

SONG OF A STONE ANGEL

BY ERIN GOODMAN

"Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand...Summer and winter she viewed the town with sightless eyes. She was doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight. Whoever carved her had left the eyeballs blank. It seemed strange to me that she should stand above the town, harking us all to heaven without knowing who we were at all."

— THE STONE ANGEL

Thirty-three years ago, the image of the Stone Angel first beckoned readers into the imagination of Canadian writer Margaret Laurence. Today, the author lies beneath the blind gaze of her image of mortality, leaving the legacy of Manawaka, the fictional prairie town that has so profoundly influenced Canadian literature.

The death of the 60 year-old Laurence on January 5th was particularly significant to Dr. Malcolm Ross, an English professor at Dalhousie University. He feels a deep sadness to have outlived the student whose talent he once nurtured.

During the late 1940's, Ross taught Laurence a course in 17th-century English literature, which she was taking at the University of Manitoba while finishing an Honours degree in English.

"I remember telling her that if she's never going to be a scholar, she's going to be a writer," recalls Ross. An average student, Laurence retained a low profile throughout university, but the talent of a woman who'd been writing stories since the age of seven was already apparent. She often brought Ross her material to be read, but even he could not have predicted the success of a career that spanned 10 novels, numerous short stories and children's works.

Born Jean Margaret Weymyss on July 18, 1926 in Neepawa, Manitoba, Laurence became acquainted with tragedy at a young age. The death of both parents during the first nine years of her life created an awareness of her own mortality, a theme that is prevalent in her work.

Two years after graduating from United College in Winnipeg, the writer married Jack Laurence, a civil engineer, whose work took the couple to England, Somali, and Ghana. Laurence's early works were based on the seven years spent with her husband and two children in Africa. This period of stability ended in 1962 with her separation from Laurence, and out of the confusion of a failed marriage arose the creation of the powerful five-part Manawaka series.

The struggle of her female characters trapped within the confines of a small prairie town, and the constraints of their own flawed personalities, have become imprinted in the minds of the Canadian public.

"The character of Hagar in *The Stone Angel* is one of the great characters of fiction," says Dr. Ross, who cites his favourite Laurence works as

being *The Stone Angel* and the *Diviners*. He identifies the writer's early influences as being Vancouver's Ethel Wilson, and Sinclair Ross, whose novel *As For Me and My House* sparked Laurence's recognition of the creative potential of the Canadian prairies.

"She saw Sinclair Ross as a kind of a prophet of what the prairies could be."

Laurence's work has been described as fresh, unpretentious, honest, . . . and controversial. In 1976, a fundamentalist church group tried unsuccessfully to have *The Diviners* removed from Lakefield District Secondary School in Ontario, the town which Laurence had made her home for the several years. In 1985, another drive to remove the writer's books, described as "dirty, disgusting, and degrading", from Lakefield High School reading lists was afoot. Ross feels that the complaints about Laurence's material arose from "arrogant, self-righteous ignorance", and maintains: "There's nothing obscene about anything she wrote. She tried to be faithful to reality."

Laurence defended her novels as works of

love, with a strong underlying religious influence, and was deeply hurt by accusations of alleged pornography.

"Those self-righteous attacks on her took a lot out of her," says Ross. "She was a very sensitive and a very vulnerable person." Laurence's wounded reaction to the accusations of immorality could be partially attributed to the fact that she was so deeply concerned with humanity.

Before her death, she was active in the anti-nuclear cause, contributing to "Speaking our Peace", a film about women, peace, and power. She was also committed to helping young writers hone their skills, and devoted a great deal of time to personally answering the hundreds of letters that she received every year. Says Ross, "She spent a great deal of time worrying about other people."

Despite Laurence's involvement in various causes, she continued to devote much of her energy to writing. She felt she had drained the potential of Manawaka as a creative source, and had decided that she would not write another novel.

"I think she hadn't been able to transfer her imagination to something else," explains Dr. Ross. He adds that although Laurence actually had written another novel, she had ripped it up without sharing it with anyone. "She never really felt that she'd done something as well as it should be done."

The writer completed a volume of her memoirs, to be published in the fall.

"When my second son was born, he found it difficult to breathe at first. He gasped a little, coming into the unfamiliar air. He couldn't have known before or suspected at all that breathing would be what was done by creatures here. Perhaps the same occurs elsewhere, an element so unknown you'd never suspect it at all until — wishful thinking. If it happened that was, I'd pass out with amazement. Can angels faint?"

