Rereading Anne in the Time of Coronavirus

DOI
http://doi.org/10.32393/jlmms/2025.0005
Published on
Wed, 01/22/2025 - 20:56

July 2020

One of the greatest joys of becoming a parent was the opportunity to share my favourite children's books with my daughters. When my first-born, Tiferet, was just a few days old, and I was up at night nursing her by the moonlight, I read her my best-loved childhood books in instalments—partly so she could get used to the sound of my voice. By the time she was three months old, she had already "read" L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*, three books that kindled my love of literature early on and inspired me to become a writer.

While lockdowns were in place and preschools closed for more than two months during the coronavirus outbreak, I spent most of my time at home looking after my two girls: Tiferet, then four, and Maayan, age two. As a result, I mostly reread children's books. I found and continue to find comfort in revisiting beloved books from my childhood, which offer me a sense of belonging, a homecoming of sorts, particularly during uncertain times.

Tiferet loves to take possession of my old books, announcing: "These were once yours, but now they are mine." I know it is one of the most meaningful gifts I can give her, making me appreciate the value of the book as a physical object. As Anne would say, it "gives me a thrill" to see that my own childhood books are still used and that my daughters love them as much as I do, even though there are so many other distractions claiming their attention these days. There is something magical

about holding a book in your hands that belonged to your family—something in the shape, the texture, the smell, that a screen could never replace. Even my two-year-old would take my books off the shelf and flip through the pages until she came to the illustrations, telling the story in her own words.

I first encountered Anne as a six-year-old, right after my family moved from Israel to Canada. It was love at first sight. When I woke up early on Sunday mornings, I would tune in to the Japanese anime series, exquisitely executed with delicate depictions of Prince Edward Island and an evocative soundtrack. Dubbed into French, the program strengthened my identification with Canadian society and culture. As I could only watch the one episode screened each week, I was held in suspense all week long until the following Sunday. During COVID, I found the same series on YouTube, dubbed into both English and Hebrew, and my daughters could choose the episodes they wanted to watch. Their favourite has always been Anne and Diana's tea party.

When I learned in third grade that this television series had been based on a beloved classic book, I asked the school librarian if I could borrow it. To my surprise, the library did not have a copy, but she called me in a few weeks later and showed me a beautifully illustrated abridged version of the novel, in which she had affixed a plaque indicating that the book had been purchased in my honour. It was after reading this book that I told my parents that I wanted to be a writer when I grew up, like Anne. I have not changed my mind and finally wrote my first novel as part of my doctoral dissertation.

Anne's love of language, poetry, and storytelling inspired my own lifelong love of literature and my desire to tell my own story. It is not surprising, then, that the first stories I wrote in grade four imitated L.M. Montgomery's style, though they were set on a kibbutz in Israel. I also remember my early attempts at translating *Anne of Green Gables* into Hebrew, as I wanted my friends in Israel to be able to read it. Appropriately, years later, my first published book was a translation of a scholarly monograph. Like Anne, I constantly strove for academic excellence and for a literary career, encouraged by L.M. Montgomery's success at a time when women had few opportunities. Anne taught me to cherish those things that made me unique and that it was not necessary to conform to social expectations; but, most of all, she taught me to value my imagination and validated my literary ambitions, though it may not generally be considered a lucrative career path.

At the end of grade six, just as I was about to graduate from elementary school, we were asked by our French teacher to draw a self-portrait as we envisioned ourselves twenty years into the future. We were given coloured pencils and a large piece of paper a metre and a half in length. Inspired by the cover of the French edition of *Anne of Avonlea*, I drew myself sitting at my desk with a pen in hand, wearing a white lace blouse with puffed sleeves, certain that I would grow up to become a writer. And, yet, it was only after Tiferet was born that I felt compelled to write my first novel, so that I could truthfully say to my daughters one day: “Dream big; you can realize your wildest dreams.”

With the girls at home for two months during COVID, I sought different channels to keep them entertained. YouTube offered a wealth of resources, and we discovered a new Hebrew musical based on *Anne*, as well as exploring the *Anne with an “E”* series on Netflix. One day, my daughters were watching a televised play called *Heroine* when I heard the name Sara Crewe and realized that it was an adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *A Little Princess*. I began reading my daughters one chapter each evening at bedtime from the book that was once mine.

When I heard about a new *Secret Garden* motion picture, I introduced my daughters to this magical story. A previous version of the movie came out in 1993, when I was in elementary school, and the following year a *Secret Garden* storybook was on offer through the Scholastic brochure. I persuaded my parents to order it for me—it came with a key-shaped pendant that could unlock the garden gate—and it is this same book that I reread to my daughters in the weeks leading up to the release of the new film adaptation.

While children’s books often deal with emotional struggles and difficult situations, they also offer a glimmer of hope and a model of fortitude—much needed in a period of sickness and solitude. Through these much-loved books, I was able to present my young, impressionable daughters with positive female role models, young girls who are intelligent, resourceful, kind, compassionate, and blessed with huge imaginations.

When Sara Crewe loses her fortune and is relegated to the attic as a maid, she imagines a warm fire burning in the fireplace and a feast on the table, cheering her best friend with fantastical stories. Anne, too, finds comfort in her imagination, helping her surmount the challenges of orphanhood, while starting her life anew in

Prince Edward Island. As she says to Marilla, “Do you never imagine things different from what they really are?” When the elder woman responds in the negative, Anne exclaims, “Oh, Marilla, how much you miss!” (Montgomery 56–57). Likewise, my daughters and I enlisted our imaginations and the power of storytelling to envision a different reality for ourselves and to find joy even in our confinement.

Bio: Raised in Montreal, Canada, Merav Fima is a writer, translator, and literary critic currently living in Melbourne, Australia. She holds a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from Monash University and her prose and poetry have appeared in a number of anthologies and literary journals, including *Verge; Poetica Magazine*; and *Parchment: A Journal of Contemporary Canadian Jewish Writing*. Her short story “Bride Immaculate” won the 2014 Energheia Literary Competition (Matera, Italy), “Of Pearls and Garnets” was highly commended in the My Brother Jack Awards (2023), and “Rose among the Thorns” was a finalist in the *Tiferet* literary journal’s 2019 fiction contest. She has recently completed a novel, *The Rose of Thirteen Petals and the Pomegranate Tree*, and a short story collection, *Late Blossoms* (Vine Leaves Press, forthcoming October 2025), and is currently at work on a memoir. Her story "Dancing in Splendour" earned an honourable mention in the 2024 Art of Unity Literary Award. She is the translator of Gal Ventura’s scholarly monograph, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and Its Substitutes in Nineteenth-Century French Art* (Brill, 2018).

Certain parts of this article are based on a reflection previously published in *Meanjin Quarterly* (July 2020), for which the author retains full copyright.

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Peer reviewed
No

Work Cited

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Banner image: Tiferet and Maayan Sadoff reading beloved children's books.