WRITING GRIEF: MARGARET LAURENCE AND THE WORK OF MOURNING

Christian Riegel.
Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003

ALIEN HEART: THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARGARET LAURENCE

Lyall Powers.
Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003

REVIEWED BY SHELAGH WILKINSON

These two books, published by the same Press in the same year, provide new and challenging critical approaches to Laurence's work and when read together they add a dimension and scope that has previously been missing. Although the books are very different in their approach they are complementary.

Lyall Powers was an intimate friend and Margaret often spoke of him with affection and admiration. His account of her life and her writing weaves together the personal and the professional with a knowledge and compassion that opens up unique aspects of the work, affording interpretations that have not been brought into focus before. In his own words: "The justification of a biography must be that it illuminates the achievements of its subject. It must answer questions about what features of the life explain and clarify those achievements, what persons and what experiences influenced the subject and in just what ways – and precisely how the influence appears in the achievements." This statement encapsulates what the book accomplishes.

Christian Riegel's book is a thematic analysis of Laurence's writing offering challenging interpretations of specific texts while providing an integrative exploration of the work as a whole. As the title suggests, Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* provides a template for Riegel's thesis. He examines the literary and philosophical associations of the elegiac tradition, producing an exploration of the lives of Laurence's women who, through different stages of mourning and grief, accord "the self the right to mourn." Riegel finds that because of this grieving process Laurence's characters achieve a more complete knowledge of self.

It is interesting that both writers have chosen titles that underscore the concept of the 'black Celt'—the alienated and the bereaved self that Margaret Laurence often alluded to—but many of her readers, myself included, find that her work is fundamentally one of hope, offering the reader an essentially integrative and optimistic interpretation of life, especially of our lives as women. So one is relieved to find that Lyall Powers, who knew Margaret from student days, also shares with us the eager, joyful, young woman who embraced new experiences, was politically astute, fought hard for the 'under-dog', and was fully engaged in her world of writing and collaborating in college activities.

Powers is perceptive in the way he selects the naming process in this biography. In the opening chapter he asks rhetorically "What's in a Name?" and proceeds to give us a comprehensive social and cultural heritage of the writer. But it was the title of this chapter that stayed with me because there is quite a lot in a name and Laurence obviously thought so too. Through an exploration of the life Powers shows (and names) Peggy the child becoming "Citizen Peg." Then as the biography moves on we learn that Margaret leaves these earlier namings behind her signing her adult fiction Margaret Laurence—thus the writer-in-waiting comes into being. The biographical text asked the question, but as we discover from the rich cache of letters between Margaret and Adele Wiseman, Laurence is thinking too—what IS in a name? Powers is clever in tying the structure and even the 'narrative' of the biography to both the factual and the fictional .We learn about Margaret the woman and the writer from the many letters she wrote to other writers of 'the tribe' – especially through her long and detailed correspondence with Al Purdy. We also become aware of her political loyalties, her deep faith,and her integrity, her search for her own geographical place in which to locate her characters, and above all we hear her joy in the use of language. Sharing all of these new details about her life I found myself in the midst of Margaret's work again, hearing her women speak with added strength and authenticity. Powers' style is not 'scholarly' though obviously this is a work of immense scholarship – he does not so much 'tell' this life as let us discover it for ourselves. I believe this is what makes it a page-turner.

While the writing itself makes this a fast read, Powers' research is impeccable and large in scope. So often in reading a biography the footnotes get skipped over— but not here. Over and over again I found his resources providing new ways of understanding Laurence. For instance his references to other writers such as Milton, Hopkins, Eliot (and many more) as touchstones for his analysis of the novels provide a canonical linkage that is sometimes missing in the critiques of Canadian literature. Powers is careful in revealing Laurence's Celtic ties and introducing (but not attempting to solve) the question of her Aboriginal blood-tie and relating this to the creation of the Jules Tonerre character, "the most difficult" for Laurence to get right.

Also difficult for Laurence is the struggle with the demands of motherhood while trying to keep her writing beside her. Using the resources of poetry, notes, diaries, reviews, as well

as the many letters, Powers allows us to hear the writer's guilt, her doubts and confusion, her fears and her hopes and above all we feel her fierce devotion to her family—and much of this in her own words. The structure of the biography is such that although the events are dealt with chronologically no single chapter merely defines the life or provides a critique of the creative work. Rather the different historical episodes give rise naturally to an exploration of the more recent writing. But an analysis of the early work often reveals material that is developed and then used in the later creation of the Manawaka women. Or, Powers back-stitches and analyzes how the theme of reconciliation at the end of the *Stone Angel* taps back into a significant episode in *The Tomorrow Tamers* , from Laurence's African stories. Powers does this throughout the biography, constantly demonstrating how Laurence was working out thematic material, testing the authenticity of dialect, controlling symbolic constructs, developing her powerful evocation of place, and generally seeding ideas that would become vital catalysts for later work and for different characterizations. Because of his attention to the minutiae of Laurence's life Powers proves the justification of his earlier comment that the life must explain and clarify the writing – as we finish this book we come closer to an understanding of how the personal is fictionalized.

Christian Riegel's text is very different from that of Powers—he deals minimally with the personal trajectory of Laurence's life. Instead, in his introduction he traces the tradition of loss and mourning which is central to the great western writers from Sophocles through Dante to Joyce *et al.* Later he coins a word *thanatosroman* to define "the learning of life through an exposure to death – the development of the individual through an understanding of death *through* the figuring of death" (his emphasis). It is this concept of thanatosroman that provides the framework for the book and in his exploration/explication of this idea Riegel's resources are both specific and comprehensive.

Naturally the tradition of elegy is essential in this analysis of mourning and he references this material, but his main focus is on the dilemma of the twentieth–century elegist. Modern writers who use this form must suppress the grieving process and yet develop protagonists who, in seeking a knowledge of self, only achieve it through that very process. This requires the writer to create situations in which the protagonist is aware of the need to mourn but must seek subversive, non-apparent, even sub-textual methods to achieve this. Riegel, echoing Derrida, writes: "it is difficult to accord oneself the right to mourn in a society that publicly defines that mourning as a transgressive act." Riegel suggests that Laurence controls and develops characterization through the actual work of mourning and in so doing she consistently places her characters in these types of situation.

Riegel introduces various psychological/sociological concepts in order to open up the writing to his central theme. For instance he finds that most of the Manawaka

protagonists are placed in situations of liminality – explained by Morawski as "the threshold, the betwixt and between of established social states." Riegel specifically selects the opening line of *The Diviners*— "The river flowed both ways" —to demonstrate a paradoxical state of being. He suggests that this line provides us with "the association of Morag Gunn to a liminal moment" and he proceeds to reveal other situations occuring throughout this novel that define the dilemma of liminality. Using the same analysis and applying it to the other Manawaka novels Riegel is able to demonstrate how Laurence adapts and refines this technique. He also suggests that "mourning, work, and liminality all partake of the process of articulating loss, which, in turn, is tantamount to recognizing it and thus allows a necessary revaluation of the self to occur in Laurence's protagonists."

Riegel's text reveals that all of Laurence's women characters are placed in various 'thresholds of betwixt and between'. He demonstrates how Laurence uses this as an initial setting through which she is able to explore "her protagonists' movement towards articulation in their work of mourning." Riegel, using Freud's research amongst others, helps us to understand the complexity of mourning and the expense of energy required to work through alienation and loss. Because this is a work of close textual analysis the reader will find these new interpretations provide a depth and scope to the fiction which is illuminating and challenging. The work of grieving undertaken by Laurence's protagonists is indeed central to a full understanding of their lives as women. And Riegel is careful to explain that this must be a fully conscious journey for these women. In fact he sees in the Manawaka fiction a palpable progression (from the first novel to the last) of a raised level of self-consciousness in the central protagonist. And of course Laurence chooses to begin her stories with the somewhat obdurate Hagar —who is surely dragged screaming into self-consciousness—and to end the cycle with Morag who is her own diviner, able to write herself into being.

The alienation from the other and from the self that is evident in Hagar's great story always makes me think of her as Lear – only Canadian and female. Riegel's work is alive with many new insights into the examination of self that one always knew was basic and fundamental to characterization in Laurence's writing but perhaps one had missed the sub-textual nuances that Riegel's book manifests. One of the most insightful aspects of the book, for me, is the specificity with which he tracks the psychic journey each woman must take from the initial emotional loss through a period of

mourning—to a recognition of the task of self- healing. This is an integrative analysis which brings into focus the great arc of Margaret's life work. Because Laurence has given us women of all ages and because she has placed them in the social situations we all find ourselves in—married, single (and undecided—opting in and out) the very scope of the Manawaka cycle seems to resist a single thematic interpretation. But even while exploring these disparities, Riegel traces the link running through them all, pointing out the significance and particularity of each woman's movement into full selfhood through her active involvement in the work of mourning.

These two books, written from very different perspectives, are a "must read" for Laurence fans and scholars alike. Christian Riegel and Lyall Powers have added immensely to our appreciation and understanding of Margaret Laurence, as woman and as writer demonstrating her great gift of "writing the self into being."

ETHEL WILSON: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

David Stouck.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003

CONSTANCE LINDSAY SKINNER: WRITING ON THE FRONTIER.

Jean Barma.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003

REVIEWED BY CLARA THOMAS

Among women writers of British Columbia Ethel Wilson and Constance Lindsay Skinner provide stark contrasts in manner and methods. Skinner, born in 1877,the older by eleven years, wrote of the frontier of her youth when her father was factor of the Hudson's Bay trading post at Quesnel, the northern terminus of the Cariboo Wagon road and a distribution centre for miners and settlers. Her burning desire to be a writer, and a self-supporting one at that, had manifested itself very early. By hook and by crook she achieved her goal, but its cost was high in terms of personal relations and financial security. Emigrants from England and Scotland, both her paternal and maternal grandparents had hoped for financial success and stability in Canada. Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful in the businesses they had chosen and when Annie Lindsay and Robert Skinner, their children, were married in 1877, their only security rested in his employment at Quesnel. There he was a figure of authority and importance and Connie, an only child, was very much a part of both parents' lives. She particularly relished her status as "the little princess" of the trading post, where all the men who came to do business with her father, trappers, traders, Chinese from a village up the river, voyageurs and Métis, spoiled her and brought her gifts. Her gorgeous snowshoes, black frames embellished with tufts of scarlet, blue, white and yellow wool, were a favourite gift from "the old canoeman, her almost dearest friend." As she wrote of her childhood later, and she did so many times, she described herself as "home-taught and self-educated." As an adult, she romanticized her frontier childhood and as a writer she learned very early that it was her most successful stock in trade: "I can recall a small child scraping the thick frost off the window pane in a far northern log fur trading post, to see the sleds, the huge Hudson-Bay dogs with bells on, swinging in with the mail."

Ethel Wilson, like Skinner, is a special case. Born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 1888, she was the daughter of Lila and Robert Bryant, Methodist missionaries. Her mother, always fragile, died when Ethel was just over a year old and in 1890, her father yielded to the advice of the many relatives who had urged him to bring his daughter home, and returned to England. When Ethel was nine, he died of pneumonia and so began for her a long saga of being passed around among relatives who were kind and generous, but who could not possibly take the place of the father whom she idolized for the rest of her life.

Her maternal grandmother, Annie Malkin, made a trip to England especially to collect her granddaughter and bring her back to Vancouver. Unlike the Skinners, the Malkins were financially successful in Canada. They were also strict Methodists. Ethel shone at Miss Gordon's elite school in Vancouver but for her high school years it was decided that she should go back to England, to Trinity Hall School, founded in 1878 mainly for the daughters of Wesleyan Methodist clergy. Its regime was a strict one and the girls were trained, first and foremost, to grow up as godly women in the Methodist tradition. Though Ethel never suffered from the insecurity poverty brings, she did suffer all her life from the upheavals that had been such a part of her childhood as well as from the conflict set up between her gratitude for the care and kindness of her relatives and the suffocating piety of their way of life. Two of her father's sisters, Aunts Hannah and Margaret Bryant, became her lifeline during her years at Trinity Hall. They lived what seemed to her to be a glamorous life in London and they took her to concerts, art galleries, theatre, and restaurants, all of them quite outside the acceptable Methodist norm. Back in Vancouver in the Malkin household, her schooling over, she began teacher training in 1906 at the recently established Normal School. Thereafter, she taught in several Vancouver schools until her marriage in 1931. She conformed to the rigidly