trop jeune encore, précisait-elle de sa voix douce. Jamais elle ne criait.

Que cette phrase m'exaspérait . . . Trop jeune? alors que le sérieux de mes seize ans m'apparaissait évident. Ma maturité, hélas! restait invisible aux yeux des parents. Mes protestations se butaient à leur infailibilité. Un mal généralisé chez eux, m'affirmèrent mes amies adolescentes qui, tout comme moi, supportaient mal l'incompréhension de leurs aînés.

Et le temps qui prenait son temps. Indomptable, mon impatience! La vie me semblait si terne en comparaison de l'activité incessante des adultes.

A vingt-et-un ans, l'interdit levé, le mariage accompli, le rythme de ma vie ira de pair avec les obligations ménagères et les soins à donner aux enfants, ces grugeurs de temps. — Tu es chanceuse, me disait-on, tu n'as pas le temps de t'ennuyer. On oubliait l'ennui qui vient avec la routine.

Je rêvais d'un temps qui m'appartiendrait en propre. Il est venu. Parcomieux. Indifférent à ma gourmandise. Insensible à ma nostalgie.

Renouer avec la lenteur du temps. Retrouver l'enfance. Perdre la notion du temps!

Alice Desaulniers