Reading In and Out of Order: Living In and Around an Extended Fiction

DOI
https://doi.org/10.32393/jlmms/2020.0001
Published on
Fri, 01/24/2020 - 00:00

Many series books recount the life of a character growing up over a sequence of titles, offering a strong sense of clear progression. Readers, however, may encounter this series out of order, or they may encounter numerous adapted versions of a story. Either way, they have to decide their own interpretative priorities.

Back to top

Introduction

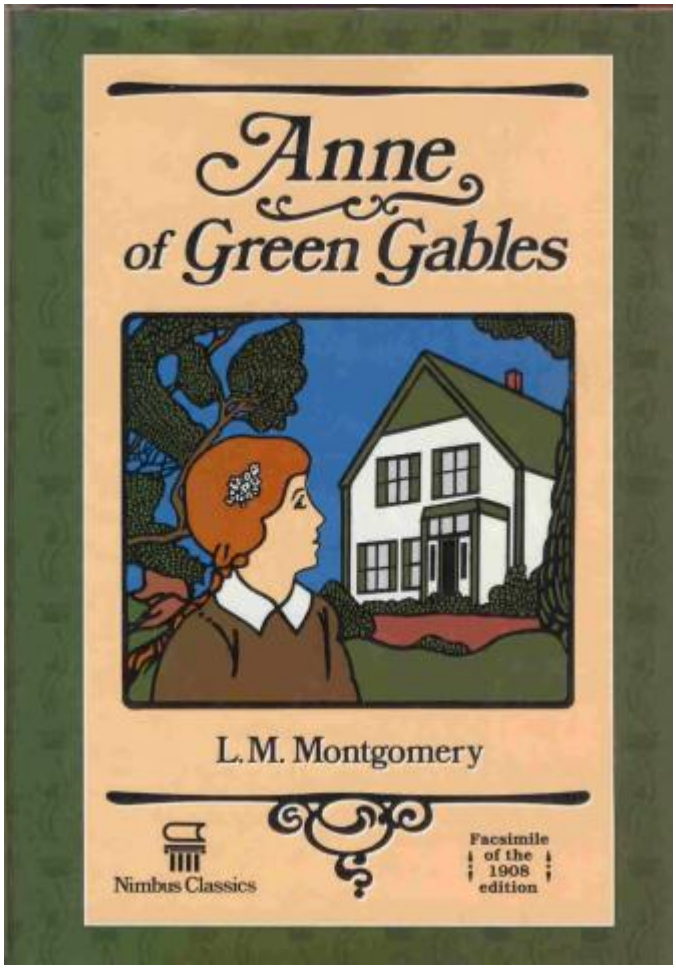
The concept of a sequence implies an orderly progression. A series of books conveys the sense of a logical advancement through a character's life or a succession of events, intelligibly assembled into a system that is sometimes even numbered for maximum clarity. Such a sequence of novels frequently uses time as an organizer—either moving through part of a character's lifespan or manipulating the calendar to run on a repeat cycle through (for example) Nancy Drew's eighteenth summer.

We know that life is not as tidy as the stories conveyed in books. But, in the case of series, even the material presentation of the books is misleading; despite the neat row of ascending numbers on the books' spines, readers encounter a series of titles in partial, messy, sometimes consuming, and sometimes unsatisfying ways. Furthermore, in the clutter and circularity of contemporary culture, book series in their pristine order on the shelf frequently do not represent the only versions of characters and events. Media adaptations, publishers' reworkings, fan variations, and a plethora of consumables all offer forms of what we might call "re-presentation," and there is no telling what route through this busy landscape of reiteration any particular reader may take, or what version of the story they may encounter before reaching the original version. In the case of adaptations, materials are less likely to be organized as a progression through time; frequently, multiple

adaptations cover the same period in a character's life. Adaptation in this context is a form of juxtaposition in space: different renditions of the same story exist side by side.

The repetitive format of series fiction or a novel with sequels offers an intoxicating blend of familiarity and novelty that appeals strongly to newly fledged readers. Such novices rely on what they know about a series to scaffold their processing of what is new and challenging in any given book of that series. Victor Watson speaks of "a paradoxical search for familiarity combined with strangeness. Readers of a series want more of the same—but with a difference. This is not a form of readerly self-indulgence or childish laziness."[1] Shannon Wells-Lassagne suggests that adaptations hold a similar appeal. We enjoy the familiarity of a known story. "At the same time, of course, the very pleasure of adaptation is founded on the novelty of a new rendition: bringing literary figures to life through actors' performances, depicting familiar textual locales on screen, provides a new means of ingress into the diegetic world."[2]

How readers gain access to "more of the same" is often complicated. Readers and even authors do not always behave tidily; books are read out of sequence and sometimes even written out of sequence, and the overarching narrative is frequently put together in haphazard ways rather than in a smooth progression. And in the ever-expanding world of adaptations, readers may not only have patchy access to a character's growth but also conflicting access to a character represented in a variety of different ways. This article explores these two issues. For examples, I draw on L.M. Montgomery's two best-known series, the books about Anne of Green Gables and Emily of New Moon, as read by myself and by others; and I also invoke series and sequels by other authors where it is helpful to do so. Contemporary readers, used to cheap paperbacks and numbered covers, may find it easier to control their reading order than I did as a child, in the era of happenstance access to expensive hardbacks. Even today's readers, however, are not always able to slide smoothly through a sequence—and the consequences of reading out of order remain very interesting.



Book cover of *Anne of Green Gables*. 1992. KindredSpaces.ca. 231 AGGNIMBUS.

Our stereotype of a series book is that it presents the adventures of a central character, usually surrounded by a group of friends or family or both, sometimes involving their growth and development over the range of books and sometimes creating a timeless zone where nobody ages and adventures recycle through a limited and repetitive season. In either case, we tend to think of these series as purposefully developed with deliberate decisions guiding the creation and placement of characters in fictional worlds. We also frequently think of readers progressing seamlessly through these series—growing with the characters or strengthening their reading muscles through reiterated scenarios that allow for plenty of practice.

Sometimes all these stereotypes are true. But both writers and readers may approach a sequence of stories in both orderly and unruly ways. An author may write one book after another in a tidy sequence so that the writing and publication patterns reflect the onward movement of a character's life—or that author may dip backwards and forwards through the timeline, infilling or branching sideways. Similarly, the reading of such a chronology may be smooth and progressive, or it may be disrupted and piecemeal. When the sequence of writing and publishing is complex, the compositional context may itself affect how the series is read. The adaptation of a

series book into new formats, repeating some ingredients and changing others, offers new and different challenges of continuity and recall.

Back to top

Living Forwards and Reading Back

As children, we learn about living our lives forward. “I am nine years old this summer; I will never be eight again.” Many children are happy, in the famous words of Ramona Quimby, to be “winning at growing up.”3 But the human condition for persons of any age entails not only an absence of knowledge about what lies ahead but also an inability to return to what was before. At a relatively young age, moving through one birthday after another, children start to grasp the present-tense nature of being alive.

The inexorability of aging is a fact of life for every breathing person—but characters in fiction work by different rules. Even as I read about Ramona Quimby, aged nine, I know I have the privilege of revisiting her life as an eight-year-old in an earlier book of the sequence. Unlike my own eight-year-old existence, now consigned to memory, Ramona’s life at eight will be every bit as present-tense and vibrant on each revisit as it was on the first-time read.

And as series readers, we are able to recall the events of prior books along with the characters in our current book. Rose Lovell-Smith, writing about *Anne of Avonlea*, observes, “Possibly the series is suited to that classic theme of juvenile fiction, growing up, precisely because it is by remembering that the child recognizes its new status, knowing that it is more adult than in the past. Reading a sequel might even exercise the child’s memory in a way closely related to this act of self-recognition.”4

Much series reading and rereading is recursive. When you reread an early book in a series after reading its sequels, you have the advantage over the characters of knowing their futures, a position of psychological power. At the same time, rereading can offer a feeling of emotional safety, perhaps even stronger because we can brace ourselves when we know that trouble is coming. I will never be detached enough to read about Matthew’s death in *Anne of Green Gables* without being upset over the loss of this kindly and unassuming man. But I will never again be shocked and devastated as I was on my first encounter with this story, at a point in my reading life where it had not even occurred to me that a major character in a children’s book could die. And, as a rereader, I am also aware that, while I can’t prevent his death in the last pages of the book, I have a surefire way to bring him back to life: just read the book again. Indeed, my power as a reader is such that I can forestall that death by simply closing the book and ceasing to read before I get to the final part of the narrative.

Children are fascinated by power. They attend carefully to issues of power because they lack agency in so much of their daily doings. Discovering the power to retreat to an earlier time through the act of reading prior books in

a sequence is profoundly appealing to those who are newly aware of the inexorability of the onward movement of time in real life. Knowing what is coming to a character, even if it can't be changed, is another form of readerly potency. Reading offers control over an aspect of being human that even adults cannot fix.

One element in that power of control lies in the condition of books as objects with covers and titles. Such materials can be arranged, organized, managed. Within the context of the large story, its ingredients can be atomized, at least to the point of the individual titles. Content yields to the organizing apparatus of the sequence. Bettina Kummerling-Meibauer outlines some of the satisfactions and demands relating to this itemization of narrative elements:

> A serial text does not need to sustain the illusion of completeness and closure that a single text requires, to a certain degree. The series as such becomes the text, which implies that readers cannot base their expectations about the nature of the text just on one single text within the series. A singular text within a series becomes an episode, which is situated in a greater context.[5]

"Consequently," says Kummerling-Meibauer, "the sequel works against the limitations of literary art by extending the storyworlds before and after the initial book."[6] At the same time, a reader can locate these episodes in a larger trajectory by dint of managing the bookshelf.

Back to top

Writing Out of Order

Our concept of a child's developmental work in series reading is often predicated on an untroubled sense of a sequence of stories, organically created out of the raw material of the protagonist's life. We do tend to perceive our characters' lives as being lived forward and assume that they were created under the same powerful impetus. But writing is very often a more hardscrabble enterprise, tolerating a surprising amount of improvisation, reworking, and manipulation (of texts and, by extrapolation, of readers).

Not every book in a related sequence is written out of an equally pure creative instinct. The intersection between the economics of publishing and the personal development of individual readers is complex and underexplored. People become readers one book at a time; "texts teach what readers learn."[7] Yet books for young readers are not always freely created out of an author's urgent and unsullied wish to communicate a particular story to reading children. Particularly in the universe of sequences—series and sequels—a contractual relationship between author and publisher is frequently the primary motivator.

Philip Pullman expresses it bluntly when he speaks of a writer's primary responsibilities:

> The first responsibility to talk about is a social and financial one: the sort of responsibility we share with many other citizens—the need to look after our families and those who depend on us. ... I'm just going to say that we should all insist that we're properly paid for what we do. We should sell our work for as much as we can decently get for it, and we shouldn't be embarrassed about it.8

The pressures of making a living by writing have lured many an author into creating a sequel—in many cases the artistic impetus takes a remote second place to this imperative. Montgomery's first publisher, L.C. Page, was committed to the creation of series as money-spinners: "While Montgomery wanted to make money, like most authors she also aspired to literary respectability and thought of herself as an artist who should control the terms of her work. Page, however, as a commercial entrepreneur, regarded her as the producer of raw material for a process of book production over which he had absolute control."9

Page committed Montgomery to a series of onerous contracts, and Carole Gerson quotes her as fearing she would be "dragged at Anne's chariot wheels the rest of my life."10 Anne is given her own sequels, and she is dotted into assorted stories in *Chronicles of Avonlea* and *Further Chronicles of Avonlea*. *Anne of Windy Poplars* and *Anne of Ingleside* were written many years later than the other books, and *The Blythes Are Quoted* was published in full long after Montgomery's death. A reader determined to master the complete saga of Anne must cast her net widely, even if she sticks exclusively to the canonical Anne as created by Montgomery herself. Gerson says,

> Sequels were a determining factor in Montgomery's literary and personal life, producing the launch of her first book and her financial well-being, as well as decades of bitter dispute with publisher and a problematic relationship with an intrusive, adoring readership. In her last years, sequels provided a refuge from an increasingly troubled world; they had ceased to be disappointing, even for their author.11

Late in her life, shouldering many personal burdens, Montgomery found returning to the world of Anne (writing *Anne of Windy Poplars* and *Anne of Ingleside*) to be restorative. Gerson quotes her: "It was like going home."12



Stack of books from the *Anne of Green Gables* series. 1 Nov. 2019. Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies collection.

But it is certainly arguable that *Anne of Ingleside* in particular cannot be inserted seamlessly into the overarching narrative of the series. Laura Robinson points out, "While *Anne of Ingleside* is surprisingly grounded in realism compared to some of the other books in the series, some of the moments are dark indeed."[13] Robinson argues,

> Reading backwards through the lens of the later novels encourages a darker reading of the earlier ones. ... no longer does the reader have to "read between the lines" as Marilla does in Anne of Green Gables to understand the despair that children and women might confront in their daily lives. What is a quiet murmur in the early novels begins to roar in the later ones.[14]

The final volume of the series, *The Blythes Are Quoted*, was published posthumously, first in an edited version that extracted and presented the blander ingredients (*The Road to Yesterday*, 1974), and then in the fuller, more

bitter volume that Montgomery herself created. A child reading this last work may well find that, although she retains the power to turn back the clock to Anne's youth in Green Gables, it is radically more difficult to subtract the atmosphere of unhappiness conveyed in *The Blythes Are Quoted.*

There are other issues in trying to read the characters' chronological sequence in a series that was actually produced outside of that orderly progression. In *Anne of Ingleside,* for example, Montgomery is relatively heavy-handed in her references backwards and forwards to other books in the series. In particular, right at the end of the book, she inserts an unsubtle image that acts as a clumsy spoiler for those readers who have yet to meet *Rilla of Ingleside*:

> Walter was smiling in his sleep as someone who knew a charming secret. The moon was shining on his pillow through the bars of the leaded window ... casting the shadow of a clearly defined cross on the wall above his head. In long after-years Anne was to remember that and wonder if it was an omen of Courcelette . . . of a cross-marked grave "somewhere in France." But tonight it was only a shadow ... nothing more.[15]

I would charge Montgomery here with at least a lack of discipline, if not outright self-indulgence. In *Rilla of Ingleside*, Little Dog Monday immediately acknowledges the death of his master by howling all night. But information about Walter's death is slow to arrive. "When five days had passed, the Ingleside people began to feel that they might be cheerful again."[16] The news thus comes as a shock for Rilla and for her readers alike—if they have not been flagged to a sensitivity to the name of Courcelette through reading the "earlier" book. The balance between fear and the instinct for normal daily life is well calibrated in *Rilla of Ingleside*; by putting a thumb on the scale, so to speak, in *Anne of Ingleside,* Montgomery undermines the delicacy of that achievement and does her readers a disservice.

In short, authors may themselves interfere with the smoothness of progression through the lives of their series characters. Best practice usually entails a scrupulous and reliable continuity between books—no forgetting, no contradicting, no indulging in a foreknowledge that upsets the balance of the overall narrative arc. But perfection is an aim rather than an achievement in most series titles.

Back to top

Reading and Rereading in Real Life

Just as the writing of a series may be more of a jumble than is conveyed by a neatly numbered sequence of book covers, not all reading is honed to a high polish of literary achievement. Real-life reading can be sloppy: readers fail to notice details; they ignore elements that are complicated or otherwise displeasing; they forget items they

did notice; and they are frequently surprised, not always in ways the author intended. Unless they are in a situation where they have to account to someone else, readers are fully in charge of deciding what is “good enough” for the occasion.17 For some readers, it can be a sobering exercise to reflect on how differently they read for book club than for their own private entertainment—how much more care and attention they lavish on the text when they think others may be paying attention to the quality of their perceptions and responses.

Many rereaders make forgetting a condition for picking up a book again. They require a time lapse, maybe even a brain lapse, before they tackle a story they have read before. Rereaders fold fiction into their lives in new ways, sometimes even losing the origin story of how they encountered the plot for the first time. “It is easy for me to forget,” says Rebecca Mead, “that there was ever a time when I did not know how the love problem presented in the novel [*Middlemarch*] would be resolved.”18

Critical literary essays camouflage some of the messy realities of reading.19 They are likely to conflate multiple readings into one smooth, finished version. They take a perspective of achieved understanding and pay rather less attention to the partial accomplishments of a first read or an early reread. But when we examine the vagaries of recreational reading, we may discover that the mind is adroit at tricking itself in order to enhance an experience of narrative. Let us look at two examples: the sleight-of-mind represented by the notion of anomalous suspense, and the effect of reading order on the alignment of a real reader with the one implied by the text.

Back to top

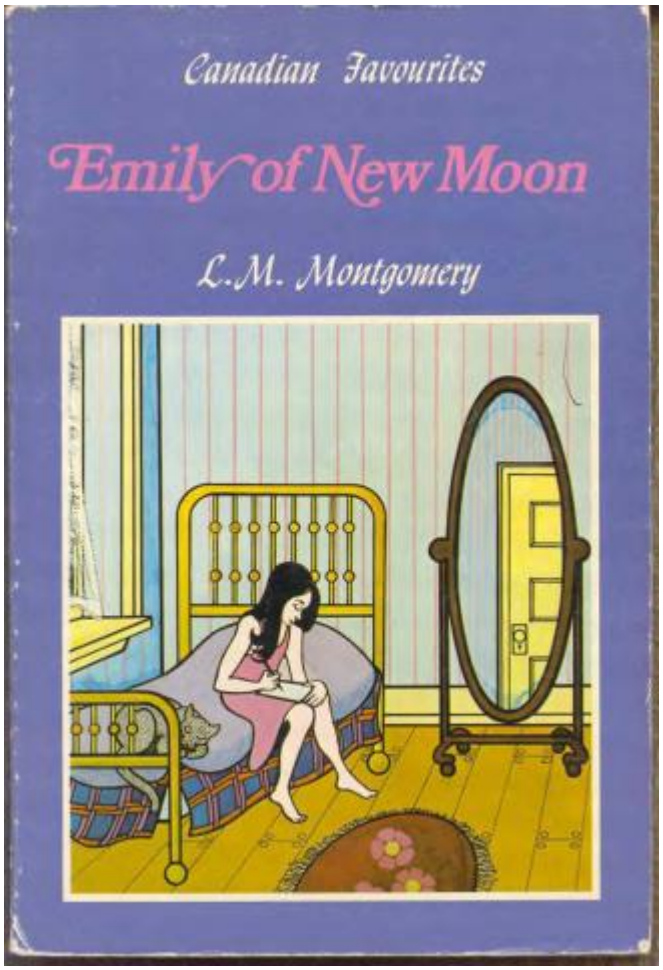
Anomalous Suspense

A rereader of *Anne of the Island*20 certainly knows that Anne will choose Gilbert at the end of the book. And yet, in some ways, as we align ourselves with the characters in that novel, there are essential ways in which we don’t know all over again. Richard Gerrig calls this phenomenon “anomalous suspense.”21 We move into the now of the characters, seeing the world from their perspective—a view that includes their perceptions of time, in which their own future is naturally hidden from them. We join them in their hopes, fears, and expectations of that future. In Jerome Bruner’s invocation of the subjunctive mood, a narrative’s essential “as-if,” we are “trafficking in human possibilities rather than settled certainties.”22 Our allegiance as readers leads us to believe, hope, fear, and expect along with those characters, and this process begins anew when we reread. The now of the story is always a new now. In recreating the uncertainties of the characters, the narrative trance opens up those uncertainties again to the reader. Anne does not know that Gilbert will recover from typhoid; I, as reader, live that uncertainty with Anne. This kind of purposive forgetting, aimed at joining the live suspense of the story all over again, is different from the careless forgetting that loses details through a lack of attention.

Back to top

Reading Order

As a child reader of Montgomery I specialized in a kind of compensation for the happenstance order in which I managed to gain access to the books. I did read *Pat of Silver Bush* ahead of *Mistress Pat*, but this was the only sequence I met just as the author designed. With the *Anne* books there is both a publishing order and a reading order; my experience matched neither of them. I also read the *Emily* books out of sequence: *Emily of New Moon* (first published in 1923), *Emily Climbs* (first published in 1925), and finally, many months later, *Emily's Quest* [23] (first published in 1927). It is easy now to forget the enormous impact of widespread paperback availability (even before those paperbacks were routinely numbered in series order) on children's capacity to read a series in canonical order. Today, children can often afford to acquire their own books, and libraries stock multiple copies of popular paperbacks, as opposed to a single copy of an expensive hardback. I did not need numbers on the spine of my hardback to tell me that the logical reading order aged the heroine book by book. I suspect that disruption of the most coherent sequence of the story was a regular feature for many readers in those days. This higgledy-piggledy access introduces a whole new category of gaps, large, random, and annoying.



Book cover of *Emily of New Moon*. 1973. KindredSpaces.ca. 165 ENM-MS.

Nevertheless, there are some salutary lessons for a reader stuck in this undesirable state of affairs. The first statement of principle of most media studies programs is a reminder that "All media are constructed." My disjointed reading of the Montgomery books, satisfying and engulfing as they were in most other respects, caused me never to lose sight of the fact that this intriguing world was made by someone. A more seamless immersion in the right sequence of titles might have beguiled me into less awareness of its nature as a composed work. I remember *Emily Climbs* as a particularly aggravating read (ecstatic as I was to find it on my grandmother's bookshelf), because of its regular references to the unknown events of *Emily's Quest*. I have reread these three titles many times since, and always in the correct order, but I have never erased the traces of my frustration on that first read; to this day, I recognize elements that once I did not know but needed to know, and I am invariably thrown out of the story by this recollection.

As a consequence of this erratic access, however, I acquired some compensatory skills. I got better at creating some semblance of the larger narrative arc through processes of extrapolation and guesswork. As if I were tackling some kind of giant cloze exercise, instead of deducing the missing words I worked out that, if that known event was a consequence, then this unknown event or something like it was a probable cause. I had to marshal extra effort to align myself with the implied reader of the story, who, of course, was familiar with all the necessary precedents and antecedents. Needless to say, I did not use such technical terms, but I was implicitly aware that the implied reader of *Emily Climbs* was a reader who understood the background, and I worked strenuously to read as if I got it. I could not fill some gaps, but I knew such gaps were to be read as fillable. It was a challenging mental exercise, but, in the absence of alternatives, I learned to become a kind of fictional variant on the implied reader—a reader who was reading as if she knew everything necessary to comprehend the story, although she did not.

Yet there is no doubt that the gaps chafed. In my late fifties, doing some work on the girl detective Beverley Gray, I was finally able, for the very first time in my life, to read *Beverley Gray, Sophomore*.[24] This title is the second book in the series and the story in which Beverley meets Larry, the man to whom she becomes engaged near the end of the lengthy run of novels. The series has not survived well. The plots are ridiculous, even for a girl detective; many of the scenes and adventures and passing details are intolerably and ignorantly racist; and Beverley's romance with Larry is predictably insipid. Nevertheless, my middle-aged delight at having the opportunity to read about their first meeting at long last was surprisingly real and vivid. Clearly, it had rankled at the time and remained a bit of a sore spot never to have been able to close that particular gap.

Many of today's children, with more reliable access to their favourite series books, consider it a kind of literary hygiene to read a series only in the correct order—though I am sure there are still many whose access is more happenstance. How do such conditions of access affect our intimate responses to books? What is gained and what is lost when one source of readerly frustration and inventiveness can be eliminated by good shelf management? I learned how to construct a coherent world order from fragments of text. Even if you would not want to ruin orderly access to titles arbitrarily just to enhance this particular skill, it is at least worth acknowledging its scope and significance. Issues of access involve a public and measurable situation; but the private impact of unreliable contact with the stages of a narrative may be very substantial and long-lasting, though publicly unknowable.

Back to top

Reading and Its Afterlives

Louise Rosenblatt offers a useful distinction concerning the stance of the reader. Reading, she says, can be efferent or aesthetic in nature. The purpose of efferent reading is to take something away; the function of aesthetic reading is to dwell in the world of the text.25

An aesthetically oriented reader savours the moment of encounter with a text, not looking to learn anything new or to recall all the details presented by the words, not wanting to take anything much away from the experience except a sense of enjoyment and perhaps of an enlarged world view. Sometimes, however, even though the reader has no efferent intent to mine the text for new information, a residue permeates that reader's mind like a kind of haunting. Sven Birkerts calls such loitering in the world of a story "the shadow life of reading." He says, "The page is our platform, the beginning place. When we lift our eyes away we carry the energies of the book inside ourselves as a kind of subsidiary momentum. Some books possess us so thoroughly that for a time we see everything as if through a special lens."26 As a young reader, I was certainly "haunted" by this shadow life of Montgomery's characters and worlds, and I suspect many of her readers would recognize this phenomenon. The books lingered in my mind, probably more so during the period when I had not completed reading the series. Just as a fragment of song will linger in the mind, inviting the recall of subsequent lines, so a partial awareness of a narrative will prompt speculation and rumination in ways that the closure provided by a completed story may not do.

As I acquired access to different *Anne* books, I would gobble them up as fast as I could, and then I would reread from the beginning of the series to incorporate my new finding in the overall story. As my questions were slowly answered, the remaining gaps lingered and niggled. If you dismantled a jigsaw puzzle and started from scratch again every time you located a new piece, you would become very adept with the parts of the puzzle you owned from the beginning. So it was that the *Anne* books settled into my memory. Mead, writing about rereading *Middlemarch*, acknowledges "the strange potency of a great book—the way a book can insert itself into a reader's own life story, until it's hard to know what one would be without it."27

Like all readers, I necessarily contributed elements of my own life to the creation of the story. No author can describe every detail. The abstract words convey aspects of a scenario; readers bring their own understanding of the world to flesh out a three-dimensional mental universe. In Wolfgang Iser's famous phrase, they "fill the blanks"28 thus fusing their own world with that created by the author. The text is shaped by what the reader brings; likewise, the reader is shaped by the observations, opinions, and limitations of the author. It is a form of co-creation, one whose uniqueness is highlighted by the exigencies of rereading. In normal circumstances, a text does not change from one reading to another, but a reader does, and the confluence of reader and text is never the same twice.

Children's literature is frequently read early and often, and Wendy McClure provides a vivid example of fusion at work as the books are read, remembered, and read once more:

> I was born in 1867 in a log cabin in Wisconsin and maybe you were, too. We lived with our family in the Big Woods, and then we all traveled in a covered wagon to Indian Territory, where Pa built us another house, out on high land where the prairie grasses swayed. Right? . . . we were a girl named Laura, who lived and grew up and grew old and passed on, and then she became part of us somehow. She existed fully formed in our heads, her memories swimming around in our brains with our own.29

McClure provides an example of the intensity of connection that children can make with their fictions. We know less than we might about the lingering impact of such loyalty to imaginary people in imaginary worlds. We know even less about how such commitment fares in a world of multiple and distributed reworkings of a beloved character.

Back to top

Managing Narrative Plurality

My problems with the *Emily* books were merely sequential. I knew there was a section missing, and I infilled it as best I could in a way that I knew at the time was provisional. There was an authorized version; I only had to locate the missing book to make things right. Although the impact of that uneven access remains a feature of my relationship to these books, it was a problem of omission, not commission.

Today's young people encounter a well-known series such as *Anne of Green Gables* in a variety of formats and renditions. Contradictions abound. Kevin Sullivan, for example, established his reputation as a respectful interpreter of Anne's life with a television miniseries of *Anne of Green Gables*. He remixed ingredients from *Anne of Avonlea* and *Anne of Windy Poplars* to develop a sequel that was recognizable in terms of the originating fiction, if more melodramatic and slapstick (*Anne of Green Gables: The Sequel*). But in *Anne of Green Gables: The Continuing Story*, he leaped over the traces and produced a ridiculous World War I story that bears no identifiable relation to the fictional world created by Montgomery. Characters and plot lines are all caricatures; yet the actors are the same ones who featured in the more respectful predecessors and bring their own version of authority with them. How do viewers and readers of *Anne* deal with such excesses?

Each reader creates a personal reading order of a series of stories, one which may or may not conform either to the chronology of the characters or to the publication order of the titles. Similarly, today each reader/viewer approaches the story of Anne in particular through a thicket of media options.30 For example, I talked to a reader, Halia, who first met Anne when she was a child in Iraq watching a Japanese animated series of *Anne of Green Gables*, translated into Arabic and based only very loosely on the world of Avonlea. After moving to Canada, she read the book in school and watched Sullivan's first miniseries, *Anne of Green Gables*. Partly

because the Arabic translation of her first encounter led her to associate Anne with Iraq, she never did register that the story is Canadian both in terms of setting and by the nationality of the author. In similar ways, many readers assemble attributes of a character from diverse sources as a routine element of participating in contemporary culture.

Halia's story of contemporary transmediation, globalization, and personal mobility is a reminder that any individual's pathway into a particular fiction may be highly idiosyncratic and unpredictable. I have explored the impact on my own reading history of my access to Montgomery's books out of series order, but there is a far broader story to be told about today's children who may meet Anne over and over again in a wide variety of formats and interpretations. How much does it matter which version they encounter first? How much does it matter which version they love best? Halia's sense of Anne was in some ways permanently inflected by the incongruities of the Japanese animation, but she was also able to consider the relationship between the book and the Sullivan adaptation. As a reader meeting *Emily* out of order, I developed strategies for filling in the blanks. Halia and other contemporary readers do need to acquire this skill when they are dealing with partial access to a multi-part story. It seems clear, however, that they also need to develop strategies and tactics to achieve the opposite effect: to ignore, to write off (as we say) the inconsistencies that might otherwise interfere with their engagement with a text that speaks to them.

Back to top

Strategems of Inattention and Vehicles of Focused Selection

Todd Gitlin says we need to learn how to ignore as well as how to notice. We must learn what he calls "stratagems of inattention. ... Everyone learns not only to see but not to see—to tune out and turn away."[31]

Tuning out what interferes with our smooth progress through a story that pleases us can be a complex process in an era of constant adaptation and reworking. The most elaborate scheme for not attending that I have ever encountered came from a young man called Warren Maynes.[32] I tell his story here because it provides an externalized and material account of the management of attention. As an adolescent, Maynes became captivated by the movie *Highlander* (1986). Its placement of fantasy encounters within a recognizable contemporary world and its use of swordplay to resolve hierarchical rivalries appealed hugely to him, all the more as he was a fencer himself. The second *Highlander* movie horrified him, but he was partially mollified by the spinoff television series, though some contradictions between the different renditions continued to trouble him.

Maynes found a way to shape and express solutions to the inconsistencies in different accounts of the *Highlander* saga when he discovered the collectible card game of the story. At first, he bought cards, then, when the company ceased production, he downloaded fan cards from the Internet. When that source also ran dry, he simply created his own cards. With a partner, he played *Highlander* games just about every Saturday for a decade. He was explicit that a major pleasure was the control the game gave him to smooth out opposing rules of

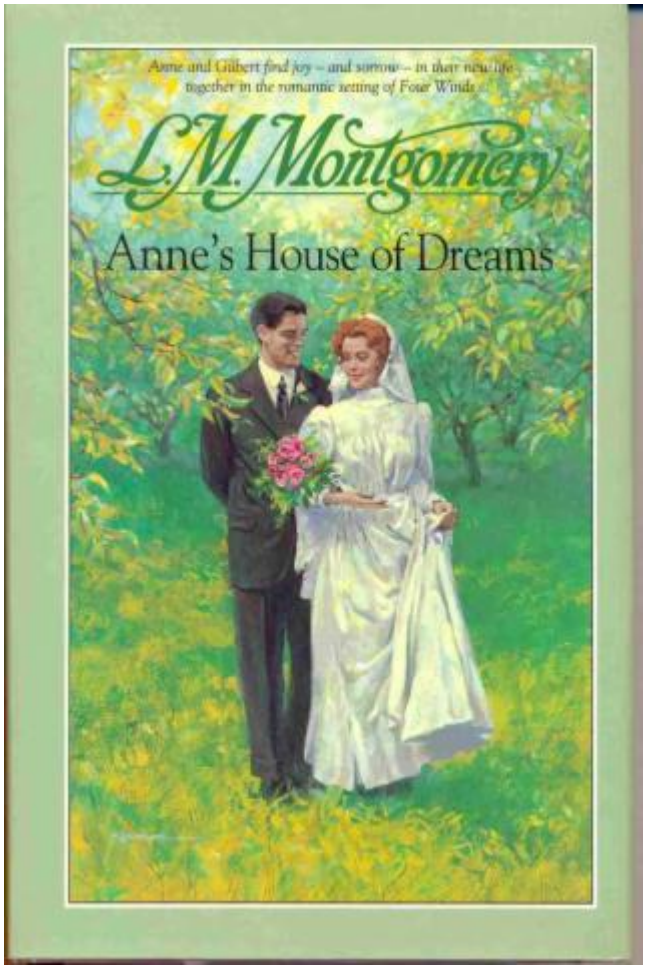
engagement with the story:

> [A]ll the movie characters and all the TV characters could be potentially in the game. I think they almost have now been, with the Internet in here. So it's sort of like all the continuity has been put into one. It's sort of like having one set of rules put on top of all the different ones. It sort of merges them. So it's nice to be able to see that even the characters from the second movie, which is horrible, are characters in the game, so you can create your own history for them and imagine them as if they were real.[33]

In my 2006 commentary on Maynes's account of his ongoing commitment to the card game over so many years, I observed, "Thus, to the satisfactions of the combat elements of the card game, Warren added the appeal of being able to imagine an integrated and coherent version of a fictional world that had been presented to him originally in fragmented ways."[34]

The material reality of the cards, with all their varied production values, gave him a vehicle for managing his attention across a variety of textual accounts and helped him to clarify the intellectual and emotional role of the synthesis enabled by the game. More frequently, people will simply assemble a mental world view of a fiction, one that includes certain versions and discounts others. In effect, a reader may set up a personal canon—though it is probably impossible to create mental walls so impermeable that there is never any leakage from a rejected option into the settled world. One of the virtues of the card game to Maynes was that it offered him practical processes of exclusion; if elements of the world were not covered by the rules of his game, they could safely be ignored.

Because of the material nature of what we might call his interpretative infrastructure, Maynes was obliged to articulate his selective reading of the *Highlander* story and could describe it to me. I suspect many readers and viewers of multiple versions come up with some kind of equivalent scaffold, only more internalized and inchoate. To take the egregious example of *Anne of Green Gables: The Continuing Story*, it is not difficult to imagine a lover of the original *Anne* seizing with initial delight on the appearance of Megan Follows and Jonathan Crombie as Anne and Gilbert. (Some viewers of the first two miniseries, for example, were explicit online about how much they looked forward to seeing Anne and Gilbert's wedding, and how much they regretted that the wedding scene was highly truncated.) Viewers presumably vary in the ease with which they are able to ignore or discard the images of Anne disguised as a nun, swigging alcohol on a train crossing war-torn Europe, and so on. It is possible that some viewers might take the preposterous plot events of *The Continuing Story* simply as license to imagine Anne away from the setting of Prince Edward Island that is so vital to all the books, and not worry about any other aspect of the program.



Book cover of *Anne's House of Dreams*. 1989. KindredSpaces.ca 093 AHD-MS.

Back to top

Stories in the World

Just as the temporal sequence of books or movies may be disrupted by the author or producer, either for artistic or for financial reasons (or some mix of both), so it is obvious that the juxtaposition of different adaptations of the same story may be driven by fiscal as well as (or even instead of) aesthetic considerations. Similarly, an interpreter's reading/viewing path through the multiplicity of renditions may be profoundly idiosyncratic. Some of these interpreters will carve out an individual frame for the different world views organized perhaps along the lines of the rules developed by Warren Maynes to handle the contradictions of the *Highlander* franchise, whether by articulated or tacit means. Other interpreters will take a more placid approach and find ways of simply living with the confusion of incongruous versions. Forgetting is almost a methodology in some circumstances! People learn to read or watch "as-if-they-didn't-know" some contradictory ingredients. But this approach can be a

fragile process, as we may gather from the testimonials of the many readers who make sure they read the book before they see the movie, in order to reduce interference with their mental imagery.

A sequence of stories looks like a logical organizer for both writers and readers. The implied continuity of a fictional world across multiple titles indicates that the books can offer a coherent scaffold for a reader. But the examples given in this article introduce elements of messiness that often overrule logic and coherence. In regular daily life, things are not necessarily neat—and nor is regular daily reading. Readers scramble to infill missing details. They develop ways of overlooking discrepant representations of characters or story worlds or both. They carry stories with them in their heads—reliving appealing moments, covering over gaps, inhabiting a loved character or mentally moving into an alluring world—even when, or perhaps especially when, their initial access is fragmented.

A series by definition is a story distributed over many parts. Once the materials are published, however, control over how those parts are accessed becomes just one more variable in the unruly world of real-life reading. For most readers, some qualities of great value survive any discontinuities or contradictions; we know this to be the case because otherwise readers would simply abandon the series. The messiness of much series reading is, in fact, a powerful testimonial to the flexibility and adroitness with which human beings make stories work for them—a phenomenon all the more remarkable for being so ordinary.

Acknowledgements: The work with Halia was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada under Grant #435-2015-1075.

Banner image derived from row of books from the *Anne of Green Gables* series. 2019. *Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies* collection.

This article will exist in a print edition. Where there are any discrepancies, and for citing page numbers, the print edition should be considered definitive.

Last edited 04/15/2022

- 1 Watson, *Series Fiction* 205.
- 2 Wells-Lassagne, *Television* 63.

- 3 Cleary, *Ramona Forever* 191.
- 4 Lovell-Smith, “Ending” 33.
- 5 Kummerling-Meibauer, “Seriality” 172.
- 6 Kummerling-Meibauer 172.
- 7 Meek, *Texts*.
- 8 Pullman, *Daemon* 4.
- 9 Gerson, “Dragged” 149.
- 10 Gerson 152.
- 11 Gerson 156.
- 12 Gerson 156.
- 13 Robinson, "Anne Repeated” 69.
- 14 Robinson 70.
- 15 Montgomery, *AIn* 262, ellipsis in original.
- 16 Montgomery, *RI* 241.
- 17 Mackey, “Good-Enough.”
- 18 Mead, *Life* 112–13.
- 19 Mackey, “Many Spaces.”
- 20 Montgomery, *AIs*
- 21 Gerrig, *Experiencing* 171.
- 22 Bruner, *Actual* 26.
- 23 “ *Emily's Quest* (first published in 1925), and finally, many months later, *Emily Climbs*” changed to “ *Emily Climbs* (first published in 1925), and finally, many months later, *Emily's Quest*” on 03/2022 as per Margaret Mackey's request.
- 24 Blank, *Sophomore*.
- 25 Rosenblatt, *Reader, Text, Poem* 23–24.
- 26 Birkerts, *Gutenberg* 101.
- 27 Mead 16.
- 28 Iser, *Act* 182.
- 29 McClure, *Wilder* 1.
- 30 Mackey, “Inhabiting.”
- 31 Gitlin, *Media* 118–19.
- 32 Maynes and Mackey, “Narrative Attraction.”
- 33 Maynes and Mackey.
- 34 Maynes and Mackey.

Back to top

Article Info

Creative Commons License **Copyright: Margaret Mackey, 2020. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (Creative Commons BY 4.0), which allows the user to share, copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and adapt, remix, transform and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, PROVIDED the Licensor is given attribution in accordance with the terms and conditions of the CC BY 4.0.**

Peer reviewed
Yes

Works Cited:

Birkerts, Sven. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.

Blank, Clair. *Beverley Gray, Sophomore*. A.L. Burt, 1934.

Bruner, Jerome. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Harvard UP, 1986.

Cleary, Beverly. 1984. *Ramona Forever,* illustrated by Jacqueline Roberts. Harper, 2013.

Gerrig, Richard J. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. Westview, 1998.

Gerson, Carole. "'Dragged at Anne's Chariot Wheels': L.M. Montgomery and the Sequels to *Anne of Green Gables*." *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, edited by Paul Buidra and Betty A. Schellenberg, U of Toronto P, 1998, pp. 144–59.

Gitlin, Todd. *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*. Metropolitan Books, 2001.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

Kummerling-Meibauer, Bettina. "Seriality in Children's Literature." *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature*, edited by Clementine Beauvais and Maria Nikolajeva, Edinburgh UP, 2017, pp. 167–78.

Lovell-Smith, Rose. "Ending Only to Begin Again: The Child Reader and One Hundred Years of Sequel and Series Writing." *Children's Literature and the Fin de Siècle*, edited by Roderick McGillis, Praeger, 2003, pp. 31–39.

Mackey, Margaret. “Good-Enough Reading: Momentum and Accuracy in the Reading of Complex Fiction.” *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1997, pp. 428–58.

---. “Inhabiting Anne’s World: The Performance of a Story Space.” *Children’s Literature in Performance and the Media*, edited by F.M. Collins and J. Ridgman, Peter Lang, 2006, pp. 61–82.

---. “Many Spaces: Some Limitations of Single Readings.” *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1993, pp. 147–63.

Maynes, Warren, and Margaret Mackey. “Narrative Attraction: One Story, One Reader and Two Decades of Ongoing Appeal.” *Language and Literacy: A Canadian E-Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2006, http://www.langandlit.ualberta.ca/.

McClure, Wendy. *The Wilder Life: My Adventures in the Lost World of Little House on the Prairie*. Riverhead Books (Penguin), 2011.

Mead, Rebecca. *My Life in Middlemarch*. Crown Publishers, 2014.

Meek, Margaret. *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*. Thimble Press, 1988.

Montgomery, L.M. *Anne of Green Gables*. 1908. Penguin Books, 1975.

---. *Anne of Ingleside*. 1939. Puffin Books, 1983.

---. *Anne of the Island*. 1915. George G. Harrap, 1946.

---. *Rilla of Ingleside*. 1921. Viking, 2010.

---. *Emily Climbs*. 1925. Seal Books (McClelland-Bantam), 1983.

---. *Emily of New Moon*. 1923. Seal Books (McClelland-Bantam), 1983.

---. *Emily’s Quest*. 1927. McClelland and Stewart, 1980.

Mulcahy, R., director. *Highlander*. 20th Century Fox, 1986.

Pullman, Philip. *Daemon Voices: On Stories and Storytelling*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.

Robinson, Laura M. "'Anne Repeated': Taking Anne Out of Order." *Seriality and Texts for Young People: The Compulsion to Repeat*, edited by Mavis Reimer, Nyala Ali, Deanna England, and Melanie Dennis Unrau, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 57–73.

Rosenblatt, Louise. 1978. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Southern Illinois UP, 1994.

Sullivan, Kevin, director. *Anne of Green Gables*. A Kevin Sullivan Production, 1985.

---. *Anne of Green Gables: The Continuing Story*. A Kevin Sullivan Production, 2000.

---. *Anne of Green Gables: The Sequel*. A Kevin Sullivan Production, 1986.

Watson, Victor. *Reading Series Fiction: From Arthur Ransome to Gene Kemp*. RoutledgeFalmer, 2000.

Wells-Lassagne, Shannon. *Television and Serial Adaptation*. Routledge, 2017.