On the Same Page: Community in L.M. Montgomery's Fiction

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By the end of the first page, I want to know who your main character is, what they're like, and what their main problem is, even if they don't know it themselves.

As a writer of middle grade fiction and a member of the Society of Children's Book Authors and Illustrators (SCBWI), I've heard that piece of advice over and over again. I've heard it from authors, agents, and editors. I've heard it from experts and novices. I've heard it from writers whose work I love and writers whose work isn't my cup of tea. I've heard it in conferences, workshops, critique groups, reading groups, and Zoominars. I've heard it a lot.

Do you know what goes through my mind every time I hear it?

L.M. Montgomery didn't do that.

It's true. Go look it up. L.M. Montgomery, one of the most successful middle grade authors of all time … heck, one of the most successful authors of all time, period, whether you measure by career longevity, continuous sales, number of readers, fervour of the fandom, prolific output, influence on other writers, number of responses and adaptations, robust scholarly response to the work, or almost any other measure known to measuring kind … L.M. Montgomery almost never starts her books with her protagonist.

Instead, she starts with community.

Just take a look at the first paragraph of her most famous work, *Anne of Green Gables*:

Rachel Lynde lived just where the Avonlea main road dipped down into a little hollow, fringed with alders and ladies' eardrops and traversed by a brook that had its source away back in the woods of the old Cuthbert place; it was reputed to be an intricate, headlong brook in its earlier course through those woods, with dark secrets of pool and cascade; but by the time it reached Lynde's Hollow it was a quiet, well-conducted little stream, for not even a brook could run past Mrs. Rachel Lynde's door without due regard for decency and decorum; it probably was conscious that Mrs. Rachel was sitting at her window, keeping a sharp eye on everything that passed, from brooks and children up, and that if she noticed anything odd or out of place she would never rest until she had ferreted out the whys and wherefores thereof. (Chapter 1, Verse 1)

Yep, that's the start to *Anne of Green Gables*, and you can bet for darn tootin' that Rachel Lynde isn't the main character. And it's not that little brook, either. When do we first see Anne? In the e-book version I'm using at the moment, it's page eight. Anne doesn't speak for the first time until two or more pages later. Personally, I'm devoted enough to L.M. Montgomery to think we should just dispense with page numbers altogether and start citing her works based on chapter and verse (or in this case, paragraph), the way we would with the Bible or a Shakespeare play. Anne first appears in Chapter 2, Verse 5. Anne's first speech is Chapter 2, Verse 17, and it's a doozy, chock full of Anneishness: packed with words, bubbling over with imagination, bursting with trees and blossoms and the love thereof. Yes, we get a very full and complete picture of Anne from her own words, but it doesn't happen until midway through chapter two. On the first page of *Anne of Green Gables*, she's nowhere in sight. Whatever method we use, we can see plain as plain that Anne is nowhere near the beginning of the novel.

But that's not just a delightful quirk of Anne's, though she has many, from using big words to bedecking herself and everything around her with flowers. The *Emily* trilogy starts like this:

The house in the hollow was "a mile from anywhere"—so Maywood people said. It was situated in a grassy little dale, looking as if it had never been built like other houses but had grown up there like a big, brown mushroom. It was reached by a

long, green lane and almost hidden from view by an encircling growth of young birches. No other house could be seen from it although the village was just over the hill. Ellen Greene said it was the lonesomest place in the world and vowed that she wouldn't stay there a day if it wasn't that she pitied the child.

Emily didn't know she was being pitied and didn't know what lonesomeness meant. She had plenty of company. There was Father—and Mike—and Saucy Sal. The Wind Woman was always around; and there were the trees—Adam-and-Eve, and the Rooster Pine, and all the friendly lady-birches. And there was "the flash," too. She never knew when it might come, and the possibility of it kept her athrill and expectant.

So, we "meet" Emily a little earlier than Anne, but once again we meet her sideways and slantways, through the perception of others. More important to the opening are the landscape, the house, the trees, and the observations of the housekeeper, Ellen Greene … not to mention the "Maywood people," who come first and foremost. We get a little insight into Emily from her viewpoint, "[she] didn't know what lonesomeness meant" and she awaits "athrill and expectant" for the arrival of "the flash," though we don't know what that is yet, either. And, like Anne, she makes friends with trees. But rather than truly meeting Emily, or seeing Emily's problem and how she will fix it, we see the *real* problem, and it belongs not to Emily, but to her surroundings. Emily is misunderstood.

Where is the physical presence of the protagonist? What is she doing? What is her internal flaw? Where is her all-important agency?

Apparently, she's off wandering in the woods or among the hills somewhere, as are we, all of us waiting for her story to begin. Unless it's already in progress. If it's even her story at all.

Then we have *Jane of Lantern Hill*. Jane is a little closer to the modern trend, mentioned on the first page and with immersion in her viewpoint. But, once again, the description focuses on her physical surroundings, and the problem does not rest with Jane, but everything around her:

Gay street, so Jane always thought, did not live up to its name. It was, she felt certain, the most melancholy street in Toronto … though, to be sure, she had not seen a great many of the Toronto streets in her circumscribed comings and goings

of eleven years. Gay Street should be a gay street, thought Jane, with gay, friendly houses, set amid flowers, that cried out, “How do you do?” to you as you passed them, with trees that waved hands at you and windows that winked at you in the twilights. Instead of that, Gay Street was dark and dingy, lined with forbidding, old-fashioned brick houses, grimy with age, whose tall, shuttered, blinded windows could never have thought of winking at anybody.

Do we truly know anything about Jane herself at this stage? Don’t we only know that she’s sad, in the same way dozens of young children could be sad for dozens of different reasons? But what we see most—what we are most immersed in—are her physical surroundings, what the community should be and what it isn’t. We know immediately that this place is no community for Jane. Unlike Anne and Emily, Jane is going to have to pick herself up and go find her community, instead of having it morph lovingly around her. But either way, once again, it’s not so much our heroine who will be doing the changing. As with both Anne and Emily, the world will shift to form community around them. It’s the community that has an internal flaw that must be corrected for a satisfactory ending to be achieved. It’s the community that gets the attention at the novel’s onset, far more so than the purported heroine.

Nowhere is this more true than in *The Story Girl*. Though the Story Girl is mentioned at the onset of her book, we know nothing about her inner workings nor her character arc, if indeed she has one. Instead, the focus is on the narrator and his journey—though he is by no means the protagonist—as well as the group he and his brother Felix will encounter in the landscape they will come to know and love. Indeed, they have already begun to know both community and landscape prior to the arrival, through stories:

“I do like a road, because you can be always wondering what is at the end of it.” The Story Girl said that once upon a time. Felix and I, on the May morning when we left Toronto for Prince Edward Island, had not then heard her say it, and, indeed, were but barely aware of the existence of such a person as the Story Girl. We did not know her at all under that name. We knew only that a cousin, Sara Stanley, whose mother, our Aunt Felicity, was dead, was living down on the Island with Uncle Roger and Aunt Olivia King, on a farm adjoining the old King homestead in Carlisle. We supposed we should get acquainted with her when we reached there, and we had an idea, from Aunt Olivia's letters to father, that she would be quite a jolly creature. Further than that we did not think about her. We were more interested in Felicity

and Cecily and Dan, who lived on the homestead and would therefore be our roofmates for a season. But the spirit of the Story Girl's yet unuttered remark was thrilling in our hearts that morning, as the train pulled out of Toronto. We were faring forth on a long road; and, though we had some idea what would be at the end of it, there was enough glamour of the unknown about it to lend a wonderful charm to our speculations concerning it.

We were delighted at the thought of seeing father's old home, and living among the haunts of his boyhood. He had talked so much to us about it, and described its scenes so often and so minutely, that he had inspired us with some of his own deep-seated affection for it—an affection that had never waned in all his years of exile. We had a vague feeling that we, somehow, belonged there, in that cradle of our family, though we had never seen it. We had always looked forward eagerly to the promised day when father would take us “down home,” to the old house with the spruces behind it and the famous “King orchard” before it—when we might ramble in “Uncle Stephen's Walk,” drink from the deep well with the Chinese roof over it, stand on “the Pulpit Stone,” and eat apples from our “birthday trees.”

Where o where has our protagonist gone? It’s not Bev, though it’s his viewpoint we’re immersed in here. And, clearly, he expects us, as readers, to be “more interested” in the King family as a whole, just as he is, than in one waif whose moniker gives the novel its title. But the focus is once again on the landscape, the trees, and the houses and the stories that dwell there. The human inhabitants are, at best, a supporting cast to this storied landscape.

Just for the record, the Story Girl of the novel’s title is among the last of the key characters to be introduced, waltzing into the scene a whopping twenty-seven pages into the novel, as the e-book flies, Chapter 2, Verse 14. That’s even later than Anne.

The Story Girl is one of my favourite Montgomery novels, specifically because it disregards almost everything we’re told needs to happen in a novel. It has an ensemble cast, rather than a single protagonist. It really has no linear plot per se, but rather a series of episodic little plots with even more plots inside them, in the form of the stories the community tells. But I love it. I love it because it’s a story about stories and storymaking, about memories and memory-making, and about community and community-building. And, as always with Montgomery, the community is bound together with the land, and so are the stories, intertwined with both people and nature, so much so that the stories grow tall and spread their

branches alongside the trees that bear the children's names.

If you want to read more about that, you can check out some of my prior essays on Montgomery, landscape, memory, and story, if you can find them (Frever, "Emergent Words"; Frever, "Recollection and Remembrance"), but, for now, let's get back to the beginnings of L.M. Montgomery novels and their purported protagonists … if we can find them.

So, we have Anne, Emily, Jane, and Sara Stanley seemingly nowhere to be found, or at best dimly hinted at, when their novels get underway. That's probably enough to make an argument right there. But, just for good measure, let's turn to one or two of Montgomery's other heroines and their notable absence from the beginning of their books: Marigold is four months old at the start of her book and can't even feed herself yet, let alone exhibit agency. Kilmeny doesn't appear until twenty-three pages into the physical book that bears her name, Chapter 5, Verse 17, possibly a new record as late-arriving protagonists go. In each case, the first page is devoted to all the people—and trees—surrounding the supposed main character, but rarely, if ever, the main character herself.

Suffice to say that Montgomery defies the current conventions of literary construction over and over again, and she does it successfully.

So, what gives? Is it that literary tastes have changed so much in the century since Montgomery first put pen to paper? Probably so, but, then again, her books are still wildly popular today. So, is it that today's literary "experts" and advice-givers don't know what they're talking about? Possibly. Yet there does seem to be something astute about the observation that today's readers tend to get bored more quickly, tend to like things to get straight to the point, don't want to wait around for a buildup. That's how social media works. That's how television works. Truthfully, these days, that may be how our brains work. And while not all video games work this way, if there isn't some good action on level one, we're not waiting around too long to level up.

So, then, two questions remain: Why does L.M. Montgomery do this? And, if this strategy runs so counter to the current tidal wave of literary advice, how is she getting away with it?

I have a theory, and the theory is this: for L.M. Montgomery, the community *is* the main character. Or, perhaps more accurately, all of her books have two main characters: her human protagonist and her community. It's right there in the titles: *Anne of Green Gables. Anne of Avonlea*. *Emily of New Moon*. *Jane of Lantern Hill*. And so on and so on and so on. The character and the community stand side by side, of equal importance.

Truthfully, in most of these novels, it's a toss-up which main character goes through a developmental arc, the person or the place. Anne does not change that much in the course of *Anne of Green Gables*. Margaret Atwood puts it this way: "Although she changes in the book—she grows up—her main transformation is physical. Like the Ugly Duckling, she becomes the swan; but the inner Anne—her moral essence—remains much what it has always been" (225). The novel tells us Anne becomes less talkative (Chapter 31, Verses 23–25), but that may not be strictly true, since she monologues almost immediately after that statement (Frever, "Anne Shirley, Storyteller"). We're told Anne is more mature and has fewer antics (Chapter 37, Verse 33), but then she's right back to the same ol' shenanigans in *Anne of Avonlea*. As Anne herself states: "I'm not a bit changed—not really. I'm only just pruned down and branched out. The real me—back here—is just the same" (*AGG*, Chapter 34, Verse 8).

But who does change? For Atwood, it's Marilla. But for me? It's Avonlea. Avonlea is completely transformed for the better by the presence of Anne.

Now, I'm not the first or only person to notice this. One of the earliest examples of someone documenting Avonlea's transformation is Susan Drain's essay, "Community and Individual in *Anne of Green Gables*: The Meaning of Belonging." She also analyzes the opening of the book and suggests that "the community is presented first" in order to achieve "a vision of the relation between community and individual which is complex as well as close, challenging as well as comfortable" (Drain 21, 20). She goes on to write: "Individuality, then, is established not in contrast to a community, but by a commitment to it" (Drain 29). Drain traces out what she sees as the mutual adaptability of Anne to the community and the community to Anne. But while I agree with her on several points, I'm still not seeing those places where Anne truly and authentically changes. But Avonlea does, in its acceptance of her. Avonlea follows the editorial rule for what main characters ought to do in a way that Anne never does. Avonlea is cast as a character in itself.

By the end of the first page, we know who Avonlea is: Avonlea is a sleepy little rural town. Avonlea is beautiful, but Avonlea, like the brook in front of Rachel Lynde's house, is slow. Avonlea residents are in need of help, the way Marilla and Matthew are in search of a boy to help on the farm. But like most protagonists, what they think they want and what they really want are two very different things. Matthew and Marilla are about to find out that what they really want is a girl, a very specific girl, who can add imagination to their lives and make those lives "real interesting" (Chapter 3, Verse 64). Indeed, Anne's own interest is infectious, because she calls three things "interesting" in her first drive with Matthew (Chapter 2, Verses 25, 27) and seemingly forever after, Matthew refers to her as "interesting" or "an interesting little thing," at least three times directly and once through Marilla's recollection (Chapter 3, Verse 64; Chapter 6, Verse 33; Chapter 14, Verse 51; Chapter 4, Verse 38). So, it's possible Anne is transforming Avonlea's vocabulary as well as its personality. Someone "interesting" in the neighbourhood—both interested in the world of Avonlea and of interest to it—is also perfect for residents like Rachel Lynde. What we know about Rachel Lynde at the beginning of the book is that she has a curious mind that is in need of information and excitement. What Rachel Lynde thinks she needs is information about where Matthew is going; but what she actually needs is a source of things to think about and talk about all over town. Enter Anne Shirley. As the incomparable Elizabeth Epperly puts it: "Montgomery pairs up nature and human emotions so that we take sides: it's the brook against Rachel Lynde, just as it will soon by Anne Shirley against unimaginativeness" (18). One could almost read Anne as the antagonist of the story: she drives the positive growth and development of the town and nearly everyone in it by working against their norms and pushing back against how they think they want things to go.

Though Epperly does see Anne having an arc, in her shift from the Romance of poets like Wordsworth to romance with Gilbert (17–38), I'd like to suggest that there's another way to read that seeming alteration to Anne. If the shift from poetic Romance to courtship romance is a shift at all—and perhaps it's not, if your courtship is invested with poetical qualities—then maybe *Anne of Green Gables* is a different kind of love story than we think. Maybe Avonlea has a developmental arc in its romance with Anne. Because just as Anne and Gilbert start out at odds and (spoiler alert) end up together, so do Anne and Avonlea … at least for several more books than expected. Once the community changes—accepting and embracing Anne just as she is—it is worthy of her love and her enduring devotion. True, some citizens

of Avonlea, such as Matthew and Diana, see Anne's good qualities right off. But Marilla, Rachel Lynde, Mrs. Barry, Aunt Josephine Barry, and a host of others all have to learn that Anne was a delight and a gift to the town all along, though they couldn't see it at first. And we know the town has been a-talking, because on their first meeting, Diana tells Anne that she "heard before that you were queer. But I believe I'm going to like you real well" (Chapter 12, Verse 38). The developmental arc, in romance and outside of it, belongs to Avonlea far more so than to Anne.

The same could be said for *Emily of New Moon*. True, Emily develops into a writer in the course of her series. But does she really change at all from beginning to end? In my opinion, not so much. Her curmudgeonly relatives develop a bit more sympathy and heart. Her true love finally realizes he needs to speak out. His bitter mother has a change of heart. Emily's jilted suitor gives her a *house* of her own, for crying out loud. Did ever a moody, self-centred anti-hero transform so completely? Truthfully, nearly everyone in the Emily series can be seen to change except for Emily.

How does Montgomery get away with that?

Maybe because it's not just about Emily. It's about community.

For Anne. For Emily. For Jane. For the Story Girl. For each of these novels and the series of books that follow them, the community stands as a main character alongside the protagonist. If it's a writing "requirement" to know the main character's personality, flaw, and story arc from the get-go, then where we're getting and going in these novels is to a new community … not a new and improved heroine. With Anne, with Emily, with Jane, and perhaps most of all with the Story Girl, the community *is* both main character and story.

If we accept this notion that the main character of most of L.M. Montgomery's novels is actually the community within the novel, what are the implications of that?

Well, to my mind, there are a lot of implications here, and a lot of lessons to be learned. But for me, as a reader, writer, scholar, theorist, and Montgomery fan, the most important thing is this: Montgomery understood something about the importance of community. Moreover, she understood something about the importance of everyone's role in community. Rachel Lynde may seem to start the novel as a busybody and a naysayer, but, if we didn't have Rachel, Anne would never have her puffed-sleeve dress and that millionaire on Spofford Avenue would

never have his “tulip-pattern” quilt (*AGG*, Chapter 25, Verse 26; *AIs*, Chapter 16, Verse 11). Montgomery also understood the importance of community surrounding reading, writing, and storytelling. Why else would the Avonlea girls have a Story Club? Moreover, would any of the young women of Patty’s Place have graduated with such honours and distinctions if they didn’t have each other to get them through? Would Sara Stanley and Peter Craig be perched on separate rocks in separate fields, preaching and performing to no one, if they hadn’t found their cousins, their neighbourhood friends, and one another? In other words, if they hadn’t found their calling, their first audience, and their community, all at the same time? Would Bev King have become a writer at all? And, to circle back, what would have become of Anne if she hadn’t found Avonlea?

The people make the community, and the community makes the people. If it’s the right community, a sympathetic and empathetic community, then everyone is the better for it.

As I edit this essay, I’ve just “returned” (I attended remotely) from the L.M. Montgomery conference in Prince Edward Island. The theme was home. And one thing I’ve seen and heard over and over again, at this conference and others, is how L.M. Montgomery’s writing is home for so many of us … and maybe also for her, who was denied a home of her own for so long. I read, hear in presentations, or hear in conversations, over and over again, how many of her readers, including myself, felt like the oddball child at times: the one who saw fairies or talked to trees or was “always poring over a book” (*AGG*, Chapter 12, Verse 23). This particularly struck a chord with me when talking to other remote attendees of the conference over Zoom at the conference’s conclusion. When we turn to Montgomery’s books, we find our home. The writing is home. The pages are home. The stories are home. But more than that, we find our people, our Kindred Spirits, “the race that knows Joseph” (*AHD* , Chapter 7, Verse 52). To coin a phrase, we find—and are—The Fam Who Knows Anne. But this phenomenon doesn’t only happen on the page, in the books, as we read them. When we go to discuss those books—online, in reading groups, with friends, at conferences, and maybe most especially at the biennial conference on Prince Edward Island—we find The Fam Who Knows Anne all around us. We find our true kin through immersion in the books, but also among other readers and fans of Anne. At long last, for many of us, we have found our community.

Maybe, just maybe, that happens because Montgomery understood. If her journals are anything to go by, she herself didn't always have the community she sought. But she had glimpses of it. She had her kindred spirits. She understood the ways that a protagonist needs a community, and a community needs everyone in it, and most importantly, the ways that that community then becomes a character of their own: with flaws, and growth, and change, and love.

L.M. Montgomery understood that, sometimes, the community is the main character. As a writer, that's one more lesson that I'm learning from her, and her communities, every single day.

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