

EXCALIBUR EXCLUSIVE: Laurence interviewed at York

BARB TAYLOR

Excalibur: Have you consciously attempted to portray strong women in your novels?

Margaret Laurence: No, I don't think it was really conscious. My protagonists really are all women and the reason is because I am a woman. I always say, I don't think anyone ever asked Mr. Hemingway, why are all your protagonists men? Even if these women are very different, as Hagar was different than myself, I can still, I think, feel my way into that character's mind and heart more than I could with a male protagonist. There's a lot of good male novelists around with male protagonists.

Excal: How do you think men portray women?

M.L.: I think you find among men writing about female characters, very certain wonderful examples. Sinclair Ross comes to mind with *As For Me and My House*, and Graham Moore, in several of his books, his protagonist is a woman. That's quite remarkable; but I do think in a lot of books by male novelists women are really short-changed, well, they're just not portrayed as what I think is accurately.

Excal: Do you actively encourage young writers?

M.L.: Certainly over the years I've met with a great number of young writers and I've been Writer in Residence at three different universities, University of Toronto, Western and Trent, and I see many young writers. It doesn't matter to me whether the young writer who wants to talk to me is a man or a woman, if I'm in a job like that. But I think, I could honestly say that I do try to encourage younger women.

Excal: In your work you portray the problems women face with birth, abortion, etc. in a very sympathetic light. Where did your concern for these issues and your work with the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League come from?

M.L.: I myself have never had an abortion. I have two very, very beloved children, 27 and 30 years old. I had my children by natural

childbirth as long as 30 years ago when it wasn't too popular, and my second child was born in Africa and this was a wonderful experience. Those kids grew up as wanted children. I became concerned because I could see and read about so many young women who were bearing unwanted children and children of rape and incest—it just broke my heart. I can't stand to think of those young women with no home and being responsible for that child for perhaps 18 years and what it would do to the child and the mother.

Excal: I understand you're also involved in Arts for Peace.

M.L.: I'm involved with quite a number of anti-nuclear groups and I may add, totally committed to non-violent protest. I'm involved with Operation Dismantle, Project Ploughshares, which is the inter-church group and I have done quite a bit of that kind of stuff. I think it's the most important cause of our time. If we don't solve this one, there's not going to be anyone around to solve anything else.

Excal: Concern about war comes out in your novels, for example, when the young men go off to war in *Bird in the House*. When did you become concerned about these issues?

M.L.: Dieppe is mentioned in every single one of those books (Manawaka series). The reason is, of course, I was about 16 when Dieppe happened and, of course, a lot of the boys from my town joined up. That was the moment when I first realized what war was all about. What war was all about was people being killed, and I feel very passionate about that. It makes me so angry when you think both the great powers have got nuclear arms to, the jargon word is overkill. It can overkill every creature on earth many times over. They can only die once. I think the whole thing is madness and we've got to raise our voices against it.

Excal: The depression years form the background of many of your novels. What do you think of our current economic situation?

M.L.: I think what's happening to people these days is getting to be all too similar to what happened to people in the hungry thirties. It's scaring me.

Excal: Are you writing about that?

M.L.: I'm trying to write a novel; of course, the thing is if these things come into my books they come in naturally by themselves. I don't start out to write a short story or a novel with a particular sort of cause in mind because these things simply come out because they're part of my life view.

Excal: Your first published stories were from Africa. At the time, did you have any sense of wanting to write about Canada, about your own roots?

M.L.: I knew that I would ultimately write (about Canada) because I had before. I started writing about Grade Three. Our years in Africa were such a fascinating experience that I was overwhelmingly motivated to write about that. But I always knew I would come back and write about Canada and indeed, I didn't want to keep writing about Africa too long because there were certain things about African society that I could not know as well as I could about my own people. Because it's your own people, your own country, your own culture, you know things that you don't even know you know.

Excal: Do you feel like a small town person still?

M.L.: I live in a small town.

Excal: Is it different because you travel?

M.L.: I still feel like a small town person because basically I am. That's why I choose to live in Lakefield. I'm not suited to living in the wilderness and I'm not suited to living in a metropolis. It's because I grew up in a small town.

Excal: How large is Lakefield?

M.L.: The sign outside Lakefield says 2,200, but I'm darn sure there are a few more than that. When I first moved there, I was tempted to go out in the dead of night and add a one.

EXCALIBUR

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violence against us and that he doesn't have adequate bouncers to work the door," said Khan.

The Alliance claims that O'Sullivan excuses were unacceptable. "He's just building a strong athletic reputation at the pub by supporting and allowing dances in the JCR by the various sports organizations," said Khan. "He doesn't want us there," she continued, "because he thinks we will be a detriment to the reputation he is working so hard to build. It's outright discrimination against the gay population at York."

When contacted by *Excalibur*, O'Sullivan refused to speak on the record about the incident, offering nothing more than a "no comment".

The Bethune College Council, which gave the Gay Alliance \$100 earlier this year, must approve the club's application for use of college facilities and Khan thinks her group "will be given the room." But stated in a letter written to the *Excalibur* Editors that "further action will be taken against Bethune College if such discrimination persists."

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