

carry out Jost's wishes. The child appears fated to become the Red Queen's new envoy. Curiously, whereas Drabble's novel concludes with the adoption of an Asian child, Anne Tyler's latest novel, *Digging to America* (2006), begins with it.

In "Postmodern Times" Drabble extends the metafictionality by writing herself into a final scene where Barbara Halliwell and her best friend, Polly Usher, who met when they found each other reading the same (unnamed) Drabble novel, meet the novelist herself at a launch—recalling John Fowles's innovative metafictional 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—bringing the novel full circle. The various levels of Drabble's narrative certainly make for intriguing reading.

Paul Comeau

Margaret Laurence's Epic Imagination

Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005. Pp. xviii + 144. \$34.95

Reviewed by Laura Strong Davis

Paul Comeau's *Margaret Laurence's Epic Imagination* (2005) is a welcome addition to the corpus of criticism on the renowned Canadian writer. The book is the first full-length study to address Laurence's work as "epic" literature. Comeau seeks to challenge the notion that Canadian literary icons are still minor writers by exemplifying how Laurence's work adheres to Giltrow and Stouck's definition of that which is written in the "epic mode"—that which involves a monumental struggle of people to survive. While Laurence's African writing is not epic in itself, the Manawaka cycle, Comeau maintains, follows the epic pattern of Dante's *Commedia*: Laurence's characters go through three stages, "an infernal state of self-destructive pride," "a purgatorial condition of self-doubt," and "a paradisaic fulfillment in self-knowledge" (xvii). Comeau not only draws upon epic mode as exemplified by Dante, but also, admirably, as it is demonstrated in the Bible, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Homer's *The Odyssey*.

Comeau discusses Laurence's African writing in light of C. S. Lewis's theory of the epic, as outlined in Lewis's *Preface to Paradise Lost*. Comeau astutely demonstrates how the character of Nathaniel Amegbe, in *This Side Jordan*, embodies the tensions, as outlined by Lewis, between primary and secondary epic. For Lewis, primary epic is concerned with the individual, whereas secondary epic is concerned with a "momentous event"—such as the fall of Rome (5). Nathaniel Amegbe, Comeau asserts, is affected both by personal, individual issues (such as his lack of qualifications as a school teacher) and larger, "momentous," and political ones (such as "the transition of power from colonial rule to self-government") (6). Comeau also points out that Nathaniel is the "antithesis" of a traditional epic hero, but that his qualities, "(sincerity, diligence, honesty), are among the heroic virtues endorsed in Christian epic" (6). Such an analysis of Nathaniel in light of Lewis's theory of epic is excellent, and it

is at such moments of close reading set against concrete theory that this book is at its best. There are also instances, however, when Comeau's discussion of Laurence's African writing falters. For example, he discusses O. Mannoni's work on psychology and colonization in relation to the character of Johnnie Kestoe in *This Side Jordan*—this is important, since Laurence read and supported Mannoni's work. But the author does not acknowledge how Mannoni's work has been contested by writers such as Franz Fanon, and therefore does not go far enough in his analysis of epic and colonization. It seems to me that Laurence's African work—while influenced by epic literature—is primarily concerned with decolonization. Comeau does not make clear how the issue of decolonization and the incorporation of epic mode come together in Laurence's work.

Comeau begins his discussion of the Manawaka cycle with *The Stone Angel*, and he focuses on the figure of Hagar as epic hero. The author acknowledges that Hagar does not seem the typical hero: she is "the authoritarian, a mirror reflection of her father before her" (48). Just as Dante begins his *Divine Comedy* with a "lost soul," so Laurence, Comeau explains, begins the Manawaka cycle with the "lost soul" of Hagar Shipley (49). Comeau also compares Hagar to Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who, it has been argued, is the hero of that epic. In his discussion of *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*, Comeau explains that "pride" is a root sin for Dante, and that it is pride that comes into Rachel's and Stacey's stories in these novels. Comeau also explains how the "'ladder' of Jacob's vision in Genesis 28:12" relates to Laurence's work. First, Laurence alludes to it in *The Stone Angel* with Hagar's descent to Shadow Point; second, she alludes to it in *A Jest of God* with the staircase from Rachel's apartment "down to the funeral chapel" (78)—that which "figures prominently in Rachel's psychic revival" (78). In the final chapters of the book, Comeau discusses Bakhtin's comparison of the epic with the novel, and argues that *A Bird in the House* may be read as an "epic dialogue"—a dialogue between the past and the present. In his discussion of *The Diviners*, he aptly notes the "folk epic qualities" of both Christie's tales of Piper Gunn and Skinner's tales of Rider Tonnerre (124). Throughout the book, Comeau returns to Dante, the Bible, Milton, and Homer to demonstrate how Laurence's characters are constructed and redeemed. Most impressive is Comeau's thorough knowledge of epic works, and above all, his astute close analyses of Laurence's texts. The book's value lies not only in its significant contribution to Laurence criticism, but also in how it places Laurence's work in relation to those works of "great literature" by which she was influenced and of which she is now a part.