The Idea of Place

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On 15 May 1970, I took the ferry from Caribou, Nova Scotia, to Wood Islands, PEI. The sun was shining. The patchwork of red soil and green fields against the blues of sky and the Northumberland Strait took my breath away. I had not yet read Montgomery's work.

I have not yet recovered from my initial enchantment with this little red-clay island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It is my home, and it is the home and setting of many of my characters: Brupp, the Island cat who sets out to see the world; Lena of *Lena and the Whale*; Lee of *Lobster in My Pocket*; Ella in *Home for Christmas*; and it is the destination of the main characters of my adult novel, *Darwin's Hornpipe*.

My first experience with Montgomery's writing was through the eyes of children when I read aloud *Anne of Green Gables* to my grade three class at a rural school, Vernon River Consolidated School, where I taught for seven years. Daily we would huddle together by the one window, all of us on low chairs, while I read aloud *Charlotte's Web*, *Owls in the Family*, and other favourite children's books. Because of all the fuss about Montgomery in my new home province, one spring I chose *Anne of Green Gables* from the school library to read a chapter a day to the children. I did not first read the novel myself, and when we came to the chapter, "The Reaper Whose Name Is Death," my throat thickened as I read: "Anne dropped her flowers and sprang across the kitchen to him at the same moment as Marilla. They were both too late; before they could reach him Matthew had fallen across the threshold" (Montgomery 314). Tears filled my eyes. I stopped reading and sat in silence on the little chair, surrounded by the tight semicircle of children, all of us silent and still. I couldn't read any further, couldn't stand the sorrow of Matthew's death.

I had come to love all of the children in the class. I'd been their grade two teacher and had requested I follow them to grade three; the next year I followed them to grade four. We all sat in sorrow until one of the children, Gregory, said, "I didn't know a teacher could cry."

My life as a writer began in earnest the moment I was caught in the web of "real" landscape and the landscape described by Montgomery and imagined by all her readers. Montgomery created a literary landscape that transcends the literary: it is a place where there is licence to write, to create art, a place that offers the freedom to be oneself, just as Anne both found and created a niche where she could express her personality, mind, heart, soul, and spirit.

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Works Cited

Montgomery, L.M. *Anne of Green Gables*. 1908. McClelland and Stewart, 1992.

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