

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2009

Review of *Divining Margaret Laurence: A Study of Her Complete Writings* By Nora Foster Stovel

Lyall H. Powers
University of Michigan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Powers, Lyall H., "Review of *Divining Margaret Laurence: A Study of Her Complete Writings* By Nora Foster Stovel" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1257.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1257>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

admirer. Malcolm Ross did not teach the future Margaret Laurence or anyone else at United College (now the University of Winnipeg): I was a student with Peggy Wemyss in Ross's stunning "Seventeenth-Century Thought" on the Fort Garry campus of the University of Manitoba (and in spite of the uncorrected typo of photo #18, following p. 124, of my *Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence* [2003]).

More serious, Stovel repeats Denez Xiques's misreading (in *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer* [2005]) of Laurence's early and impressive poem "Pagan Point," where one notes the evident opposition of the "unearthly paganism" of "Old Neptune . . . and the ancient battle-voice of Thor" to what replaced them. Peggy's pagan gods are associated with "the cry, / raucous and heathen, of a far-off loon," anticipating the loons heard by Piquette in *A Bird in the House*. Piquette belongs to the family Tonnerre (some *Canadiens* recognize that as the family of Thor) and "might have been the only one, after all, who had heard the crying of the loons," also heard by Allie Chorniuk in "Dance on the Earth" who thinks "but tonight their voices are silent"—*Homo sapiens* "is driving them away from the lakes, or killing them off . . . The thought . . . hurts unbearably" (quoted in *Alien Heart*, 449). The opposition here (which Stovel discerns) is also that of "Pagan Point": "the raucous and heathen loon" versus the "dim cathedral—full of rest, . . . where Man *may* [*sic*] find his God." This is like the opposition to Tennyson's meek and mild Lotos Eaters posed by Ulysses, whose aim was echoed in the motto of Peggy Wemyss's high school: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." The attitude of Blake ("Was Jesus gentle . . .?"), was familiar as well to Hagar's creator. This misreading is almost as regrettable as identifying "Henry James's definition of the novel as a loose, baggy monster" (*Divining*, 247), a phrase James used in his preface to *The Tragic Muse* as a critique of certain novels, not as a definition of the genre.

Quite as grievous is Stovel's accepting, untested and bizarrely supported, the authority of James King (*The Life of Margaret Laurence*

Divining Margaret Laurence: A Study of Her Complete Writings. By Nora Foster Stovel. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. xxi + 406 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$95.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Neil Besner is right to judge Nora Foster Stovel's *Divining* highly: it "ranges across all of Laurence's work . . . intelligently and accessibly," as he says on the jacket. Before I augment his praise I must note a couple of blemishes, if Stovel will accept the soft impeachment of an

[1997]) on such serious matters as Laurence's association with George Lamming, particularly her characterization of a "catalytic love affair with Barbadian novelist George Lamming" (308) as being largely responsible for Laurence's separation from her husband.

The truly brilliant achievements of Stovel's *Divining* are, first, her critical review of Laurence's African texts (85-152), especially *Long Drums and Canons* and the hitherto somewhat misunderstood *This Side Jordan*, which illuminates the contribution of those works to the Manawaka Saga. The crowning achievement, however, is the creation of a credible text for "Dance on the Earth" from the several pieces of the unfinished but cherished potential novel, companion to the memoir *Dance on the Earth*. Stovel's sensitive and intelligent construction discovers an important and breathtaking addition to Laurence studies. It also permits Stovel's modest conclusion, "Clearly, 'Dance on the Earth,' if completed, would have been an intriguing Canadian novel and would have complemented the other Manawaka novels as well" (279). And she quotes Allie Chorniuk on the difficulty of shaping such material, "to divide up these memories so they'll have some kind of form" (281). Stovel beautifully adds, in the note (14) to this passage, "This section continues, 'Form is to try to give a shape to things so they'll be understood'" (360). *That* is a true echo of Henry James, who asked of the "large loose baggy monsters" what they claimed "artistically [to] mean." We need not ask that question of Stovel's achievement, especially in regard to her "Dance."

LYALL H. POWERS
 Department of English, Emeritus
 University of Michigan