Of Daydreams and Influence

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This essay details L.M. Montgomery’s influence on my writing and my life as an Atlantic Canadian and a woman who grew up with Montgomery’s characters. In this essay, I address my sense of wonder and imagination as well as my relationship to nature and depression. I also touch on my experiences growing up in, and eventually escaping, a cult, because L.M. Montgomery’s influence is there as well.

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When I was a child, my parents were extremely cautious and watchful over what I was allowed to read. And I would read anything within reach. Happily, L.M. Montgomery’s books were fair game, even by their stringent standards, and I read them all.

It meant a lot to me that LMM was Atlantic Canadian like me, that she wrote of a climate like mine, and that my mayflowers were the same as Jem’s. Female role models were in short supply, especially from my isolated part of the world.

L.M. Montgomery made me proud to be a girl, and then a woman. She showed me that our stories are beautiful too, even the simple ones, even the quietest ones of happy lives and starry eyes.

I was raised in what was essentially a fundamentalist cult, and I found solace in L.M. Montgomery’s characters. While I was the only kid in class who had to live by a strict religious code, L.M. Montgomery’s characters lived side by side with equally exclusive religious expectations. What appealed to me was that these characters were much more than just their religion. If they were more than the forced faith that

I often felt myself drowning in, maybe I could be too.

In Emily, I saw myself: a girl who scribbled stories and poems and roamed the woods around her home looking for inspiration. According to my childhood journals, I started rereading Emily every December as the snow started to fall and life turned inward.

I don't know if I wanted to be a writer first or Emily first, and I'm still not sure, but when I look back at my life, I see L.M. Montgomery's influence everywhere. At eleven years old, I created my own newspaper like the kids in *The Golden Road*. I called it *The Maywind Chronicles* and filled out the articles by assuming the identities of an assortment of characters who lived in a community I called Maywind.

My real childhood home was a trailer nestled up to a deep forest criss-crossed with overgrown farm roads. My father built us a treehouse and encouraged us to explore, which we did, readily. As I grew up in the shelter of those trees, it never occurred to me to be anything less than an L.M. Montgomery character. Of course I named every tree. Of course I wrote poetry over the little white violets that peppered my own Lover's Lane. Of course I daydreamed that the abandoned basement where we caught tadpoles was the ruins of a castle.

Would I have come up with all of that on my own if I hadn't devoured L.M. Montgomery books year after year? I'm not sure. Maud, and yes, sometimes I call her Maud, since we're old friends, and I've known her all my life, taught me a particular way of seeing the world that has enriched my life in unknowable ways. I write; I still wander the woods for inspiration. When I'm sad, I pick up her books and feel like I'm home. There's a rhythm to her books and her stories that my spirit hums along to and comes away soothed.

L.M. Montgomery took poetry out of my school textbooks and made it accessible; she placed it into the hands of fictional girls much like me, and so I knew it was for me as well. What quiet, lingering spells she cast over me when I thought I was just reading stories.

Then I consider my relationship to nature. Some days I'm a poet, other days I'm hunting for stories in the beetled undergrowth, and I'm always a hungry, would-be scientist, eager to learn about that flower or this mushroom and why they inflame my sense of wonder. It was L.M. Montgomery who first taught me to look, not just

with my eyes, but with my imagination flung open, to feel a thing as much as view it. To let myself see the world with wonder, and to see that wonder as a blessing rather than a childish thing to hide away in secret.

In my own work, I've always been inspired to write out the fantasies of Maud's characters—the fanciful stuff Maud alluded to on the page. I write about girls who run into fairies or who go on adventures in impossible places, and what happens when they befriend trees and the trees befriend them back. All of these ideas feel like they're growing from the seeds that Maud's stories first planted.

These books mean more to me than a mere literary influence: they have been companions. There has been an LMM book for every stage of my life.

When I finally had the courage to remove myself from the religious cult, I clung to *The Blue Castle* like a lifeline while I endured my excommunication and watched the only life I'd ever known fall away. We worked together to rebuild our lives and claim our blue castles.

I learned the joys of making a home from Jane of Lantern Hill, how to love a place from Pat and Silver Bush. I learned to sit in motherhood from Anne. As I grow older, I'm sure I'll find solace in Marilla, Aunt Elizabeth, and Aunt Laura, and sometimes I wonder if there isn't a little Peg Bowen in me too.

When depression comes, I remember the darkness in Maud's journals. I wish she'd given us fictional heroines who struggled as she did, because those characters would mean as much to us as the others do. Perhaps more, because finding wonder despite depression, something more than the plodding on of Rilla during the war, would be a boon. One, I suspect, L.M. Montgomery needed too. Maybe she didn't know how to find wonder in those shadows; maybe that's why she never wrote those stories, and why her story ends the way it does. Maybe it's up to us to write those characters.

Bio: Jennifer Shelby is a New Brunswick writer with over twenty-five short story publications. She is also a published poet and YA novelist. In late 2022, she received a grant from artsnb to write her first adult novel, *The Fae in the Machine*. This same year, she was invited to archive a collection of her short fiction on the moon as part of the Lunar Codex. A terrestrial edition of this collection is forthcoming in late 2024.

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