

A look at Canada's leading women writers: Laurence, Engel, Atwood and Sylvia Fraser

By KEITH NICKSON

The sudden emergence of female Canadian writers in recent years raises a number of pertinent questions. More so than in many other western cultures. Why do women make up such a high percentage of Canada's popular writers? Has the females' role in the development of Canadian culture been significantly different from that of women in other western cultures and American culture in particular? Does the success of writers such as Margaret Atwood, Marian Engel, Margaret Laurence and Sylvia Fraser really signal the fledgling development of a unique Canadian feminine consciousness? These questions may seem premature but the mere success and predominance of female writers makes them worthy of consideration.

Of these four writers, the veteran Margaret Laurence is the pioneer whose works since the sixties have consistently explored the female consciousness in its search for self awareness. From *The Stone Angel* through to *The Diviners* which Laurence insists is her last novel, a series of heroines have been presented who incur a loss and spend the remainder of their lives trying to find substitutes for that deficiency. This is especially true in the case of *The Diviners*.

A WOMAN'S CONSCIOUSNESS

The heroine, Morag Gunn initially loses her parents and responds to this dilemma by attempting to regain her heritage and thereby establish the legitimacy of her existence. After groping at her mythological ancestors for many years and having an illusory affair with Dan, a married artist, Morag realizes that it is the faith in one's heritage that is important, not the stark reality that often lies behind it.

The Diviners is the tale of a tough woman's experiences that are often specifically feminine in nature. We men can try to understand a woman who so desperately wants a child, she leaves her husband of many years and allows a childhood friend to sire her baby, but we can never really empathize with her. The subsequent trauma of Morag supporting herself through pregnancy and raising the child by herself are experiences that are so peculiarly feminine that a male author's portrayal seldom ap-

proaches the authenticity of a female writer's feeling for the situation.

Laurence in her last novel traces the slow, agonizing development of a woman's consciousness from its first jolting inception through to the final congealing of that fractured consciousness. Although few other novels by woman writers concentrate so exclusively on the growth of the female identity, there are several that touch on various aspects of the unique female experience.

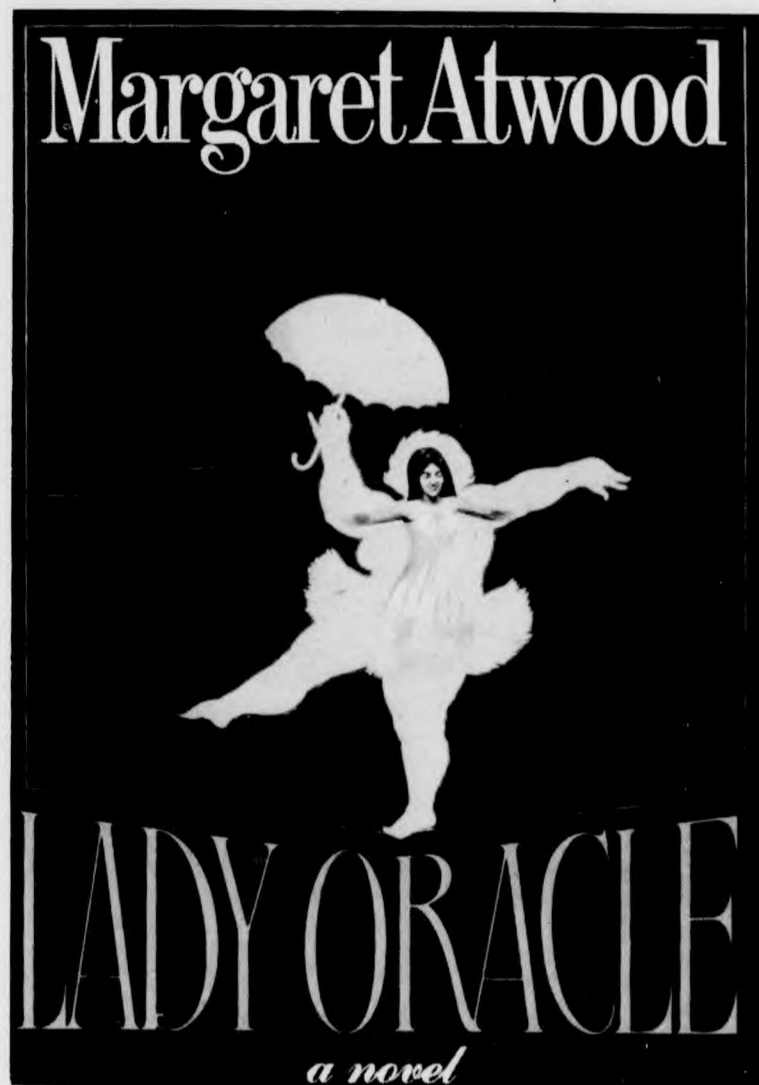
LOU AND A BEAR

Perhaps the most controversial novel in this genre is Marian Engel's *Bear*. Apparently written with no great scheme in mind, Engel has been surprised by the publicity her novel has received and a little awed by the labels that have been attached to her novel. The brief tale is concerned with a lonely, alienated young woman called 'Lou' who works for a Historical Institute. She is assigned to catalogue the entire contents of the remote Cary Estate and in the process begins a relationship with the previous owner's bear. As Lou records all the relevant historical information on the island estate, she discovers notes left by Colonel Cary about the roles of bears in various cultures. Simultaneously, Lou's relationship with the bear is transformed from one of platonic friendship to sexual passion, though the liaison is never properly consummated.

Within this milieu, Engel attempts to probe the lacklustre life of her heroine. Lou's growing passion for the bear jolts her complacent acceptance of urban existence and consequently Lou begins to re-examine her own self. She starts to resent her job at the institute along with her physically satisfying but unfulfilling 'screwing of the director!' Combined with this sudden emptiness is Lou's discovery of the history behind the Cary family and the various mythological roles of the bear. Each discovery reorients Lou away from her sterile, urban life towards a more natural existence with the bear and the historical Cary estate.

Or so Engel suggests.

The novel is never fully successful primarily because Engel's style is often clumsy and uninspired. The narrative and dialogue



are often stilted and unnatural in their progressions leading to implausible developments. Due to this fault, the novel remains a flat surface despite Engel's very obvious attempts to mold a story with depth, dimension and texture. Furthermore, Engel fails to properly reveal the psychological elements of the relationship between Lou and the bear. Engel awkwardly juxtaposes such lines as: "Her fishy friend came up the stairs. His tongue bent vertically and he put it up her cunt. A note fell out of the book - 'The offspring of a woman and a bear is a hero, with the strength of a bear and the cleverness of a man. - Old Finnish legend'".

Then Engel adds: "She cried with joy". Rarely does Engel penetrate beyond merely sensual observations and as a result Lou remains a stupid office girl incapable of the transformation Engel suggests.

The mythology surrounding the bear nevertheless relates Engel's work to *The Diviners*. The notes Lou discovers are an attempt by Engel to create an aura around the bear that turns the animal into a mythological creature with wide-ranging importance. Lou first perceives the bear as 'only a dusty bulk of blackish fur' but eventually she sees the pet as 'my well-beloved honeyeater of the woodlands'. Like Morag Gunn, it is Lou's faith in the mythology of the bear and the Cary Estate, that elevates her relationship beyond the merely physical. Just as Morag discovered that probing into her relationship with Dan the artist was disillusioning, Lou likewise realizes that if she has sexual intercourse with the bear, their special relationship will dissolve into one of base bestiality.

This raises the broader question of male-female relationships in *Bear*. Lou's affairs with men are all empty, unfulfilling liaisons. She has bitter memories of a lover who left her and begins to despise the director with whom she sleeps on occasion. All indications suggest that Lou has rejected men in favour of the bear. In spite of the fact that the affair is never consummated, this animal provides a depth of feeling and sensitivity that males fail to supply Lou with. In *Bear*

Marian Engel presents a woman who has discarded her male counterpart and begun the vital quest for the natural spirit independently.

ANOTHER MASTERPIECE

A female in quest of herself is also the subject of Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*. It has been confirmed as the Canadian bestseller of 1976 and hailed in Canadian literary circles as yet another Atwood masterpiece. South of the border and in Europe however, critical opinion has been almost unanimously negative. This clearly delineated disparity reflects a very real danger that threatens the future development of Canadian literature.

So desperate is our need for eminent writers who can define our amorphous culture that a tendency has developed to make objective critical opinion of secondary importance to the fact that a writer is Canadian. Many critics mistakenly place emphasis on the heroic efforts of struggling Canadian writers to define our culture and thereby lose their critical perspective. A book must be more than Canadian and more than merely the latest effort of an established writer before it is lauded as a positive contribution to Canadian literature.

Lady Oracle I think, is a work whose success is due more to these factors than its own merit.

The novel explores the life of one Joan Foster who initially faces her own death and hides in Terremoto, Italy. Like Morag in *The Diviners*, Joan then begins to trace the progression of her fractured life from childhood to the present. The past and present planes of narration merge gradually as Atwood attempts to depict the development of Joan's various identities. Joan begins as a fat child, becomes the lover of a Polish Count, the secret writer of trashy historical romances, a celebrated poet, part time leftist agitator and lover of the Royal Porcupine. Many of these identities exist simultaneously and the story really focuses on Joan's attempts to keep her selves separate. In this she fails causing her to connect her own fabricated suicide.

DRIFTING ALONG

Not only is this meandering tale

contrived and pretentious, but it does not smack of the reality Atwood desperately attempts to create. At every opportunity Atwood inserts details of urban culture in a mechanical fashion whose effect is negated by the writers cold and calculated manner.

Joan drifts along assuming different roles but Atwood consistently fails to delve into Joan's split consciousness. Since Joan strains to keep her identities separate, one would assume there is some overlapping in Joan's psyche. Atwood however is oblivious to these possibilities causing Joan to lack credibility as the multifaceted character Atwood attempts to present. The many twists and turns in the plot become implausible as a result.

Not only is the central character faulty but the novelist's attempts at satire fail miserably for the most part also. The Royal Porcupine, whom Joan meets at a press party, picks up dead animals and freezes them in their last position and then exhibits them as art. He is not a funny character, merely a bizarre figure who does not effectively satirize the fringe elements of modern art and is not a worthwhile part of the novel.

This is especially disappointing since Atwood has experienced the frenzied world of writing, publishing parties, fringe 'artistes' and should be able to deliver some slashing satire. The only satirical highlights concerned Joan's book of poetry which Atwood cites the *Globe and Mail* as calling "gnomic and chthonic" while the *Toronto Star* headlined their review "Unknown bursts on literary scene like a comet".

What exactly Atwood's novel contributes to the development of the female Canadian consciousness is hard to say. The novel is permeated by Joan's vision of the Fat Lady, a projection of herself into fantasy. She imagines the Fat Lady walking a tight rope "past the lumbering enterprises of the West Coast, over the wheatlands of Ontario, appearing in the clouds like a pink vision to the poor farmers of St. Lawrence valley and the mackerel fishermen of the Maritimes". Joan envisions herself successfully balancing the forces that tug at her from both sides and finally stepping to safety with "the roar of their (the crowds) voices her tribute".

This motif contrasts sharply with the procession of events Joan experiences in the novel. She wanders from relationship to relationship, continually being taken in by men who provide the security she desperately needs. When Joan finally decides to begin her life anew, she bungles her suicide and is eventually forced to return to Toronto to clear her friends who are suspected of killing her. Certainly not a very positive picture of the emerging female consciousness.

With all its contradictions and faults however, one suspects that Atwood's vision of Joan is perhaps more accurate than Engel's or Laurence's one sided positive approach. Both Engel and Laurence fail to consider the painful transformation a woman endures when she tries to be an independent person in a male oriented society. Atwood's novel does not focus on this exclusively either, but at least some of the complexities of the situation are considered.

By far the most exciting of the newer Canadian female novelists is Sylvia Fraser.

See CANDY page 18

Engel

BEAR

A Novel by

Marian Engel

BEAR

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