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Review of *Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman* Edited by John Lennox and Ruth Panofsky

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Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman. Edited by John Lennox and Ruth Panofsky. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. Photo, introduction, note on text, index. x + 424 pp. \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

For various reasons, a great many more of Margaret Laurence's letters to Adele Wiseman survive than those in the opposite direction; consequently this collection gives better insight into Laurence's life and voice and work than Wiseman's. Laurence's is definitely a life and voice and work meriting insights. Wiseman is not entirely lacking, though we learn more about the details of her everyday life than of her writing or inner concerns.

What these letters demonstrate most clearly is how uncertain Laurence was about

her own writing and how misjudged both writers were by critics and, at times, even their own editors. Macmillan of Canada, which had published Wiseman's Governor General's Award-winning *The Sacrifice*, rejected *Crackpot* as "grotesque & incredible" (304), the editor even suggesting that Wiseman herself no longer had faith in the novel. Laurence wrote back that Wiseman was a prophetic writer, ahead of her time. Both Wiseman and Laurence recognized that *Crackpot* was, overall, right, but these letters, frustratingly, do not indicate what kind of revision Wiseman finally did undertake before publishing the novel.

The lion's share of the book belongs to Laurence and contains her most personal, most characteristic voice. She talks about her family, about her marriage, about her early need to conceal not only her writing but even the fact that she wrote from almost everyone but her husband, Jack, and Adele herself. She also writes about her separation and later divorce and her sense that she had unfairly hurt a good man simply by not being the kind of woman he needed. Unceasingly she worried about balancing her requirements as a writer with her children's claims on her as mother.

The letters are most revealing, however, of Laurence as a writer. She confides in them not what she intends her work to mean but rather her process—her sense that for her writing is discovery, a series of false starts, then finding the right voice, then pruning back her first draft to discover the story hidden inside. Sometimes she agonizes unsuccessfully for years, as with *The Fire-Dwellers*, to find a way to get outside herself and inhabit a character who impresses her as real. We also see Laurence's unswerving faith in Wiseman and her large canvases, while she believed her own books to be simpler and, because they focused on a single character, less profound and lasting. She predicted, unfortunately accurately, that *The Diviners* would be her last novel, though this may have been a self-fulfilling prophecy. The completely unconditional love between the two women gives

Laurence's voice the vulnerability and frankness she showed to friends in conversation.

In some of the last letters both writers laugh at the idea of future scholars going through their archives, but the letters do shed light on several current critical issues. Laurence's response to some of the negative reviews of *The Fire-Dwellers* might serve as a reply to James King's recent biography: reviewers say Stacey "does nothing but drink (who do they think gets meals in the MacAindra house?)" (300); who does one think served as Chancellor of Trent University and worked actively in politics and the peace movement? Laurence's concerns about cultural appropriation arise in her worrying about how to respond to the gift of a calendar with "a great deal of stuff about the religion of the Native Peoples of N. Amer. . . . It isn't that I am uninterested in the N. Amer indigenous religions . . . I am. But I am not an Indian and have this strong feeling that it is a kind of insult to *them* to be a make-believe one" (377).

This is the third and best volume of Laurence's letters published to date, a collection she herself had begun to accumulate before her death and one that deals with the central friendship of her life. Read it for sure.

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