

Margaret Laurence

According to her Northwest Passages [biography](#), Margaret Wemyss (1926-1987) started writing in Grade two and began her professional writing career at eighteen by taking a summer job on a newspaper. After completing an Honours English BA at what is now the University of Winnipeg, she became a reporter for the *Winnipeg Citizen*.

She married Jack Laurence, whose name she used for her writing life, although they eventually divorced. The young couple spent several years in Africa, first in Somalia and then in Ghana. During this time, Lawrence worked on translating Somali poetry and prose, and began to write short stories, which were eventually collected in [The Tomorrow Tamer](#) (1963). She remained interested in African literature, and later, back in Canada, published a critical study of contemporary Nigerian dramatists.

In 1960 while living in Vancouver she published [This Side Jordan](#), a novel set in the newly independent nation of Ghana. This book received an award for Best First Novel by a Canadian writer. *The Stone Angel*, set in her fictionalized home town followed in 1964. This was staged as a play and made into a [movie](#) that became an official selection at the Toronto and Tokyo film festivals.

In 1966 she published [A Jest of God](#), which won the Governor General's Award for fiction. This novel was made into a successful movie called *Rachel, Rachel*. Paul Newman directed and Joanne Woodward starred.

[The Fire-Dwellers](#) came out in 1969. In 1970 Lawrence published *A Bird in the House*, a linked short story collection about the fictitious town of Manawaka. She was made a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1971.

Though Laurence continued to publish for the remaining thirteen years of her life, *The Diviners* (1974) is probably her finest novel. This book won another Governor General's Award and also the Molson Prize.

Laurence's work generated controversy. In 2010, Nora Foster Stovel published an [essay](#) in the International Journal of Canadian Studies, discussing the "racist or anti-racist?" nature of the Metis girl character Piquette Tonnerre in "The Loons" (*A Bird in the House*).

The novel [The Diviners](#) also came under fire from Christian fundamentalists who complained the book was "obscene" and pressured school boards to ban it ([CBC 1985](#)). Presumably, what they found objectionable part was the sex scene between the young protagonist and her Metis lover.

Margaret Laurence spoke and wrote not only on social issues like race and gender, she also spoke out to support nuclear disarmament and to promote literacy. It is a blot on Canadian literary history that the last years of this talented writer's life were plagued by attempts to censor her groundbreaking work.