

# Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence translates desperation into action

BARB TAYLOR

Margaret Laurence, Canadian author, peace and pro-choice activist, spoke to a crowd of 600 at York yesterday at a benefit for the York Women's Center.

Laurence read from her novel, *The Diviners*, and from a collection of her essays, *Heart of a Stranger*. These excerpts expressed her feelings about Canadian nationalism, about growing up in a small town, and about the difficulties women face as youth and mothers.

"I see now that I used it as one more means of working out a theme that appears. That is the question of where one belongs and why and the meaning to oneself on ancestors - both the long ago ones and remembered history," said Laurence of her essay "Where the World Began."

The piece begins with the study of the child in a small town: the "vulnerable and violent" girls on the wrong side of the track; the dim awareness of drought and depression; the eccentric few and the few excitements. It ends by questioning our collective roots as

Canadians. To those that have called Canada dull she says, "Stullifying to the mind it certainly could be, but not to the imagination. It was many things, but it was never dull."

"They might try to understand that for many years we valued ourselves insufficiently living as we did under the huge shadows of two dominating figures - Uncle Sam and Britannia. We have only just begun to value ourselves, our land, our ability." She places the blame on Canadians as well: "It can never be forgotten that it is we ourselves that have sold such a large amount of our birthright for a mess of plastic process."

The struggle to overcome the "plastic process" occupies much of *The Diviners* as well. Morag, the main character, says "Our minds are on higher things," when she is told, "you could both be gorgeous if you put your minds to it."

Laurence breathes the fear of growing up and the fear of the world into the character as Morag breaks down crying, and the author asks, "What the hell is she crying about?" and answers, "Because of hope she

feels?...because she feels she can't carry through with the new her and because she doesn't even want to because it shouldn't all be necessary but it is...because life is bloody terrifying."

Morag grows up and goes on, like Laurence, to question the women who came before her, the pioneers of this country, "Women working like horses - also probably pregnant most of the time...Baking bread in brick ovens with a loaf in their own ovens...How many women went mad, the strain, the loneliness, the isolation, despair, overwork, fear, out there in the bush?"

Yet Laurence does more than glorify our history, she translates her desperation into modern action: she works with the Canadian Abortion Rights action League, Arts for Peace and a number of other peace groups. She is currently Chancellor at Trent University and has been Writer in Residence at three universities. And she is also attempting to write a novel.

SEE EXCALIBUR NEXT WEEK FOR A FULL FEATURE ON LAURENCE.



Photo: Mario Scattoloni

Canadian novelist, Margaret Laurence at York yesterday.

# Geneticist examines issue of pre-natal diagnosis

DAVID SPIRO

The Geneticist-in-Chief at the Hospital for Sick Children is concerned about state medical practice in Ontario, especially as it applies to pre-natal diagnosis.

On Tuesday, Dr. Louis Siminovitch spoke at York, where he outlined some of the ethical concerns of physicians who are involved in genetic counselling and research. He also discussed moral issues which are likely to arise in the near future.

Pre-natal diagnosis, explained Siminovitch, is a simple technique which can be performed in the doctor's office. The process involves taking cell samples from the

amniotic fluid of a pregnant woman) feel they are entitled the lab. The cell chromosomes, which determine inherited characteristics, are then examined. The presence of Down's Syndrome, which is caused by the presence of an extra chromosome, can be detected by this method.

Siminovitch was quick to point out that "the extent of the defect varies enormously from one child to another", and that a diagnosis of Down's Syndrome does not necessarily mean that a child will be seriously retarded. In fact, "technology does not discriminate between a major defect and a minor defect" - a drawback which may lead

parents to become anxious about an inconsequential abnormality.

Who should be allowed access to the technology has become an important issue. Siminovitch claimed that the procedure has been overpublicized and that as a consequence, all requests for the test could not be met. "At Sick Kids," he said, "we have a strict regulation that those under 35 can not have access to the technology (all other things being equal)."

The "fairly arbitrary" cutoff creates dilemmas for the medical profession. What if a 30 year old woman comes into the doctor's office says she has two cousins with Down's Syndrome, and

demands that she be given the test, asked Siminovitch. "Since the service is provided by the state, they (the woman) feel they are entitled to it," the geneticist argues that allowing those under the cutoff age access to the technology, would set a dangerous precedent. He also believes that when a reliable test becomes available to determine the sex of a fetus, the health care system will be flooded with women from whose "point of view it's important what sex the child is."

Connected with the age question is another concern - the extent of legal liability faced by the doctor. "What if we say no to (testing) a woman

who is 34 and then she has a Down's Syndrome child when we could have told her that before?" The same woman could have had the test done in the United States where "everyone who wants it gets it". Siminovitch used the example of a wealthy woman under 35 who can afford a trip across the border as well as the medical fees to be tested.

Pre-natal diagnosis is also being used in the detection of certain biochemical disorders where defective enzymes are produced by the cells. Examples of such disorders are Tay-Sachs disease which primarily afflicts the Jewish population, and cystic fibrosis. There are about 3000 of these diseases but only 150 can be diagnosed while the fetus is in the womb. Even for these 150 the results of a screening test are not perfect. Certain other defects are diagnosed by measuring the level of a protein in the amniotic fluid rather than by examining individual cells. This type of test is the least reliable.

Even when the doctors refer to blood tests for confirmation, there can "still be

possible mistakes". Serum tests for genetic abnormalities are generally about 90 percent accurate. Siminovitch asks, "What happens to the 10 percent you miss? How are they going to feel that all your tests were wrong?"

Because "the technology promises to become much more extensive" society will be faced with more and more choices in terms of the directions genetic forecasting will take in the next few years.

A new field of research is the area of blood testing for recessive chromosomal defects (i.e. a one in four chance that a child will be affected.) Siminovitch wonders what the impact will be on the structure of our population if everyone starts walking around with badges identifying themselves as carriers of one disorder or another. The debate might dredge up the spectre of racial purity and selective breeding a la Brave New World. The conclusion was that "essentially we're not ready in terms of how we'll deal with the new technology and how we'll apply it to the general population."

## Gay Alliance provides forum for discussion

# Experiences of homosexual parents shared

NIGEL TURNER

Even though Jane knew she could raise her eight-year-old son better than her ex-husband, and despite the fact that she had to win a hard battle for custody of her child, she's still worried about his growth environment. Jane is a lesbian and she's concerned about how her sexuality will affect her son.

It was these types of problems that Eilert Frerichx,

a gay father, and Helen hood, a lesbian mother, discussed at Thursday's meeting of the Gay Alliance at York -- an organization whose purpose is to provide a relaxed social atmosphere for homosexuals and to provide information to its members through films and speaker.

Eilert was divorced after a ten year marriage, but remained close to his ex-wife, and has shared in the

continued development of his teenage son. He said that he was fortunate to have remained close to his wife. Often with divorces the spouse feels that he or she has been the failure -- an inadequate wife or insufficiently attractive. And "this anger is turned outward against the homosexual" says Eilert. Or, the child itself might "resent the gay parent, blaming him or her for the

traumatic split." There is nothing peculiar about being a gay father, "Most parents whether gay or straight," says Eilert, "will work for the interest of the child without sacrificing their own identity."

Eilert has no concerns about being an improper role model. Since most homosexuals come from heterosexual families, Eilert concludes, "Heterosexual role models don't always rub off." He says, "Role models only function to reinforce sex roles," and points out that his own son is "militantly heterosexual."

Helen Hook, also a divorcee, belongs to a free legal service and support group for lesbian mothers. In her opinion, the sooner children learn about their parents' sexuality, the better; younger children will not have had time to acquire any prejudices. She says her son "has realised the need for discretion", and tells some people about his mother, not others. If the child thinks its parent has been hiding his/her sexuality, the child may ask, if it's not bad, "why was it a secret."

# "Giving a voice to the voiceless"

JANIS ROSEN

Last Thursday a very unique event took place at York's Calumet College. Billed as Solidarity Coffee House, the evening included two folk songsters and a visual presentation focusing on Latin America's oppressed society.

The Student Christian Movement organized the evening to help create an awareness of the oppression that exists throughout the world. This approach, said SCM Secretary Cathy Moffat, is more appealing than a

lecture or a seminar.

Moffat, a graduate in Latin American Studies and a former resident in a Latin American village, spoke about the region's struggle for human rights and social justice, and said, the artists' performances were a way of "giving a voice to the voiceless". And although she acknowledged York student body's general apathy towards social and political issues she said the situation "was not hopeless". She attributes the lack of concern to the pain and suffering as related to ourselves."

Mario Rossini, a member of the Defence for Human Rights in Uruguay, and Joy Jukes, a member of Amnesty International who has a special interest in Latin America, demonstrated that entertainment can contain politically potent messages.

The next SCM event will be the Social Justice with the Law Union film series, organized in conjunction with the Law Union. If interested in this and for more information concerning SCM activities, phone 667-3171.

# A banner theft

PAUL O'DONNELL

On January 20, a Stong College banner was stolen and a shower curtain put in its place.

The banner designed by artist Aba Bayesksky has wavy lines and five stars representing the five colleges of York. Olga Cirak, the Assistant to the Dean of Stong, is angry, and says, "The persons responsible should be more mature as they are not public school children."

Not only were the banners stolen but the flag pole and part of the wall were pulled out. The college will have to pay for repairs. A new banner may cost as much as one thousand dollars, and installation will be another sixty or seventy dollars.

One banner was found January 25 in a plastic bag stuffed behind a video machine in the games room.

Stong has been doing well in intramural sports, and some think college rivalry is behind the theft; the banners of other colleges are hung in Stong, but none of these were harmed.

All colleges have been victims of the same type of vandalism and most colleges have not replaced banners due to cost.

Anyone knowing anything about the missing banners is asked to contact Olga Cirak in Stong College. A reward is being offered.