

Laurence graces her audience

By KIM ECHLIN

I am sitting in Bloor Street United Church, sniffing with a cold, waiting for the main attraction of the morning — an interview with Margaret Laurence.

When Laurence finally steps up to the front she is greeted with applause by the standing congregation. From the first question there is an odd mélange of Christian problems of faith and the clichéd Canadian writer's for roots and identity served up to our hungry congregation. The minister raises the question of grace.

"You use in your novels the word 'grace' very much in a religious sense. Do you think your readers can understand it in that sense?"

Laurence speaks with her hands and directly to the audience. She describes characters from *The Diviners* as if they are alive, maintaining they are often born in a moment filled with something like grace.

"You don't know how they come into your head," she observes. "Inspiration is not a word I like very much. A character comes by itself. Many writers say that they have these moments."

Nobody deserves grace, you can't deserve it, but it happens."

We hear her character, Royland, the water-diviner echoing, "You don't have to have the mark of God between your eyebrows . . . Or if you do, quite a few people have it."

Laurence draws for the congregation the analogy of mothering real children. "As a mother, in a sense, or even wat-

ching other people's children, you feel the mystery of life which I think is the core of my world-view, if you like," she says. "I don't know what God is, but I don't need to define it now. Defining things is something I did alot when I was much younger."

The minister quotes someone who called her a pessimistic writer. Laurence objects.

"I'm not pessimistic. I think you must make a distinction between hope and optimism though. I have tremendous hope that we won't destroy ourselves but I was in Calcutta, you know, and I have never seen suffering like there — it will take work, not just blithe optimism."

Clara Thomas has described *The Diviners* the "endless, stumbling pilgrimage of the tribe of man towards God." Rev. David Allan, who preached a series of sermons on the book used it as an example of irony and the hidden, divining capacity everyone has for understanding. But Laurence speaks with equal concern of the

quest for roots in her writing. Thankfully, she doesn't say Canadian writers need roots, but discusses the problems of art in the broader framework of her personal expression, lending even Canadian criticism the universal perspective which Canlith band-waggon-riders might consider.

The past and the muth compose the Laurence reality. Her only generalized comment on Canadians throughout the interview is that she feels the mythic consciousness of Canadians is generally more Hebraic and bible-oriented than classical. When describing the significance of myth she echoes young Morag in *The Diviners*, who describes the gift of the rediscovered past as "a place to stand on".

"The river which runs both ways is the reality," suggests the minister, quoting the first lines of *The Diviners*.

"Yes," agrees Laurence. "And it's also inside."



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