Taking Your Own Life Seriously

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L.M. Montgomery’s fiction has greatly impacted my writing. I write my books in Finnish, and I read Montgomery’s books in Finnish when I was a child. Books you read at an early age have a special place in your brain and body: they become part of you and your subconscious. My debut novel was set between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—the era I know best from Montgomery’s fiction and her life—so naturally, when I was trying to conjure the language of that time, my mind turned to Montgomery’s language. Funnily enough, for me this is not her original language, English, but the old-fashioned language of the Finnish translations of the 1920s and 1930s, when Montgomery’s books were first translated into Finnish. Through this complex transference of text through cultures, languages, and time, my childhood readings impacted my adult writings, and the book captured a little bit of Montgomery’s world.

But it’s Montgomery’s autobiographical writing that has had the biggest impact on me as an author. The influences are not as easily detectable as with my novel, but they show in how I think about writing, what I consider worthy as subject matter, and how it’s possible to approach both life and writing with a certain courage.

The reason for this is that Montgomery took her life-writing seriously. Writing her journals, compiling her scrapbooks, and taking her photographs were her biggest life project. Montgomery might not be as well known for these things as she is for her red-haired heroine, Anne, but, for her, the autobiographical project was always important. So much so that she wanted her journals to be published after her death. The journals are a work of art, not some side project secondary to her fiction. Montgomery made her living and name with her novels, but it was the journals that sustained her through a rather difficult life and where I think she put the most

ambitious artistry.

In the journals, written between 1889 and 1942, Montgomery writes realistically about war, criticizes her friends and neighbours, opens up about her depression and her husband's mental illness, and describes childbirth in a realistic way. She couldn't have written as candidly about any of these topics in her novels, and she knew it. The fact that she still wrote about them, at a time and in a culture where women were supposed to be well-behaved, obedient, and proper, tells all you need to know about the kind of person she was. As fellow Canadian writer Alice Munro noted, Montgomery was in some ways boxed in by being nice and genteel (Thacker 65), especially when it came to her fiction, but in the journals a more complete and complicated picture emerges of a woman writer who could be as acerbic and honest as she wanted.

Recently I reread the entries in the second volume of Montgomery's *Selected Journals*, where Montgomery depicts the birth of her first son, Chester. I wanted to see how Montgomery writes about approaching motherhood and childbirth, topics that haven't traditionally been given much space in fiction (although she also writes about the experience beautifully in *Anne's House of Dreams*). I didn't remember these entries well from my previous readings, and I was pleasantly surprised by her candid tone.

In her entry of 4 April 1912, there still lingers the Victorian hue of "dimpled little hands coming out of the lace-edged sleeves" (Montgomery 96), but it is counterbalanced by more straightforward language. "How strange it all is—this life coming out of the silence—out of the unknown," Montgomery contemplates in the same entry. She notes that she is beginning to feel the inconveniences of increasing size, although "[t]he 'old women' say I 'carry it well.'" She is worried about dying in childbirth and goes over the trauma of losing her own mother when she was a baby (97).

A week before her confinement, on 30 June 1912, Montgomery casually mentions that her "new book 'Chronicles of Avonlea' came the other day," but that there is only one thought that dominates her mind (98). Here, the mother trumps the writer, although it is interesting that she still mentions the book event in her journal. And then the baby is born, and, two months later, Montgomery has time to write up a long entry describing the events and the feelings she had before and after.

“Motherhood is *heaven*” (99) is the relieved verdict, but I find it very moving that she doesn’t hide the various doubts she had before the baby was born. She fears for her life; she is worried about the act of labour—having heard horror stories from friends—and that she will not love her child (99–101). Montgomery also depicts a set of muscle exercises she has taken to ease her labour, proving that she has a medical approach to childbirth (100). However, true to her nature, she also repeats a set of mental exercises, because she has a “strong belief in the power which the subconscious mind can exert over physical functions” (101). Perhaps thanks to the exercises, her labour goes well and pain-free.

Perusing these entries I’m again reminded of the scope of Montgomery’s writing. You can find almost every experience of human life reflected in her novels and her journals. However, it is especially in the journals that I encounter her belief that aspects of a woman’s life are important enough to be captured for posterity. With every entry she is saying: “I existed. I mattered. Here are my thoughts.” What better inspiration could she give to fellow writers?

Bio: Vappu Kannas is a Finnish author and scholar who holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Helsinki. Her dissertation examines the journals of L.M. Montgomery and the depictions of romance in them. She has published articles on Montgomery in *The Looking Glass*, *Reading Today*, *L.M. Montgomery and Gender*, *Children and Childhoods in L.M. Montgomery*, and the *Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies*. In addition to a collaborative chapbook, *As an Eel Through the Body*, co-written with Canadian poet Shannon Maguire (Dancing Girl Press, 2016) and a poetry collection based on Montgomery’s life, *Morsian* (Ntamo, 2018), she has published three novels, *Rosa Clay* (Kustantamo S&S, 2020), *Kirjeitä Japaniin* (Kustantamo S&S, 2021), and *Kimalaisten kirja* (Kustantamo S&S, 2023).

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Banner Image: Chester being held by his mother Lucy Maud Montgomery. Digital image courtesy of Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph. L.M. Montgomery Collection, XZ1 MS A097029. Please contact University of Guelph Library (libaspc@uoguelph.ca) regarding any planned print or electronic republication of this image.