Story-Gifting: An L.M. Montgomery Approach to Honouring Births and Birthdays

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This celebratory essay honours 150 years since the birth of L.M. Montgomery in 1874 by considering the intersection of celebration and story. In Montgomery's work, celebration and story are rooted in place, are experienced by budding writers, and relate to birth, that very first of birthdays.

The 30th November 2024 marked 150 years since L.M. Montgomery was born in Prince Edward Island in 1874. In that celebratory year, readers and fans, writers and translators, tourism experts and community groups, extended Montgomery's legacy by telling her story as a Canadian icon, writer, teacher, and photographer and sharing new stories about her life and work through scholarly conversations, translations, adaptations, and artistic interpretations. (For examples, see this link!)

Given Montgomery's status as an internationally renowned and beloved writer, it is perhaps not surprising that across her life, works, and legacy, births and birthdays are marked with stories—stories told, stories gifted, stories made possible.

This essay explores the weaving together of celebration and story from three angles: "The Stories of Place," "The Stories of a Budding Writer," and "The Stories of Birth." The first section, "The Stories of Place," considers how celebrations happen in place. In my own family, I'm thinking of birthday after birthday, year after year, of pictures of my nieces gathered at the end of their dining room table in front of a glowing cake—whether it's their birthday or not, they are there, crowding around the cake. Indeed, celebration often relies on repetition, ritual, tradition—cake, candles, gifts—and so each celebration recalls earlier ones, adding meaning and evoking old stories, while at the same time creating new stories and imagining futures ones: all those pictures of girls and cakes yet to come. Even the Zoom rooms, now-familiar since COVID-19, and that weary many of us, recall for me happy occasions: end-of-the-week drinks, birthdays, graduations, and my baby shower. Physical world–markers of time such as lines on the wall showing a child's growth or the birthday trees planted in the King orchard in *The Story Girl* help people remember, track, and enter into their own stories.

Then in section two, "The Stories of a Budding Writer," I'll think about how, for a young writer like Montgomery's Emily Byrd Starr, the birthday gift of paper and a place to write is absolutely crucial for her artistic development. Dreaming, imagining, and creating are part of the magic Montgomery and Emily make, as is their writing's rootedness in the real world, in objects; and for Emily, birthday gifts become springboards to story creation and writerly apprenticeship. Family and community support for Emily's emergent career as a writer may not always be enthusiastic or explicit, but in descriptions of Emily's birthday, Montgomery dramatizes how people and places, ordinary objects, and special days provide a writer with the gift of story.

Section three, “The Stories of Birth,” explores that crucial beginning for each of us: birth. Here are new life, possibilities, relationships, and roles, both for the new humans and the people who welcome them into the world. Montgomery invites readers into the complexity of birth: celebration and hope, yes, but also loss, sometimes of a child, sometimes of physical or mental health or spiritual well-being, or of an earlier identity or role in the world. And, in stories of birth, as always, Montgomery invites readers to remember and commemorate, to make sense and to find joy through story.

The Stories of Place

Birthday Trees

In Montgomery’s own family and in her novel *The Story Girl*, family events—visits, anniversaries, and birthdays—are marked with the planting of a tree named in their honour. As that novel’s narrator, Bev King, writes,

> When a son was born to Abraham and Elizabeth a tree was planted in the orchard for him… . And each grandchild had its tree, there, also, set out by grandfather when the tidings of its birth reached him; not always an apple tree—perhaps it was a plum, or cherry or pear. But it was always known by the name of the person for whom, or by whom, it was planted; and Felix and I knew as much about “Aunt Felicity’s pears,” and “Aunt Julia’s cherries,” and “Uncle Alec’s apples,” and the “Rev. Mr. Scott’s plums,” as if we had been born and bred among them." (*SG*, Ch. 2)

These trees form an orchard that in turn becomes the setting for the Story Girl’s storytelling—the enchanting, idyllic, indelible scene of cousins gathered around the animated storyteller on warm summer days. Sometimes the Story Girl’s stories are about the people for whom the trees are named, such as the story of Rev. Mr. Scott’s replacement hiding in a closet. Some stories take place in this very orchard, about which, according to the Story Girl, there are “two important” stories: “The story of the Poet Who Was Kissed, and the Tale of the Family Ghost” (*SG*, Ch. 3). The trees themselves and the apples they bear have stories: “‘Your apples are lovely to eat,’ the Story Girl told Bev, ‘but Felix’s are only good for pies’” (Ch. 3).

The trees’ names and stories take the history of this family and the legends of this land all the way to Toronto, to the “exiled” Bev and Felix King. After all, these Toronto boys’ father too is a storyteller of sorts:

> He had talked so much to us about [the King family homestead], and described its scenes so often and so minutely, that he had inspired us with some of his own deep-seated affection for it—an affection that had never waned in all his years of exile. We had a vague feeling that we, somehow, belonged there, in that cradle of our family, though we had never seen it. Everything was just as father had described it. We felt that we had come home, leaving exile behind us." (Ch. 1)

When a Montgomery character loves a place, they really love it. No detail is too minute to notice, love, and share with others. The boys are eager to explore all these details, and on their list of homestead sites to explore and experience is to “eat apples from our ‘birthday trees’” (Ch. 1). The trees mark their births into this family, into this family home, and while the boys themselves have never, until now, been to the homestead, the trees—their names, their physical presence, their fruit—have been waiting for them, saving the boys’ place here. The birthday trees offer multi-sensory and repeated storytelling: these stories are spoken, seen, and tasted with harvest after harvest reminding the King family of friends and kin far away and dearly departed. Incorporated and remembered psychically and physically, the power of these stories is strong, signalling the exiled boys’, and others’, belonging.

Hester Gray's Garden

In *Anne of Avonlea*, Anne decides that she wants her birthday to be in the spring—it is, after all, most likely still winter in Prince Edward Island for her actual March birthday—and she whisks her girlfriends off for a celebratory "Golden Picnic." A story of this place, of Avonlea, and specifically the tale of Hester Gray's garden, as told by Diana, is Anne's present: "This is my adopted birthday, you know, and this garden and its story is the birthday gift it has given me" (*AA*, Ch. 8). By receiving Hester's story, Anne incorporates this long-dead young woman into birthday traditions of reflection and commemoration. Until now, Hester has largely been forgotten: Diana says, "I've heard mother speak of [Hester Gray's garden] but I never saw it before, and I wouldn't have supposed that it could be in existence still," and while "the name seems familiar to me," probably from Hester's headstone in the Avonlea graveyard, Anne hasn't heard the story, and Diana isn't surprised: "To be sure, it happened thirty years ago and everybody has forgotten" (Ch. 8). This gathering of female friends expands through storytelling to include Hester; the extending circle of kindred spirits, then, is not limited by time or mortality. As with *The Story Girl*'s birthday trees, Montgomery and her characters become local historians, highlighting the thrill, the romance, the importance, of remembering and honouring those who have gone before. Both storytelling and birthday-celebrating can thereby be processes of unforgetting.

Montgomery's characters, like Bev and Felix's father, love places because of and through knowing every nook and cranny, every layer of story and history, and here, in Hester Gray's garden, learns another legend of the land she loves, thereby deepening her attachment to it (as Anne says, "Well, if there's a story we must have it"! [Ch. 8]). This story-gifting is a birth of sorts for Hester Gray who is granted a new (after)life, which Anne weaves into her own story: from now on, when visiting Matthew's grave, Anne also puts flowers from Hester Gray's garden on that young woman's grave, a tradition Diana continues when Anne is away from Avonlea. Poignantly, the flowers that Anne once held as Matthew died, that she now sits among as she hears Hester's story, and that she will lay on that young woman's grave later that birthday day are all narcissi. On one of Anne's many subsequent visits to Hester Gray's garden, she and Gilbert finally become engaged: "'It's the birthday of our happiness,' said Anne softly. 'I've always loved this old garden of Hester Gray's, and now it will be dearer than ever'" (*AIs*, Ch. 41). Past, present, and future are intertwined with the past infusing the present and future with romance and happiness: Gilbert and Anne are the happy inheritors of the love between Hester and her husband Jordan.

The Stories of a Budding Writer

The telling of stories is a professional ambition for Emily Byrd Starr, so it is no surprise that she writes down stories about her birthday guests and gifts, while her 11th birthday celebration is also a milestone on her journey as a writer. Emily writes to her deceased father the stories of her own birthday, the first at New Moon, just as she's shared much of her life in her new home with him in writing. (What follows is Emily's own writing, in her own voice and questionable spelling, just as Montgomery represented it):

> Yesterday was my birthday dear Father. It will soon be a year since I came to New Moon. I feel as if I had always lived here ... My birthday was very nice. Aunt Laura made a lovely cake and gave me a beautiful new white pettycoat with an embroidered flounce. She had run a blue ribbon through it but Aunt Elizabeth made her pull it out. And Aunt Laura also gave me that piece of pink satin brokade in her burow drawer. I have longed for it ever since I saw it but never hoped to possess it. Ilse asked me what I meant to do with it but I dont mean to do anything with it. Only keep it up here in the garret with my treasures and look at it, because it is beautiful. Aunt Elizabeth gave me a dixonary.

> That was a useful present. I feel I ought to like it. You will soon notice an improovement in my spelling, I hope. The only trouble is when I am writing something interesting I get so exited it is just awful to have to stop and hunt up a word to see how it is spelled ... Cousin Jimmy gave me a big thick blank book. I am so proud of it. It will be so nice to write pieces in. But I will still use the letter-bills to write to you, dear Father, because I can fold each one up by itself and adress it like a real letter. Teddy gave me a picture of myself. He painted it in water colors and called it The Smiling Girl. I look as if I was listening to something that made me very happy. Ilse says it flatters me. It does make me better looking than I am but not any better looking than I would be if I could have a bang. Teddy says he is going to paint a real big picture of me when he grows up. Perry walked all the way to Shrewsbury to get me a necklace of pearl beads and lost it. He had no more money so he went home to Stovepipe Town and got a young hen from his Aunt Tom and gave me that. He is a very persistent boy. I am to have all the eggs the hen lays to sell the pedler for myself. Ilse gave me a box of candy. I am only going to eat one piece a day to make it last a long time. I wanted Ilse to eat some but she said she wouldnt because it would be mean to help eat a present you had given and I insisted and then we fought over it and Ilse said I was a caterwawling quadruped (which was ridiklus) and didn't know enough to come in when it rained. And I said I knew enough to have some manners at least. Ilse got so mad she went home but she cooled off soon and came back for supper." (*ENM*, Ch. 17)

This is a celebration—complete with gifts, cake, friends, and family. Significantly, Emily receives a Jimmy-book—the "big thick blank book" that Cousin Jimmy gives her—the first of many in which she will do her creative writing for years to come. A notebook of one's own is a fundamental part of a writer's toolkit but not one that is easily accessible at New Moon: in Jimmy's words, "Paper's too scarce at New Moon. Elizabeth has some pet economies and writing paper of any kind is one of them" (Ch. 7). Jimmy, a poet in his own right, is a supporter of Emily's artistry in a world in which her work is often overtly undermined. With the present of a Jimmy book, this birthday, then, is an important milestone in Emily's *Künstlerroman*, the story of an artist's coming of age, her protracted "birth" as a writer.

In this birthday description, Emily's skill as a storyteller is on display: the description of each gift is a succinct character sketch and micro-narrative. Across these stories significant literary themes emerge: family, friendship, humour, self-sacrifice, love. Stern Aunt Elizabeth is there with a "useful," but not beautiful or easy to love, gift; Aunt Elizabeth wouldn't understand Emily getting carried away with excitement in her writing and indeed discourages her writing to the extent that Elizabeth extracts a promise from Emily to not write imaginatively for her three years at high school. And yet, this dictionary is a useful, even inspired, present for this particular birthday girl: Emily's spelling does fall short of the sophistication and accuracy of her storytelling, as she well knows, and Aunt Elizabeth hasn't given her just any practical gift but a word-rich, writing-supportive one. Is this perhaps foreshadowing that eventually Aunt Elizabeth will at least resign herself to Emily's writerly ambitions? Emily's burgeoning creativity is mirrored in Teddy's own aspirations as a visual artist: through his paintings, both gifted and promised, he is also telling a story about his present and future work (and love for Emily). It is not just Emily's, but also her creator Montgomery's, literary technique that is on display here. There is humour in Montgomery's, via Emily's, matter-of-fact summation of the "persistent" Perry's comedy of errors and Ilse's typical cycle of rage and cooling off.

And, finally, as we have seen with other birth and birthday stories, Emily's party reflects and creates a sense of belonging. Emily's stories of her life, which she shares with her father, chronicle her growing connection to New Moon. Birthdays make us aware of passing time, of milestones, and on this birthday, Emily can declare, "I feel as if I had always lived here"—she is becoming the eponymous Emily of New Moon, just as Bev and Felix King are Kings of the old King homestead. Moreover, Emily in her life-writing, like Anne in her listening to

Hester's story, honours women's lives and the love of people and place.

The Stories of Birth

Birthdays all begin with the first birth day, the day of our birth. "'Oh, oh, and I think I'll soon have to be doing some rooting in the parsley bed,' said Judy Plum" (*PSB*, Ch. 1.1). And so, using the time-honoured folk tradition of ascribing babies' arrivals to storks or cabbage patches or parsley beds, the family's housekeeper opens the novel *Pat of Silver Bush* by gently breaking the news to her beloved Pat Gardiner, the seven-year-old, and, until-now, baby of the family, that she will soon have a new sibling. Births and birthdays signal change—a new life, a new age, more wisdom, more grey hair—and Judy knows that the change-averse Pat needs to warm up to the idea of "a tiny wee new baby": "Do you think, Judy, that we really need another baby here?" is Pat's skeptical response (Ch. 1.1). To be sure, soon Pat cannot imagine Silver Bush *without* her adored baby sister Cuddles.

The mature Anne in *Anne's House of Dreams* does not have the luxury of this child-friendly, pain-and-danger-free story of childbirth. Anne has a difficult first delivery, and her first baby lives for only a day. While she later has a healthy baby boy, Jem, who is eventually joined by five more siblings, Anne continues to mother little Joyce:

> little Joy has her [place], and always will have it. If she had lived she would have been over a year old. She would have been toddling around on her tiny feet and lisping a few words. I can see her so plainly, Marilla. Oh, I know now that Captain Jim was right when he said God would manage better than that my baby would seem a stranger to me when I found her Beyond. I've learned THAT this past year. I've followed her development day by day and week by week—I always shall. I shall know just how she grows from year to year—and when I meet her again I'll know her—she won't be a stranger." (Ch. 34)

Joyce's story, the story of mother and daughter, of mother and first-born baby, continues to unfold. In her early days at Green Gables, Anne's imagination is sometimes unruly, but here it becomes a beautiful tool for navigating grief. In her mind's eye, Anne continues to see her baby grow, marking the developmental milestones, the years, as a mother of a living child would do. Stories of birth continue to entrench a sense of belonging as Anne explains her attachment to the house of dreams:

> this little house, consecrated aforetime by love and joy, had been re-consecrated for her by her happiness and sorrow! Here she had spent her bridal moon; here wee Joyce had lived her one brief day; here the sweetness of motherhood had come again with Little Jem; here she had heard the exquisite music of her baby's cooing laughter; here beloved friends had sat by her fireside. Joy and grief, birth and death, had made sacred forever this little house of dreams." (Ch. 40)

In Anne's and Montgomery's time, childbirth was more dangerous than in Canada today (and even here and now it has risks), and so birth was attended by the spectre of death for mother and child. Montgomery waited with both joyful anticipation and fearful apprehension the birth of her own first child. Birthdays are also potentially a time of both celebration (of continued living, of gatherings, of honouring the good in life) and sadness (making us aware of those who are no longer present to celebrate their own or loved one's anniversaries). Anne captures the range of life experienced within her humble home—deepest joy and deepest sorrow—and transfigures it into something meaningful, even transcendental. The house of dreams is given spiritual meaning—it is a consecrated, sacred space. Again, births and birthdays and the stories we tell about them are an opportunity to claim, and

reclaim, our belonging to beloved people and places, no matter if they are far away, almost forgotten, difficult, or changed.

The generative connection between stories and births continues in Montgomery's legacy. In a 2018 L.M. Montgomery Institute conference presentation and later in a *Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies* article, "Seeing Female Readers, Reading Female Readers, Making Meta-Readers: Montgomery as Depictor and Creator of Scholars," Trinna Frever coined the concept of Montgomery "origin" stories; that is, stories that convey a person's moment of becoming a Montgomery reader or fan. Inspired by this idea, Trinna and I collected more than 200 readers' and fans' stories from 23 different countries via our "Your LMM Story" project (yourlmmstory.com), and we are now writing a book, *Your LMM Story: The World of L.M. Montgomery and Her Fans*, exploring these responses. While there are many routes into and experiences of Montgomery's literary world, we were struck by one particular strand of engagement: for many readers and fans discovering or rediscovering Montgomery is bound up with beginnings. Sometimes this means literal birth: we were gifted stories of new mothers spending time with Anne, Emily, and other characters as their babies nurse or sleep. For some readers, Montgomery's novels support more figurative births as comfort reads or life guides during times of juncture, such as arrivals in new homes or jobs. Some readers and fans shared with us how they engage with the world of Montgomery as a catalyst that helps propel them toward new lives and experiences; there are fans who draw from Montgomery as they make big and small choices about what career to pursue, what to study, where to live, which community and friendships to foster, and even whom to marry. Montgomery, and now her fans, scholars, readers, offer up story upon story, beginning upon beginning, possibility upon possibility.

Additional Note on the Text:

This essay is part two of a three-part series that includes:

1) "L.M.M. 150 Tribute: Flowery Passages, Golden Picnics, Golden Roads, and Golden Roses," by Frever, celebrating Montgomery and her literal, literary, and metaphorical flowery passages, ranging from Anne's arrival at Green Gables to developmental rites of passage to flower-laden prose;

2) "Story-Gifting: An L.M. Montgomery Approach to Honouring Births and Birthdays" by Kate Scarth, which considers the intersection of celebration and story, as rooted in place, as experienced by budding writers, and as related to birth, that very first of birthdays; and

3) "Flowery Passages and Story-Gifting: A Coda" by Frever and Scarth. This co-authored reflection weaves our solo pieces together. The coda is our celebratory birthday toast to Montgomery and to story as we honour all sites of story, on the page and on the screen, in our lives and in our minds.

This joint project—in anticipation of Frever and Scarth's future book, *Your LMM Story: The World of L.M. Montgomery and Her Fans*, based on their Montgomery "origin" story project (yourlmmstory.com)—honours Montgomery's work through celebration and parties, stories and storytelling, gifts and flowers.

Article Info

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