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Book Review: Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning

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Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning. By Christian Riegel. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003. 192 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paper.

Writing Grief promises two departures in Laurence criticism: a study of the literary output in the context of the author's life, and a theoretically informed work on the psychology of grief. In his introduction the author asserts that mourning is pervasive in Margaret Laurence's work and that "her personal life was deeply informed by her first hand experience of death"; he then proposes that "for Laurence, this work of mourning involved writing texts that explored autobiographical materials." One expects, therefore, an exploration of fictional texts informed at each turn by biographical and autobiographical materials, an innovation in Laurence study that would be led by what now seems a logical progression in Laurence's work—from fiction based far from her prairie roots, through the Manawaka home ground fictions, to what Laurence herself called her "spiritual" autobiography, *The Diviners*, and the memoir of her last years, *Dance on the Earth*—to show the effect of "her first hand experience" on her art, and perhaps even the effect of her art on her own work of mourning.

The second promise is implicit in the quotation that begins the work, Derrida's proposal (echoed in the subtitle of Riegel's text) in his *Work of Mourning* that "one should not develop a taste for mourning, and yet mourn we *must*." This raises an expectation that we will find Derrida's ideas on mourning, and perhaps the more seminal work, Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," explored in detail as critical/theoretical texts that facilitate this new reading of

Laurence and her work. These expectations of innovation are left largely unfulfilled as this text settles down to some pretty unsurprising readings of the five Manawaka books, with only casual reference to the autobiographical nature of *A Bird In the House* and *The Diviners*, and a mere paragraph on *Dance on the Earth* early in the introduction. As for Derrida and Freud, they do not become integral to the close readings, only appearing in concert in the introduction to introduce the idea of mourning as work, and not often after that, except as Freud is used to tease out meaning from the German word *trauerarbeit*. While other critics and theorists are introduced to support the text's "work of mourning" argument, such as anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, their ideas remain briefly stated and not well integrated with the exploration of the five Manawaka texts Riegel has chosen for close reading.

Each chapter that follows the introduction deals with one of the five sister texts, proposing Hagar as occupying three liminal stages of mourning, Rachel as involved in mourning as a prelude to awakening, and Stacey as existing in the nightmare reality of mourning that will never end; while in the two writer/heroines texts, the lives of the central characters justifiably take second place to the idea of mourning as aesthetic product and part of the elegiac tradition in literature. In each chapter, Riegel presents ideas that might well offer innovative readings of Laurence. For example, he proposes that Rachel is in rebellion against the "taboos" that modern Western society puts in the way of the work of mourning; or in the case of *The Diviners*, he argues that renaming this novel from bildungsroman (or kunstlerroman) to thanatosroman will redirect our reading to the important culmination that Laurence reaches in terms of the work of mourning. As in the introduction, however, the promise of these proposals is not carried out in the competent but rather standard readings that follow. This is unfortunate, because, by and large, studies of Laurence have not yet raised the reading of her works to the level of sophistication they

deserve. She was, indeed, a brilliant writer of her century, one for whom the theories of the most germane modernist and postmodern theorists of culture, and literature, from Freud to Kristeva, have important resonance.

In terms of the theme of mourning, for example, it might be useful to look more critically at Laurence's life and work in terms of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" to distinguish more closely the difference between the two states: mourning as "work" and mourning as "pathology." This might lead to some interesting, if difficult, questions about her art, her life, and the nature of writing in general. Was Laurence herself a sufferer from melancholia, one who could never acknowledge the extent of her own loss, one who incorporates the lost object into her own ego, with the resultant guilt and unrelieved mourning? If so, were these works brilliant, artful, compensatory "work," with her heroines drawn accurately as victims of melancholia, ones who have encrypted loss into their psyches? To what degree does each heroine unlock the crypt of melancholia? To what degree does Laurence's final memoir turn melancholia into a celebratory mourning as surely as a singing holy man, a needy son, and a girl who requires a bedpan turn Hagar's life from defeat to victory? To what degree does being a female victim of melancholia change the psychological parameters of the pathology?

Critiques of Laurence in general and this one in particular have, in my view, been too polite to the much loved author, too respectful of traditional critical values of the author as superior person in taking up her works. The result is far too many critiques that do not tangle with complex creations like Hagar and Stacey with the same boldness as we do with, for example, that other famous melancholic, Hamlet. Laurence's heroines are as memorable an expression of human suffering at the end of the modern era as Hamlet was at its beginning. They deserve the same level of critical study.

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