Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

THE GOLDEN ROAD TO AVONLEA

The journey begins. Dennis Adair and Janet Rosenstock. HarperCollins Publishers, 1991. 138 pp., $4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00647033-5; **The Story Girl earns her name**. Gail Hamilton. HarperCollins Publishers, 1991. 117 pp., $4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00647034-3; **Song of the night**. Fiona McHugh. HarperCollins Publishers, 1991. 120 pp., $4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00647035-1.

Each *Road to Avonlea* storybook bears the reminder on its cover that it is "Based on the Sullivan Films productions adapted from the novels of Lucy Maud Montgomery." Such pointed spin-off appeal begs the novels to be compared to both the television series and to the original Montgomery novels on which it is based. The Avonlea storybooks, however, have not the charm of either source. More significantly, these novelizations of first-season teleplays do not stand on their own merit as good works of literature.

The appeal of the television series lies in its recreation of turn-of-the-century life. Idyllic scenery and award-winning Edwardian costume design help to draw the viewer into a romantic depiction of life on Prince Edward Island in the 1900s. The interaction of engaging character actors provides depth to storylines that, for the most part, are gently sentimental, uncomplicated and easily resolved. Characters are never really challenged: there is always an air of complacent certainty that everything will turn out all right. As the storybooks capture neither the atmosphere nor the personalities of the television show, this flaw of the series is more apparent in the novelizations. Plausibility is stretched to achieve neatly tied-up happy endings. In *The journey begins*, a single pleasant romp in the hay overrides the cruel behaviour of Sara's cousins while permitting her to see the benefits of family life .

The storybooks also lack the lyrical richness of Montgomery's novels. *The Story Girl* and *The golden road* are odes to the power of imagination. It is Sara Stanley's ability to tell stories to transport listeners into the fantasy which makes her a unique individual. Deprived of the presence of winsome Sarah Polley, who plays the protagonist on television, there is nothing especially unique about Sara in the storybooks. Moments from the teleplays which would help underscore her "natural gumption" oddly have been cut. Sara doesn't slurp soup along with the hired boy to annoy Hetty in *The journey begins*. She is too cowed by her formidable aunt, a Sullivan creation. Sara's skill as a story-teller

is unconvincing in *The Story Girl earns her name*. An interesting twist to the "Story Girl" nickname is that it is bestowed pejoratively. Sara's perceived oddity thus is paralleled with that of the stuttering awkward man, Jasper Dale, who helps Sara put on a magic lantern show. Sara only slowly comes to appreciate the benefits of being different. But even her rendition of the "Little matchgirl" is made prosaic by prosaic prose.

While some attempt is made to explain motivations that may not be so apparent on television, the storybooks plod along from event to event with little effort taken to endow characters with personality or to linger over descriptions which would help the reader to see the scene. Sara's and Andrew's revenge on their cousins in the graveyard, in *The journey begins*, falls flat as it is over before it can get going. As soon as Felicity makes a wish with a "magic seed," the constable appears and drags the children off to be punished. Perhaps HarperCollins is counting on its readership having watched appropriate episodes to endow events with life, but the novelizations should be able to stand on their own.

The storybooks also suffer from poor editing. Continuity problems and inconsistencies suggest a too hurried approach. In *The journey begins*, Felicity appears in two places at once. She rounds the house and stops behind the buggy when Sara first arrives so that she overhears what she takes to be a slight. On the facing page, Felicity is standing behind her mother in the house when she and Sara first meet. Further, described in the text of *Song of the night* as having thick white hair, Old Lady Lloyd has dark hair in the accompanying photographs. (Each book has four pages of pictures from the corresponding television episode. They are poorly chosen as they are not generally indicative of the action; they are also out of chronological order in *Song of the night*.)

More significant to the storyline is the inconsistency in how much Sara knows about her father's business scandal. It is set up in *The journey begins* that Sara does not know the real reason why she is sent to P.E.I. Sara only learns about the embezzlement charges against her father by overhearing an argument between her nanny and aunt. Sara must confront her belief in Stanley's innocence based on her own knowledge of her father. Yet, in *Song of the night*, Fiona McHugh, who should have known better as she helped develop the television series, writes that Sara was told by her father before she left Montreal that he was not an embezzler, which undercuts the importance of Sara making up her own mind.

The storybooks suffer from uninspired writing. Aimed at the eight to twelve age group, they offer no stretch for the imagination and provide no better understanding of life in an earlier era. For Montgomery, the golden road alludes to childhood; for HarperCollins, the connotation is less poetic.

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