L.M. Montgomery, Physical Books, and the Pandemic

Published on
Tue, 11/24/2020 - 02:21

In early March 2020, headlines began to alert us to an impending pandemic. In spite of these headlines, I travelled from Columbia, South Carolina, where I live and work at the University of South Carolina, to speak at the King's University College in Edmonton, Alberta. I spoke to a small class of students about my current research on human rights, specifically about the challenges of US-sponsored security programs, and opportunities that may lie in smaller-scale grassroots initiatives. I also spent quality time with friends. I returned home to Columbia in time for spring break.

That was the week everything changed. About halfway through that week, my university's administration cancelled classes for the following week and, as with most universities in Canada and the United States, announced we would move to online course delivery. I learned how to use new features of programs I had already used and, like most professors, somehow found a way to keep teaching. At that time, it was hard to imagine what would come next. I went to the on-campus gym—where I used to lift weights—to clean out my locker and picked up books I had on hold from the public library. I also went to my office to get the essentials: some books, my desktop computer, and my second monitor. This was fortuitous, since the public and university libraries closed shortly thereafter. My new life, like that of most people, had changed to become more electronic than ever.

I craved physical objects and projects. Over the past few months, since March, I have done countless small home repairs, jumped on the puzzle trend, and filled notebooks with my lists. Once I had finished the books I had taken out from the public library, I read some e-books but wanted to read something I could hold in my hand. So, I turned to my own bookshelves. They are full of works of contemporary literary and cultural theory, Mexican history and literary criticism, and other books I've reviewed for journals. There is also a section of Canadian literature—classics such as L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and more recent works such as Dionne Brand's 2019 novel *Theory*.

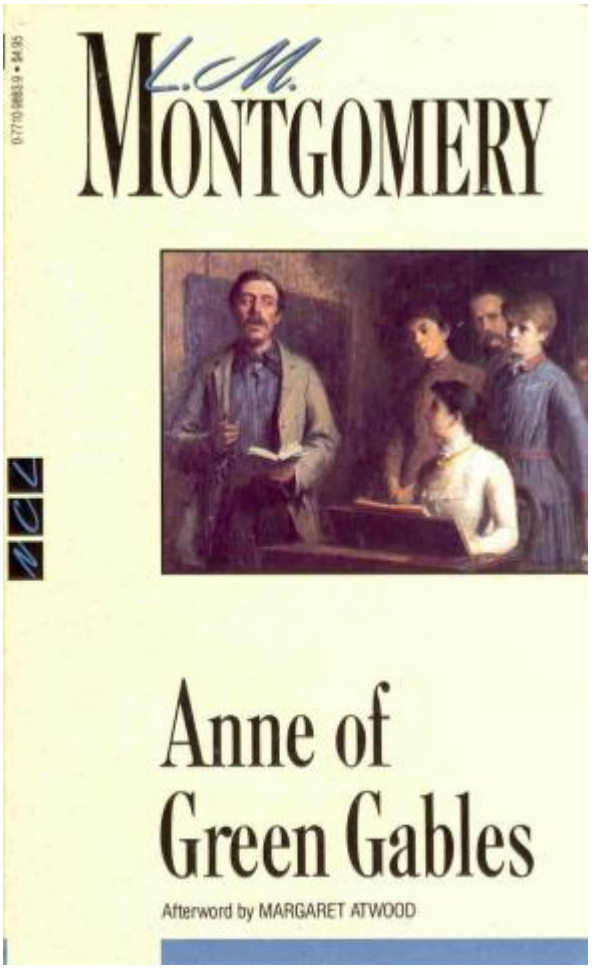


Author's bookshelf. 2020. R. Janzen's private collection.

I hadn’t thought about *Anne of Green Gables* in years. I knew right away what I had to do: I set myself a challenge. Just as I had done at some point in late elementary school, I tested myself for how long it would take to read the entire series. When I was twelve or thirteen years old, it took me about ten days. I read quickly and had already read the series several times, but I had to take a break between *Rainbow Valley* and *Rilla of Ingleside* . Even as a teenager, I knew that I had to prepare to grieve Walter’s death before rereading *Rilla of Ingleside*. My reading was slower this time. I am no longer accustomed to sustained reading for pleasure.

As I reread the books, I thought about the ways the *Anne* series has been a touchpoint for many important moments in my life: the two years of my childhood I spent in Egypt, my undergraduate studies in Waterloo, and my first job as a professor at Bluffton University, a small college in rural Ohio.

I first encountered the *Anne* series as an eight-year-old in Cairo. I would have been in P4, one of the best school years of my life. Not only did I have free rein of the school library, my family and friends in Canada also sent me books to read! One of these was the sombre-looking McClelland and Stewart version of *Anne of Green Gables*, which has a painting of a schoolroom on the cover.



Book cover of *Anne of Green Gables*. 1992. KindredSpaces.ca. 234 AGG-M&S-NCL.

I was initially unenthused. The first chapter, about a woman called Mrs. Lynde, seemed odd. Then I started reading it, and I couldn't stop. My parents eventually gave me the whole series. I am not surprised that a story about a lonely girl in a new place resonated with me. I was also a child living in a new place. When we returned to Canada, I read every novel by Montgomery that I could find, like *Kilmeny of the Orchard*, *The Story Girl*, the *Emily of New Moon* series, *Pat of Silver Bush* and *Mistress Pat*, and collections of short stories like *Akin to Anne: Tales of Other Orphans*. I read the books so regularly that my dad teased me. He told me that I should study English at university and go on to research L.M. Montgomery in a Ph.D. program.

I returned to the series as an undergraduate student at the University of Waterloo. I wanted to reread *Anne of the Island*, and since I had not brought all my books from my parents' house in Ottawa with me to Waterloo, I went to the library. Imagine my surprise when the online catalogue displayed books, plural, by L.M. Montgomery that I had not even heard of, let alone read! These collections of stories included *Against the Odds*, *After Many Days*, and *Across the Miles*, edited by Rea Wilmshurst in the 1990s.

After reading some of these new-to-me books, I returned to my initial plan and reread *Anne of the Island*. Anne was, after all, a university student in that novel. Like Anne, I lived with friends. It was the first time I saw just how different other families were from my own, even if our differences were not quite like those of the wealthy Phil Gordon or humble Anne Shirley. Having an Aunt Jimsie to do our housekeeping probably would have helped.

In spite of this fun reread, the series languished on my bookshelves for several years—a period that coincided with my M.A. and Ph.D. programs in Spanish at the University of Toronto. Then, when I moved to the United States, I returned to reading Canadian literature for pleasure. It eased my homesickness ever so slightly. I again identified with Anne's shock after moving to PEI, just as I had as a child in Cairo. I also—thanks to interlibrary loan—was able to read *The Blythes Are Quoted*. At some point along the way, I also read Sarah McCoy's imaginative fiction *Marilla of Green Gables*, but I decided to stick with the well-known and well-loved characters.

This past March, then, I hesitantly returned to *Anne*. She was so important to my childhood, and I had returned to the novel at other times since then, but what if I didn't like the books anymore? Fortunately, *Anne of Green Gables* holds up. I noticed a few new things on this reread, in part because of my training as a literary critic and in part because of the world around me. Several themes also became incredibly clear. One is the importance of community. Female characters spend time together. They do household chores, raise their children, and do church work, as a community. I live in a context where wearing masks to protect oneself and others appears to be too difficult for many people. This reckless behaviour and complete disregard for the lives of others has led to devastatingly high numbers of deaths. These novels are reminders of the importance of caring for the people around us.

I was also struck by the role of medicine in these novels and the way it relates to medicine in the US in 2020. *Anne's House of Dreams* features Gilbert Blythe as a young doctor who takes care of people even when they cannot afford to pay him. He eventually encourages Leslie Moore to have her husband taken to Montreal for an operation because he thinks it will restore his memory. Leslie takes out a mortgage on her farm to do so—from Captain Jim—because she is too proud to take a gift. While events like those described in this novel are part of Canada's past, they are very much part of the US today with people fundraising online to pay for medical bills. This parallel was chilling.

The *Anne* books also relate to the protests for Black Lives that have occurred throughout the summer and fall of 2020. I noticed the series' overwhelming whiteness in part because of the way McCoy's novel inserts Marilla's life story into the abolition movement and in part because, as a literary critic, I could no longer overlook the main characters' attitudes towards Acadian people, Indigenous people, or people who live in poverty.

In spite of these concerns, my reading challenge showed me these novels are well worth rereading as an adult, particularly during these times of overlapping crises. Their rich stories relate to some challenging periods in my own life and in the world around all of us. I am sure that I will return to them and continue to be inspired by their portrayals of the characters' connections with one another, and to work towards building a community like theirs, no matter how many obstacles certain leaders may put in our way.

About the Author: Rebecca Janzen is Assistant Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. She is a scholar of gender, disability, and religious studies in Mexican literature and culture whose research focuses on excluded populations in Mexico. Her first book, *The National Body in Mexican Literature: Collective Challenges to Biopolitical Control* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015), explores images of disability and illness in twentieth-century texts. Her second book, *Liminal Sovereignty: Mennonites and Mormons in Mexican Culture* (SUNY, 2018), focuses on religious minorities. Her most recent book, *Unholy Trinity: State, Church and Film in Mexico* (SUNY 2021), deals with religion in Mexican film. She has published widely on Latin American history, culture, religion, and film in the press, edited collections, and academic journals. This work has been funded by the Plett Foundation, the Kreider Fellowship at Elizabethtown College, the C. Henry Smith Peace Trust, and a short-term fellowship at the

Newberry library in Chicago.

Article Info

Creative Commons License **Copyright: Rebecca Janzen, 2020. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.**

Peer reviewed
No