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Book Review: Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections

Sheryl Allen
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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David Staines’s collection of essays by twelve distinguished scholars, critics, and writers illuminates the accomplishments of one of Canada’s most acclaimed and beloved authors. Like the volume’s cover photo of a young and attractive Margaret Laurence, an image unfamiliar to readers accustomed to the round face and over-sized glasses of her later years, the essays themselves, and the editor’s introduction, offer fresh perspectives on Laurence’s work, challenging us to view it in new ways.

This is particularly true of Kristjana Gunnars’s “Listening: Laurence’s Women.” Gunnars compares the Manawakan female protagonists to the Canadian Prairies: “an earthquake waiting to happen, perhaps. A dam waiting to break. The stillness before the storm.” Gunnars ruminates on the “stillness” and “unhappiness” of Laurence’s women, expanding these qualities to include all Canadian women, artists, and writers. Her bald statement, “I have discovered that Canada is an unhappy country,” is a provocative one, whatever the likelihood of her readers’ agreement.

Helen M. Buss’s essay proposes feminist, postcolonial readings of The Prophet’s Camel Bell and Dance on the Earth: A Memoir. Retelling the painful story of Laurence’s encounter in Somalia with an eight-year-old prostitute named Asha and the bitter realization that she can do nothing to help the girl, Buss accentuates the problematic disjunction that occurs when feminism and postcolonialism meet. While resolutions are difficult, Buss argues that Laurence’s writing “works toward” the concept of a female postcolonial position for privileged, white, female cultural workers. . . .” Dance on the Earth, for instance, moves away from patriarchal limitations and yet is set in a postcolonial situation.

The power of Joyce Marshall’s concluding essay emerges from its author’s intimate knowl-
edge of Laurence and her admiration for Laurence's contributions to the Canadian literary community. Marshall acknowledges Laurence's flaws—"she had her demons," her self-doubts—but also avows that "it's perhaps not fair to put too much weight on words that slipped out . . . while she was drinking." Marshall's understanding of the personal costs accompanying Laurence's creativity and magnanimousness affirms this essay's sense of authenticity.

Focusing on the Manawaka fiction, as it should, the volume also recognizes the significance of Laurence's correspondence, autobiographical works, African texts, and children's books. It offers a comprehensive reflection that, like the cover photograph, requests us to look at Margaret Laurence anew.

SHERYL ALLEN
Department of English
University of Nebraska-Lincoln