Reflections of Myself: Anne, Emily, and the Creative Spirit

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When I was nine, my grandmother gave me a copy of *Anne of Green Gables* for Christmas. I put it on my bookshelf without opening it. It looked too girly for a tomboy engrossed in her brother's *Hardy Boys* novels and her father's collection of Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour Westerns. A year went by before I opened *Anne* and stepped into Lucy Maud Montgomery's world, a world that felt instantly familiar.

I saw a lot of myself in Anne's quick temper and runaway imagination. Like her, I had "a tendency to fall into daydreams in the middle of a task and forget all about it until such a time as I was sharply recalled to earth by a reprimand or a catastrophe" (Montgomery, *AGG* 66). As for temper, in Grade Two I hit a boy over the head with a book when he called me "four-eyes" the first day I wore my new glasses to school. I found still more to recognize in Emily Starr. By the time I discovered Emily, I had my own version of a Jimmy-book full of sketches and stories. Through Emily's eyes, I first saw myself as a writer.

The settings through which I followed Anne, Emily, Pat, and Valancy were familiar, too. My parents, transplanted Maritimers, took us "home" every summer from Montreal to Kingsport, the small village on Nova Scotia's Minas Basin where my father grew up. The area had changed little in fifty years. It could have been Avonlea, and my grandparents' home was my Silver Bush. The bedrooms were still furnished as they had been when my father and his sister and brothers were growing up. Toys, old readers, and books of hand-drawn maps remained in the closets. The sun porch overflowed with old books and magazines, classics like *Evangeline* along with tattered volumes by minor Victorian authors long forgotten. Endless fuel for the imagination of a bookish child. I would disappear in there, lost to the world until someone came looking for me. I roamed the beach, lingered in the little country store down the road, sat in the swing chair in the front yard while dark came down and bats swooped over the house. I absorbed my grandparents' stories of their childhood pre–World War I, in what Montgomery called "the olden years before the world turned upside down" (*EC* 2701), just as she absorbed the tales of her childhood—the wreck of the *Marco Polo*, the legend of Cape Leforce, and many others that found their way into her fiction.

My grandfather told of the winter a moose moved into the stable in his father's lumber camp, and of the time his brother cut off the end of his sister's finger in an accident with an axe. ("Don't tell such stories to the children!" my grandmother would scold.) Gram shared her experiences as a teenaged teacher in a one-room country school, experiences that mirrored Anne Shirley's. As with Montgomery, those stories became part of my inner landscape, part of who I am as a writer. I too became a teacher, and I use Montgomery's writing, as well as my own, to link my smartphone-savvy, social media–adept students to a world that has all but disappeared from living memory.

Through Anne and Emily, and later through Montgomery's published journals, I learned valuable lessons of writing-craft along the way. Simple words are best. Let the sun rise and set without making a fuss about it. And, perhaps most importantly, don't apologize for choosing to portray the positive side of life. To paraphrase Montgomery, pine woods are as real as pigsties, and much more pleasant as well(*ENM* 4421).

Montgomery also introduced me to the realities of publishing, which are essentially the same even in our digital world. Rejection, financial stress, and the struggle to find time for writing were all part of her long apprenticeship. Starting in her teens, she spent almost twenty years building up a clientele of magazines and church periodicals before *Anne of Green Gables* brought her recognition. I, too, submitted my first manuscripts by mail, and experienced the joy of getting a thin letter of acceptance as well as the disappointment of dismal fat letters containing returned submissions.

Authors have always had to wear many hats—editor, marketer, promoter. They have always had to deal with series fatigue ("It is such a relief to be done of the 'Anne gang.' I had gone so stale on them," Montgomery wrote in her journal in August 1921 [*SJ* 3:16]), and there have always been unscrupulous publishers. I have great respect for Montgomery as an adept businesswoman who held her own in a man's industry and refused to be exploited.

I write historical fiction. My recent novels are set in Halifax, Nova Scotia, during and after World War I. Montgomery's wartime journals, along with *Rilla of Ingleside*, were invaluable resources as I created my characters and their world of hope, heartbreak, and, above all, dizzying change. "I wonder if a hundred years from now, anybody will win a victory over anything because of something I left or did. It's an inspiring thought," Emily Starr writes in *Emily Climbs* (2703). I can certainly say that I have been inspired by Emily and her creator. I doubt that there is an author in Canada who can't say the same about Montgomery, a remarkable woman whose life and writing are part of the fabric of our culture.

Bio: Linda Atkinson is a high school science and history teacher in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She is a lifelong reader and writer who also enjoys cooking, gardening, and shamelessly spoiling her two Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retrievers, Chandler and Echo. Under the pen name Jennie Marsland she has three historical novels currently available from Amazon. The trilogy, *Winds of War, Winds of Change*, including *Shattered*, *Deliverance*, and *Flight*, is set in Halifax at the time of the 1917 Explosion.

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