A Gathering of Artists Respond to L.M. Montgomery: A Foreword

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Much has been published about L.M. Montgomery—and in my opinion, much of the best of that material has come through the L.M. Montgomery Institute (LMMI) in Prince Edward Island, which runs this journal. When I saw a new call for proposals in fall 2023, my first reaction was, *I have nothing to add*. This was not modesty—I'd recently written a biography of *Montgomery, House of Dreams: The Life of L.M. Montgomery*, and it had been published in 2018 by Candlewick Press; and then kindly received, thanks to the world's love of the book's great subject. I felt I had added as much as I could to the archives of the world of kindred spirits.

My sudden brilliant (or so I hoped) idea came to me just a few days before the proposals were due. I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to know what Maud's fellow children's book writers—as colleagues, comrades-in-arms—had to say about her work, and wouldn't it be wonderful to have their thoughts collated into one special collection? My initial proposal aimed for "a collection of highly regarded children's book writers' responses to the life and work of L.M. Montgomery."

Certainly, her books had inspired me to become a writer. I was curious to see what other practitioners of an undervalued and often overlooked genre might write about the woman who came from a remote Maritime Canadian province and changed the lives of millions of children based largely on one simple but brilliant book. This kind

of overwhelming reader response had happened before *Anne* (for instance with Louisa May Alcott's wildly popular *Little Women*)—and as Harry Potter proved, it could happen after. I am sure it will happen many times over, as long as this reading world survives. But universally adored and enduringly brilliant books for the young remain rarities, pink diamonds sparkling among the rocks. (Though Maud, as we know, preferred the humble amethyst.)

I thought my call for papers, "highly regarded writers' responses etc." would be clear and broad enough to do the job. It turned out to be neither. There were simply not enough children's book authors ready or willing to do all the lifting. I shifted scope to all highly regarded authors, regardless of genre. The LMMI responded enthusiastically and accepted my eleventh-hour proposal. With the kind guidance and inestimable advice of Dr. Kate Scarth, editor of the *Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies* and Chair of L.M. Montgomery Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, it quickly became apparent that more tweaking was needed.

The starting point of this collection—the seed of this ever-growing project—rested on the noteworthy fact that both Mark Twain and Aretha Franklin were outspoken fans of *Anne of Green Gables*. Aretha Franklin and Mark Twain! What a great, unlikely pair of fans. *Anne of Green Gables* was one of Aretha's "favourite things." She once told a Toronto interviewer, "She's such a can-do kind of girl, that's why I'm crazy about her" (White). I felt sure there must be dozens more of these illustrious fans hidden from view. Yes, we began to discover, there were more of them indeed—and new ones are born each year.

But you'll see the remaining problem right away. Aretha Franklin was not a "highly regarded" writer; she was a highly regarded musician, a multi-instrumentalist, and a singer of amazing range. For that matter, not all great writers are "highly regarded." Herman Melville died with all his books out-of-print, and the living Emily Dickinson never got one into print. If we included Aretha, we couldn't accept only the work of writers. Artists, then, we decided. Accomplished artists of any genre.

This description still excluded highly regarded and accomplished admirers such as

Kate Middleton, the now–Princess of Wales, who had arranged her honeymoon around a trip to Prince Edward Island, in honour of a certain favourite writer. But villainous authors who had written sneeringly of Montgomery were admitted in. (In addition to the complete pieces published in this collection, we are sharing dozens of shorter quotations. Their insults are recorded there.)

We invited “artists of accomplishment in any genre” to respond to the work and/or life of L.M. Montgomery. We received, solicited, unearthed, or cajoled responses from a wide field—musicians and composers, actors, visual artists, filmmakers, experimentalists, a group of extraordinary needleworkers, and, of course, writers. Kindred spirits emerged from every corner of the globe—Russia, Australia, China, Japan—working in every medium. Unsurprisingly, the majority were writers, representing a wide range of age and background, culture, and nationality; each with distinct temperaments, opinions, and points of view. We were stunned by the avalanche of submissions from our call for papers, and reluctantly, we had to turn down many fine pieces.

Those we ultimately selected range from actual children and self-taught artists to prized authors like the Canadian James Garratt—naturalist, writer, and photographer—and National Book Award–winning author of *The Penderwicks*, Jeanne Birdsall, among many others. We’ve included as many beautiful and varied voices as possible.

Writers write the most insightful literary criticism—or so I believe. (I am not objective.) Actors know most about acting; musicians about music. That doesn’t mean that non-practitioners can’t also address these subjects—what’s odd is the common assumption that practitioners *can’t*. Think of author/critics such as T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence. The most brilliant essay on Walt Whitman is by poet William Carlos Williams. The best essay on Williams was written by poet Robert Creeley. Creeley’s best critic is likely working on a poem right now. If it doesn’t take one to know one—it certainly helps. Author Mark Twain gave *Anne* its earliest and warmest praise: “the dearest most moving and delightful child since Alice” (Wheeler). The great American Southern novelist and short story writer Eudora Welty put in her two cents’ worth forty years later. And she was followed by

admirers such as Canadian authors Margaret Atwood and Louise Penny. The late Canadian short story master Alice Munro wrote in her afterword to Emily of New Moon, “What matters to me finally in this book, what was to matter to me in books from then on, was knowing more about life than I’d been told, and more than I can ever tell.”

We had the advantage of a wider lens. Artists think long and deeply about art. Many great artists practise more than one art. William Blake, the English poet/engraver, and the Japanese poet/painter Buson were equally revered as visual artists as they were writers. Sappho was a singer-songwriter of ancient Greece as much as she was a poet. Maud herself had a keen appreciation of many arts, especially music. She was her church pianist and also sang, recited dramatically on stage, took extraordinary photographs, and created scrapbooks and beautiful embroideries. (You can find many of those scrapbooks and embroideries in Ontario and in PEI.) I think she would appreciate the spirit of this special collection, a gathering of artists-who-are-fans and fans-who-are-artists.

When Kate Scarth explained at the outset that according to protocol and common sense, I would need a *Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies*–based co-editor and scholar, I begged her to join forces with me, and she generously agreed. Had she not done so, you would not be sitting here now reading this—or reading anything, because I literally could not have done this without the remarkable Kate, plus the host of assistants and copyeditors and designers, advisors, senior editors, graphic artists, and other helpers who brought this special collection into being both digitally and in print by performing the hard, actual work day to day, week after week, consistently, meticulously, and cheerfully. (I represent none of these three virtues, being neither consistent, meticulous, nor reliably cheery.)

This collection contains an assortment of brilliant artists who pay homage and attention to Montgomery’s life and work. In these pages, these artists express their debt to her. Some have dedicated their lives to this. Lesli Weston has created more than two hundred paintings around Montgomery’s books. Jane Eccles has crafted a marvelous series of paintings based on the dresses of famous Canadian women. James E. Garratt guides us deep into Montgomery’s nature landscape through her

fiction and notebooks, which act as field guides for the hearts of the willing. Voice actor Sandra Churchill describes how it felt to perform a favourite author's words.

Despite the popularity of Anne of Green Gables, and its inevitable association with L.M. Montgomery, many artists in this collection focus on her other works, from her autobiographical *The Alpine Path*, to Montgomery's own favourite novel, *The Story Girl* (*AP* 78), explored here brilliantly by author Lois Metzger. The works range from her adult novel The Blue Castle, singled out by two highly regarded contributors to her notebooks, letters, poems, and one of her least-praised books, *Pat of Silver Bush* .

Of course, *Anne* and *Emily* are also well represented. If Montgomery is an avid reader's favourite—and she most certainly is—her *Emily of New Moon* books are the ones her fellow writers often speak of first. That flash! The instant of inspiration that Emily experiences—she speaks to artists, about artistry and art. There are so many facets to Montgomery, it is no wonder that so many readers from so many different backgrounds, cultures, and countries herald her influence. Every contributor here has been moved by her genius. All make passionate and articulate cases for their work of choice. I think Montgomery's beautiful words come into flower again under their deft affectionate touch. We hope you think so too, and that you enjoy the collection.

Bio: Liz Rosenberg is a Professor of English at Binghamton University. Liz is the author of five adult novels, four books of poetry, and more than thirty books for young readers, from picture books to poetry anthologies and YA biographies, including *House of Dreams: A Biography of L.M. Montgomery* (2018). For about twenty-five years, she was Book Review Columnist at the *Boston Globe*, and her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker, Harper's*, *Paris Review,* and elsewhere.

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