This Hunger for Books

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I was born and raised on a farm on the east coast of Scotland. The farm road, long, lonely, and deeply rutted, clattered down a steep hillside. We drove to school each day along the crest of the hill, with the broad expanse of the tidal Eden Estuary to our left and the ruins of the cathedral towers of the city of St. Andrews silhouetted against the sea before us.

At school I was eager to learn to read, but the Janet and John books, which were the UK's equivalent of Dick and Jane, soon dulled my enthusiasm. I had had little contact with other children and was wary of them, preferring the safety of standing, back against the wall, watching. After school I would don my work clothes and go to help Dad with the milking. One day I was told I must stay with Mother. My young brother was now of an age where he would replace me as the wee helper, and, instead of milking, I would learn to cook, clean, and take care of my younger siblings. I was an obedient child, but often a lonely one.

Each night I was read a bedtime story; however, that practice ceased by the time I was four years old. Eventually I mastered reading, and, yet, there was nothing in the farmhouse for me to read. It was an ache deep inside, this hunger for books. One day a school friend told me about a place where you could borrow books for free. I badgered my mother, who sent me into the town library to find out how to join. It helped a little, but the librarians, standing behind their desk watching, never offered advice about what I might like. It didn't feel a welcoming place.

My aunt came to visit once a year arriving in great state on the overnight sleeper train from London. She was a nanny to the aristocracy, and we would get constant warnings beforehand about our behaviour and to speak properly—that is, to not use Scots words, which Dad did and which was considered fearfully common.

My aunt was not the most approachable of people, but for some reason I spoke to her of how starved I was of reading material.

"She'd like the *Anne* books," my aunt said over the top of my head.

My mother blinked.

"Surely, you know *Anne of Green Gables*?"

But my mother didn't know. She'd spent her adolescence in an orphanage, although I only discovered this in the final years of her life, for it was something she was deeply shamed by. Her own mother had died when she was eleven and her father, who'd left Scotland and disappeared into the wilds of Canada, could not be found to take responsibility for his motherless children. My aunt, a clever child, was removed from school and sent to work as a skivvy in an asylum kitchen. Although there were married uncles, and an elderly grandmother, no one wanted to take the girls in, and so my mother was sent a hundred miles away to an orphanage. She had no contact with

her family, not even a letter, for the next five years.

Christmas 1963 arrived three green hardback books with orange covers—a fashionable colour then—with a painting of Anne at a different age inset on the front of each, and I was in possession of *Anne of Green Gables*, *Anne of Avonlea*, and *Anne's House of Dreams*, respectively. It was a feast, and I read, reread, and reread.

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Over the next few years I acquired more *Anne* books courtesy of my aunt, and, finally, the local library came into its own, for I learned how to request books from other libraries and in this way worked my way through everything available that L.M. Montgomery had written. I had also, by now, discovered the other great L.M., Louisa May (Alcott). Then I was gifted a set of second-hand *Bobbsey Twins* books and the *What Katy Did* series. Life in North America seemed both exotic and exciting.

Always I came back to Anne. Anne was my role model: she was who I aspired to be. I can honestly say I loved everything about those books—except how Montgomery wrote about Anne as a writer. Writing was something Anne dabbled in, her little hobby, and it was never treated seriously, especially by Anne herself. "Oh, I do little things for children. I haven't done much since I was married. And—I have no designs on a great Canadian novel," laughed Anne. "That is quite beyond me." So says *Anne's House of Dreams* (157).

"The great Canadian novel" was instead written by Anne's friend's husband (Owen Ford). It is of note that it is men, including her pupil Paul Irving and her son Walter, who achieve the dizzy literary heights, but never Anne. Of course, in the *Emily* books, Montgomery does have Emily finally achieve success as a writer, but it's left opaque as to whether Emily will be granted both love *and* success. L.M. Montgomery's own marriage reportedly was not happy, and perhaps she felt you couldn't have both.

I am now an author myself, of historical fiction, and, although our genres are different, I'm still channelling L.M. Montgomery in various ways. I am hugely influenced by her sense of place, and my first novel, *The Castilians*, is set in my home town of St. Andrews, Scotland. I feel a visceral connection with this ancient town, and my country of birth, which I suspect is similar to the connection L.M. Montgomery felt to PEI in particular and Canada generally. Though I do wish I could master her skills of descriptive writing—but it's always good to have something to aspire to.

I was always drawn to how her characters are essentially people doing their best within the constraints of the era they inhabit and seeking to live decent lives. My books cover the religious turmoil that spread across Europe during the Reformation and, through my characters, I try to show that, whatever faith they adhere to (and for many people that kept changing depending on who was king or queen at the time), most people have a moral code of inherent goodness they do strive to follow. The foundations for this philosophy originate from my immersion in L.M. Montgomery's books as a child.

It's also in the nuggets that open up the world her characters inhabit that I especially try to follow in my own writing. Montgomery set up many questions in my child mind, not least how a child could be handed over without any checks on the family she was given to—without even prior sight of them. And what was a "home boy," and why would Marilla refer to a child as a "London street Arab"?

Around 2008 the terrible stories about the impact of Britain's Child Migrant Programme broke and we learned, through reports on the BBC, that beginning in the late 1860s, through various migration schemes, children were shipped to Australia, New Zealand, and Canada and were frequently ill-treated and sometimes abused. What was especially astounding was that this had gone on right up until 1967—four years after I read my first *Anne* book.

“This explains what a *home boy* is,” I thought at the time. But I had more to discover. A little more digging, and I learned that there was also a process of “assisted juvenile emigration” (Constantine) in effect from 1869 until 1939, when 100,000 children were sent to Canada, over half of them from Barnardo Homes. They were apparently referred to as “home” boys or girls because they went from a British home to a Canadian one—and “home” here refers to an orphanage. That is not to say motives of the philanthropists funding their migration were evil, only ill thought-out, and the consequences were often devastating to the children involved.

And then, in one of those strange coincidences, as I was writing this piece I caught an episode of the *Antiques Roadshow*, a British TV show which has run for over forty years. Up on the screen came some slides, which had inevitably been discovered in a dusty corner of an attic, picturing boys on the deck of a ship. These lads were being trained on an educational facility farm near Glasgow when, without the knowledge or permission of any family they might have had, they were shipped off to Canada to work on farms. The scene shifted to an interview with the head of a charity in Canada that assists descendants of home boys and girls to trace their ancestors. She said that around ten per cent of Canada’s population is descended from these children but frequently know little because there was such shame attached their parents never spoke of it (just as my own mother never did until near the end of her life). So, I wondered, might this have happened to my mother—could she ever have ended up a home girl in Canada?

In researching my novel *The Apostates*, which is set partly in Geneva of 1550, I learned that the reformer John Calvin distinguished between the deserving and undeserving poor. The former, who were sick, very old, or disabled, were virtuous; and the latter were anyone else in poverty and were feckless. My mother fell into the deserving category. Not only was she a child, but she also came from a middle-class background and was sent to an orphanage for middle-class children, and not to a workhouse. The girls there were given a good education, as opposed to having to leave school at fourteen to go into service or a factory, and Mother emerged with the qualifications to train as a nurse. I once asked her if she chose nursing because her grandfather had been the village doctor.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “They provided accommodation, and I had nowhere to go.”

So Mother was protected from the Child Migrant Programme because she was middle-class, but, in another strange quirk of fate, my husband’s father was not. My father-in-law began life in the East End of London so truly was a London street orphan. His parents were among the sizable group of immigrants flowing into London in the 1880s, fleeing the pogroms in Russia. His own father soon vanished, and my husband’s grandmother was left with four small boys under the age of eight. After playing in the streets one day, the boys returned to an empty house (probably a couple of rooms). Their mother had gone, and the neighbours took the boys to the workhouse. They most certainly could’ve been transported to Canada or Australia, but two factors perhaps made this unlikely.

First, their mother regularly removed them from the orphanage to provide cheap labour for the variety of restaurants she ran; then, when they were no longer needed or she could no longer support them or both, she sent them back to the orphanage or foster care. Nevertheless, she could have turned up one day to find some or all of them gone. Second, and possibly more critically, they were Jewish—and if Marilla was reluctant to take in what she referred to as a “London street Arab,” how much less willing would she have been to offer shelter to a *Jewish* “London Street Arab”!

I am writing as though L.M. Montgomery was unkind, which is far from the case. There is a heartrending paragraph in *Anne’s House of Dreams*, which resonated for me even as a child. Here’s what her character Miss Cornelia had to say:

> Mind you, Anne dearie, I'm not down on all evangelists. We've had some real fine, earnest men, who did a lot of good and made the old sinners squirm. But this Fiske-man wasn't one of them. I had a good laugh all to myself one evening. Fiske had asked all who were Christians to stand up. I didn't, believe me! I never had any use for that sort of thing. But most of them did, and then he asked all who wanted to be Christians to stand up. Nobody stirred for a spell, so Fiske started up a hymn at the top of his voice. Just in front of me poor little Ikey Baker was sitting in the Millison pew. He was a home boy, ten years old, and Millison just about worked him to death. The poor little creature was always so tired he fell asleep right off whenever he went to church or anywhere he could sit still for a few minutes. He'd been sleeping all through the meeting, and I was thankful to see the poor child getting a rest, believe ME. Well, when Fiske's voice went soaring skyward and the rest joined in, poor Ikey wakened with a start. He thought it was just an ordinary singing and that everybody ought to stand up, so he scrambled to his feet mighty quick, knowing he'd get a combing down from Maria Millison for sleeping in meeting. Fiske saw him, stopped and shouted, "Another soul saved! Glory Hallelujah!" And there was poor, frightened Ikey, only half awake and yawning, never thinking about his soul at all. Poor child, he never had time to think of anything but his tired, overworked little body. (159–60)

Scholars more knowledgeable than I have written saying L.M. Montgomery (I cannot refer to her as *Lucy Maud*, or even *Maud*: it seems inappropriately familiar, and I didn't know what "L.M." stood for until I was well into adulthood) drew on her own childhood experience of loneliness and emotional neglect in writing the *Anne* books. She was also an acute and sympathetic observer of life and human frailties, which the passage above well displays.

And, for me, she was both a safety net, in what was at times a lonely childhood, and an inspiration. Not only in terms of my own writing but in shaping who I am.

Bio: V.E.H. Masters is the author of *The Seton Chronicles*, an historical fiction series set in sixteenth-century Europe. She is the winner of the Barbara Hammond Trophy, and her books are regularly on the Amazon Bestseller Lists. She lives in the Scottish Borders.

To find out more please go to https://vehmasters.com/.

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Banner image: Farmhouse in which V.E.H. Masters grew up. Painting courtesy of Elizabeth Wilson.