Strength Without Beauty

Reviewed by Linda L. Richards

Retrieved from: <http://www.januarymagazine.com/stoneangel.html>

*The Stone Angel* is a disturbing book. Disturbing enough, in fact, that it's been making readers feel uneasy since it was first published nearly three and a half decades ago. Since the book is required reading in many North American school systems and colleges, a lot of young people are disturbed by *The Stone Angel* every year. And quite often they don't know why.

There's a funny popular notion in our culture -- an unwritten one -- that says that the things we enjoy must either be pleasant or noticeably horrific. Movies must make us smile or cringe. Art must either make us feel good or frighten us. Music must either soothe or make us dance. Photographs must be pretty. *The Stone Angel* doesn't fit with these expectations. It is not a warm book and the smiles that come are forced and perhaps expectant. But neither is it frightening in a very obvious way. There is no gore and certainly no ski masks. What we see is the life of a woman spread over 91-odd years. We see her looking over her shoulder at the end of her life and -- in retrospect -- seeing that she is "less certain of it now than I was then."

Hagar Currie Shipley is a character that deserves a special place in modern literature: she is utterly unique and without parallel because Hagar is a very difficult woman to like and she has been for a long time. Almost, it seems, forever. The daughter of a successful Scottish merchant, Hagar chooses to marry the man her father is most likely to disapprove. Her father is hard and unforgiving. He dies without seeing his daughter again and without meeting her sons: his grandsons.

We learn that many of the father's traits belong to the daughter. She lives her life joylessly: not sharing her inner self or gentleness with her husband or her two sons. She finds herself eventually mortified by her farmer husband's country ways. And scornful of her sons dreams and ambitions.

We find her late in life the picture of the crotchety old lady, being cared for by her eldest -- and least loved -- son and his aging wife. As an old woman Hagar is critical and sharp-tongued and unrelenting. She has lived a life that is utterly devoid of joy and warmth and love. In a late scene, a nurse in the hospital assists Hagar from the bathroom.

*"Oh, I hate being helped --" My voice is pettish and doesn't resemble at all the fury inside me. "I've always done things for myself." "Haven't you ever given a hand to anyone in your time? It's your turn now. Try to look at it that way. It's your due." She's right. I needn't feel beholden. I can't think of many I've given a hand to, that's the only trouble.*

By that point we've traveled much of her life with her and we can see she's right: there *are* few she's helped or cared about. And now, with her 90th birthday behind her, she's not even sure she's ever felt love.

Don't misunderstand. This is not a Dickensian-style story about a badly led life that is redeemed at the end by a revelation brought in a golden light that brings a joyous repentance. Rather, it is Laurence's look at an unlovely life built on uncompromising convictions. And -- being Laurence -- we are given vivid portraits in time, character and place that have made *The Stone Angel* an unforgettable novel in all of its incarnations, including this latest republication: a deluxe collector's edition with special endpapers and ribbon.

*The Stone Angel* is one of five books that Laurence set in the fictional town of Manawaka. The others were *A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers, A Bird in the House,* and *The Diviners*. One of Canada's most revered authors, Laurence was born in Neepawa, Manitoba in 1926. She spent several years living in Africa and England, then settled in Lakefield, Ontario in 1974 where she died in 1987. During her lifetime Laurence won two Governor General's Awards for Fiction and was given more than a dozen honorary degrees. | *November 1998*

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