

# THE MAZE OF LIFE

*The Work of  
Margaret Laurence*

*S. E. Read*

**D**R. JOHNSON in his "Preface to Shakespeare" comments trenchantly on the hazards of evaluating that which is new in the realm of the creative arts. "To works . . . of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem." Yet the new must be tested and appraised, and esteem or condemnation rendered, long before the passing of the traditional century, "the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit."

To criticize the writings of Margaret Laurence is to criticize that which is new — very new. Five years ago her name was unknown to the reading public. Today, as the result of the publication of four works, three of which appeared in a few brief months in 1963 and 1964, she is recognized in many parts of the English-speaking world as a serious writer who has already achieved greatly and who gives promise of even greater achievement. I realize, of course, that the excellence of her works "is not absolute and definite," but when I read her pages I feel certain that her means are just, and "Applause, in spite of trivial faults, is due."

Margaret Laurence is a Canadian, born in Neepawa, Manitoba, a very small prairie town somewhat to the northeast of Brandon. She graduated from the

University of Manitoba but shortly after found herself in the British protectorate of Somaliland (now part of the Republic of Somalia), the young wife of a British civil engineer. She then moved to the Gold Coast (now Ghana); later, for a brief period, to Vancouver; then back to England. But wherever she goes, she looks, sees, records, studies, and remembers. For she had the eye of an artist and from the world of her experience she draws the materials for the patterns of her writing. And the patterns are many and varied.

Though the establishment of her reputation has been brilliantly rapid, this is not to say that she sprang full armed from the head of Melpomene, or some such suitable muse. From childhood on she has studied and practised the craft of story telling, and readers of *Prism* and *Queen's Quarterly* may recall a few of her short stories published in the late 1950's. But her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, did not appear until 1960, to be followed, after a silence of more than two years, by *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963), *The Tomorrow Tamer* (1963), and *The Stone Angel* (1964). It is on these books that her present reputation rests.

*The Prophet's Camel Bell* makes the best starting point for an article of this general nature. It most fully reveals the writer herself — her character and personality, her attitudes and opinions, her sensitivity and her reactions to the world around her, her ability to observe and interpret, her approach to the business of writing.

The work itself does not slip easily into any rigid category. It starts like a journal and in some parts reads like a journal. But basically it is a commentary on a people — the Somalis — and on their character, their ways of life, and their literature. It also contains a series of sharp, penetrating sketches of individuals — Somalis, Italians, British. But free of dates and the binding restrictions of time, it has a timeless feeling about it that sets the work quite apart from the usual books of travel and adventure in distant and exotic parts.

Mrs. Laurence was twenty-four or less when she went to Somaliland as the wife of an English engineer, who had been appointed by the British Government to direct the construction of a series of *ballehs* or earth dams along the southern edge of the Protectorate, just to the north of the Ethiopian boundary. The area is known as the Haud. On its northern edge is Hargeisa, the only town of any size, and it is no centre of civilization. The economy of the country is poor; the chief occupation is grazing camels and sheep; the population is almost entirely Moslem; the number of Europeans is very small; and the heat can be extreme. Yet into the Haud Mrs. Laurence went, to be with her husband as he surveyed the project and as he supervised the building of the *ballehs* that were to store water and to

bring some assurance of life to the animals and the people of the land. Conditions were tough and the hazards real. Yet it is from this background that Mrs. Laurence drew the fabrics for the *Prophet's Camel Bell*; and — if I may hazard a guess — it is within this circle of time that she began to mature as a writer.

If she had not been herself she might well have become a memsahib, a well behaved, tea-going wife of a sahib. This would have been the right and proper thing to do. But she saw the distance which the memsahibs “put between themselves and the Somalis” and quickly took the unconventional road. Within hours of arriving at Hargeisa she had gone to the town's centre *on foot* (“European women did not go to the Somali town alone, and no European ever went on foot. It simply wasn't done.”); she soon entertained Somalis in her house; and before long she moved into the wilderness to live with the working crews. Actions such as these require courage, independence, and perhaps a good sense of humour. Mrs. Laurence has all three.

But she did not do these things just to be contrary. She wanted to learn, to know, and to acquire materials from which books might be made. She not only observed and listened, with keen eyes and delicately atuned ears; she also studied works on Somaliland (for example, Richard Burton's classic, *First Steps in East Africa*), and immersed herself in the language and the unwritten literature of the people. In brief, she became a thoroughly disciplined and a hard working scholar and writer.

Two works resulted. The first, *A Tree for Poverty*, a translation of traditional though unrecorded tales and poems, was published by the Somaliland government in 1954; the second, *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, appeared almost a decade later, in 1963. I have not seen the earlier work, but one chapter in the more recent book is entitled “A Tree for Poverty” and contains critical comments on the literature of the Somalis, as well as extended examples of poems and tales. Included are one *belwo*, a short love poem; an extract from a *gabei*, the highest literary form, impressive in proportions and technique; and two thoroughly delightful tales, rapid in movement, rich in humour, and revealing Somali attitudes towards life, death, and Allah.

All in all, the Somaliland venture must have been a rich one for Mrs. Laurence, and by the time she moved from Somaliland into the Gold Coast (still not yet Ghana) she had become a skilled stylist, a sharp observer of landscapes and people, deeply involved in the study of language, folk lore, myths, and traditions. She was ready to begin the groundwork for her volume of short stories, *The Tomorrow-Tamer*, and the novel that brought her initial fame, *This Side Jordan*.

I AM NOT QUITE SURE when the Laurences went to the Gold Coast, but it was in the period of transition — shortly before Ghana became independent in 1957. Certainly the atmosphere of change — of breakdown and building, of white withdrawal and black upsurge, of uncertain conflict and deep-rooted suspicion — runs through all the stories and through the novel, a unifying, binding current.

Ten stories in all compose *The Tomorrow-Tamer*. Nine of them had been previously published in magazines and periodicals from 1956 to 1963. All of them are gems, though some more finely cut than others, and the volume is unified by a common theme — the dying of the old way of life and the birth of the new. *The Tomorrow-Tamer* has been wisely chosen as the core story for the volume. Not only is it the best story, but it best expresses the inevitable conflict inherent in change.

In bare outline the story is simple. A bridge is to be built across the river Owura. The bridge will link the village Owurasu with the outside world. The village is old and primitive, in the grip of the ancient gods and the old superstitions. The bridge is new, modern, and, to the villagers, a mystery. Will the river god be offended by the structure that slowly begins to span the waters? Will the destruction of the sacred grove bring disaster? At first the young man Kofi is the only villager the council of elders will allow to work with the invading labour force. When no harm comes to him, other villagers are allowed to join in the work. Kofi becomes their leader; then, in his own mind, he becomes the priest of the bridge. He will tend it; fearless he will tame it. In his pride, he climbs to the highest beam of the great structure, and standing erect on the steel he gazes even higher — into the sun. Blinded by the sudden brilliance, he loses his balance and plunges to his death in the waters far below.

As for the people of Owurasu, they were not surprised. They understood perfectly well what had happened. The bridge, clearly, had sacrificed its priest in order to appease the river. The people felt they knew the bridge now. Kofi had been the first to recognize the shrine, but he had been wrong about one thing. The bridge was not as powerful as Owura. The river had been acknowledged as elder. The queenly bridge had paid its homage and was a part of Owurasu at last.

This conflict, clearly symbolic, is repeated with varying patterns in the other stories — at times with humour, at times with a touch of sentiment, at times with irony and bitterness. “The Merchant of Heaven”, the tale of Amory Lemon,

“proselytizer for a mission known as the Angel of Philadelphia,” is a bitter and acid comment on a salvager of souls who is no better than the witch doctor in a bush village; “The Perfume Sea” is a delightful tale of Archipelago, “English-Style Barber European Ladies’ Hairdresser,” who managed to survive the impact of change by merging his interests with that of his manicurist and beautician and painting a new sign that read:

ARCHIPELAGO & DOREE

BARBERSHOP

ALL-BEAUTY SALON

*African Ladies a Specialty*

And “The Pure Diamond Man” is a good-fun story of a fast operator, Tettel, who tries to make quick money by selling the secrets of village magic to an amateur anthropologist only to be caught in his own trickery. It is satiric, but not as serious a study of change as the other stories I have mentioned. All in all it is a collection of delightful and brilliantly told tales. I shall say more later about the distinguishing characteristics of the style.

To date, Mrs. Laurence has had two novels published — *This Side Jordan* and *The Stone Angel*. The first (and it is the earlier) belongs to the African period; the second is purely Canadian in its setting.

*This Side Jordan* continues the theme that runs through the tales. The setting is again Ghana; the time, the transitional period of Ghanaian independence. The action stems from the problem of adjustment — the adjustment of the African to a new-found freedom; the adjustment of the English to a radically and rapidly changing position. The characters are neatly arranged in two opposing groups — Africans on the left, English on the right; and the action is skilfully developed (though at times it seems slightly artificial or contrived) so as to bring the two groups spasmodically together. Irritation, suspicion, anger, even hate are the recurring results when their paths cross.

Johnnie Kestoe, the principal English character, is an opportunist — aggressive, short-sighted, intolerant, and self-centred. As a new employee of the Textile Division of a long-established English firm, he does not understand the world he is in, nor does he want to. Only at the end does he shift ground slightly, but then by necessity more than desire. His dramatic opponent, Nathaniel Amegbe, school-master at Futura Academy (principal and owner, Jacob Abraham), is unqualified, underpaid, somewhat stupid, slightly dishonest, and, still close to the primi-

tive ways and superstitions of the bush village from which he came, confused and frustrated by Christianity, education, and city life. But, unlike Kestoe, Amegbe is something of an idealist, though slightly tarnished, and can dream about, and is willing to work for, a better world in the not too distant future.

This balance of opposites is neatly extended to include the two wives. Miranda, the wife of Kestoe, is painfully curious about the African way of life and embarrasses the sensitive Amegbe at every turn. Aya, Amegbe's wife, is ignorant, suspicious, hostile. Both women, as the novel opens, are pregnant; and, as the novel comes to its close, they find themselves together in hospital, each awaiting the common experience of birth. Within hours, to each a child is born — to Miranda, a girl, Mary; to Aya, a boy, Joshua. And with their birth, hope for the future is also born — the new Mary may bring a new love, the new Joshua may well lead his people to "this side Jordan."

Around this central four revolve a half dozen or more other characters — black and white. None is perfect, either in virtue or villainy; all are caught in the whirlpool of change, all are confused, each in his own degree. Some resist and break; some compromise and survive. All are sketched with penetrating insight and considerable sympathy. For — if I read it aright — this is a novel that damns no one completely. Rather it is a novel that pleads for understanding and enlightenment. As such, it was, and is, a successful and exciting work. As such, too, it creates its own limitations — for it is a novel that deals with a problem of a moment, and, with the passing of time, its reason for being will be darkened, and interest in it will decline.

With the writing of *The Stone Angel*, Mrs. Laurence reached full maturity as a novelist. In my opinion she must now be considered as a significant literary artist — on any terms. For here she has created a great central character, untrammelled by bounds of place or time; and has handled her core theme — the aging of a prideful, independent woman — with profound sympathy and telling conviction. This is a novel that should appeal to many readers for many years to come.

The book's jacket describes the work as a "novel with a Canadian setting." True. Part of the action unrolls in Manawaka, a small town somewhere on the prairie; part in a nameless city (Vancouver — perhaps) on the western seaboard. But these settings are condiments. They give flavour or spice, but they are not the essential food. That is Hagar Shipley, an old and stubborn woman of ninety, who is "rampant with memory," but who also finds that each passing day has for her a rarity which must be treasured and admired.

It is the weaving of these past and present strands that makes the final fabric of the work. Through an alternating pattern we are given the story of her life and the account of her last struggle to maintain her independence; and when the weaving is done, we see her as a character portrayed with deep understanding and sympathy. This autobiographical technique — combining as it does reminiscence and stream of consciousness — may produce some flaws and certainly demands suspension of disbelief; but it is handled with skill and daring and produces a fast moving story and a strong feeling of tension.

Hagar Shipley is a Lear-like figure. She is prideful, stubborn, hard, opinionated, and confused. Like her Biblical namesake, she wanders in a wilderness of her own making. Like the stone angel that stands over the remains “of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one,” she views her world with sightless eyes, for the marble monument was “doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight. Whoever carved her had left the eyeballs blank.” But, like Lear, she — Hagar — through the agony of her last days, achieves vision, understands human suffering, and reaches out her hands in a dying gesture of love.

The time span of the final action is short — a few days. But these days are rich in experience and deep with meaning. They frame her last struggle to retain her independence. Against her are ranged her disintegrating body, a bumbling son, Melvin, and a plotting, offensive daughter-in-law, Doris. Against the attacks of the flesh she is helpless; against the scheming of her human opponents she stands firm. With the sharpness of an old vixen she rightly foresees their plan to place her in “Silverthreads,” a nursing home where “Mother will find the companionship of those her age, plus every comfort and convenience,” and, with animal courage, she seeks salvation in flight.

Alone, by the edge of the sea, she takes refuge from storm and cold in a crumbling cannery building. She seeks and finds courage not through hymns or the Twenty-third Psalm, but through lines from Keats:

Old Meg was brave as Margaret Queen,  
And tall as Amazon;  
An old red blanket coat she wore,  
A ship hat had she on.

She reviews the darkest moments of her life — the deaths of her drunken husband and her favourite son John, upon whom she had lavished her affection only to

have him become her Ishmael, whose hand was "against every man, and every man's hand against him." Then into the blackness of her night comes a fool — a vague parallel, perhaps, but a parallel none the less of Lear's fool — a tipling insurance salesman, Murray F. Lees. Together they fill their bellies with cheap red wine, then tell, each to the other, sad tales of loss and of sorrow. And to Hagar, as she listens to Lees and as she receives from him understanding and kindness, comes understanding of self and the realization that tragedy is the common lot of man.

A few days later, after being found by her distraught son and daughter-in-law, old Hagar dies in hospital, but not before she has shown, through acts of kindness to those around her, that she has found a new meaning to life. Through freely giving of self, the old stone angel at last receives eyes and sees with terrifying clarity that she herself has been the cause of her blackened years. "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that lead me was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched."

It is the creation of Hagar Shipley that clearly marks — for me at least — the emergence of Mrs. Laurence as a fine novelist. For the first business of a serious novelist is the creation of character. And when any particular character slips, almost imperceptibly perhaps, beyond the realms of obvious fiction into the world of reality then the summit of the novelist's art has been achieved. Such is Hagar. She belongs in that great company that begins with Chaucer's Monk and Pardoner, Prioress and Wife of Bath and stretches through the works of the great down to our present day. At times vicious and vulgar, irascible and prideful, stubborn and independent, she is by no means loveable; but she is capable of profound feelings and in the end demands respect. I'll forget, eventually, Johnnie Kestoe and Nathaniel Amegbe; but I'll not forget the Stone Angel. I may even see her from time to time — on the street, in a bus, or in a hospital ward; for she is timeless and the world is her home.

It is evident from what I have already said that Margaret Laurence can tell a good story — short or long, skilfully handle tense dramatic situations, observe with microscopic eye the societies in which she has lived, and create memorable characters. But she can also write extremely well. Her command of language is sure and controlled. Each word is precisely chosen to produce a desired effect, and each sentence is carefully structured to fit the mood of the moment or the motion of the action. Through her extraordinary powers of observation combined with her sure grasp of words she can transport the reader into far-distant lands



where sights, sounds, smells, colours form patterns quite different from those we encounter in our own round of life. Take, for example, a brief passage from "The Merchant of Heaven" where the narrator and Brother Lemon, the evangelist, walk through the streets of a Ghanaian town:

On our second trip, however, he began to notice other things. A boy with suppurating yaws covering nearly as much of his body as did his shreds of clothing. A loin-clothed labourer carrying a headload so heavy that his flimsy legs buckled and bent. A trader woman minding a roadside stall on which her living was spread — a half dozen boxes of cube sugar and a handful of pink plastic combs. A girl child squatting modestly in the filth-flowing gutter. A grinning penny-pleading gamin with a belly outpuffed by navel hernia. A young woman, pregnant and carrying another infant on her back, her placid eyes growing all at once proud and hating as we passed comfortably by. An old Muslim beggar who howled and shouted *sura* from the Qoran, and then, silent, looked and looked with the unclouded innocent eyes of lunacy.

Or take the opening lines of "The Tomorrow-Tamer," lines filled with rapid movement, strong colours, and local lore:

The dust rose like clouds of red locusts around the small stampeding hooves of taggle-furred goats and the frantic wings of chickens with all their feathers awry. Behind them the children darted, their bodies velvety with dust, like a flash and tumble of brown butterflies in the sun.

The young man laughed to see them, and began to lope after them. Past the palms where the tapsters got wine, and the sacred grave to Owura, god of the river. Past the shrine where Nana Ayensu poured libation to the dead and guardian grandsires. Past the thicket of ghosts, where the graves were, where every leaf and flower had fed on someone's kin, and the wind was the thin whisper-speech of ancestral spirits. Past the deserted huts, clay walls runnelled by rain, where rats and demons dwelt in unholy brotherhood. Past the old men drowsing in doorways, dreaming of women, perhaps, or death. Past the good huts with their brown baked walls strong against any threatening night-thing, the slithering snake carrying in its secret sac the end of life, or red-eyed Sasabonsam, huge and hairy, older than time and always hungry.

Or again, this passage from *The Stone Angel*, which further illustrates Mrs. Laurence's profound powers of perception, her delicate handling of language, and her ability to penetrate the workings of the mind. Old Hagar, having fled from her family, sits alone in the forest. Her mind wanders freely, the movement is slow, poetic:

Now I perceive that the forest is not still at all, but crammed with creatures scurrying here and there on multitudinous and mysterious errands. A line of ants crosses the tree trunk where I'm sitting. Solemn and in single file they march towards some miniature battle or carrion feast. A giant slug oozes across my path, flowing with infinite slowness like a stagnant creek. My log is covered with moss — I pluck it, and an enormous piece comes away in my hand. It's long and curly as hair, a green wig suitable for some judicial owl holding court over the thievish jays of scavenging beetles. Beside me grows a shelf of fungus, the velvety underside a mushroom colour, and when I touch it, it takes and retains my fingerprint. From the ground nearby sprouts a scarlet-tipped Indian paintbrush — that's for the scribe. Now we need only summon the sparrows as jurors, but they'd condemn me quick as a wink, no doubt.

With equal skill, Mrs. Laurence handles the dialogue of her characters. She has a fine ear for conversation, and through the nuances of idiom, the tonal variations that exist between young and old, native and non-native, and the vocabulary differences between educated and uneducated she keeps her characters sharply apart. She rarely fumbles, for she is a genuine artist in the handling of words. There is little padding. Each word — even each sound — has its place in the overall pattern. As a result, she is effective, persuasive, and at times deeply moving.

But she is not effective and moving merely because she writes well. In the last analysis, I believe that her potential greatness — a greatness not yet fully realized — lies in the fact that through all her works runs a deep and passionate interest in human beings. From *The Prophet's Camel Bell* through to *The Stone Angel* there is an ever-present call for understanding and tolerance between individuals, of different races or of the same race. In none of her works is Mrs. Laurence just a slick and a brilliant teller of tales, nor a cold, albeit perceptive analyst. She is deeply moved, I am sure, by the tragedies of human existence, by man's constant frustrations as he tries to work through the Minoan maze that is life. She writes because she is impelled to write, not as a propagandist or an orthodox moralist, but as one willing to wrestle unceasingly with the human dilemma. Her far distant ancestor is the unknown author of Job who in his own questioning anguish cried:

Oh that my words were now written!  
 Oh that they were inscribed in a book!  
 That with an iron pen and lead  
 They were graven in the rock for ever!