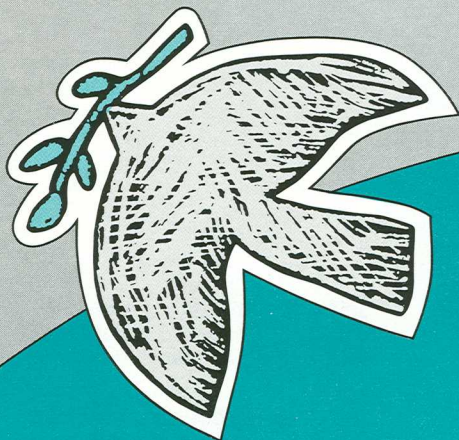


# A WRITER IN THE NUCLEAR AGE: A CONVERSATION WITH MARGARET LAURENCE



Acclaimed author, winner of the Governor General's award for fiction and literature, member of the Order of Canada, outspoken member of Artists for Peace.



*Speaking  
Our Peace  
series*

*"Language itself is being demeaned in this whole question of the nuclear arms race.... When I read words such as 'megadeath' and 'overkill'! How can there be overkill? We can only die once. Megadeath is an obscene word, when you think that it refers glibly to the death of countless millions upon millions upon millions of living human beings: women, children and men. Real people!"*

She is known to many people in Canada and around the world as "the lady of Manawaka": she is Margaret Laurence, internationally acclaimed author, noted for her sensitive probings into the complex formation of personality and her revelations of "ordinary folks" as extraordinary.

In this intense film, Laurence talks about her deep caring for human life — the central force of all her writing. Stemming from this basic concern is her livid indignation about the nuclear threat. A moral responsibility to others and to the planet has informed Laurence's life since her college days, when Hiroshima was bombed. She has been convinced, since then, that "the nuclear issue is the moral and spiritual and practical concern of our time."

The filmed dialogue with Laurence lasts only ten minutes, but within this short time-span Laurence touches on diverse issues, making the film a valuable discussion starter in several subject areas: the social responsibility of the writer; how language usage shapes reality; the role of the imagination in human life and the relationship of imagination to meaning; the nuclear crisis; the role of empathy in understanding and communication; the distinctions between fictional and didactic writing; and the power of so-called "ordinary" people to influence events. In revealing the passionate commitment behind all Laurence's writing — behind "the lady of Manawaka" so much of the world esteems — this short film provides viewers with a rare opportunity.



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## Age Groups:

Grade 10 through university

## Subject Areas:

Literature (Canadian/International); Social Studies; Ethics; Values Education; Family Life Education; Women's Studies; Political Science; Peace Studies; History and Contemporary Studies.

## Sample Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the "crisis of imagination" to which Laurence refers? How can jargon veil meaning and block the imagination?
2. Is Laurence correct in stating that the words we use shape our attitudes and perceptions? What are examples from the film? What examples can you think of from your own life?
3. What do you believe should be the role of the writer/artist in society? What are some connections between Laurence's didactic and fictional writing? How are her belief systems/world views reflected in her fiction?
4. What values are suggested by world leaders' word usage or "newsspeak"? What values are implied by Laurence's usage: a) in the film; b) in her fiction?
5. Laurence believes that "ordinary persons" have a vital role in bringing about a more just society. Do you agree? What might happen if no one tried? What are some ways to move beyond numbness towards creative action? What are examples of ordinary individuals in our historical past who effected great changes?
6. Is the image Laurence conveys in this film similar to or different from your personal image of women? Stereotyped images of women? What biases are implied in stereotyped images? Are there any connections between these stereotypes and our current nuclear crisis?

## Activities:

1. Rescreen the film and extract Laurence's key thoughts about communication, morality, imagination and meaning, uniqueness, and freedom. Then study one of Laurence's novels and write an essay discussing how these central notions appear in her fiction.
2. Compare and contrast the visual and sound structure of this film to that of the National Film Board film, *Our Kinda Talk: An Introduction to Margaret Laurence*.
3. In groups of three or four, brainstorm the meanings of the word *peace*. Collect and/or draw pictures that you consider relevant to this word. Then, put these pictures together in story form, creating a narration as you proceed. Choose a spokesperson to share the story with the rest of the class. (Note: This activity illustrates the many choices a filmmaker or commentator has in structuring a story.)

*Note:* This film is one of the *Speaking Our Peace* series. The series also includes *Speaking Our Peace*, a longer, overview film; *Nuclear Addiction: Dr. Rosalie Bertell on the Cost of Deterrence*; *A Love Affair with Politics: A Portrait of Marion Dewar* (all English films), and *Solanges Vincent* (available only in French). Viewers may also wish to screen, *If You Love This Planet*, a 1983 Academy Award-winner featuring Dr. Helen Caldicott.

*Directed by*  
Terri Nash

*Edited by*  
Janice Brown

*Camera*  
Susan Trow

*Location Sound*  
Diane Carrière

*Sound Editing*  
Wojtek Klis

*Re-recording*  
Jean-Pierre Joutel

*Producers*  
Bonnie Sherr Klein,  
Margaret Pettigrew

*Executive Producer*  
Kathleen Shannon

**Produced and distributed by**  
**National Film Board of Canada**

**color**  
**Screening time:**  
**9 minutes 10 seconds**

**16 mm: 106C 0185 077**  
**3/4": 116C 0185 077**  
**VHS: 113C 0185 077**  
**Beta: 114C 0185 077**



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