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Review of Dance on the Earth: A Memoir.

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I smile gently I hope
 because she couldn't have known
 and say
 "I was born and grew up
 hereabouts
 and for me this is
 the more interesting country."

Dance on the Earth: A Memoir. By Margaret Laurence. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, 1989. Preface, photographs. xv + 298 pp. \$26.95 Can.

The train moves west
 the American lady says
 "are you native-born Canadian?"
 Yes, I say, I'm surely that.
 Well, she says, can I tell her
 and her friend, Vancouver-bound,
 when we'll reach
 the more interesting country?

Hereabouts or "the more interesting country" is the Manitoba of Neepawa and Winnipeg; the "I" is the firm, familiar voice of Margaret Laurence (1926-1987); and the poem is the cleverly titled "VIA Rail and Via Memory," one of several included in the "Afterwords" section of Laurence's memoir, *Dance on the Earth*. These lines place Laurence as regionalist and they reveal her voice, a voice that, in its various fictional projections, most characterizes her writing and helps to account for her eminence among Canadian writers. It is in fact difficult to think of anyone else who, through fiction, speaks so powerfully and at such a gut level to more Canadians. Writing of *The Stone Angel* ("the novel into which I had invested my life, my heart, and my spirit" [165]) and the "wonderful release" she found in letting loose the voice of Hagar, Laurence notes that "the novel was reviewed in England as a study of an old person and in America as the story of a strong pioneer woman—but in Canada, Hagar was, and still is, seen as everybody's grandmother or great-grandmother" (166). Still is, indeed; Laurence, as *Dance on the Earth* reveals, worked very hard to develop that voice—gritty, idiomatic, Scots in flavor, its toughness at war with maternal and gentle urges. That sense of voice and the relation of that voice to cultural experience is what Canadians hear in reading Laurence; they recognize its urgency and authenticity.

That said I should report that it was with some hesitation that I read *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence's first major effort since *The Diviners* (1974) and a book that could only be put together after her death. I found it a revealing, engaging, and stimulating experience, however. To be sure, it is her official self-presentation, a record of how she came to—and wanted to—see her life. On one level it is the story of

a provincial, naive, and sensitive girl who became increasingly and responsibly politicized as her experience evolved. Dawnings of consciousness are here typically dawnings of political awareness. If she risks didacticism in the process, to hell, she seems to say, with reservations and restraints. Nevertheless, she is restrained and never for long interrupts the narrative's flow. The writer and the "Christian social democrat" do, however, go hand in hand in the mature Laurence who writes (of) herself.

Shaping the self-presentation on another level are the mothers in Laurence's life—her natural mother (who died young), the aunt who became her stepmother, and her mother-in-law, Elsie Fry Laurence, a remarkable woman who wrote two novels that were published fifty years and worlds apart. As a mother herself, torn between her husband (and her sensual life), her children, and her writing, she places herself in this line of influence, offering, despite much loss and pain, a book redolent in joy and "life's holy worth" (227), the quiet glories of the home place, and the powerful needs to nurture and create. It is a book to be read with Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, to which Laurence pays tribute. But it is also a book about the virtues of the ordinary. Margaret Laurence was extremely serious about this. She could not relate to that tendency in Virginia Woolf's fiction to write beyond a "sense of physical reality . . . ordinariness, dirt, earth, blood, yelling, a few messy kids" (130). She insists on everyday experience and pain. To a student of mine who criticized Stacey Cameron's ordinariness as the worried mother in *The Fire Dwellers*, Laurence had a firm and clear answer. "Listen, kid," she said in that voice she likely used in speaking to the impatient American traveler, "Stacey's pain is every bit as important as Leonard Cohen's. Don't forget that." I never will, and *Dance on the Earth* certainly helps to substantiate that claim.

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