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Book Review: Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence

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and Jack “returned the favour” for Lyall and Jean. Margaret, Lyall, and Jean remained friends until Margaret’s death in 1987. Lyall soon began interviewing her friends and family members for what would become this biography, which is based mostly on those interviews and on the many letters Margaret had written to friends, particularly Adele Wiseman and Al Purdy. The resulting “Life and Work” is companionable and gentle, similar in its information to the earlier James King biography but without the sensationalism.

Powers’s title sets his main contention: by “Alien Heart” he means that Margaret Laurence always functioned as the outsider, even when writing about her fictionalized hometown of Manawaka, Manitoba, and that she always identified with the underdog, the dispossessed and oppressed. He also argues that all of her work—except perhaps the critical study of Nigerian literature, *Long Drums and Cannons* (1968)—is essentially autobiographical, concerned with working out her own relationships to her underdog characters and with resolving the tensions in her marriage, separation, and eventually divorce from Jack. While the text could have benefited from one more editing to remove repetitions and a few typos, this is a sturdy biography that is likely to become the standard, especially as so many of the important people in Margaret’s life Powers interviewed have since died.

Alien Heart is organized in straight chronological order. It describes the Neepawa where Margaret grew up, the deaths of her parents, the powerful and supportive role of her Mum (technically her aunt and stepmother), her domineering grandfather, and her talent for making friends whom she would keep throughout her life. While the Neepawa chapters describe the prototypes for the characters in the Manawaka fiction, Powers does not really focus on the Plains, discussing the books themselves later, in the context of Margaret’s life as she was writing them. Then follow the years in Winnipeg, both in college and as a journalist, the move to London, and the years in Somalia and Ghana.

Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence. By Lyall Powers. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004; Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003. xx + 554 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95, C\$44.95.

Margaret Laurence, “First Lady of Manawaka,” is to the Great Plains approximately what William Faulkner is to the American Deep South. Her five connected novels about the fictional town of Manawaka provide a vivid and unforgettable picture of the Canadian Prairies, their people, and their global connections from about 1875 to 1975. Lyall Powers was a college classmate and friend of Margaret Laurence, then Peggy Wemyss, at United College in Winnipeg in the 1940s. His “special friend” and future wife, Jean Simpson, was maid of honor at Peggy’s wedding to Jack Laurence, and Peggy

Powers's study of the African years includes detailed examination of Margaret's first mature writings. Although he points out her disavowal of the expected *memsahib* role, he is not entirely successful at delineating her lifelong growth in understanding her role as a colonizer, both in Africa and, more fundamentally, in Canada. Margaret Laurence was one of the first writers to care about the appropriation of voice, forty or fifty years before the issue became a commonplace concern. Her understanding deepened and expanded over the years, especially in the last decade of her life working with the Northern and Native Studies faculty and students at Trent University in Ontario. Margaret's empathy and her great desire to grow in understanding seem to me her most endearing characteristics as a writer and a person—as well as the key to her attempts to reconceptualize the history of the Prairies—and I regret seeing so little exploration of that in this biography.

After Africa, the Laurences returned to Canada, to Vancouver, and Margaret began the books that would lead the Manawaka series, *The Stone Angel* (1964) and *A Bird in the House* (1970). But Jack could not find engineering work that really satisfied him in Canada, and the stresses in their marriage were exacerbated by her publishing successes and his dislike of the manuscript that would become *The Stone Angel*. They separated in 1962; he went to Pakistan and she and their two children moved to England.

Although *The Stone Angel* was drafted in Vancouver and *The Diviners* (1974), the last of the Manawaka books, was largely written at Margaret's "shack" on the Otonabee River in Ontario, Canada's most powerful and distinctive literary series was mostly written in England. Distance evidently gave Margaret a clarity and a passion. Powers also argues, reasonably convincingly, that the lack of a resolution with Jack kept Margaret writing, finding out through the lives of her heroines what aspects of love and companionship and respect she most needed in her own life—and that she

believed were most significant for growth and creativity in women.

Margaret's final decade in Ontario as an elder to her "tribe" of writers and people who care about social justice is covered relatively briefly. Powers deals with the attempts to remove her books from the schools but underlines more of the hypocrisy of their attackers than her own defense of the way that the sacred expresses itself through her characters—including through their sexuality. Powers writes honestly of Margaret's decision to end her life before being totally incapacitated by cancer and focuses on the completion of her last book, the extended memoir *Dance on the Earth* (1989).

The best introduction to Margaret Laurence will always be the writings of Margaret Laurence, especially the five Manawaka books, the three published volumes of her correspondence, and her memoir. But after one has become acquainted with that complex, vulnerable, wise, generous, and conflicted woman/writer, *Alien Heart* is a good source for recapitulation and further detail. Without blinking at or emphasizing Margaret's drinking and sometimes self-destructive relationships, Powers strongly recalls her kindness, her passion, her "idiom, and her "place to stand upon."

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