

still in the bathroom trying to act employed and save his dignity.

Jocelyn Bérubé plays the soulful Armand with real sensitivity and restraint. This is the kind of role which leaves audiences feeling that acting is not really work, and at the same time, as if they've just been through a psychological sauna. Bérubé is great — in spite of the inconsistent script. There is a shot of Armand and Thérèse coming out of a restaurant on the evening they are finally going to have together, that locks the image of poignant incongruity forever in one's mind.

Andrée Pelletier is not yet wholly at ease before the camera. There are times when her brightness seems false. In her sobered moments though, her voice and bearing have just the right cowed uncertainty about them. (She isn't helped by the confusing shift of focus in the middle of the film; the Dorion character is almost lost while we follow the frustrated suburban housewife through her paces.) Pel-

letier brings a certain classiness to the screen, and this may prove an important role for her.

There are other fine performances, by Marcel Sabourin and Gilles Renaud. For the most part though, Lanctôt's secondary characters are disappointingly one-faced.

While the music (by François Lanctôt) is often predictably emphatic, thus obtrusive, the film affords two striking musical moments. The first, when Armand, at the height of his passionate courting, leaves Thérèse alone in the kitchen while he plays her a violin serenade from behind the bedroom door. We are so conditioned into equating docility with weakness that we forget it can be heroic. And Gilles Vigneault's closing ballad ("All roads lead to the city...") is a winning movie theme song, in any language.

Joan Irving

## Margaret Laurence, First Lady of Manawaka

p.c. National Film Board 1978 exec.p. Roman Droiter p. William Weintraub d./sc. Robert Duncan art.d./research Ronald Blumer d.ph. Barry Perles cam.assist. Andy Kitzenuck sd. Michel Hazel, Bernard Bordeleau re.rec. Jean-Pierre Joutel mus.ed. Don Douglas ed. Sidonie Kerr elec. Don Caufield unit admin. Tamara Lynch col. 16mm running time 52 min. 52 sec. distrib. National Film Board.

«Art, in fact, is never life.»  
- Margaret Laurence

explore the life and work of an author must walk a fine line, balancing the tensions between two realities — imaginative and biographical. Two recent films which, in my opinion, have achieved this difficult and delicate balance are David Kaufman's *A.M. Klein: The Poet As Landscape* and Donald Brittain's *Volcano: An Inquiry into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry*. Because filmmaker Robert Duncan was producer for the latter work, I anticipated that his directing of *Margaret Laurence, First Lady of Manawaka* would merit a similar distinction.

Duncan is a Scots-Canadian who came to Canada in 1967. He worked as a journalist for the *Montreal Gazette* until 1968, when he began writing for CBC productions. In 1974, he began his liaison

with the NFB — writing for, producing, and directing several projects, including the Lowry film and the delightfully penetrating profile of ad-man Jerry Goodis, entitled *Have I Ever Lied to You Before?* for which Duncan served as writer.

"*First Lady of Manawaka* was made," says Duncan, "to help readers, students and admirers understand Laurence's background and its relationship to her works." Interviews with her childhood acquaintances — including a teacher, a neighbour, a piano instructor — recollections from Laurence herself, and information provided by a voice-over narrator, convey to the audience a sense of Laurence's early life: the loss of her parents, the influence of the United Church, the importance to her of ancestry, her inner compulsion to write — which had already emerged by the primary grades. Laurence speaks of her sense of isolation until high school, when she found that she could write for the school paper. The excitement of this discovery made her feel that "maybe I actually have some talent that is socially acceptable." We learn of the impact on her life of the Second World War, then university, work, marriage, travel, children, divorce. The film makes use of still photographs, old film footage of soldiers returning, newspaper clippings to create a feel for the past.

By intercutting anecdotal recollections with readings from the novels, the film interweaves the biographical with the literary. But in doing so, it suggests a simplistic cause-effect relationship, as though we must find our way through her literature mainly by knowing her life. This is perhaps most evident and irritating in the decision to show us tracking-shots of modern-day Neepawa, Laurence's hometown, while we hear on the sound-track actress Jayne Eastwood reading passages

To my mind, a particularly challenging form of documentary is the film which attempts to explore the life and literary work of an eminent writer. The special challenge that arises from this endeavor stems from the subtle interrelationship between the 'events' in imaginative fiction and the events in an author's life. No matter how close an author's real life experiences are to his or her literary creations, it can be argued that, ultimately, the literature transcends those objective correlatives, to achieve its own life and symbolic meaning beyond the confines of biography. According to this view, the whole of the literary work is more than the sum of the author's life.

Thus, the documentarist who would

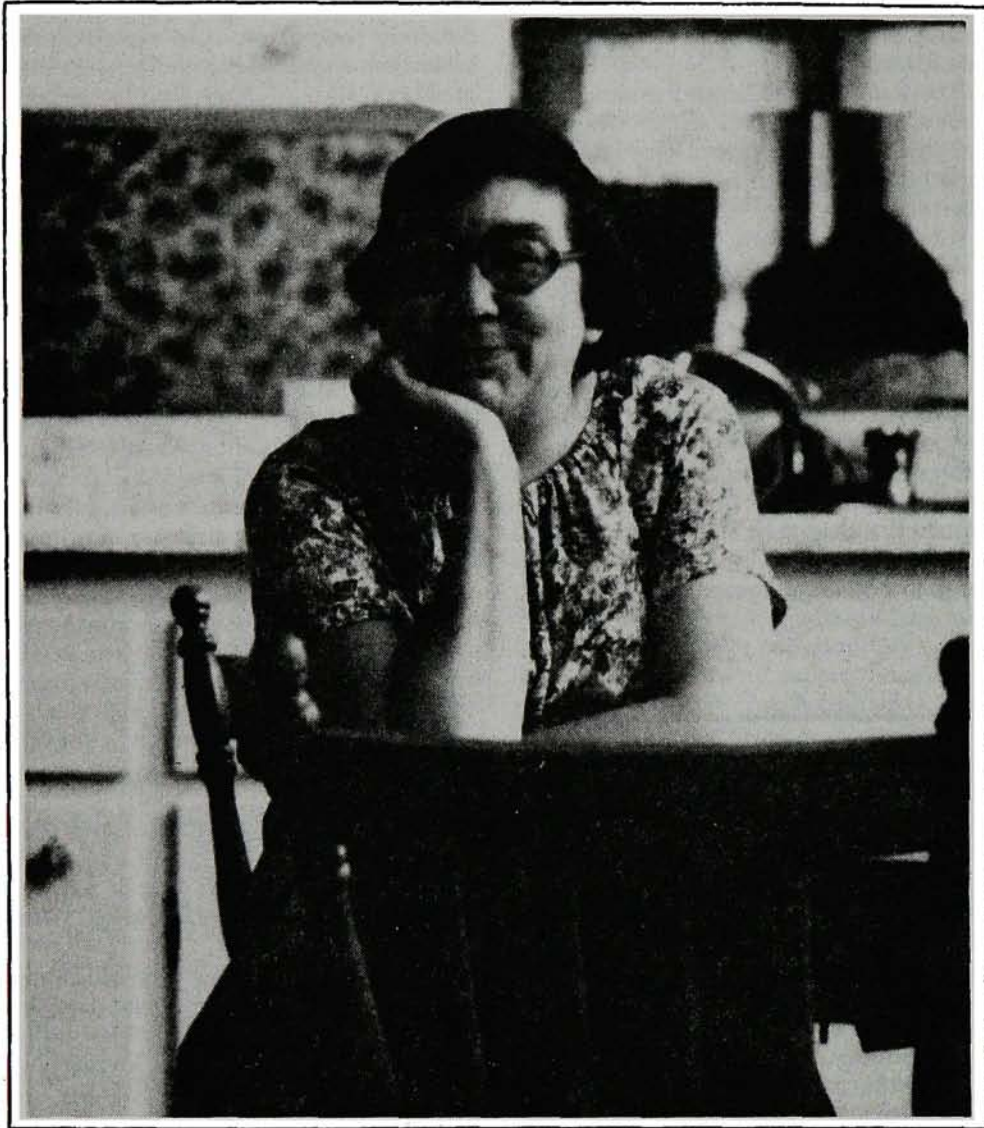
## Council of Canadian Filmmakers ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Wednesday, May 28, 1980  
7 : 30 pm

Art Gallery of Ontario  
Lecture Hall  
317 Dundas Street West, Toronto, Ont.  
(McCaul Street Entrance)

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## SHORT FILM REVIEWS



A refreshing portrait of Margaret Laurence helps demystify the writing process

which depict Manawaka — the fictional community of the novels. In other places, the film attempts, far too literally, to dramatize passages from the novels; for example, it opens with the passage from *The Diviners*, in which Piper Gunn plays the pipes over Christie Logan's grave — an unforgettable and key moment in the novel:

"He swings the pipes up, and there is the low mutter of the drones. Then he begins, pacing the hillside as he plays. And Morag sees, with the strength of conviction, that this is Christie's true burial.

And Piper Gunn, he was a great tall man, with the voice of drums and the heart of a child, and the gall of a thousand, and the strength of conviction.

The piper plays 'The Flowers of

the Forest,' the long-ago pibroch, the lament for the dead, over Christie Logan's grave. And only now is Morag released into her mourning."

On screen, this reading is accompanied by longshots of the Neepawa graveyard where a piper is pacing among the tombstones. It is an affective, moody moment until the film cuts to close-ups of the piper's face — rendering too concretely a figure which would have been better left to our imaginations, and the power of the prose passage itself. But in other places, the filmmakers' urge to visualize the prose so literally works better. The Manawakans of *The Diviners* call the dump "the nuisance grounds," and a passage depicting the novel's setting is effectively underscored by long-shots of burning mounds of garbage, a smoldering wasteland which heightens our attention

and understanding of the nuances in the prose.

Several of the interview sequences with Laurence deal with the craft of writing in such a way that they would certainly seem to encourage any young 'scribblers' in the audience. There is a sense of demystification of the writing process running through this film, a sense — or more likely, a stance — which nicely goes against the popular grain of the 'alienated artist' working in isolation. Surprisingly, though, the filmmakers do not show us Laurence's workspace in her home, nor do we get a sense of her writing as being a daily, integral part of her life. The formal, respectful qualities of the interviews perhaps heighten our awareness of what Laurence calls her need for "an essential privacy."

The film may have been intended, and will probably be used, as a kind of introduction to Margaret Laurence and her works. Ironically, however, it seems that the film works better for an audience which is already thoroughly familiar with her work, especially considering the recurrent imagery and symbolism which pervades it. None of the various people interviewed ever discuss her work as a body of literature replete with its own inner structure, correspondences, imagery, recurring figures, etc. The voice of the literary critic is not heard in the film. And yet, parts of the film rely on just this level of understanding: the recurring tracking-shots along lush greenery, the use of an old CBC black-and-white interview with Laurence which, because of its placement in the film, is so like her own technique of "memory-bank movies." The film's final shot especially relies on this level of literary familiarity, and without it, seems awkward and unmotivated. Laurence walks to the pier below her house and turns to face the camera, looking up at us, with the water shimmering behind her. Her expression is hard to read — a mixture of vulnerability and strength. The film ends with a freeze-frame of her face, with the water behind it. It seems an unusual ending, unless one realizes the significance of water symbolism in her work, used as both a restoring, cleansing element and a destructive force which drowns and overwhelms.

**Margaret Laurence: First Lady of Manawaka** has already had several public screenings across the country and was shown on CBC in late-February. The film won the Gold Plaque for documentaries at the Chicago Film Festival of 1979.

Joyce Nelson