

INTERVIEW

Clara Thomas talks about writing & Margaret Laurence

On January 5, 1987, one of Canada's best known and loved writers died of cancer. Margaret Laurence touched many of us with her brutally honest and beautiful prose. In her honour, the Canadian Woman Studies Journal has devoted their latest issue to articles about the woman and her writing. Clara Thomas, Professor of English at York, critic, biographer and close friend of Margaret Laurence guest-edited this issue. In the following interview, *Excalibur's* Deborah Dundas speaks to Mrs. Thomas about Canadian woman's writing in general, with a special emphasis on Margaret Laurence.

EXCALIBUR: You've guest-edited the latest Canadian Women Studies journal, which is a tribute to Margaret Laurence. How did this come about?

THOMAS: Last Spring, Shelagh Wilkinson, who's the editor of Canadian Woman Studies, asked me if I would guest-edit. Margaret Laurence and I were very good friends and I was very delighted. It was very therapeutic for me, because I was feeling her loss greatly. So I did a great deal of getting people to contribute and Maria Jacobs did a great deal as well. It's coming out very shortly. Altogether we have 54 contributors from across Canada, from A for Atwood to W for Wiseman. Our only problem was where to stop, because if we'd asked twice that many, we would have got twice that many contributions. People were absolutely wonderful and bent over backwards to contribute. [This all happened] in a very short time span. All this really got started last spring and everything had to be in by mid-August. So it was wonderfully rewarding.

EXCALIBUR: About her own work, Laurence has said that her underlying themes include "survival in an inner sense . . . survival with dignity . . . survival of the personality." Do you see this as a fundamental theme, not only in Laurence's work, but in Canadian woman's writing in general?

THOMAS: Well, I suppose you could take it further than that. It's an underlying theme—survival and survival with dignity—in all literature. It is, of course, very, very strong in Margaret's work, and it imprints itself on you particularly strongly because the works—the Manawaka works—are in the voice of the heroine. So you get Hagar's voice, and Rachel's voice and Stacey's voice. This is a much more intimate and intensive thing than the old-fashioned third-person narrative. Therefore it comes out particularly strongly. But it is, I would say, a universal theme.

EXCALIBUR: In woman's literature, the traditional quest novel has been adapted in that women are now searching for their selves. But, how can women reconcile themselves to Christianity? The fall from grace, which has led to humanity's endless quest for self; was blamed on a woman, according to Christian doctrine.

THOMAS: They reconcile it by realizing that the story of Genesis is an old myth; that the whole of the Old Testament tells the story of a people who were bound up in their minds with a God of wrath and vengeance. That Old Testament is a very different thing and was superseded by the New Testament, which brings the Gospel; that is, the story of God's love and Christ's love for humankind—for men and women. Christ's actions towards his own mother and towards Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene and so on are what counts; not those Old Testaments. But, it does present a problem, I know, for some women. I just don't think it's worth worrying about. I think a lot of women, certainly when you're at my age, realize that all through life there are a lot of things you were taught that you never believed. You picked up what was useful to you, hopefully, for your own development, and just discarded the rest. That's what I think women have got to do. Women have got to do.

EXCALIBUR: In Laurence's hometown of Lakefield, there was a

movement to censor or ban her books from being taught in the schools. How did she feel about this?

THOMAS: That was very hurtful to Margaret. It was spearheaded by a fundamentalist group and one woman in particular. She said there was bad language and sexual permissiveness. It was particularly hurtful that it would happen in her hometown. But the people up there were splendid. They rallied behind her. There were hundreds of letters to the school board from all over. The Moderator of the United Church and the head of a very senior Catholic order and a head of the Anglican Church sent outstanding letters.

EXCALIBUR: Margaret is held up as an icon in Canadian woman's writing. Why do you think this is?

THOMAS: It's not only in Canadian woman's writing. She's a kind of icon for Canada, for the whole of Canada, men and women. There are just as many young male writers as woman writers that look up to her, who will testify for hours at a time about how Margaret helped them. See, she always answered all her letters, and she got hundreds and hundreds of letters. And she always gave help to young writers when they appealed for it. From 1974 on, when she was living back here full-time, she began to take a part in so many other causes such as the Peace movement, Operation Ploughshares, and all kinds of things, that I think she was a complete phenomenon. I don't think we've ever had anybody who was as much loved by as many people for so many different facets of her life and work.

EXCALIBUR: What did Laurence feel her responsibility as a writer was?

THOMAS: To tell the truth. She would say fiction is often more true than fact. That is, true in spirit. You see, people arrived in her mind. She was that kind of writer. Hagar was in her mind for a long, long time and then Hagar developed and started to speak in her own voice. And then Margaret broke down what Hagar said. Her great responsibility was to get it right, to do justice to this character whom she knew so well.

EXCALIBUR: Is Hagar autobiographical in any sense?

THOMAS: No. that kind of stiff, sticky pride that Hagar has is the kind of pride that Grandfather Connor has in *A Bird in the House*, and Grandfather Connor is based on Margaret's Grandfather Simpson, who was a very hard, proud old man. But that's as far as you could go. But, certainly there is that pride and Margaret knew it well because after her father died she and her stepmother and her brother moved into Grandfather Simpson's house and she had to live with him as a teenager.

EXCALIBUR: When in England, she was feeling great pangs of homesickness. What did she love about Canada so much?

THOMAS: Her roots are here. When she was in Africa (for seven years) she learned that themes are universal and she wrote her first novel set in Ghana, and the short stories set in Ghana. Then she realized that she had to come back and write about her own people.

EXCALIBUR: the way women are regarded and have been throughout history would still have to be reconciled with this quest notion.

THOMAS: Oh, yes. But the question you asked me before was about Christianity,

and that was the answer I would give about Christianity. Now, of course, about everything else, there has to be a reinventing of womanhood as Caroline Howe once said in one of her books. Then, I think that women have to re-invent themselves according to what society has traditionally thought of them or expected from them. I think people have been doing this very thing. The feminists have the very good word, "subversive", for it; but it's worked. It's now much more out in the open and on the surface. I think that, really, is the big difference.

EXCALIBUR: Canadian woman's writing began with writers like Susannah Moodie and Louisa Murray. How has it changed since then?

THOMAS: First of all, I think I'd like to go back to the very first question you asked me which was about woman's writing and survival. This ties in with what you asked me right now. But there's something I'd like to say about it that I haven't said. Right from the very beginning, you know, we have had a remarkable number of well-known woman writers in Canadian literature. There are various reasons for this. The most usually given one is that there was a great and growing readership for woman's writing in the 18th coming into the 19th century. So women wrote for women. One of the reasons that I find and think true is that the theme of survival, which is very basic to woman's writing, is also very basic to the whole Canadian psyche, because here we are, caught; we used to be a colony of Britain and now we're at the north of a huge imperialistic nation and survival is essential. But you see, women have always been concerned with their own psychic survival and that is one reason why there are so many first-rate, woman writers in Canadian literature. To answer your question, I don't think the great themes have changed. I don't think they ever change. When Susannah Moodie wrote, she was not writing for a Canadian audience because there wasn't one. She was writing for the people back home in Britain. There wasn't really any considerable Canadian audience, in terms of numbers, until about the mid 60's, in fact. And we have made enormous strides since then in getting Canadian literature into our schools and in opening up bookshops and in the development of small publishing houses . . . the whole electronic age has made a great difference. The great trade magazine now is *Quill and Quire*. It used to be a little thin thing and now it's fairly thick, and none of us who are really interested in Canadian literature could do without it. But when you see the supplement every couple of months of how many books have been published, it's just fabulous. So, there is that factor. There is also the factor that whenever there is a readership, writers will rise to answer. It just happens. And the more educated to our literature readers become, the more they will demand the best of their authors and the more the authors will produce the best. That's just axiomatic.

EXCALIBUR: There seems to be a breakdown in the structure of the family unit in woman's writing. This is illustrated in books such as Marian Engel's *Lunatic Villa*. Why is this?

THOMAS: Because I think there has been a great deal of breakdown in the last forty years. We live in much less of a patriarchy now. Like Margaret, Marian was very, very maternal. I think those two writers at least, would have argued very strongly, as they did in their writing, that emancipation does not mean the relinquishing or in any way the lessening of the maternal impulse. That doesn't mean that they were in any way what the historians called maternal feminists which referred to people like Nellie McClung. They coined the phrase unfairly in a lot of way, I think, because it was kind of derogatory, as if the women had sort of sold out. And you have the contemporary woman writers who are physically engaged in pointing out that there is no essential barrier between maternalism and feminism.



EXCALIBUR: It's been alluded to that the Governor-General's Award was engineered so that Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* wouldn't win it. Is this true?

THOMAS: There are always cans of worms having to do with the Governor-General's Award. Politics are always involved. The Nobel Prizes are the most political thing in the world. In terms of feminism, if you are thinking that you might find some male plot to keep it from her . . . no. In fact, the Award, really, over the years, has reflected what we've just been saying about the numbers of outstanding women that we have.

EXCALIBUR: The idea was brought up in Barry Callaghan's article in *Books in Canada* last March.

The Canadian Women Studies Journal is located in Room 212 Founders College.

YORK AUTHORS WORD SEARCH

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We've embedded in that blob of SEEMINGLY RANDOM CHARACTERS up there, the names of 26 poets, playwrights, fictioneers, and literary editors and translators who teach, or have taught, at York. Geez. It's like magic or something. For bonus points: try to figure out why there are so few women among them.

BY STUART ROSS