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**Review of *Challenging Territory: The Writing of Margaret Laurence*  
Edited by Christian Riegel**

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*Challenging Territory: The Writing of Margaret Laurence*. Edited by Christian Riegel. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1997. Contributors, acknowledgment, introduction, bibliography, index. xxiii + 260 pp. \$24.95 paper.

I approached this book with the hope that my past interest in reading, teaching, and writing about Margaret Laurence, coupled with my current interests in rhetoric and composition, would enable me to respond to new critical perspectives. The "Introduction" to the volume encouraged this hope by profiling

articles with familiar themes embedded in a postmodern context of open-minded pluralism.

Yet in explaining the volume's purpose, editor Christian Riegel tends to over-emphasize novelty at the expense of continuity, describing essays that go beyond revisionist readings to "stake out critical territory, charting critical space never before traced" (xvii). Much of his claim rests on the volume's inclusion of essays that deal with Laurence's early political writing and her African fictions—material that has received scant critical attention. Yet of the collection's twelve articles, only five address this work while the remaining seven deal with the Manawaka fiction, thereby creating an imbalance that reinscribes our sense that the Canadian-based fiction dominates the oeuvre.

Elsewhere, Riegel affiliates the volume with a spirit of postmodernist pluralism and provisionalism, reminding us that these essays offer "ways of mapping the territory that do not necessarily invalidate other ways of charting the conceptual space" (xvii) and that "we must tread carefully in our attempts at finding explanations for the things we encounter in the world" (xvi). Yet his overview of the individual articles features "modernist" judgments, such as when, for example, he suggests that Beckman-Long's article offers a way for *The Stone Angel* "to be fully understood" (xviii) or comments that Foster Stovel "shows that these texts should not be read separately, as they often are" (xx). Despite protest to the contrary, the territory he describes is still one where full understanding can be achieved and shared, and where some readings are better than others.

Within the individual articles, references to previous Laurence criticism are frequently relegated to endnotes, a presentational strategy supporting Riegel's claim that the volume is staking new ground. Yet in cases where writers rely excessively on endnoted citation and commentary, it is not always clear how their text connects to earlier critical work. For example, in Angelika Maeser Lemieux's "The Scots Presbyterian Legacy," the text is punc-

uated by a number of notes that cite and summarize sources dealing with Laurence and religion, yet how the arguments in the current article are grounded in or corrective of earlier critical work often remains unexamined.

Maeser Lemieux's essay does survey the history of Calvinist thought in detail and, like other good articles in the collection, builds a strong reading by working with sources beyond the canon of Laurence criticism. In "*The Stone Angel* as Feminine Confessional Novel," Brenda Beckman-Long makes a powerful case for understanding the novel's confessional structure by building from both genre criticism and Gérard Genette's narrative theory. The final paragraphs that attempt to describe the feminine character of confessional are somewhat disappointing, however, culminating as they do in the debatable assertion that Hagar achieves "self-acceptance as an autonomous woman" (64). Later in the volume, Nora Foster Stovel draws a more convincing conclusion connecting Laurence's protagonists with love rather than independence, noting that the "emphasis is, as always, on the importance of love in the sense of compassion, as each of her solipsistic protagonists develops from claustrophobia to community" (120).

Apart from reading to learn more about current issues in Laurence criticism, I was also interested in reading for cross-disciplinary issues. In "Writing About Others: The African Stories," Gabrielle Collu raises a concern as relevant to the ethnographer as the fiction writer in her discussion of representation and appropriation (20-22). Drawing on several sources, she makes the case that cultural analysis and self-reflection need to accompany representation.

Since works cited throughout the collection are entered in a single bibliography at the end, I found my reading often disrupted by the need first to consult a note at the conclusion of an article and then turn to the back of the book to identify its source. Another curious production feature was the choice of cover photograph; I wondered how the rather severe image of Laurence taken in 1975 was signifi-

cant to a collection of essays dealing with early as well as later work— and whether the editor might have noted either its significance or the criteria used in its selection.

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