

## Frederick Feikema Manfred: Tribute to a Giant

by Denise Karachuk Feikema

**I met Frederick Manfred just once before he died, but this storyteller became my inspiration in that one rainy Friday afternoon. I was on a driving trip with my parents and my brother after my first year of graduate school. We had made plans to meet Fred on our way through Minnesota before we headed west.**

As I prepared for the visit, I wondered what I would say to this man who had been my idol since I was seven years old. I had discovered his books in a public library during the first summer I lived in Florida. I began to read *Green Earth* that summer, but found the novel to be a bit too heavy for my seven-year-old hands. When my mother read it, she decided it was "that kind of book," one which should certainly not be read by her seven-year-old daughter. Unfortunately, I let my mother persuade me not to finish the novel then, and I had not taken the time to read it before this visit to southwestern Minnesota.

Clearly, my mother's judgment on his novel was not the conversation-starter I was looking for. I didn't know what I could possibly say to this man who had been so much of who I wanted to become. Fred's image as "The Writer" in my family's heritage had an enormous impact on my youth. I remember making the decision to become a writer when I was very young. From the back seat of my parents' car, I leaned over to proudly tell my parents that I had never considered becoming a lawyer. Instead, I would be a writer, "Just like Fred," when I grew up. I practiced for a while by writing books of poetry which my mother would buy from me for a dollar and give to my dad on his birthday. It wasn't a bad business for a seven-year-old child. I still have those books of poems. I don't remember how I got them back from my father. Of course, these are silly poems, nothing I could talk to a real writer about.

I thought about the writing I had done more recently. I had published a few poems in my high school and college literary magazines. I had even sent a copy of one of these college magazines to Fred before the visit. He sent back a note: "Another Feikema who writes!" I was ecstatic for weeks. But he already knew about those poems, so I could hardly talk with him about them. I continued to struggle with my side of the imagined conversation until the afternoon when we arrived at Roundwind in Luverne, Minnesota.

The vast prairie surrounding the author's house and his writing cupola--or his teepee, as he referred to it--gave way only to the vastness of the corn fields of northern Iowa. I had never before seen so much open space. I was overwhelmed by the continuity of the land. As I knocked on Fred's door, I still didn't know what I would say to him. Thankfully, Fred took care of my problem. From the moment the giant eighty-one year old welcomed my family and me into his home until well after we left, his voice resounded inside my head. Worry about something to say to this writer became futile when I realized that he is, perhaps before anything else, a story-teller. I sat enthralled at his feet as he wove together stories from his life, his novels, and the history of Siouland. I forgot about my concern over what to say. I had only to listen.

As he spoke then, and as I hear his voice now, everything he offers seems to tell me to write. Write it down. Tell the world your story. If it's real, they'll listen. And then his voice

blends with my grandfather's "Whoa, girlee. Now, you've got the puppets a-dancing." I think Grandpa's favorite phrase originated in Dutch and had some meaning other than the one I imposed upon it, but I like to think that I can set the world to dancing with the words I might write someday. Perhaps I'll write "those kinds of books" and set all the mothers of seven-year-old daughters to dancing. Whatever I write, I know that it must be real, that it must originate from within myself.

This is the inspiration of a great writer: Fred taught me to write what is inside of me, to write about the life I've led, to write my own truth, and to write who I am. If I could have the chance to visit Fred again, I know what I would say. I would say thank you.