
Margaret Laurence. *Heart of a Stranger*. Ed. Nora Foster Stovel. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2003. Pp. xxxiii, 236. \$29.95 pb.

When George Woodcock hailed the publication of *Heart of a Stranger* in 1976, he pointed out that the essays and memoirs collected in Margaret Laurence's book formed "not merely an evocative background to her fiction, but also a minimal autobiography of a remarkable author and a remarkable person" (2). The reissued volume still performs these two basic functions, for it provides both a key to a better understanding of Laurence's novels and short stories, and an illuminating complement to her posthumously published *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* (1989). Additionally, nowadays the collection is likely to be appraised above all in the light of the increasing amount of critical attention paid to travel narratives, a substantial body of writings long subjected to a three-fold prejudice: literary, political, and disciplinary (Youngs 55). The fact that travel writing constitutes a progressively valued literary form, whose creative properties are deemed worthy of praise at last, may explain why the editor of the present volume prefers to emphasize that this book is first and foremost a travelogue. Thus, in her introduction, Nora Foster Stovel considers in detail the two aspects already noted by Woodcock in his laudatory *Canadian Literature* editorial, but she starts by focusing on *Heart of a Stranger* at a literal level, as a fascinating chronicle of the author's geographical journeys to various countries.

Inspired by the travel books she read during her childhood and adolescence, Margaret Laurence developed her keen interest in other cultures when she moved first to England and then to Africa. This continent was to be her home for seven years and the main source for five of her books: an anthology of translations of Somali poems and folk-tales, her first novel, her first volume of short stories, a travel-memoir of her two years in Somaliland, and a study of Nigerian drama and fiction. The recent scholarly recognition of Laurence's African writings, after long years of almost exclusive concentration on the Manawaka cycle, will stimulate a thorough revision of this timely new edition of *Heart of a Stranger* in search of the insights that the author gained through her experiences in Somalia and Ghana. Rereading "The Very Best Intentions," Laurence's first-published article, we perceive a heightened awareness of her awkward position as a militant white liberal trying to sympathize with a Ghanaian nationalist on the eve of independence. She was perceptive enough to understand why she encountered enormous difficulties in finding a common ground with him, for their perspectives were intrinsically opposed. Laurence's humorous and authentically humble self-portrayal as a

naïve foreigner striving to substitute stereotypes for genuine apprehensions on her part and on that of her interlocutor, while exerting herself in order to avoid causing him offence, probably remains as fresh in our post-colonial times as it was when the essay appeared in 1964. Furthermore, this article may help to elucidate certain features of her novel *This Side Jordan* (1960) and her collection of short stories *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963), both set in Ghana just before independence.

Humour is the salient feature of “Sayonara, Agamemnon,” a slight piece about a tour in Greece which meant for Laurence “an initiation into the world of tourism” (11). But most of the essays are far from being merely anecdotal sketches of her journeys, since they cover a variety of topics and substantiate the author’s wide range of interests, including mythology and history. Many of her accounts reveal her as an ethically engaged writer and give ample evidence of her deep political concerns for humanity at large, transcending the geographical borders of her own country.

In her Foreword, Laurence indicated that the nineteen essays written between 1964 and 1975, apart from describing journeys in lands strange to her, also depicted her own inner journeys. The commitment to explore her “heart of a stranger” in depth justifies the inclusion of texts that deal not with foreign countries, but with her own, her native Canada, which remained in her mind while she was far away, and which she best appreciated once she saw it from a distance. Thus, it seems appropriate that the volume starts with the article “A Place to Stand On” (1970), in which Laurence ponders an important aspect of her literary development: writing as an attempt to approach her background and assimilate her real past, partly to be freed from it and partly to understand herself. She explains how she created her fictional Manawaka, drawing many elements from her hometown of Neepawa and other prairie towns of Manitoba, but considering it most of all as “a town of the mind” and her “own private world” (7). If the collection begins with the author’s overview of the Manawaka novels she had written until then, it is equally appropriate that, coming full circle, *Heart of a Stranger* ends with another article centred on Canada as her main source of literary inspiration.

Apart from the full text of *Heart of a Stranger*, reproduced exactly as it was published in Toronto by McClelland and Stewart (except for the silent correction of some typographical errors), the edition published in Edmonton by the University of Alberta Press contains three appendices: the essay “Tribalism As Us Versus Them” (1969), which can also be found in the reissue of *Long Drums and Cannons* (2001), and the two translations—one literal and the other one poetic—that Laurence made of a *gabei* by the Somali poet Salaan Arrabey. Taking into account these valuable additions, readers may be puz-

zled by the absence of Laurence's unpublished preface for *Heart of a Stranger*. Professor Stovel only includes some passages from it in her otherwise informative and deeply researched introduction, where she explicitly deplores that such a preface was never published in spite of the fact that "it illuminates the themes of her essays" (xii). However, she does not give any reasons for not supplying it in full alongside Laurence's published Foreword.

A respected Laurence scholar, Nora Foster Stovel is the author of *Rachel's Children* (1992) and *Stacey's Choice* (1993). She has also edited *Embryo Words: Margaret Laurence's Early Writings* (1997), a compilation of poems and short prose pieces which were published between 1944 and 1946, when Laurence was still a student in Winnipeg. Alongside her new edition of *Long Drums and Cannons* (2001), also republished by the University of Alberta Press, Professor Stovel's well-annotated paperback reissue of *Heart of a Stranger* deserves praise for bringing back into print and making accessible an outstanding collection which has been unjustly forgotten for too long, and which will certainly be welcomed by a wide international readership today.

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