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"A TOWN OF THE MIND"
MARGARET LAURENCE'S MYTHICAL MICROCOSM OF MANAWAKA

NORA FOSTER STOVEL

A strange place it was, that place where the world began. A place of incredible happenings, splendours and revelations, despairs like multitudinous pits of isolated hells. A place of shadow-spookiness, inhabited by the unknowable dead. A place of jubilation and of mourning, horrible and beautiful.

It was, in fact, a small prairie town.¹

This passage introduces "Where the World Began," the concluding piece in Margaret Laurence's 1976 collection of travel essays, _Heart of a Stranger_, which functions as an autobiography, charting her life journey. Laurence wrote a preface to this collection that exists in manuscript at McMaster University, but which was never published—unfortunately, because it illuminates the autobiographical import of the essays—perhaps because the pattern of her life was clear to her by the time she wrote it in 1976: "I saw, somewhat to my surprise, that they are all, in one way or another, travel articles. And by travel, I mean both those voyages which are outer and those voyages which are inner. . . . I have not arranged these essays in the order in which they were written. It seemed better to arrange them geographically, as travel articles, and this also includes a kind of thematic arrangement, for they end, as most outer and inner journeys end, in a home-coming."² The small prairie town referred to in _Heart of a Stranger_ is, of course, Neepawa, Manitoba.

Neepawa was the model for Margaret Laurence's _Manawaka_—the name an amalgam of Manitoba and Neepawa. In "A Place to Stand On," the opening essay of _Heart of a

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Stranger, originally titled “Sources,” Laurence clarifies connections and delineates differences between her factual, personal hometown and her fictional, universal “town of the mind”: “Manawaka is not my hometown of Neepawa—it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the hill or the Wachakwa valley.... In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, a town of the mind [italics mine], my own private world, ... which one hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we all share” (HS, 3-4). Margaret Laurence metamorphoses the actual town of Neepawa into the mythological microcosm of Manawaka, the setting of her Canadian novels—The Stone Angel (1964), A Jest of God (1966), The Fire-Dwellers (1969), A Bird in the House (1970), and The Diviners (1974)—as I will argue in this essay. Nothing can traverse national boundaries so easily as the human imagination, and the artist uses fiction to recreate a private kingdom for Everyman or Everywoman to inhabit.

Many great writers have created mythical microcosms based on their birthplaces: we recall Walter Scott’s Waverley, Thomas Hardy’s Wessex, William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, and Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio. Canadian fiction is famous for its regional richness: “A ‘Dictionary of Canadian Mythology’ would contain a very large entry under ‘Small Town,’” as Clara Thomas declares in The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence. One thinks of Stephen Leacock’s Mariposa, Sinclair Ross’s Horizon, Robertson Davies’s Deptford, and Alice Munro’s Jubilee, to name but a few. Thomas insists that Manawaka is the most famous of these microcosms: “But no town in our literature has been so consistently and extensively developed as Margaret Laurence’s Manawaka. Through five works of fiction, it has grown as a vividly realized, microcosmic world, acting as a setting for the dilemmas of its unique individuals and also exercising its own powerful dynamic on them. Manawaka is also specifically, historically, and geographically authentic, dense with objects and true to its place and its development through time.”

I agree. But when I first visited Neepawa in 1988, after the Margaret Laurence memorial conference at Brandon University following her death on 5 January 1987, I was shocked. Neepawa was just like Manawaka in particulars—from the Brick House to the Little House, from the Regal Cafe to the Roxy Theatre, from River Street to Mountain Avenue, from the cemetery on the hill to the river in the valley—it was all there, exactly as in the novels. But it had none of their power. It was just a boring little burg—no different from any other prairie town or any small town anywhere—utterly lacking the mythic power of Laurence’s Manawaka. Then I saw the trestle bridge where John Shipley is killed in The Stone Angel, except that the train tracks were gone, leaving only the two earthen supports with a gap in the middle—Canada’s answer to Tintern Abbey perhaps. Then I realized that Neepawa/Manawaka was both a boring little burg and a town of mythic power—just as our birthplace appears small to our adult eyes, yet still retains the magical power it had for us as children. That is the miracle that Margaret Laurence recreates in Manawaka.

In this paper I will argue that Laurence is a mythmaker who mythologizes not only her home town of Neepawa as Manawaka in her fiction but also the actual Neepawa in her nonfiction. To support this claim, I draw on her collection of travel essays, Heart of a Stranger, a text that is virtually ignored by critics, even though it was the last adult book Laurence published.

The child may indeed be mother of the artist, for both view the world through magical lenses. Laurence’s mythologizing of Neepawa as Manawaka is essentially a child’s view of reality. She uses this quotation from Graham Greene’s Collected Essays to introduce “A Place to Stand On”: “The creative writer perceives his own world once and for all and for all in childhood and adolescence, and his whole career is an
effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share” (HS, 1). Laurence responds, “If Graham Greene is right—as I think he is—in his belief that a writer’s career is ‘an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share,’ then I think it is understandable that so much of my writing relates to the kind of prairie town in which I was born and in which I first began to be aware of myself” (HS, 6).

She begins “Where the World Began” by explaining how her childhood home created her adult vision: “Because that settlement and that land were my first and for many years my only real knowledge of this planet, in some profound way they remain my world, my way of viewing. My eyes were formed there” (HS, 237). And she concludes her personal essay with this manifesto: “This is where my world began. A world which includes the ancestors—both my own and other people’s ancestors who became mine. A world which formed me, and continues to do so, even while I fought it in some of its aspects, and continue to do so. A world which gave me my own lifework to do, because it was here that I learned the sight of my own particular eyes” (HS, 244). So Laurence acknowledges here the influence of her childhood perception on her adult writing.

Greene’s perception of a golden age of childhood and Laurence’s metamorphosis of Neepawa into the mythical Manawaka illustrate Selma Fraiburg’s theory of The Magic Years (1959), a text that profoundly influenced thinking about early childhood throughout the 1960s and 1970s, just when Laurence was composing her Manawaka novels and her Heart of a Stranger essays: “The magic years are the years of early childhood. . . . These are ‘magic’ years because the child in his early years is a magician—in the psychological sense. His earliest conception of the world is a magical one; he believes that his actions and his thoughts can bring about events. Later he extends this magic system and finds human attributes in natural phenomena and sees human or supra-human causes for natural events or for ordinary occurrences in his life. Gradually during these first years the child acquires knowledge of an objective world and is able to free his observations and his conclusions from the distortions of primitive thought.” Fraiburg’s description of the child as magician sounds like a definition of the creative artist, and her distinction between the imaginative and rational methods reads like a distinction between the artistic and scientific modes of thought, as delineated by C. P. Snow in his 1959 Rede Lecture on The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution. Karl Popper argued, “Science must begin with myths”—a view Claude Levi-Strauss developed, for myths explain or narrate scientific truths.

We can also extend Fraiberg’s argument from early childhood to ancient or primitive cultures, if we consider myth as defined by Myer H. Abrams in the following passage:

In classical Greek, “mythos” signified any story or plot, whether true or false. In its central modern significance, a myth is one story in a mythology—a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, as well as to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. . . .

A mythology, we can say, is any religion in which we no longer believe. Poets, however, long after having ceased to believe in them, have persisted in using the myths of Jupiter . . . and Jonah for their plots, episodes, or allusions; as Coleridge said, “still doth the old instinct bring back the old names.”

Laurence certainly brings back the old names from the Old Testament—in Hagar as she wanders in the wilderness in The Stone Angel, in Rachel as she weeps for her lost children, and in Jonah as he hides in the whale’s belly in
A Jest of God, to cite just a few examples—as well as from classical literature and mythology: Jason Currie, for example, recalls the legendary hero who rescued the Golden Fleece, and Hector Jonas recalls the Trojan prince, as well as the biblical Jonah, named in the Carl Sandburg poem “Losers,” which Laurence employs as the epigraph to A Jest of God.

In “Literature and Myth,” Northrop Frye explains how “the typical forms of myth become the conventions and genres of literature,” defining literature as a “developed mythology”: “We saw that one important social function of a mythology is to give a society an imaginative sense of its contract, of its abiding relations with the gods, with the order of nature, and within itself. When a mythology becomes a literature, its social function of providing a society with an imaginative vision of the human situation directly descends from its mythological parent. In this development the typical forms of myth become the conventions and genres of literature, and it is only when convention and genre are recognized to be essential aspects of literary form that the connexion of literature with myth becomes self-evident.”

Myth, as defined by Abrams and Frye, informs Margaret Laurence’s Manawaka, as we will see.

Paradoxically, myth may tell a greater truth than so-called reality. Perhaps that is why Plato exiled poets from his republic. Frye argues that “myth [is] a disguise for the real truth,” and Bruno Bettelheim argues, in The Uses of Enchantment (1976), that “fairy tales make such great and positive psychological contributions to the child’s inner growth” because “our cultural heritage finds expression in fairy tales, and through them is communicated to the child’s mind.” Bettelheim quotes Aristotle: “The friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth.”

Laurence insists, “I think that the fiction comes to have its own special reality”—like Morag Gunn, who declares in The Diviners, “The myths are my reality.” Maybe, in a metaphysical sense, Manawaka is more real than Neepawa. Laurence insists, “the fictional town of Manawaka often seems as real to me as my own town of Neepawa”; in fact, she often refers to her birthplace as Manawaka rather than Neepawa. The 1979 National Film Board documentary is titled First Lady of Manawaka, and Laurence put up a sign reading “Manawaka” at the shack on the Otonabee River near Peterborough, Ontario, where she wrote The Diviners.

Margaret Laurence’s Manawaka, like Hardy’s Wessex or Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, universalizes the human experience through mythologizing it. Laurence may mythologize reality habitually, for she allegorizes Neepawa not only in her fiction but even in her nonfiction. In her essay “Where the World Began,” the last piece in Heart of a Stranger, emphasizing the circular nature of her “long journey back home” (viii), she views her birthplace through the magical lenses of childhood, describing Neepawa in apocalyptic terms—“the Northern Lights flaring across the sky, like the scrawled signature of God” (238), suggesting the end of the world.

But myth must be rooted in reality. In “A Place to Stand On,” Laurence explains her need to employ the individual to convey the universal: “Writing, for me, has to be set firmly in some soil, some place, some outer and inner territory which might be described in anthropological terms as ‘cultural background’” (HS, 6). This soil gives Laurence’s fiction its vivid verisimilitude. Manitoba’s soil was rich: her poem published in Vox was prophetic:

Quietly I walk, wind-cloaked, 
Haring the rain’s promise 
That this land will be my immortality.

Laurence, in turn, immortalizes the Canadian prairies, its places and its people, in Manawaka. Paradoxically, particularizing fiction is precisely what universalizes it. Commenting on African literature in Long Drums and Cannons, Laurence says fiction “must be planted firmly in some soil” so it can “reach out beyond any national boundary.” She roots her own fiction in the rich soil of reality. She delineates the dual aspect of the importance of her roots
to her writing: "When one thinks of the influence of a place on one’s writing, two aspects come to mind. First, the physical presence of the place itself—its geography, its appearance. Second, the people. For me, the second aspect of environment is the most important, although in everything I have written which is set in Canada, whether or not actually set in Manitoba, somewhere some of my memories of the physical appearance of the prairies come in. . . . [for] these are things I will carry inside my skull for as long as I live, with the vividness of recall that only our first home can have for us" (HS, 4). So Laurence’s mythologizing of Neepawa as Manawaka involves two types of metamorphosis—a moralized landscape and legendary characters. Let us look first at her metaphorical mapping.

Manawaka is a moralized landscape or paysage moralisé in the tradition of John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, where features of topography symbolize social or moral values. Manawaka is dominated by two prominent sites, both denoting death. First is the cemetery on the hill, where Hagar starts her life story in The Stone Angel (1964). Manawaka’s graveyard parallels Neepawa’s Riverside Cemetery, where Margaret Laurence’s ashes are buried in the family plot, beneath the gaze of the stone angel that guards the graves, under a tablet reading Wemyss on one side and Laurence on the other, marking the end of her “long journey back home” (HS, viii). Neepawa’s graveyard faces a golf course across the river, a sharp contrast between the quick and the dead. But the dead do live. In “Where the World Began,” Laurence includes the dead in her community: “The dead lived in that place too. . . . My own young mother lay in that graveyard, beside other dead of our kin, and when I was ten, my father, too, only forty, left the living town for the dead dwelling on the hill” (HS, 241). The second repository for dead things in Manawaka is the nuisance grounds or garbage dump, which is next to the graveyard. This kingdom of garbage is ruled by that great scavenger of souls, Christie Logan, a scapegoat or Christ figure who takes away the sins of the world in the form of empty bottles and aborted babies. Morag, as an orphan, is a nuisance—white trash in the town’s eyes—so naturally she is cared for by the keeper of the Nuisance Grounds, becoming one of his “reclamation projects” (D, 26). Neepawa also called the garbage dump “the nuisance grounds”—“a phrase fraught with weird connotations, as though the effluvia of our lives was beneath contempt but at the same time was subtly threatening to the determined and sometimes hysterical propriety of our ways” (HS, 240), Laurence observes. Manawaka’s Wachakwa River valley, modeled on Neepawa’s Whitemud, with its sexual connotations, is a natural place for passion, a trysting spot for lovers like Rachel Cameron and Nick Kazlik in A Jest of God. In winter the frozen river is a source of delight for skaters or a fatal attraction—as it is for Dan Currie, when a black hole, “a deep wound on the white skin of ice,” is a window out of this world in The Stone Angel. Thus, we can see how Laurence uses topographical features realistically but also symbolically.

“Yet the outside world had its continuing marvels” (HS, 239), Laurence recalls, and hence she extends her moralized landscape to the terrain around the town, as she recreates her childhood kingdom in her Canadian fiction. Beyond Manawaka lie “Diamond Lake,” based on Clear Lake, where Laurence’s family summered, and “Galloping Mountain,” modeled on Riding Mountain. Whenever Stacey Cameron MacAindra needs to escape from the urban rat race in The Fire-Dwellers, she recalls Diamond Lake, scene of her happiest memories. At the end of The Diviners, Pique embarks for Galloping Mountain, where she will rejoin the remnants of the Tonnerre family to care for the orphaned children. Laurence’s romanticizing of Neepawa place names for Manawaka may be ironic when we recall Vanessa MacLeod’s remark in “The Loons” that “Galloping Mountain was now a national park, and Diamond Lake had been renamed Lake Wapakata, for it was felt that an Indian name would have a greater appeal to
tourists.” But even the actual place names are romanticized. Consider this passage from *Neepawa, Land of Plenty*, a 1958 publication commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of Neepawa: “NEEPAWA” comes from the language of the Crees and signifies ‘plenty’ or ‘abundance’. Thus, the town adopted as its emblem the Cornucopia, full to overflowing with the fruits of the earth. The word ‘Manitoba’ is a combination of two Indian words, ‘Manitou’—the Great Spirit, and ‘waba’, the narrows of Lake Manitoba. It has also been translated as ‘The Great Spirit’s Voice,’ probably reminiscent of the roar of the ocean-like surf on Lake Winnipeg.” Just as the name Manitoba is an amalgam of Manitou and waba, so the name Manawaka may be an amalgam of Manitoba and Neepawa. Laurence first used the invented name Manawaka in “Land of our Fathers,” her first narrative written at age thirteen in lined scribblers. But she abandoned the story about pioneers in disgust when she learned that her own grandfather, John Simpson, was a pioneer—just as the child Vanessa MacLeod does in *A Bird in the House*. The young Peggy Wemyss, like the fictional Vanessa, clearly prefers fictional pioneers to real ones. But the adult Vanessa recognizes the debt she owes her pioneering forebears: “I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins” (BH, 191). As Laurence acknowledges, “Scratch a Canadian, and you find a phony pioneer” (HS, 243).

Neepawa and Manitoba are Cree names meaning “Land of Plenty” and “God’s Country,” but that is not how they appeared to the young Peggy Wemyss growing up on the prairies, when “the Drought and Depression were like evil deities” (HS, 239). An escape artist like many adolescents, Laurence, who signed letters home *Prairie Flower*, longed to be out there “dancing on the earth,” as she explains in her memoir, *Dance on the Earth* (164). In “A Place to Stand On,” Laurence acknowledges that, as an adolescent, “my view of the prairie town from which I had come was still too prejudiced and distorted by closeness. I had to get farther away from it before I could begin to see it” (HS, 2). But in “Where the World Began” she acknowledges, “When I was eighteen, I couldn’t wait to get out of that town, away from the prairies. I did not know then that I would carry the land and town all my life within my skull, that they would form the mainspring and source of the writing I was to do, wherever and however far away I might live” (HS, 241-2).

For Laurence’s protagonists, as for the author herself, the railway is the great escape from the small prairie town, the link with the rest of Canada. The haunting voices of the trains summon all her fictional heroines away to farflung lands. Margaret Laurence herself enjoyed “a life-long love affair with the railways,” for “The long steel was what would carry us out of innumerable ruts in small towns during the Depression, into what we imagined to be the vast glamour and ease of other places, other lives” (DE, 61-62). For Stacey Cameron MacAindra, the “small-town girl” who has “shaken the dust of Manawaka off herself at last,” the train whistles beckon her to the big city. But for the mature Laurence, “the train is always moving west,” as she writes in her nostalgic 1983 poem “VIA Rail and Via Memory,” written on the occasion of her last trip out west to visit her younger brother Bob, who was dying of cancer:

because a train
of consequences binds me
like long-ago binder twine
twining lives and land together. (DE, 275)

This “train” of thought makes an ideal transition from the first of the influences of Laurence’s birthplace on her creativity, “the place itself,” to the second significant influence, “the people.” The railway did bind the dominion together, but the railroad also provided the proverbial social divide. The population of Manawaka, with its suggestion of Manawakan, is divided morally by the tracks into “upright” and “downright,” as Vanessa MacLeod puts it in *A Bird in the House* (16)—just as surely as the train tracks over the trestle
bridge separate life from death for John Shipley in *The Stone Angel*. This passage from *Neepawa, Land of Plenty*, illustrates this intrinsically moral view: “Because the country surrounding Neepawa was populated with industrious, courageous, God-fearing citizens, Neepawa became a good town; a good place in which to live because it was the centre of a number of good districts. The relationship has been good” (italics mine).20

Laurence recalls Neepawa’s own class barriers: “All of us cast stones in one shape or another. In grade school, among the vulnerable and violet girls we were, the feared and despised were those few older girls from what was charmingly termed ‘the wrong side of the tracks.’ Tough in talk and tougher in muscle, they were said to be whores already. And may have been, that being about the only profession readily available to them” (HS, 241). Manawaka replicates Neepawa’s great divide. In *A Jest of God*, Rachel Cameron, resident of Japonica Street, draws this distinction: “This is known as a good part of town. Not like the other side of the tracks, where the shack are and where the weeds are let grow knee-high and not dutifully mown, and where a few bootleggers drive new Chevrolets on the strength of home-made red biddy. No—that’s as it used to be when I was a kid, and I would go with Stacey sometimes, because she was never afraid. I don’t know what it’s like now. Half my children live at that end of town. I never go there, and know it only from hearsay, distorted local legend, or the occasional glimpse from a child’s words.”21 Even death respects this great divide. Rachel, living in the ironically named Cameron Funeral Home, declares, “No one in Manawaka ever dies, at least not on this side of the tracks. We are a gathering of immortals. We pass on, through Calla’s divine gates of topaz and azure, perhaps, but we do not die. Death is rude, unmannered, not to be spoken to in the street” (19-20). Death is banished by the proper Scots Presbyterians. Rachel reveals the ethnic origin of this class barrier: “Half the town is Scots descent and the other half is Ukrainian. Oil, as they say, and water. Both came for the same reasons, because they had nothing where they were before. That was a long way away and a long time ago. The Ukrainians knew how to be the better grain farmers, but the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God” (71). Laurence depicts the railway as the backbone of the nation in more ways than one—uniting the country but dividing the classes.

Unlike the Cameron sisters who live on the right side of the tracks, like Margaret Jean Wemyss herself, Morag, adopted daughter of the town scavenger in *The Diviners*, lives on the wrong side. Like James Joyce recreating the streets of Dublin in *Ulysses* from his self-imposed exile in Zurich, middle-aged Morag reruns mental films mapping Manawaka in *The Diviners*:

> I can smell the goddamn prairie dust on Hill Street, outside Christie’s palatial mansion.

> Hill Street, so named because it was on one part of the town hill which led down into the valley where the Wachakwa River ran. . . . Hill Street was the Scots-English equivalent of *The Other Side of the Tracks*, the shacks and shanties at the north end of Manawaka, where the Ukrainian section-hands on the CPR lived. Hill Street was below the town; it was inhabited by those who had not and never would make good. Remittance men and their draggled families. Drunks. People perpetually on relief. Occasional labourers, men whose tired women supported the family by going out to clean the big brick houses on top of the hill on the streets shaded by sturdy maples, elms, lombardy poplars. Hill Street—dedicated to flops, washouts and general nogoods, at least in the view of the town’s better-off. (36-37)

Everyone knows his place in the social hierarchy of Manawaka, symbolized by its moralized cityscape, with the upright at the top of the hill and the downright at the bottom. The Hill Street blues bottom out into the river valley, where the shacks house the people literally beyond the pale—“neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring” (BH, 108-9), as Vanessa’s
Grandmother MacLeod puts it, including the Métis family of Tonnerre. The actual shacks, which often caught fire, as one does in The Diviners, were recently eliminated from Neepawa and the area developed into a park.

Imaginative writers, such as Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, and Evelyn Waugh, to name just a few, often employ houses to reflect the character of their inhabitants, and Laurence does the same. The architecture of Manawaka's social hierarchy emblematizes the status of its inhabitants. As Vanessa recalls in the opening sentence of A Bird in the House, “That house in Manawaka is the one which, more than any other, I carry with me” (1). She refers to the Brick House, “part dwelling-place and part massive monument” (BH, 11) to Grandfather Connor. Just as Laurence insists, the Big House was “my grandfather's stronghold and he ruled it like Agamemnon ruling Mycenae or Jehovah ruling the world” (DE, 63), so Grandfather Connor's Brick House was like “some crusader's embattled fortress in a heathen wilderness” (BH, 11). At the end of A Bird in the House, Vanessa recalls: “Twenty years later, I went back to Manawaka again . . . . I did not go to look at Grandfather Connor's grave. There was no need. It was not his monument” (190-91).

So houses are memorials or coffins in Manawaka. In The Stone Angel, Hagar notes, “At the Shipley place the rusty machinery stood like aged bodies gradually expiring from exposure,” and the warped porch “wore a caved-in look, like toothless jaws” (169), reflecting the dying derelict Bram Shipley within. In The Diviners, the scavenger Christie Logan's house, full of discarded items—“good rubbish” (51)—from the town dump, is just an extension of the Nuisance Grounds.

Some of Laurence's houses in Manawaka, as in Neepawa, are literally mortuaries. Rachel and Stacey Cameron live over the mortuary where their father Niall Cameron reigned in his basement underworld as king of the dead, anesthetized by his own special enbalming fluid, in the Cameron Funeral Home that has less life than the real Riverside Cemetery. Similarly, the Simpson house in Neepawa, where Margaret Laurence spent her adolescent years, served as a funeral parlor: since her Grandfather Simpson was a cabinetmaker, he also fashioned the town's coffins, and during the Depression he gave a workman a child's coffin in payment for services rendered. Peggy Wemyss may have cowered in her bed at night, thinking of corpses awaiting burial in the basement. When the mature Margaret Laurence learned that the mellow old yellow brick house that she bought in Lakefield, Ontario, had been a funeral parlour, she almost died laughing (DE, 210). Ironically, the Simpson House in Neepawa, called the Brick House, is now the Margaret Laurence Home, maintained by a friendly staff as a memorial to the creator of the Manawaka Cycle.

Laurence extends her architectural analogy to the house of God, drawing class distinctions between different churches in Manawaka, modeled on Neepawa's own church denominations. Neepawa boasts a complete complement of religious establishments, including a Roman Catholic Church, an Orthodox Church, the United Church, attended by the Wemyss family, where Margaret Jean Wemyss herself was christened and married, the Presbyterian Church, which held out against Church Union, and the Anglican Church which displays a sign out front reading: “Drive carefully. The person you hit might be an Anglican.” Many of these churches are replicated in the fiction.

In A Jest of God, protagonist/narrator Rachel Cameron describes the Presbyterian Church that the Camerons attend religiously, contrasting it with the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn in religious and social terms. Comparing ecclesiastical architecture, Rachel says ironically of the Presbyterian Church, “The wood in this church is beautifully finished. Nothing ornate—heaven forbid. The congregation has good taste. . . . The Tabernacle has too much gaudiness and zeal, and this has too little” (47). The Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn resembles the proverbial haunted house, with its turrets and curlicues and its
crimson neon sign advertising resurrection. The interior of the tabernacle is vivid compared to the good taste of the Presbyterian church: "There is no altar, but at the front a kind of pulpit stands, bulky and new, pale wood blossoming in bunches of grapes and small sharp birds with beaks uplifted. The top of the pulpit is draped with white velvet, like a scarf, tasselled with limp silver threads, and on the velvet rests a book. The Book, of course, not jacketed severely in black but covered with some faintly glittering cloth or substance impersonating gold, and probably if the room were dark it would glow—or give off sparks" (36). The difference between the religious attitudes of the two churches is illustrated by their portraits of Christ. In the Presbyterian Church, "a stained-glass window shows a pretty and clean-cut Jesus expiring gently and with absolutely no inconvenience, no gore, no pain, just this nice and slightly effeminate insurance salesman who, somewhat incongruously, happens to be clad in a toga, holding his arms languidly up to something which might in other circumstances have been a cross" (47), while in the tabernacle "[t]wo large pictures are hanging, both Jesus, bearded and bleeding, his heart exposed and bristling with thorns like a scarlet pincushion" (36). The tabernacle's hymns are similarly passionate, celebrating surrender and vengeance, unlike the safely tasteful hymns of the Presbyterian Church with its tinkling carillon. The tabernacle preacher, unlike the Reverend Mr. MacElfrish, is fervent, speaking with arms outstretched about ecstatic utterances until a member of the congregation, eyes closed, "like a blind seer, a younger Tiresias" (41), speaks in tongues, inspiring "[t]he voice of Rachel" (43) to surface from its crypt for the first time.

The moralized landscapes and monumental mansions of Manawaka are peopled by larger-than-life characters, heroes and monsters, like the bogeys that children create out of pathetic derelicts: Laurence's Manawaka reflects Fraiberg's theory of the ambiguous magic world of childhood: "But a magic world is an unstable world, at times a spooky world, and as the child gropes his way toward reason and an objective world he must wrestle with the dangerous creatures of his imagination and the real and imagined dangers of the outer world, and periodically we are confronted with his inexplicable fears or baffling behaviour. Many of the problems presented by the child in these early years are, quite simply, disorders created by a primitive mental system that has not yet been subdued and put into its place by rational thought processes." Laurence insists that "The oddities of the place were endless" (240), as she recreates her childhood view of Neepawa's eccentrics and hoboes as legendary grotesques in "Where the World Began": "An old man lived, deranged, in a shack in the valley... a wild Methuselah figure shambling among the underbrush... muttering indecipherable curses or blessings, a prophet who had forgotten his prophecies... The kids called him Andy Gump, and feared him. Some sought to prove their bravery by tormenting him. They were the mediaeval bear baiters and he the lumbering bewildered bear half blind, only rarely turning to snarl" (HS, 241-2). As Laurence writes in "Where the World Began," "I had known all along in the deepest and often hidden caves of the heart that anything can happen anywhere, for the seeds of both man's freedom and his captivity are found everywhere, even in the microcosm of a prairie town" (HS, 243). As she insists, "Everything is to be found in a town like mine. Belsen, writ small but with the same ink" (HS, 241).

The denizens of Manawaka are as mythic as the childhood bogeymen of Neepawa. Laurence's characters are legendary figures: not just Piper Gunn, the hero of Christie Logan's Scots Tales—"a man with the voice of drums and the heart of a child and the gall of a thousand and the strength of conviction" (D, 59)—but Christie himself, the town scavenger, diviner of rubbish, who declares in his prophetic seer's voice, "By their garbage shall ye know them" (D, 48). All the characters in Laurence's "microcosm of a prairie town" (HS, 243) are types as well as individuals—from Ewen MacLeod, the town doctor, to Brampton...
Shipley, the town drunk. Many of Laurence’s characters achieve heroic status—“self-made man” Jason Currie (named for the warrior of the golden fleece), who “had pulled himself up by his bootstraps” (SA, 7), is like Laurence’s own Grandfather Simpson, who walked the fifty miles from Winnipeg to Portage La Prairie (HS, 5). Hagar Currie, who shouts her Highland war cry, “Gainsay who dare!” (SA, 15), is modeled on Laurence’s grandparents: “Hagar in The Stone Angel was not drawn from life, but she incorporates many of the qualities of my grandparents’ generation. Her speech is their speech, and her gods their gods” (HS, 4). Greta Coger says, “She creates a microcosm of Canadian history in Scots-Irish-English-Metis characters.”23 Just as Laurence acknowledges in Dance on the Earth idolizing and demonizing Grandfather Simpson, so Vanessa demonizes Grandfather Connor fuming in his basement dungeon with its whiff of brimstone. When I first visited the Brick House in 1988, I could see the vents through which Peggy Wemyss could have smelled John Simpson’s smoke. Stacey views her husband as “Agamemnon king of men” (FD, 8), and she envisions his boss Thor Thorlakson (actually Vernon Winkler) as a “bat-winged Mephistopheles” (44) and the “God of thunder” (244). Rachel Cameron views the new undertaker Hector Jonas, named ironically for two legendary figures, as a “Comic prophet, dwarf seer” (JG, 131). Rachel even allegorizes her lover and herself as “The milkman’s son. The undertaker’s daughter” (JG, 73). Many Laurence characters, such as Rachel and Hagar, are loaned legendary status by their biblical namesakes. Indeed, Hagar is arguably one of the most internationally famous figures in Canadian fiction, perhaps partly for this reason. John Lennox explains this phenomenon in “Manawaka and Deptford: Place and Voice”: “Manawaka’s mythologies are those of Scots-Irish Canada—the small town, mercantile Calvinism and the Old Testament world associated with both. They are the mythologies of heroes and self-made men like Jason Currie and Vanessa MacLeod’s Grandfather Connor whose foot journey of one hundred miles eventually assumes epic meaning in her mind. They are the legends of dispossessed newcomers like Piper Gunn. They are the stories of another ancient, wandering people seeking deliverance in a new land: Hagar, Abraham, Jacob and the angel in The Stone Angel; Rachel and Jonah in A Jest of God; Jericho’s walls in A Bird in the House; Sion in The Diviners. They are the history of the new land itself—Louis Riel and Batoche in The Diviners.”24 Consequently, Lennox concludes “Place and Voice”: “There is a way in which Laurence works out from her particular place and its times to touch what they, and we, represent universally.... Given this special skill and perception...it is ultimately the Manawaka voices which articulate the accents and places of the Canadian imagination with the most authentic resonance.”25

Manawaka and its people were so real to the author that when she completed The Diviners, the last novel in the Manawaka Cycle, Margaret Laurence wrote to Al Purdy on 3 February 1973: “Actually, for me this is a bit worse than the usual withdrawal symptoms at the end of a book, because in fact this is the end of a 12-year involvement with Manawaka and its inhabitants, and as the wheel comes full circle in this novel, it will be the last of those. There will, if this one is published, be 5 books concerning the town and its people. Little did I think, when writing THE STONE ANGEL, that it would all work out like this. So I feel a bit odd, and empty, as though part of my inner dwellingplace has now been removed from me. I don’t know where to go now—this is why I’ve always said this would likely be my last novel.”26

Manawaka is indelibly etched on the minds of both reader and writer. Laurence acknowledges, “I may not always write fiction set in Canada. But somewhere, perhaps in the memories of some characters, Manawaka will probably always be there, simply because whatever I am was shaped and formed in that sort of place, and my way of seeing, however much it may have changed over the years, remains in some enduring way that of a small-town prairie
person" (HS, 7). She says, "The town of my childhood could be called bizarre, agonizingly repressive or cruel at times, and the land in which it grew could be called harsh in the violence of its seasonal changes. But never merely flat or uninteresting. Never dull" (HS, 238). She extends her focus on the small town to encompass the whole nation: "The same, I now see could be said for Canada in general. Why on earth did generations of Canadians pretend to believe this country dull? We knew perfectly well it wasn't. . . . [But] living as we did under the huge shadows of those two dominating figures, Uncle Sam and Britannia, we have only just begun to value ourselves, our land, our abilities. We have only just begun to recognize our legends and to give shape to our myths" (HS, 242). Margaret Laurence is one of those Canadian writers who have made truth of myth and shaped the legend of our land. By mythologizing Neepawa as the microcosm of Manawaka, she has given Canada legendary status.

Laurence is such a great mythmaker, however, that she not only mythologized Neepawa as Manawaka in her fiction, but she also mythologized Neepawa in her nonfiction—as evidenced by Heart of a Stranger. Perhaps Fraiberg's theory of the magic years was borne out in Laurence: her childhood view of her birthplace made such an indelible impression on her that her vision of her hometown influenced not only her creative compositions but even her autobiographical writing. Maybe her self-styled status as a "Method writer" extended her mythic view of reality from her fictional works to her factual texts. Certainly, myth is at the heart of all her writing.

NOTES


7. Ibid., p. 37.


17. Margaret Laurence, Dance on the Earth (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), p. 73. Subsequent citations to Dance on the Earth appear in parentheses in the text, with the abbreviation DE added if necessary.


22. Fraiburg, Magic Years (note 4 above), pp. ix-x.


25. Ibid.
