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REVIEW ESSAY

Margaret Laurence's Epic Imagination. By Paul Comeau. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005. xviii + 186 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

Intimate Strangers: The Letters of Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy. Edited by Paul G. Socken. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2004. xvi + 104 pp. Selected bibliography, index. \$18.95.

Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer. By Donez Xiques. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2005. 408 pp. Photographs, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.

THE MAKING OF MARGARET LAURENCE'S EPIC VOICE

George Woodcock, international man of letters, once referred to Margaret Laurence as Canada's Tolstoy. To some the comparison seems far-fetched, out of scale, but for others it has substance. Certainly, both writers were from continental plains and were drawn to large events in their country's history; they wrote at length about the relations of the sexes, about injustice and the harsh impact of war, and about the plight of poor people. One could also note they both turned away from writing fiction in midcareer, feeling they had lost the gift, and instead addressed with moral authority the pressing issues of their times, trying to recover and practice the fundamentals of the Christian gospel. And for their large readerships they wrote in such a clear, straightforward, unadorned prose that they have been likened to forces of nature.

Woodcock's observation comes to mind as I turn to a new book titled *Margaret Laurence's Epic Imagination*, a book evoking in masterful fashion both the authority and the largesse of its subject. In this study, Paul Comeau, known for his essays on Willa Cather and several mid-century Canadian authors, traces the steady development of an epic voice in Laurence's

work, from its tentative beginnings in her African fiction, where myth and reality are fused in evocation of the oral tradition, to its culmination in the five linked Canadian books known as the Manawaka cycle. On the simplest level this study gives an account of Laurence's references to the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton in her writing, and it shows how she was always attentive to epic structures and the power of archetypes when creating plot and character. But Comeau's study reaches beyond allusions and archetypes; its concern is with epic in its political application—as a way of demonstrating how Margaret Laurence recorded on both national and personal levels “the human struggle for self-realization and redemption in an often hostile world.”

Comeau assembles several frames of critical reference to accomplish his goal. To measure the significant resonance of literary allusions, he turns to Northrop Frye's theories of myth and archetypes where literature is not viewed as a linear sequence but an “evolution of a single archetypal form . . . the whole of human life seen in the framework of fall and redemption.” Postcolonial theories of reading are engaged to examine the African writings, and

feminist reasoning helps Comeau chart the struggles of Laurence's female protagonists. To describe Laurence's concern to connect with the past, Comeau evokes Bakhtin's concept of dialogue that can take place between the verbal-ideological life of different generations, a critical strategy especially helpful to reading the stories in *A Bird in the House*. But it is David Quint's concept of the "loser epic" that is especially useful to Comeau for reading Laurence, especially *The Diviners*, a story not of society's powerful people, but of the marginal and defeated whose resistance contains the germ of a broader democratic politics.

The fine achievement in Comeau's study is that he blends these different critical approaches into his readings of the Laurence texts without ever disrupting our connection to the fiction. His epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* honoring Virgil is well chosen because, in beautifully measured prose, Comeau similarly guides us through Laurence's world, its hell, purgatory, and promise of heaven, signalling to us the larger reaches of her imagination and some of its meanings. For twenty years Laurence criticism has consisted of collections of essays on specialized topics; with its sustained original vision and comprehensive reading of all the author's works, this book brings new energy to Laurence studies, and confirms again her status as one of Canada's classic writers.

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Part of the scholarly apparatus necessary for the study of a major literary figure is the publication of letters. This is what situates a writer in his or her historical period and at the same time gives us an intimate glimpse of a personality that we would otherwise not see. There have been at least three substantial volumes of Laurence's letters, including her correspondence with Adele Wiseman, and with the poet Al Purdy. *Intimate Strangers: The Letters of Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy*, edited by Paul G. Socken, is a small collection, just thirty-two letters, nineteen of which have appeared in print before. The University of Manitoba Press

has unfortunately diminished the project with a miniature publishing format—the book is 4½ by 7 inches. The cream-colored dust jacket features a ribbon and bow to suggest a packet of letters tied together for safekeeping, but the title and subtitle are in small print and hard to locate at a first glance, and the editor's name is barely distinguishable at all. Matters are worse inside: the font used is so small and the typeface so frail that most readers will have to place the book under a strong halogen light in order to make out the text. It is not comfortable reading.

This is unfortunate because bringing together in one volume the letters these two writers exchanged is a very worthy project. Both were from Manitoba and shared the experience of a childhood on the prairies and an adult life spent in Ontario and Quebec respectively, far from the sources of their creativity. The correspondence began late in their lives when in 1976 Laurence wrote to say she had just reread *The Road Past Altamont*: "I shared something of that Manitoba background and could understand and feel it so well." The letters they wrote over the next seven years (until Roy's death in 1983) include discussions about their writing, Canadian politics, the weather and nature, and of course matters of health. There are words of love and admiration exchanged, and yet the tone of these letters is public rather than private, both speaking from a position of self-conscious eminence within their respective linguistic cultures. But it is this cross-cultural dialogue that holds our interest in this little collection, in the way it so easily transcends the two solitudes of language in Canada.

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Looking back with some regret on her full-length story of an artist's life in *The Song of the Lark*, Willa Cather wrote that "Success is never so interesting as struggle—not even to the successful." With something like this in mind perhaps, Donez Xiques in *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer* has chosen to confine her biography of Laurence to the

early life and apprenticeship years. Given that two full biographies of Laurence have recently been published, this choice was fortunate, for it allows Xiques to focus in great detail on the formative period, making her biography the authority on Laurence's early life. The research here is exhaustive in the best sense of that term; it represents fourteen years of interviewing people who knew Laurence and who were intimate with the different places in which she lived, reading at length in the Winnipeg newspapers that gave a daily account of Laurence's world as a college student and published her youthful journalism, reading her voluminous correspondence with friends and publishers, and locating and reading her literary agent's files. This painstaking research, recorded in a very readable style, provides a solid bedrock of information for a full account of the author's early years.

The story of Laurence's childhood and school days is comprehensive and in places moving, but as biographical narrative the sections I found most compelling are those that describe her experiences in Africa and her subsequent years in Vancouver as a young mother, all the while she is writing and working to find an audience for her fiction. What made these years for Laurence both exhilarating and difficult was her struggle to balance the conflicting demands made on her as wife, mother, and artist. This is the drama at the center of this

story, and Xiques describes vividly the terrific constraints of this life and the occasional release Laurence experienced when she was able to connect with fellow novelist Adele Wiseman, her friend from college.

Choosing to end her story at the point when Laurence achieves her first major publishing success also preserves dramatic interest, what Cather deemed missing in the latter half of *The Song of the Lark*. Laurence's struggle with her personal demons went on, but from this point forward her reputation was established and her success assured, as she became a literary icon. Xiques tells instead the story of a high-strung girl and young woman who was insecure and anxious, who was driven to succeed by a deep conviction that she was meant to be a writer, but whose struggles and achievements were eroded by a pervading sense of guilt and failure. On the dust jacket to this handsomely produced volume, Silver Donald Cameron observes pointedly that this biography is the "moving and truthful portrait of a young woman's struggle to liberate herself from herself, and to exercise her talent to the limit of its possibilities." This seems to me a very accurate description of *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer*.

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