Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence
by Lyall Powers

Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning
by Christian Riegel

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

The University of Manitoba Press is to be lauded for keeping work related to Manitoba and the West in the public eye and available. It is important intellectual territory which must be defended. Our “first lady” of Canadian literature, Margaret Laurence, is a good case in point. In 2008, Ontario philosopher and writer John Ralston Saul opened his A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada with the proclamation “We are a métis civilization” (3). The line has been picked up and widely quoted, including by Emma LaRocque in When the Other Is Me. Speaking of a turning point in “themes, direction, and critical treatment” since 1990, [my bold] “as may be indicated by John Ralson Saul’s opening declaration in his recent book A Fair Country, that ‘We are a métis civilization,’ I can’t argue with that” (15). For those of us who have been reading Margaret Laurence for half a century, it is disappointing to have an idea Laurence published about in the 1960s and 1970s, our “métis” identity, reappear, uncited and unacknowledged, fifty years later. For this reason alone, that one of our greats deserves to be given her due, the University of Manitoba Press’s contribution is crucial. Keep the Laurence-abilia and Laurence criticism coming. For, writing as she did about colonized minds, about including women and Native people in the Canadian narrative, and assuring that Western stories are part of the Canadian identity, she warrants credit and continued study. Regional publishing still seems necessary to counter the old patterns of exploitation of the hinterlands and marginalization of artists from outside the centre.

Christian Riegel’s Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning fits that growing body of Laurence-abilia which includes substantial literary criticism. In academic writing it’s all about focus. Pick one topic, one small topic, and expand upon its appearance within a text or a series of texts – “From Rocking, Muskoka, to LaZboy: The Chair in Canadian Literature,” for example. Riegel in Writing Grief pulls out the topic of grief and traces its progress through Laurence’s Manawaka cycle, placing it within a history of literary elegy, and showing how it is informed by Freud’s idea of “Trauerarbeit,” the “work of mourning” (9). “For Laurence, this work of mourning involved writing fictional texts that explored autobiographical material” (5).

Academic writing runs the risk of being reductive. Here, the required focus makes Laurence an autobiographical writer writing about grief when she is so much more than that. She is a novelist writing about what it means to be fully human, as a woman, a westerner, a Canadian, an artist in the second half of the twentieth century. Grieving is of course an important part of being fully human. But her central theme is humanity, not grief. The strength of Christian Riegel’s offering is in his close reading of the whole Manawaka cycle, the patterns he reveals, the growth in maturity and human potential evident between Hagar Shipley’s raging and Morag Gunn’s quiescent bowing out. For
“the price of the story is the content” (149), Riegel concludes. This does seem to apply to mourning, but it is just as applicable to the whole of life, of her life, of our lives, to the love, relationships, politics, faith, identity – the many other topics and issues embraced in Laurence’s stories.

Another valuable addition to Laurence studies, Lyall Powers’ Alien Heart, is the second major Laurence biography and, in my opinion, the better of the two. (James King’s The Life of Margaret Laurence came out in 1997.) Powers has the advantage of being a close friend of Laurence since their university days in Winnipeg; his book is informed by personal anecdote and recollection, an honest love and respect for his subject, and a sensitive close reading of the published works. As a professional reader and scholar, he recognizes The Diviners for the masterpiece it is. He understands the creative process, editorial collaboration, the development of theme as evidenced by the rewritings; he too suggests that “in spite of all the awards Laurence received, her work was yet undervalued” (xvi).

Powers’ emphasis on the connections between the African years and the themes of the Canadian stories, colonization and postcolonialism is especially useful. He points out how Laurence reconciles the paradoxes of life, how the personal cannot be divorced from the political, the history from the mythology, the ancestors from the self. Powers and Laurence also share a love of the magic of words. By including the fact that Laurence’s family name, Wemys (pronounced “weems”) (8), translates as “cave” (9), he gives passionate fans such as myself all the proof we need to proclaim her as our Plato, our Merlin. ♦

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