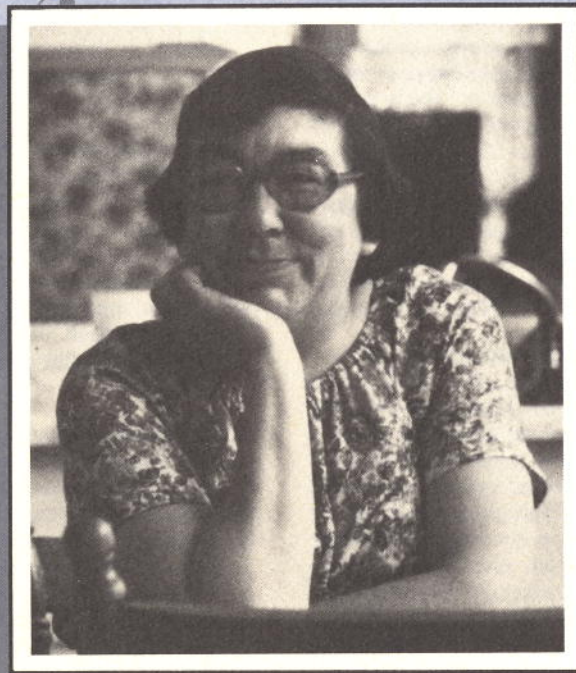


A Study Guide for the Film

OUR KINDA TALK:

An Introduction to

Margaret Laurence



National
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Film synopsis

Our Kinda Talk shows Margaret Laurence as both a person and a writer. The film juxtaposes an interview with the author, a middle-aged woman living in a small Ontario town, with scenes from her childhood prairie home of Neepawa. Stills, film footage, and excerpts from her fiction combine with interviews to recreate significant moments in Laurence's life and art. Discussing the process of writing, Laurence states that character is her main concern. Themes, everything else, arise naturally from characterization.

Some readers have been disturbed by her fiction. Reacting to criticism of her novel, *The Diviners*, Laurence distinguishes serious literature from pornography.

The film ends with Laurence on the dock by her cottage, next to the Otonabee River. An excerpt from the end of *A Jest of God* suggests possibilities for her future. This film, for Senior Secondary grades, is an adaptation of the original one-hour film, *Margaret Laurence: First Lady of Manawaka*.

Margaret Laurence

Students tend to forget that literature is written by a person; they study a book, not an author. Through a personal glimpse of Margaret Laurence, *Our Kinda Talk* illuminates her writing. Laurence was born in 1926 in Neepawa, Manitoba, a small town about 125 miles north-west of Winnipeg; her birth place becomes the Manawaka of her fiction portraying the interrelationship of four generations. The geographical settings of Laurence's works are never exactly places where she has lived, nor are the people the precise counterparts of those she has known, nor are the events those of her own life. Yet all of these are transmuted and used convincingly in her art.

Laurence's ancestry was Scottish, Irish, and United Empire Loyalist. Her father was a lawyer. Her mother, a pianist and music teacher, died suddenly when Margaret was four years old; her mother's older sister, also named Margaret, came to Neepawa to look after her niece. A year later Laurence's father and aunt married. A beloved stepmother, she nurtured young Margaret's love of literature and passion for writing.

In 1935, Margaret's father died of pneumonia, leaving his widow with two young children, Margaret and her half-brother Robert. Her grandmother Simpson died soon after. In 1938, the family moved into Grandfather Simpson's home. In the film, Laurence speaks about being "dead sure" of the speech of her grandparents' generation; she found words and rhythms in her subconscious, waiting to be retrieved. She notes her "very keen" fiction writer's memory "for the way places look and the way people talk."

Margaret married Jack Laurence, a civil engineer, in 1948. The Laurences went to England in 1949 and to Africa in 1950. Five books resulted from Laurence's experiences living in Somalia and Ghana (the first four books listed in the bibliography and her later *Long Drums and Cannons*). Laurence showed a remarkable ability to write movingly and authentically about an alien culture. For Canadian literature, however, the most important result of her African experiences was the perspective distance gave to her own roots and culture.

When the Laurences returned to Canada in 1957 with their daughter and son, aged five and two, they settled in Vancouver. By 1962, Laurence had completed the first draft of her most acclaimed novel, *The Stone Angel*. In the same year, the Laurences separated and Margaret moved with the children to London, England, where she rewrote her novel. It was published in 1964. From London she moved to Elm Cottage in Buckinghamshire where she wrote *A Jest of God*, published in 1966.

Seven of the eight short stories of *A Bird in the House* were also written in England and published in various periodicals; the collection was published in 1970. Laurence calls these stories "fictionalized autobiography"; Manawaka during the Depression and the central character's Scottish ancestry are pervasive and powerful in these stories of a child's growth into adolescence.

The Fire-Dwellers is the fourth of the Manawaka works. In conversation with Donald Cameron, Laurence speaks of having made "at least three, if not four, separate starts on it," beginning in Vancouver, even before *A Jest of God*. In England in 1963, she wrote two or three chapters and discarded them. After completing *A Jest of God*, she began again, completing a hundred pages or more before she gave up in disgust and burned the unsatisfactory work. After an interval of work on another project, she found herself ready to write *The Fire-Dwellers*. It was published in 1969.

Over the next few years *The Diviners* was written, mostly in Canada. Laurence had returned from England in 1969 to be writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto. Longest and most complex of Laurence's works to date, this epic novel about Morag Gunn rounds the series of Manawaka works. Laurence has said that she would like to see these works read as a cycle. Each one enriches an understanding of the others, not only because her characters and their relatives often have bit parts in each other's stories, but also because the reader gains a deeper understanding of how the people are formed by Manawaka.

Suggestions for follow-up

- Have students outline the visual structure of the film. What contrasts have been used? How are the shots of Margaret Laurence herself varied? Which shots and sequences are most powerful, interesting, or memorable?
- Next have students consider the sound component of the film: the voices of the narrator (male), the reader of the excerpts (female), and Margaret Laurence herself. How has the director, Robert Duncan, achieved variety? What parts of the sound portion do the students find most effective? What is the effect of a female voice speaking the thoughts of the male character, Christie Logan?
- Have students examine where and how sight and sound enhance one another.
- Have students identify the scenes in the film that are most memorable, have the greatest impact. Ask them to explain their choice.
- Have students read a critical work, such as *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, or a brief biographical and literary sketch, such as the one in *Our Nature — Our Voices* by Clara Thomas. Have students compare the written work with the film. What does each contribute to an understanding of Margaret Laurence and her work? What have they in common?
- “I think that as far as images are concerned, they must, like symbols, be organic. They must grow out of the work itself; you can’t superimpose them.” (Margaret Laurence, *Indirections*, Winter 1977, p. 40. See bibliography). What images and symbols are used in the film? How may they be considered “organic”?
- This is an after-school project for media buffs or Margaret Laurence devotees: Have students obtain the longer NFB film, *Margaret Laurence: First Lady of Manawaka*, which was the basis for *Our Kinda Talk: An Introduction to Margaret Laurence*. View both and compare them. What are the advantages/disadvantages of each length? How does the impact of the films differ? Have students write a short essay comparing the two films.

Suggestions for further study

- The film can provide background for the study of themes in Margaret Laurence’s writing. Recurring themes include the need for communication between people, and the impossibility of communication; the tragedy of isolation; freedom; morality; the importance of the place of a person’s origin, and of the myths and legends of the ancestral past; both universality and uniqueness in human experience.
- In her writing, Laurence often takes an ironist’s view of the world. What ironies does the film show in Laurence’s experience of life? Explore irony in one or more of her works.
- What can we learn from the film about Margaret Laurence as a writer and about her process of writing?
- The filmmakers chose to include the issue of literature and pornography, although they must have known that this might provoke controversy. Have students take the role of the filmmaker and prepare a memo to their boss stating why this material must be included in the film*.
- The film shows three age groups of women, all represented in Margaret Laurence’s fiction — the fifteen-year-old on a movie date (cf. Vanessa, *A Bird in the House*), the middle-aged author in person (cf. Morag Gunn, *The Diviners*, or Rachel, *A Jest of God*, or Stacey, *The Fire-Dwellers*), and the old woman (cf. Hagar, *The Stone Angel*). In small groups, explore representations of different ages in Margaret Laurence’s writing.
- Divide the class into eight small groups and assign one story to each from *A Bird in the House*. Ask the groups to discuss the story in relation to ideas and information presented in the film. Have one member from each group briefly and informally present results of the discussion.

* For \$1.00, the Book and Periodical Development Council, 86 Bloor St. W., Ste. 215, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1M5, provides a booklet entitled “C*ns*rsh*p: stopping the book banners.” This booklet can be used in conjunction with the film as a basis for further discussion of censorship.

Quotations for discussion

Margaret Laurence, from the film...

"I always knew that I was a writer; it was never a hobby with me. But I never knew for a long, long time that anybody else would ever know that."

"I began to write *The Stone Angel* — well, it's simply the old lady just walked into my mind one day.... I realized... that I would have to start with my grandparents' generation.... I found that certain phrases, certain idioms, certain turns of speech... were in my mind and they simply came up when I needed them."

"The thing that concerns me most in writing is character, and everything else — the themes and everything — arise out of those characters."

"I don't write in a directly autobiographical way... But... everything you write of necessity is in some way an expression of your life view... of what constitutes the tragic and what constitutes, you know, joy."

"People are not exploited in my books, and if exploitation of persons occurs it is shown as evil, and I would passionately affirm the strong morality of my writing. Every serious writer is in some way a moralist and I'm no exception."

"The novel that exists in the head is always a much better novel than the one that finally gets down on the printed page."

from other sources...

"A lot of my characters, like myself, inhabit a world in which they no longer believe in the teachings of the traditional church, but where these things have enormous emotional impact on them still, as they do on me. I'm particularly attached to the King James version of the Bible, because it *is* the poetry of that that really hits me."
Conversations with Canadian Novelists, Cameron, p. 112.

"Those years in Africa were valuable because I discovered, through getting to know a certain amount about African life, a lot about my own country... which still to some extent suffered from a colonialist mentality. It took a long time in our literature to write out of what we really knew, rather than to follow British and American models."
Indirections, Winter 1977, p. 37.

"There were moments when I would think that I knew what was going to happen in a scene, and then it didn't happen at all; something else happened."
Indirections, Winter 1977, p. 41.

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Other Canadian Literature Films distributed by the NFB

<i>A.M. Klein: The Poet as Landscape</i>	106C 0178 494	58:00
<i>A Bird in the House</i>	106C 0173 180	49:36
<i>Capital</i>	106C 0181 073	28:40
<i>Darts in the Dark: An Introduction to W.O. Mitchell</i>	106C 0180 173	15:35
<i>Earle Birney: Portrait of a Poet</i>	106C 0181 032	53:09
<i>In Search of Farley Mowat</i>	106C 0181 008	57:38
<i>Jack Hodgins' Island</i>	106C 0181 060	57:00
<i>Lucy Maud Montgomery – The Road to Green Gables</i>	106C 0175 263	86:50
<i>Margaret Laurence: First Lady of Manawaka</i>	106C 0178 390	52:52
<i>Poets on Film Series:</i>		
<i>Poets on Film No. 1</i>	106C 0177 144	8:17
<i>Poets on Film No. 2</i>	106C 0177 145	7:55
<i>Poets on Film No. 3</i>	106C 0177 146	6:37
<i>The Street</i>	106C 0176 059	10:12
<i>The Sweater</i>	106C 0180 079	10:21
<i>Ten Million Books: An Introduction to Farley Mowat</i>	106C 0181 014	25:15
<i>Volcano - An Inquiry into the Life & Death of Malcolm Lowry</i>	106C 0176 054	99:20
<i>W.O. Mitchell: Novelist in Hiding</i>	106C 0180 022	57:33
<i>Wood Mountain Poems</i>	106C 0178 452	28:06

***Our Kinda Talk : An Introduction to
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16 mm Color

106C 0178 927

Screening Time: 23 minutes 30 seconds

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