

I wonder what it is a friend.  
Your love to me is  
along with on the long  
do we see through your  
country, the deep sky so  
the more we see to  
believe I hadn't seen.

**INTIMATE STRANGERS**



**The letters of Margaret Laurence & Gabrielle Roy**

should hesitate to approach  
confidence before I wrote to  
me tribe, all of us. The  
long the Anglophone writer  
owing mainly, I believe to  
me is true among Francoph  
r more, across the langua  
**EDITED BY PAUL G. SOCKEN**  
f languages, two of my no

# INTIMATE STRANGERS

---

The Letters of  
Margaret Laurence & Gabrielle Roy

---

*This page intentionally left blank*

# INTIMATE STRANGERS

---

The Letters of  
Margaret Laurence & Gabrielle Roy

---

Edited by Paul G. Socken

University of Manitoba Press

Introduction © Paul Socken, 2004  
The letters of Margaret Laurence © The Estate of Margaret Laurence, 2004  
The letters of Gabrielle Roy © Fonds Gabrielle Roy, 2004

University of Manitoba Press  
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2N2  
Canada  
[www.umanitoba.ca/uofmpress](http://www.umanitoba.ca/uofmpress)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database and retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the University of Manitoba Press, or, in the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a licence from CANCOPY (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency), 6 Adelaide Street East, Suite 900, Toronto, Ontario M5C 1H6.

Cover and text design: Terry Gallagher, Doowah Design Inc.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication  
Laurence, Margaret, 1926-1987.

Intimate strangers : the letters of Margaret Laurence &  
Gabrielle Roy / edited by Paul Socken.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-88755-177-7

1. Laurence, Margaret, 1926-1987--Correspondence.
  2. Roy, Gabrielle, 1909-1983--Correspondence. 3. Novelists, Canadian (English)--20th century--Correspondence.
  4. Novelists, Canadian (French)--20th century--Correspondence.
- I. Roy, Gabrielle, 1909-1983. II. Socken, Paul, 1945- III. Title.

PS8523.A86Z496 2004

C813:54

C2004-906494-0

The University of Manitoba Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for its publication program provided by the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program; the Canada Council for the Arts; the Manitoba Arts Council; and the Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Tourism.

Printed in Canada

In Memory of Pierre H. Dubé

---

“A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of Nature”

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON

---

*This page intentionally left blank*

❖ TABLE OF CONTENTS ❖

---

Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	ix
Intimate Strangers: The Letters	3
Selected Bibliography	93
Index	103

---



❧ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ❧

I undertook the publication of the letters of Gabrielle Roy and Margaret Laurence after working in the field of French-Canadian and Québécois literature for over thirty years. However, my experience with English-Canadian literature, and Margaret Laurence in particular, is very limited. I am deeply grateful for the extraordinary kindness shown to me by eminent Laurence specialists who shared their knowledge with me and offered very helpful advice and encouragement: Clara Thomas, John Lennox and Susan Warwick of York University, Denez Xiques of Brooklyn College, and Lyall Powers of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Their assistance was indispensable.

The staff at the York University Archives and Special Collections was very accommodating and helpful. I would like to acknowledge their assistance.

I want to thank the Fonds Gabrielle Roy and the estate of Margaret Laurence for permission to publish these letters.

❖ INTRODUCTION ❖

In February 1976, when Margaret Laurence first wrote to Gabrielle Roy, she said of Roy's *The Road Past Altamont* that "I shared something of that Manitoba background and could understand and feel it so well." It was the beginning of a seven-year correspondence. The two writers shared their mutual admiration for each other's work, but, more than that, discovered the elements and issues they held in common as Canadian, prairie, women writers who cared passionately about their work and political and cultural world. These letters express hope, frustration, caring, daily trivia, joy, and fear. They are a remarkable glimpse into the private lives of two of Canada's greatest writers who had experienced great success in their work and were now struggling with their capacity to continue.

Both writers were born in small-town Manitoba, Roy in 1909 in St. Boniface, and Laurence in 1926 in Neepawa. Both had left Canada before they began to commit to their writing, and both remained forever imprinted with their prairie roots. When Laurence and Roy began this correspondence in early 1976, they were also at important stages in their lives. In 1974, Laurence had completed her

---

Manawaka series with the publication of her final novel, *The Diviners*. It met with great critical and popular success, and won Laurence her second Governor-General's Award for fiction. *The Diviners* was her last published work of fiction for adults. The remaining years of her life were devoted to writing smaller pieces – such as several books for children – and to social activism. After many years of living in England, Laurence had returned to Canada in 1970, and settled in the village of Lakefield, Ontario, outside Peterborough. During this period she became the chancellor of Trent University and the first president of the Writers' Union of Canada. By the mid-1970s, Margaret Laurence was very much a public figure, one engaged in many of the political and social debates of the time.

Gabrielle Roy's first novel, *Bonheur d'occasion* (*The Tin Flute*), had been an immediate sensation when it was published in 1945. Despite the great success of her work throughout the following two decades, by the 1960s it seemed that Roy's reputation had begun to be eclipsed by a wave of new writers and styles. During this period she dedicated herself to her autobiography, which was published posthumously in 1984. Nevertheless, in spite of many obstacles, in the last period of her life she wrote what many

would consider Roy's most beautiful and mature works: *Un Jardin au bout du monde* (1975), *Ces Enfants de ma vie* (1977), *Fragiles Lumières de la terre* (1978), and the posthumous *La Détresse et l'enchantement*. She won the Governor-General's award for *Ces Enfants de ma vie* in 1978, among a host of other prizes and awards, and by the late 1970s her work enjoyed a real revival.

At the time of this correspondence, Roy was beset by health and personal problems. She had been ill for many years and now complained about her weakness to friends and in her correspondence. She suffered from arthritis, asthma, and heart problems to such an extent that her later years were taken up, to a large measure, by coping with her increasing distress. She was also troubled by family burdens. Her beloved sister, Bernadette, had died in 1970. Without Bernadette, Roy became largely responsible for overseeing the care of their sister Clémence, who had been emotionally unwell since childhood. In 1979, another sister, Adèle, published a scandalously vindictive autobiography that portrayed Roy as mean-spirited and self-centred. Although few found Adèle's portrait credible, her book was one of many worries that contributed to the weakening of Roy's health. By the time of her last letter to Laurence in March 1980, Roy

wrote she was “fighting my way through with poor hands, poor breath, poor heart.” Eventually, these burdens were too much for her, and Roy died of a heart attack in July 1983.

Margaret Laurence, although 17 years younger than her counterpart, was soon also dealing with ill health. By the early 1980s, she had begun to suffer from arthritis and eye problems, and in 1986 was diagnosed with lung cancer. After it became clear that her cancer was inoperable, Laurence took her own life in January 1987.

Gabrielle Roy never enjoyed attending social or public functions, small or large, claiming it took time from her work. It may have been her work, her ill health, her shy nature, or a combination of all these factors that made her withdraw and assiduously guard her privacy. What is clear is that Laurence’s more outgoing, exuberant nature and more robust exchange with life were qualities that the older, frailer Roy truly admired.

A mutual friend, Joyce Marshall, helped to initiate this relationship between Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy. Marshall, a novelist, broadcaster, and translator, had met Roy in 1959 and translated three of her books, including *Enchanted Summer*, for which she won a Governor-General’s Award for Translation in 1976. Beginning in the 1960s,

---