Chapter IV
The Fire-Dwellers
I would sort out and understand my life.

The Fire-Dwellers (1969) is a pioneering post modern text, in which Laurence shows how hard it is for the individual to salvage a unified sense of identity in the face of contemporary culture which fragments the self. Being one of Laurence’s Manawaka novels it depicts survival with human dignity. Stacey MacAindra, the serio-comic thirty-nine year old protagonist of the novel is “a spiritually isolated housewife and mother threatened by domestic and social chaos which she fears both as personal hell-fire and nuclear holocaust.”

Stacey MacAindra appears as Rachel’s older sister in A Jest of God whom Laurence portrays as the phototype of a modern housewife is caught in a whirlpool of myriad demanding roles. She struggles with four children and an overworked husband who faces a crisis in his career. She is acutely aware of herself and is a moderately intelligent woman who seems touchingly real. Set in the background of social unrest, she finds herself in the midst of a disastrous world. “Doom everywhere is the message I get.”

Coomi S. Vevaina remarks:

Stacey’s greatest fear is of the violent incendiary world in which she lives. Maternal to the point of being overprotective, she is extremely worried about the safety of her
family (particularly her children)... Stacey is extremely worried about the safety of her children. Stacey's state is commented as private fears echo public horrors.3

Stacey struggles to identify herself as an individual amidst the roles of daughter, wife and mother. She longs to enjoy life at her mother's place and at the same time does not want to forget her role as mother to her children. “Stacey is however, worthy of respect for her valiant fight simply in coping from day to day.”4

She is dead against the tight schedule of the household that takes up most of her precious personal time. Nevertheless she likes to establish a harmonious relationship with her children but cannot help behaving like her own mother. In this process she becomes a tyrannical mother. She subjects her children to the same inhibitions which she herself was subjected to. This she does in order to become a good mother.

That Stacey's identity is marked in her roles as housewife and mother is evident in her remark early in the novel:

I can't go anywhere as myself. Only as Mac's wife or the kids' mother. And yet I'm getting now so that I actually prefer to have either Mac or one of the kids along. Even to the hairdresser, I'd rather take Jen. It's easier to face the world with one of them along. Then I know who I'm
supposed to be. (FD 81) In her essay "Identity in The Fire-Dwellers", Nancy Bailey states that in the above passages, Stacey is worried about the real self which underlies the diverse personae.\(^5\)

Moreover she comments: "It is the changing masks that she resents in the long run, but she understands the need to work out her realisation within the confines of a family."\(^6\)

Stacey does not depend on her husband Clifford MacAindra to help her in her family chores, since Clifford's nature of job is such that he comes home very late. Hence she has to shoulder the family commitments all by herself. Even during his short stay at home he is preoccupied with his own work and this has led to a monotony in their lives. He would just enquire about the children and then would proceed to concentrate on his own work. Even their physical relationship was always under a compulsion, developing a sense of boredom in Stacey. Due to this there was always a negative feeling in the minds of Clifford and Stacey which in turn resulted in a negative impact in the minds of the children.

Living at Vancouver, Stacey is exposed to an urban way of life only after her marriage. She is confused about the historical and social issues as she watches television or reads the newspapers whether it is about advertisements, about Vietnam war, crime, drugs, nuclear
weapons, all issues contribute to her sense of catastrophe. Stacey is a fire-dweller trapped in the flames of modern society.

Stacey is unable to come to terms with herself. Nor is she able to accept a world which she perceives as chaotic and threatening. The title of the novel suggests her dilemma on several levels. The song, “Lady bird, lady bird / fly away home” (FD 209) in her dream reflects Stacey’s fear that Providence will punish her for her sins through her children. Her brief extra-marital affair with Luke, tortures her with a sense of guilt:

Lady bird, lady bird, flyaway home; Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone’. Stacey becomes tense [...] I have to go home [...] it’s something I can’t tell you [...] But neither of them can say anything more. Then she goes. The car responds to her tension, and she drives fast, hardly seeing where she is going, her inner automatic pilot having taken over. (FD 209-10)

When Duncan nearly drowns, Stacey bargains with God:

-God, let him be all right, and I’ll never want to get away again, I promise. If it was anything I did, take it out on me, not on him—that’s too much punishment for me. (FD 267)

Later she reflects:

-Judgment. All the things I don’t like to think I believe in.
But at the severe moments, up they rise, the tomb birds, scaring the guts out of me with their vulture wings. Maybe it's as well to know they're there. Maybe knowing might help to keep them at least a little in their place. Or maybe not. I used to think about Buckle that he was as superstitious as a caveman. I didn't know then that I was too. (FD 270)

Stacey often desires to get rid of her identity as the kid's mother or as Mac's wife. She assures herself, "I'm not a good mother. I'm not a good wife. I don't want to be. I'm Stacey Cameron" (FD 124). She meets a young man by name Luke Venturi when she takes a long drive to escape from home. She has an intimate relationship with Luke. Luke's kindness as a writer and related superiority as a man force her to cringe before him. She finds herself discussing and arguing with him without any hesitation. The inhibitions and anxieties which she experiences when she is with Max vanishes when she is with Luke Venturi. She forgets her children, her husband and everything else and enjoys herself for a short while. Her Calvinist background from Manawaka renders her guilty even as she is consumed with the fires of lust. Later Luke invites her to accompany him to the North. It is then that mother in her reminds her of her children and she gets back home, resisting the temptation to go with Luke.
By the time Stacey arrives at a compromise with her married life, she finds her children spoilt and in trouble. Her elder daughter Katie is lost in a promiscuous way of living; her sons Ian and Duncan are ruined by her excessive cuddling; her younger daughter Jen who is two years old is unable to speak. Finally it ends with her having a strong belief that at least temporarily, her family is more or less settled.

Stacey has a very distinctive voice. Commenting on her daily activities as a mother and as a housewife Woodcock observes:

The inner monologue, of course is strictly in Stacey's voice and it was through this, largely, that I hoped to convey her basic toughness of character, her ability to laugh at herself, her strong survival instincts.\textsuperscript{7}

Identity, particularly female identity was a major theme which was dealt with by the women writers of the sixties. \textbf{The Fire-Dwellers} is the best example of this type. Laurence depicts Stacey as a person who finds it difficult to perform her duty as a wife, a mother and at the same time to maintain her sense of self as a unified subject in the face of an antagonistic culture. She is somebody's wife, somebody's mother, somebody's daughter and somebody's sister. She has forgotten who she is as an individual. Stacey's quest was like any other heroine of the period. It was to resurrect her spirit from the onslaught of different
social constraints. Marriage involves motherhood which was another theme of the novels of the sixties. Usually the mothers were considered as the root cause of all evil.

Bevan’s brief introduction remains one of the very best discussions of *The Fire-Dwellers*. In a few short pages, he clarifies characters, theme, narrative method, and symbolism succinctly. Bevan appreciates Stacey female identity crisis:

*The Fire-Dwellers* is a searching novel about life in the mid-twentieth century as seen through the eyes of a middle-aged, middle-class, ordinary sort of a woman who needs to remind herself that she should have an identity of her own, other than that of wife and mother." Bevan also observes that Stacey’s desperate dilemma is echoed by her husband’s only near the end of the novel does Stacey appear to become aware of the strong probability that Mac’s inner world is as tormented as hers [...] Unlike male reviewers of the novel, Bevan sympathizes with Laurence’s female protagonist and , unlike female reviewers, he admires Laurence’s artistic achievement.

In the novel the protagonist is an ordinary housewife with whom many women can identify themselves. Stacey being a contemporary housewife is confused, anxious and self-doubting. Most of the actions
and deeds take place in her mind as she struggles with herself, her
husband, their four children and their society. Verduyn, a critic
examines how Stacey struggles with the inadequacies of language, of
social construction of the female body and the self. She gradually
attempts to develop a sense of identity that will accommodate her
perception of reality. She concludes: "Margaret Laurence's. The Fire-
Dwellers suggests that there is a conjunction of language and identity
in woman's understanding and expression of self" and presents an
"interrogation of language and its constructs of the female body and
human identity."\textsuperscript{10}

Stacey is introduced as seen in her own room in her house on
Bluejay Crescent. She identifies herself with "the big dark-green frame
house with gabled roof and screened front porch" (FD 16) which is
aging comfortably, as she is "attached to it, partly because she fears
new houses and partly because her own veins and skin cells seem
connected with this one" (FD 32).

Stacey likes the house's high gabled gray roof, its evergreen
painted walls and screened veranda. This is like a second skin for her.
It is a part of her identity. In this comfortable family home she lives in
uneasy proximity with her growing children and her husband. This is
the house which Stacey loves, but Mac dislikes. This results in a
conflict between them. "This fortress, which I'd like to believe strong"
(FD 18) becomes a prison for Stacey, as she feels that her "boundaries
are four walls" (FD 69). Eventually she understands, "I was wrong to
think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world" (FD 276).

The conflict in Stacey, the dilemma of the mother may be the
major conflict of the contemporary world. She is highly confused and
ponders whether to live for herself or sacrifice herself for her family.

Clara Thomas feels that Stacey is constantly striving to reach
out to the others: "She thinks of herself as commonplace and ordinary,
but the great achievement of her anxious, rueful, urgent voice is to
reveal her extraordinary qualities of love, fortitude and especially
vitality."11

The dilemma of personal identity which is seen in the other
novels of Margaret Laurence is very much evident in The Fire-
Dwellers. Assurance of oneself and knowledge, and communication
which confirms identity are very much evident in the novel. These
personal qualities determine the personality of Stacey. Her confused
state of mind is expressed through her voice and time. It is the voice of
the past and present. Her expression is either full of the babble of
conflicting voices or on the other extreme silence, which is very painful
and disturbing.

Stacey complains that she is surrounded by voices all the time
but none of them seem to be saying anything, including hers. She as
well as the other minor characters are able to speak. They all have secret names like. Clifford, Arbuckle, Vermon Winkler and so on. Jen, Stacey’s youngest son never opens his mouth as if determined not to speak. Even Mac, her husband does not communicate well with her. They seem to be scared and due to this fear their conversations grow absurd:

Stacey, everything is okay. How many times do I have to say it? Can’t you please for heaven’s sake quit yakking about my work? I’m sorry. But you won’t talk. You won’t ever say. There is nothing to say. Oh well in that case. Look, what do you want me to say? I don’t want you to say anything-Then why do you keep on I’m sorry its just that.

(FD 75-76)

The story reveals Stacey’s growing confusion in the domestic and social set up. It also reveals the loss of control, and the surrender to impulse in her which is playful yet dangerous. Her inner voice helps her to escape into a reverie. She reviews her life to find a solution to her present difficulties and dilemmas. The inner voice makes her a rich and complex character.

The voices from her past reveal the continuity of time. Stacey very often complains that she is leading an aimless life. But memories link her to the past which seems at once remote and omnipresent. Her
youth, hopes, plans along with her past is gone. It leaves her to be only an older, and a sadder personality. She wrestles with ghosts that are powerful yet insubstantial. It is because she drinks and eats too much, and is worried about trifle issues. She is able to trace the origin or the cause of her sins or faults. She becomes serious and quite understanding when she meets an old Manawaka acquaintance, Valentine Tonnerre. She hears the voices of another fire-dweller. She blames herself for the social, political and historical mistakes.

Finally the damage is undone by Stacey seeking out to understand life. She seeks to establish a pattern that gives her life a meaning. She tries to remake herself in order to fit into the society. She dresses appropriately, uses plastic kitchenware, and also plays the role of a businessman's wife. Through the character of Stacey, Laurence mocks at the middle-class dream of 'The good life', which ironically seems to depend more on insecurity and fear of death rather than any sense of value.

Mac's friend Buckle Fennick's identity seems to be secure because he asserts it through the force of his desires and will. When he drives his giant truck ferociously across British Columbia, he refuses to adhere to the social pressures. He is superstitious and obscene. Like Calla in A Jest of God, Buckle becomes a form of self-assertion, and self-denial that Stacey cannot adopt.
Stacey runs her life in the same way as all Laurence's protagonists do. She does it through action and through contemplation. These two ways provide a means to self-discovery. Though the actions are light and simple they are important psychologically and symbolically as self-assertive deeds. Stacey has an affair with a young man, Luke Venturi who is an Italian. Venturi lives outside Vancouver in a peaceful, natural setting where only the cry of birds is heard. She finds comfort physically and psychologically. Temporarily she escapes into the primitive wilds of British Columbia. This was Buckler's territory too, but Stacey does not succumb to the illusions that it encourages. There is no escape from self. She is shocked when she finds that Luke Venturi is only twenty-four and that she is as old as his mother. Her childish romance merely confirms her immaturity.

Stacey finds it difficult to observe, understand and judge herself. Memory becomes inaccurate and also the voices of the past cannot be answered. She asks herself "who is this you?" (FD 171) when she feels baffled by her own identity. The theme of death also influences the theme of quest for identity.

Stacey is inhibited by the fear of death. She fears that she might die or she might be driven into committing suicide thinking that her recurring headaches are caused by a tumour which would cause her death at the age of thirty-nine. Her fear of death is partly the result of
her childhood and adolescence spent at her father’s home and the memory of his funeral. She also suffers from a nudging pain under her ribs which makes her wonder if death will meet her “with insolent quickness, a growing fashion” (FD 307). Death seems to lurk dangerously close to Stacey and her family.

There are many incidents in which Stacey escapes death narrowly. One night, after a fight with her husband when she drives fast to the shore, she narrowly misses colliding with another car. Mac and her daughter Katie fear that Stacey will attempt suicide, like her friend, Tess. Ian narrowly escapes being run over by car when he runs on the road after a football. Mac’s friend gets killed in an accident. Duncan’s drowning in the sea seems his closest brush with death. Stacey feels as terrified as Duncan himself about the reports of death in the newspapers, accidents, death in riots and due to starvation all of which depict the world as a hate-filled world, where “everybody’s living dangerously” (FD 193).

There is violence everywhere and Stacey is panic-stricken. Her panic is genuine as “anything that could happen to anybody” (FD 212). She feels that it is very difficult to survive in a world in which one needs to work very hard.

In the novel, Stacey uses mental baggage to express the conditions of her ultimate victory:
Mental baggage suggests that life is a journey through time. We carry with us the past and its burden of guilt. Thus the mind is an untidy, overstuffed container. But it also suggests that Stacey is strong enough to carry her bags. Unpacking them means reviewing, analyzing, judging—shortly composing the narrative that forms this novel.

Stacey learns to accept more or less patiently the things that cannot be changed. Moreover she learns to recognize and use her powers to a considerable extent. This is due to her strength of character. She did not know how to exercise the strength, which she possessed. While other people admired her skill and resourcefulness, Stacey herself felt feeble and inapt due to lack of confidence and faith in herself. At last she is able to assert herself in the face of time, age, loss and death: “I can’t stand it. I cannot, I can’t take it. Yeh, I can though, By god, I can, if I set my mind to it” (FD 289).

Vancouver, despite being the jewel of the Pacific Northwest, seems a kind of a wasteland. It represents violence and this is inhabited by the spiritually dead. Much to Stacey’s horror, she witnesses an accident near her home. Knowing the victim to be a young boy of seven or ten, she dashes home to see if Ian and Duncan are safe. This attitude of Stacey shows that she is like a woman who is
full of anxiety and fear. She is like a person who dwells on the fire.

Stacey is alienated from herself because of the certain illusions which she develops viewing the advertising in the media. She tries to resist the materialism rampant in her society. She tries to act in accordance with her own thoughts and feelings, but she falls a prey to the pressures of society.

Stacey's fear and anxieties are bred and sustained by her ideas about womanhood. She fears that she is trapped by trivialities all through her life. She has a very strong hold on her mind and imagination. She lives her life for others and exists only “as Mac's wife or the kid’s mother” (FD 95).

Stacey's affair with LukeVenturi helps her to prove her identity. The misunderstanding which exists between her and Mac is further widened by Buckle Fennick's lies about taking her to bed. Though she is not guilty she is not able to make Mac understand this. This affair becomes clear to Mac only after the death of Buckle. It is because of this unfair accusation of Mac, Stacey finds an excuse for her affair with Luke. Luke is young and fresh and is a welcome change to her after Mac. Her inquisitiveness to know about a new man in her life is expressed much earlier in the novel: “I want some other man, someone I’ve never been with. Only Mac for sixteen, years. What are other men like?” (FD 21-22). Stacey is not deprived of any sexuality. But Lukes
relationship is “like the rain in a dry year” (FD 174).

Luke sees Stacey exclusively as a woman and she is momentarily freed of the “Wife-mother-housekeeper roles”. Her relationship with Luke is uncontaminated by the activities of the daily life:

I'd like to start again everything, all of life, start again with someone like you-with you-with everything simpler and clearer. No lies, No recriminations. No unmerry-go-round of pointless words. Just everything plain and good, like today, and making love and not worrying about unimportant things and not trying to change each other. (FD 189)

Her affair with Luke also serves as a substitute for her reminiscences about her love-life as a young girl in Manawaka. This affair helps her to enter into her married life with confidence. Later she realises that Luke is no less a substitute for Mac and that he does not offer any magical solutions to life’s problems as she hoped he might. “Luke is to Stacey a lover as well as a spiritual healer [...] The challenge that Luke represents is not a call to the confession of inner truths previously rejected but rather to the full acceptance of the demands of the individual self.”

Stacey is depicted as a mother of four children who is forever worrying about them and their welfare and also about her husband
Mac's lack of affection for their son Duncan. Katie is her daughter, through whom she recalls her own past. This reveals that she occupies a middle position between mother and child.

Stacey has a strong maternal nature. Though she appears at times as a harsh mother yet her nature shows that she is very protective. She tries to protect her son's need for privacy. This maternal concern does not stop with her children alone. It extends even to Buckle's mother. She even goes to the extent of helping Mac's father whose confession she hears and to whom she is very generous.

Stacey's children inhabit the world which is represented as the destructive fire world. It is the world which lacks in qualities of culture and art. It also represents death and destruction by violence. Stacey does not have any realistic way of changing the external world.

Stacey's struggle in the present is to maintain the real part of herself. This, according to the psychologists, is essential if a woman is able to value individual relationships. It helps one to have a fulfillment of personality. There is a strong relationship between Stacey and her daughter Katie. This relationship illustrates that this mother-daughter bond is essential to keep going the strong line of love from mother to daughter, from woman to woman.

Stacey retains the real part of her "self. She even keeps alive the erotic self in her. For instance towards the end of the novel she is closer
to Mac than she has ever been since those honeymoon days when she could say: “You know something, Mac? What? I like everything about you” (FD 38). She understands Mac in a greater manner and tries to perceive Mac’s hidden need and his real strength. This offers fresh hope for their marriage.

Stacey’s view of God is unusual. She learns to survive without much help from God. Her view of God is a lot more complicated than that of Rachel who basically regards God as a brutal joker. God created man in his image, but Stacey is confused as she creates God in her image. Hence the image of God in the novel varies from person to person. This is clear in the following imagined conversation:

At the Day of Judgment, God will say Stacey MacAindra, what have you done with your life? And I’ll say, Well, let’s see, Sir, I think I loved my kids. And He’ll say, Are you certain of that? And I’ll say. God, I’m not certain about anything anymore [...] Maybe He’d say, Don’t worry, Stacey, I’m not all that certain, either. Sometimes I wonder if I even exist. And I’d say, I know what you mean, Lord. I have the same trouble with myself. (FD 14)

Stacey often feels that she is living an unreal mechanical life devoid of meaning and that she is manipulated by a force beyond her control.
The Fire-Dwellers has not received the required critical attention that Laurence’s other Manawaka Novels have received. The reasons for this are that Laurence was far ahead of her time in both the feminist content and post modernist form. Only later did the novel find its true value, and due appreciation.

Laurence was reluctant to introduce her middle-aged protagonist:

Who on earth, I asked myself when I began writing this novel, is going to be interested in reading about a middle aged house wife, mother of four? Then I thought the hell with it. Some of my best friends are middle-aged house wives; I’m one. Myself. ("Tys" 21-22) But many male reviewers appear enraged by the figure of the house wife as heroine.14

D.O. Spettigue comprehends the universal appeal of Laurence’s creation—"Stacey is not only every woman but every man coming to terms with his inadequate and at the same time learning his strength."

It also anticipates recent critical appreciation of Laurence’s examination of languages: “A book also about language, then exterior ones, social ones, the intimate language of the body and especially the forever unspoken agonized language of the solitary self that is in every one of us.”15
Stacey’s conversation with God seems to have a cathartic value. It fulfills her desperate need for a confidant. She tries to find some meaning in her life. “Stacey gropes for some pattern of meaning amidst a chaotic life.”

Stacey feels guilty for not asking Mathew, Mac’s father to move in with them. Stacey, not wanting to die before her children are grown up, imagines her inner voice mocking at her ability to cope. It rages:

Listen here, God, don’t talk to me like that. You have no right. You try bringing up four kids. Don’t tell me you’ve brought up countless millions because I don’t buy that. We’ve brought our own selves up and precious little help we’ve had from you. (FD 168)

Stacey considers God as a very intimate person. She finds comfort in confiding to him.

Another critic appreciates Laurence’s feminist subject. “The Fire-Dwellers presents an ordinary housewife with whom many women will identify” as “much of the action takes place inside Stacey’s head as she struggles with herself, her husband, their four children, and their society, to bring a modified victory from besetting difficulties.”

Namcekevill, a critic, demonstrates how the circular nature of Stacey’s journey is reflected in the circular structure of the novel, thereby demonstrating a graphic representation of her memories,
fantasies and dreams which in turn reveal the overall cyclic nature of
The Fire-Dwellers the critic concludes that finally the heroine's quest leads to rediscovery of her inner strength and recognition of her ability to cope with a world on fire.

Stacey feels a sense of anguish and fear in bringing up her kids in a world on fire. She is concerned about raising children in a backdrop of drug culture. She fears that the drug culture is invading her family when the adolescent Katie wants to watch an experimental film. Moreover she announces a date with a boy whose father reported him to the police.

In Laurence's fiction the characters have independent individuality. They are the different facets of the author's personality. Laurence portrays Stacey's dilemma through a dynamic of division between internal and external dimensions. She employs first and third-person narrative techniques, switching from inside Stacey's consciousness to outside. She has a split personality. She cries out: "Help, I'm schizophrenic" (FD106).

This dual personality of Stacey is seen in the very opening page of the novel as she observes herself in the mirror, comparing the objective reality reflected there with her subjective self-image: "Stacey sees mirrored her own self in the present flesh" (FD8) compared with the wedding photograph of "Stacey twenty-three, almost beautiful
although not knowing it then" (FD8).

At the age of thirty-nine, and after four kids, Stacey does not expect to “look like a sylph” (FD 8). In due course she puts on “the slow accumulation of flesh. Not flesh. Fat. F.A.T.” (FD 21). Moreover she is “shorter than she would like to be” (FD 9). She finds life empty, isolated, unformed, confined to her home and her “boundaries are four walls” (FD 69). Nagging in her mind is the constant quest for identity. Stacey asks herself, “who is this you?” and replies “I don’t know” (FD 159).

Bevan, in an introduction to The Fire-Dwellers comments on Stacey’s identity crisis:

The Fire-Dwellers is a searching novel about life in the mid-twentieth century as seen through the eyes of a middle-aged, middle-class, ordinary sort of a woman who needs to remind herself that she would have an identity of her own, other than that of wife and mother.  

She is in a dilemma, which revolves round the question of whether to live for herself or sacrifice herself for her family.

Her feelings are paradoxical Nora Stovel observes:

Stacey’s dilemma of identity is signified by her names. ‘Stacey’, short for “Anastasia” (90), from the Latin word ‘Stasis’, meaning stability, as in the ‘status quo’, is ironic,
because Stacey is kinetic, not static, although she does provide stability for those around her. Caught between her past name, “Stacey Cameron”, and her current label, “Mrs.C.MacAindra”, she addresses herself by various epithets, from “dream girl” (170) “female Saint” (231), from “clown” (122) to “doll” (13), from “Idiot child” (177) to “rotten old bitch.”

The Fire-Dwellers is said to be “a type-setter’s night mare.”

Stacey’s story is told in blocks of third-person, present tense narrative; her thoughts are in the first-person, present tense, passages of dialogue, memories of Stacey’s childhood, conversations, interruption of radio and television broadcasts and so on. Such a kind of narration is complex and sometimes, even confusing.

Stacey’s husband Clifford MacAindra, known as Mac, is introduced in the opening pages of the novel. He remains the same till the end of the fiction except that he had some lines in his forehead like the stretch marks on Stacey’s stomach. Mac is like any other Canadian male hero. He is always tight lipped. He carries more mental baggages than Stacey. Only later she begins to realise this:

May be I do begin to see. If he doesn’t deal with every thing alone, no help, then he thinks he’s a total washout [...] Mac’s got only himself. And if he doesn’t speak of it to some
extent, one of these days he'll crack up. (FD 234)

Mac along with Richalife, sells placebos to chronic neurotics who think that eating a pill will renew their psyches and physiques. Mac does not like his job but pretends to be thrilled. He is astonished why his boss Thorlakson needs him. But Stacey finds out that he is scared of a person from Manawaka. Finally Thor is transferred to the head office in Montreal and Mac is offered the position of manager. Everything ends well in the end.

Stacey and Mac's talk always end up in a conflict as far as the children's welfare is concerned. They are afraid that their son might go wrong. Mac chastises Duncan for crying over an injury and blames Stacey for babying him when he has nightmares. He shouts, "Ruin them, for all I care" (FD 198) making her feel like a "Kid-ruiner" (FD 29). The present situation contrasts with that of Mac visiting Stacey in the hospital after Jen's birth, bringing her two dozen yellow chrysanthemums. Mac's act of saving the almost-drowned Duncan is an act of redemption. Appreciating finally Mac's idiom of silence, she comments: "The silences aren't all bad. How do I know how many times Mac has protected me by not saying? "(FD 264) and finally she concludes, "yet he's a whole lot stronger than he thinks he is. May be they all are. May be even Duncan is. May be even, I am" (FD 260).
Thus in the end Mac depicts his own individual identity which is very strong and unique.

Mathew MacAindra, Mac's father, retains his individuality when he admits that he has glaucoma. His vulnerability is revealed dramatically when he falls down the stairs on Sunday. He confesses that he has glaucoma. Confessing his physical weakness leads him to acknowledge his spiritual weakness as well. Stacey calls him "Dad" realizing the flaw in him. It is "Mathew's despair" (FD 257). The name "Dad" is reserved for her own long-dead father, Niall Cameron. Mathew's fall finally makes her invite him to her home.

Stacey and Mac have four children. Katie is fourteen, Ian and Duncan are ten and seven respectively and Jen is two. The characters represent their creator's personalities. Similarly MacAindra's children represent aspects of their parent's personalities. Katie demonstrates parallels with Stacey and Ian with Mac. Stacey and Mac have opposite philosophies of child-rearing. Mac seems to be more a disciplinarian whereas Stacey is a permissive parent.

Katie MacAindra is a younger replica of Stacey. She is symbolised by green, the colour of new growth. There is the mother and daughter conflict when Katie tries to establish her independence. Stacey accuses Katie and forbids her to see an "A" film called "Psychedelic sidewalk". Katie finds Stacey behaving in an
unreasonable, inconsistent and immoral manner. The whole affair appears ironic when Stacey returns late at night: “Katie confronts her with a combination of maternal protectiveness and adolescent rebellion.” She sees herself as Stacey’s equal and angrily tells her: “Just don’t ever bawl me out again, eh?” (FD 182)

Ian and Duncan represent their father and mother respectively, echoing their parents’ conflict. Ian is replica of Mac, very silent, whereas Duncan is more open and expressive like his mother. When Duncan has a nightmare or cuts his hand, he cries to his mother, but Ian when upset, holds himself. He does not fear or cry like Duncan. Ian seems to be a man of action. A life long bondage occurs between Ian and Duncan when he saves Duncan’s life when the latter gets drowned in the water.

Stacey feels that she has no existence, apart from her roles as a wife and mother. She has to look into the mirror, “to make sure [...] (she is) really there” (FD 132). She often asks herself: “What’s left of me? Where have I gone?” (FD 70) On one occasion, Luke challenges her to come out of her invisible existence: “Come out. From wherever you’re hiding yourself [...] I can just about make you out [...] like looking through the wrong end of a telescope” (FD 167). On another occasion, Stacey questions her very self: “Who’re you? One of your otherselves. Help, I’m schizophrenic” (FD 106). Once, in a nightmare, Stacey sees
herself as carrying her own severed head. “The head she has been carrying is of course none but hers” (FD 115).

Imagery, especially mirror imagery is central to Laurence’s theme of identity. Laurence compares mirrors to television in the opening page of the novel, “the Ever open Eye”, (FD57) shows pictures of people. Stacey identifies herself with the newspaper photograph of a mother holding her dead child: “The woman’s mouth open wide—a sound of unbearability but rendered in silence by the camera clicking. Only the zero mouth to be seen, Noiselessly proclaiming the gone-early child” (FD 254).

Stacey eventually does realise that sympathy is the antidote to the poison of personal conflict: she questions: “Wouldn’t it be strange of I could ever stop thinking in terms of them and me? (FD 189) Stacey has sympathy for Buckle Fennick. She confesses: “I never before in my life felt sorry for Buckle Fennick” (FD 59). After his death, Stacey sheds tears for him. Later her sympathy extends even to Mac. For she recognises Mac’s “acceptance of the responsibilities he took on long ago when he never suspected what they might mean” (FD 62). It is the responsibility for the growing family. Stacey later says: “Mac has to pretend he’s absolutely strong, and now I see he doesn’t believe a word of it and never has. Yet he’s a whole lot stronger than he thinks he is. May be they all are. May be even Duncan is. May be even I am” (FD260).
Stacey tries to rediscover her true identity. This makes her want to escape from her role as wife and mother and she declares: “I’m trapped” (FD 194). For her the strong home becomes a prison for her “My boundaries are four walls” (FD 69).

Stacey finally “comes to terms with her life and recognises herself as a survivor” (FD 198). She learns to accept life as it is. She realises that she should accept herself as she is and stop wanting to be like others for, as Luke rightly says: “Everything looks better and worse from the outside” (FD 198). She decides to remain with Mac and her children and rather than go forth with her young lover. She decides to take life as it comes and to quit fearing the unknown. She prefers to have her own identity. She finally attains self-realisation. With characteristic irony Stacey declares:

I used to think there would be a blinding flash of light someday, and then I would be wise and calm and would know how to cope with every thing and my kids would rise up and call me blessed. Now I see that whatever I’m like, I’m pretty well stuck with it for life. Hell of a revelation that turned out to be. (FD 298-99)

The novel ends on a note of reconciliation and acceptance of those things which cannot be changed. Stacey’s four earlier dreams are
dominated by one of the four elements. Fire, water and earth appear in her dreams as destructive forces while air appears as an escape device. Stacey’s improvement in her relationship with Max and the others, and her last dreams combines the four elements and indicates the possibility of finding peace and freedom despite the social unrest around her. The ‘trap’, Stacey realises, is not the four walls of her home but the world. She realises that the fire born are at home in fire. Stacey born to this element, learns to survive in it with dignity and the ability to give and receive love. She is brave and is determined to face life for she realises that the others around her are Fire-Dwellers too. She, by enduring the purgatorial flame finds her own individuality and her own identity. Her quest comes to an end.