# *The Nostalgic Appeal of a Popular Place: Female Fans Interpreting* **Road to Avonlea**

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***Résumé*** *: Cet article cherche à découvrir les raisons pour lesquelles Avonlea suscite encore autant d'engouement de nos jours. Fondée sur une étude qualitative de la réception de la télésérie* ***Les Contes d'Avonlea****, dont l'action se déroule à l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard au début du siècle dernier, l'analyse met à l'épreuve certaines idées reçues sur la nostalgie dans l'imaginaire populaire. Le cadre historique de cette série permettrait aux téléspectateurs de prendre leur distance vis-à-vis notre société contemporaine sans que cette dimension critique soit exprimée directement dans les divers épisodes. L'attrait pour Avonlea comme lieu populaire résulterait donc d'un examen critique de certains modes de vie.*

***Summary****: What sentiments make the romance with Avonlea possible at the turn of the twenty-first century? A qualitative fan study of the television series* ***Road to Avonlea****, a rural-historical family romance set in Prince Edward Island in the early twentieth century, answers that question by testing assertions about nostalgia's role in popular imaginings of place. Findings suggest that period setting gives fans the opportunity to be critical about the present in ways only indirectly expressed within the series, making Avonlea's appeal as a popular place the product of a critical engagement with forms of life.*

The longevity of Avonlea as a popular place offers fertile ground for considering the relationship between the popular and history. In their groundbreaking work *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (1987), Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott define the popular as "public property in the sense that images are reworked, inflected in different directions and for different ends" (283). In other words, popularity entails that a text, symbol, or figure be continuously modified — that is, made respon-

sive to the historical situation and prevailing social sentiment. According to this definition, the significance of Avonlea shifts with the changing historical moment, inventing new meanings redolent of the day's sentiments. But what are the sentiments that make the ongoing romance with Avonlea possible at the turn of the twenty-first century?

My hypothesis is that the enduring appeal of Avonlea, a fictional place created by L.M. Montgomery for her bestselling *Anne of Green Gables* novels and extended to the contemporary television screen, is linked to forms of life in the twentieth century. Montgomery's idealized portrayal of the pastoral and pre-industrial world, her passionate descriptions of spiritual communion with nature, and her sympathetic depiction of a state in which sentimental feelings govern all show her debt to Romantic conventions deployed a century before she began to write. But romance itself has an even longer tradition in Western culture, evolving from a distinct literary form in the medieval period to a quality or sensibility deployed in the popular culture of modernity. Indeed, Northrop Frye sees romance as inseparable from modern popular culture and likens it to "secular scripture": at the heart of romance, Frye suggests, is the quest for identity, with the movement from alienation to identity involving ascent from a demonic world to an idyllic one (54). Alternatively, Gillian Beer describes romance as "a cluster of properties":

> the themes of love and adventure, a certain withdrawal from their own societies on the part of both reader and romance hero, profuse sensuous detail, simplified characters (often with a suggestion of allegorical significance), a serene intermingling of the unexpected and the everyday, a complex and prolonged succession of incidents usually without a single climax, a happy ending, amplitude of proportions, [and] a strongly enforced code of conduct to which all characters must comply. (10)

According to Beer, romance also requires a degree of distance from the real world, and so it invokes the past, but often through well-known stories that are familiar and reassuring (2). For Frye, these references to other stories make romance more remote from reality than realism, which as an aesthetic practice makes use of reality as its referent (59). Instead of the mimesis or actuality demanded of the representational practices of realism, romance offers exaggeration, imagination, and sensation (Beer 53; Frye 37). Most importantly, the world of romance is *an ideal one* that is nevertheless described in such sensuous detail that it seems material (Beer 3). Romance intensifies and exaggerates human experiences and behaviour, with characters exhibiting the emotional idealism commonly associated with sentiment (see Beer 3, 9). This, in combination with the abundant attention to interpersonal relationships, helps domesticate the past, closing the gap between "then" and "now" (Beer 2).

Romance also closes the gap between the past and the present by en-

gaging the hopes, wishes, and fears of its own era, but at a symbolic, allegorical level. For Beer, romance flourishes during times of rapid change and, in releasing attendant anxieties that cannot find expression elsewhere, demonstrates its revolutionary function (12-13). Frye also notes a radical function for romance, but he writes of the future rather than of revolution. He proposes that romance unites "the past and the future in a present vision of a pastoral, paradisal, and radically simplified form of life [that] obviously takes on a new kind of urgency in an age of pollution and energy crisis, and helps to explain why romance seems so contemporary a form of literary experience" (179).

With the above definition in mind, my research asks, what is the contemporary romance with Montgomery's Romantic imagination — not only in her fiction but in the television adaptations of her work of the past twenty years? What does romance speak to at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first? I make use of a qualitative fan study of Sullivan Entertainment's television series *Road to Avonlea* (1990-1996) to answer these questions and to test assertions about the role of nostalgia in popular imaginings of place. Inspired by Montgomery's fiction and co-produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the Disney Channel, *Road to Avonlea* is a rural-historical family romance set in Prince Edward Island in the early part of the twentieth century. *Road to Avonlea* centres on the King family as well as on their friends, neighbours, and relations in the pastoral community of Avonlea. The series credits two of Montgomery's novels, *The Story Girl* (1911) and *The Golden Road* (1913), as well as two of her collections of short stories, *Chronicles of Avonlea* (1912) and *Further Chronicles of Avonlea* (1920), as sources. The television series also incorporates characters such as Marilla Cuthbert, Rachel Lynde, and Muriel Stacey from Sullivan Entertainment's television miniseries *Anne of Green Gables* (1985) and its sequel (1987), which helped construct the series as a spin-off of these two highly successful productions.[1] *Road to Avonlea* borrows loosely from these sources, making the series a pastiche of Montgomery material: in fact, executive producer Kevin Sullivan once described the series as a "montage of pieces" from Montgomery (qtd. in Boone). Websites dedicated to the memory of *Road to Avonlea*[2] as well as Internet discussion groups[3] and fan fiction[4] based on the series' characters all indicate that the series continues to have a remarkable affective pull on fans even though no new episodes have been produced since 1996, with the exception of the movie-of-the-week *Happy Christmas, Miss King* (1998), which aired on the CBC. The series also lives on in syndicated reruns: *Road to Avonlea* aired on Canada's Vision TV in 2001 and on America's Odyssey Channel (now known as the Hallmark Channel) throughout 2000 as part of its Hallmark Hall of Fame presentations. The series also appeared in daytime syndication on the CBC between 1998 and 2002 and can still be seen on Canada's Bravo.

This paper reports on findings from a survey of female fans on the Internet. Part of the reason for this study is to redress the lack of scholarly research on the reception of the past in popular entertainment.[5] How do fans understand the historical setting of the series and its relationship to real life? What does Avonlea mean to fans as a place and what desires does this place satisfy? What role do expectations of gender and genre play in fans' attitudes toward era and place? And finally, if the series produces nostalgia, then what are fans nostalgic for? Findings suggest that period setting offers participants the chance to be critical about the contemporary world in ways that the series only indirectly expresses, making Avonlea's appeal as a popular place the product of a critical engagement with forms of life.

## Theorizing Nostalgia

*Road to Avonlea* is selective about the past. Such selectivity is mandated by the political economy of television co-production (Kotsopoulos, "Avonlea as Main Street" 182; Lefebvre 174, 180): as a result of the involvement of both the CBC and the Disney Channel, the Canadian Edwardian past of Montgomery's novels is adapted to suit not only more than one national audience but the contemporary viewer. As a generic series, *Road to Avonlea* is expected to fulfil audience expectations of familiar and accessible themes explored in a pleasing and idealized historical setting. As I have discussed elsewhere, *Road to Avonlea* offers the look and the feel of the past for entertainment purposes and makes use of a selective view that programs out the messiness of history ("Avonlea as Main Street" 171-76, 185). In its place, *Road to Avonlea* substitutes an imagined past that is more ordered, more coherent, and more satisfying than the present. In effect, the series' treatment of history is not only utopian but also decidedly nostalgic.

Many discussions of nostalgia are highly critical, arguing that history's commodification in entertainment *smothers* and *others* the past. For instance, according to heritage critics such as Robert Hewison and Kevin Walsh, the commodified past floats as an object disconnected from history and unconnected to the present, generating a lapse in historical consciousness that serves ideologically-regressive ends. As Hewison describes it,

> this pastiched and collaged past, once it has received the high gloss of presentation from the new breed of "heritage managers", succeeds in presenting a curiously unified image, where change, conflict, clashes of interest, are neutralized within a single seamless and depthless surface, which merely reflects our contemporary anxieties. (175)

The argument here is that commodification reproduces certain images of the past — of home, rootedness, and social cohesion — but only those that have an exchange value on the market. In the process of inventing the past

as a pleasurable commodity, history is simplified and sanitized, made nostalgic and ideal. Nostalgia fosters indifference to history since it deals with free-floating images devoid of context rather than the past to which it refers. The past becomes an autonomous object — de-contextualized, non-specific, severed from time and place. As a result, critical dialogue about the past is foreclosed.

The focus on political-economic determinants belies a discomfort with the affective dimensions of popular culture. In reducing nostalgia to its economic origins, Walsh concludes that the commodity consumption of the past is "an artificial desire imposed on society by capital" (116). Absent in such formulations, however, is the possibility that nostalgic representations satisfy certain needs, respond to contemporary situations, and function as wish-fulfillment. Throughout *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (1996), film theorist Marcia Landy emphasizes these affective aspects, making the point that the stress on political economy and its effects on the past as a commodity does not provide an adequate explanation for the existence of these images (259). The focus on commodification, although important to be sure, nonetheless fails to adequately address the affective dimensions of nostalgia, which hold out utopian — sometimes even radical — possibilities. Indeed, Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw point out that the emergence of nostalgia as a modern cultural phenomenon is contemporaneous with the rise of modern utopian literature and that this convergence is not coincidental but related. As they put it, "Nostalgia becomes possible at the same time as utopia. The counterpart to the imagined future is the imagined past" (9).

Any critique of nostalgia and its manifestation in popular imaginings of the past must keep in mind its historical antecedent as a cultural response to the ills associated with modernity. Nostalgia is defined as a distinctly Western cultural phenomenon that in actual fact represents an *affective response* to Western modernity. Literally translated, "nostalgia" refers to a painful yearning for home. Although the word "nostalgia" pre-exists modernity, theorists point out that its contemporary meaning does not emerge until the eighteenth century, before which nostalgia was medicalized and understood as a disease, a nervous disorder with physiological manifestations (see Boym 3-32; Davis 414-15; Lowenthal 20-21; Ritivoti 16-22). Due to the effects of urbanization and industrialization, however, previously inexperienced forms of geographic movement and de-localization became a reality for more and more people. Thus, once the shift away from traditional relations takes place, nostalgia loses its medical meaning and is transformed into how we understand it today — as a common, rather than pathological, emotional experience (Ritivoti 24, 29).

This displacement from traditional rural life and agricultural rhythms, coupled with the loss of a cyclical relationship to time, constituted necessary precursors to the cultural redefinition of nostalgia. Hence, the current

definition of nostalgia depends on a linear sense of time rather than on a cyclical one: there must be a sense that something — a past time before the loss of community, before alienation, before fragmentation — has been left behind. As Andreea Decui Ritivoti puts it, "homesickness is in an inverse relationship with cosmopolitanism: The more advanced Western civilization becomes, the less its people will belong to specific places or cultures" (24). Therefore, a nostalgic perspective assumes that social relations from the past provide a cohesion and plenitude lost to contemporary society. Indeed, in nostalgia, there must be a sense that the present is somehow deficient (see Chase and Shaw; Lowenthal). This sense involves a concomitant romanticization of the past, which is viewed as a period of wholeness and certainty. Nostalgia enchants the past as a means of coping with the present, thereby acting unconsciously as a covert critique of the present and demonstrating its ties to Romantic thought, also a child of modernity. Romanticism is a modern phenomenon that arose in the eighteenth century as a critique of the excessive rationalism of Enlightenment thinking. This critique entailed enchanting the world — not retreating from it, as is often assumed — and restoring some of its lost magic through an engagement with the sublime and the arational. The Romantics' focus on nature, aesthetics, creativity, and beauty went hand in hand with the process of re-enchanting the world (see Black).

Nostalgia as Romantic affect enchants the past, imagining a time when people did not feel estranged and when doubt was absent. It constructs a unified, comprehensible past in opposition to the perception of an incoherent and divided present — regardless of whether people in the past actually experienced their reality as coherent and secure (Lowenthal 29-30). As such, nostalgia represents a reaction to the present and a displaced anxiety about the future. Nostalgia interprets the past through a present-day framework and consequently must be regarded as a subjective state — affective rather than rational. Nostalgia must be differentiated from remembrance, which is less subjective about the past than nostalgia since it recalls both the good and the bad and may evoke pain as well as pleasure; nostalgia, on the other hand, is a positive feeling infused with pleasure, and although nostalgia may be tinged with sadness, it is still a "good" feeling (Davis 418).

Ironically, the political-economy critique others nostalgia by disconnecting it from historical circumstances. By contrast, as Raymond Williams has argued in *The Country and the City* (1973), feelings of nostalgia are historically situated, the past carrying meanings specific to the present day. In other words, ideas of the "good old days" vary and change; they are dynamic, not fixed. According to Williams, invocations of a rural past "when they are looked at on their own terms . . . mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question"; for this reason, Williams adds, nostalgia requires "precise analysis" (12). Moreo-

ver, latent in nostalgia is a critique of contemporary values and as such marks a crisis of values (35-36) that, for Williams, carries the potential for a "retrospective radicalism" that could slide into a "feudal" conservatism (36). Williams's cultural-historical view of nostalgia complicates critiques grounded in a political-economy perspective and brings to the fore the affective dimensions of nostalgia. All this contributes to a framework for understanding fans' experiences of *Road to Avonlea*.

## Method and Sample Profile

In September 2001, I posted a notice to English-language Internet discussion groups related to *Road to Avonlea* and/or to L.M. Montgomery, inviting fans of the television series to send me an e-mail requesting a questionnaire if they wanted to participate in my study. The groups to which I posted my initial request for participants were comprised of the Avonlea clubs at the American-based Yahoo, the Kindred Spirits list hosted by the L.M. Montgomery Institute at the University of Prince Edward Island, and the L.M. Montgomery forum, a discussion group dedicated to Montgomery scholarship and hosted by the University of Toronto. I invited recipients to forward my request for participants to anyone who was a fan of the series. The purpose was to generate qualitative responses that would suggest interpretations of the series. To avoid suggestion, questions were open-ended rather than limited by a fixed choice of answers and focused on reasons for participants' attachment to *Road to Avonlea*, the moral or lesson conveyed in the series, the series' relationship to lived reality, and participants' experience of setting. I wanted to establish resonant themes and the appeal of the series (i.e., what expectations did it fulfill, what desires did it satisfy, and what role did setting play). Themes that were repeated in answers were subsequently clustered according to conceptual similarity, which helped reveal patterns in interpretation. In addition, participants were asked to contribute personal information. The questionnaire included a total of 40 questions, with seventeen of a personal nature.

In the end, I received 54 completed questionnaires from self-selected participants; of these, only four respondents were male. Given the overwhelmingly female response, my analysis concerns *Road to Avonlea*'s female fans, as found on the Internet. From this universe, I acquired a fairly homogenous sample of 50 respondents — all heterosexual, mainly of white European heritage and overwhelmingly single at 68 percent.[6] Two-thirds of the respondents were American in nationality and almost one-third Canadian, a bias of the lists to which I posted.[7] The median age of the respondents was 25, with half of the respondents aged between fifteen and 24.[8] The young age of the sample was a surprise, since most of these fans would have been children when *Road to Avonlea* originally aired. Consistent with this median age, a large proportion of the respondents — 40 per-

| | *Number* | *Percentage* |
|---|---|---|
| When episodes were first run | 36 | 72 |
| In syndicated reruns | 12 | 24 |
| On video | 2 | 4 |
| Totals | n=50 | 100 |

*Table 1: When did you first become aware of* **Road to Avonlea?**

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=50* |
|---|---|---|
| Surfed the net for websites | 45 | 90 |
| Collected memorabilia | 31 | 62 |
| Read fan fiction | 31 | 62 |
| Belonged to a fan club | 30 | 60 |
| Participated in an e-mail chat group | 30 | 60 |
| Written fan fiction | 17 | 34 |
| Subscribed to a newsletter/fanzine | 14 | 28 |
| Written fan letters | 12 | 24 |
| Created a website | 12 | 24 |
| Held social events | 6 | 12 |
| Produced a newsletter/fanzine | 1 | 2 |

*Table 2: Have you ever participated in the following* **Road to Avonlea** *activities?*

cent — identified themselves as students.[9] Meanwhile, more than a third had jobs described as professional/managerial or office-related, and more than two-thirds had or were in the midst of a university or college degree.[10] Education level and type of work suggested the middle-class tenor of the sample.

Almost three-quarters of those who responded were aware of the series from its first season,[11] with nearly as many participants also reporting awareness when episodes were first run, between 1990 and 1996 (see Table 1). Still, syndicated reruns demonstrated an important role in generating series awareness and attachment. In fact, slightly more respondents reported watching *Road to Avonlea* most frequently in syndication at 45 percent than the 40 percent who watched more frequently when episodes were first run.[12] A larger percentage of fans said they watched *Road to Avonlea* more in syndicated reruns after 1996 than when it first aired (42 percent), compared to those who reported watching it less (36 percent) or as much (22 percent). An impressive 84 percent reported watching some episodes several times. Along with repeated viewing and syndication, the Internet played a key function in maintaining awareness and attachment. Ninety percent indicated they had checked the web for related sites; likewise, a majority reported reading fan fiction, participating in e-mail chat groups, and belonging to fan clubs (see Table 2).

About two-thirds of the women (64 percent) said they watched *Road to*

| | *Number* | *Percentage* |
|---|---|---|
| Before *Road to Avonlea* | 25 | 50 |
| Because of the *Anne* miniseries | 14 | 28 |
| Because of *Road to Avonlea* | 9 | 18 |
| Have not read L.M. Montgomery | 2 | 4 |
| Totals | n=50 | 100 |

*Table 3: When did you read L.M. Montgomery's fiction?*

*Avonlea* by themselves. This finding is expected given the profile of the sample (mostly single women attending a post-secondary institution), but it does raise questions as to the series' family appeal — that is, whether or not *Road to Avonlea* fulfilled producers' objectives for quality entertainment the whole family could enjoy together. Instead, this statistic is revealing in terms of both the relationship between gender and genre and the appeal of period soap opera for female viewers, which confirms *New York Times* reporter Dinitia Smith's claim that costume drama[13] fills the void in adult entertainment for predominantly white middle-class women. Indeed, when not solitary, the viewing of *Road to Avonlea* by these participants tended to be a gendered family activity between mothers and daughters (73 percent) or between sisters (39 percent).[14] These findings correspond with those of CBC Research, which consistently found that the largest demographic for the series was women, and also with former Disney Channel executive Cathy Johnson's assertion that Disney's audience for *Avonlea* was comprised mostly of women.[15]

Familiarity with L.M. Montgomery was a significant factor in respondents' decision to watch *Road to Avonlea*. Half of the sample had read Montgomery's fiction before watching *Road to Avonlea* (see Table 3). Slightly more than a third read Montgomery because of the Sullivan Entertainment adaptations (i.e., *Anne of Green Gables* and *Road to Avonlea*). Most respondents came to the series because they were readers of Montgomery, and if not already readers, then they read her after watching the television adaptations; only a negligible percentage had never read Montgomery's fiction, either before or after watching *Road to Avonlea*. Moreover, 40 percent of respondents named Montgomery as a reason for choosing to watch *Road to Avonlea* (see Table 4). She was the second highest reason, after characters and setting/look, which tied for first place at 42 percent each. Setting/look included references to the time period, era or place, and mentions of detail (e.g., costumes) or production quality. Clustering these concepts under setting/look speaks to the conventions of costume drama, particularly the expectation of visual pleasure and historical authenticity. Indeed, respondents who said *Road to Avonlea* was different from other series — these were in a majority at 62 percent[16] — named the period setting, detail, and look as the number-one reason for its uniqueness at 32 percent (see Table 5).

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=50* |
|---|---|---|
| Characters[1] | 21 | 42 |
| Setting/look[2] | 21 | 42 |
| L.M. Montgomery | 20 | 40 |
| Morals/values[3] | 18 | 36 |
| Sullivan Entertainment's *Anne* | 12 | 24 |
| Family/kids' content[4] | 11 | 22 |
| Writing/stories | 7 | 14 |
| Different, special | 5 | 10 |

1 Includes cast, individual actors, acting, and character interrelationships.

2 Includes references to time period or era, place, detail (e.g., costumes), and production quality. Clustering these concepts together comes from the way in which period dramas are generally discussed. References to the look of the series tend to be synonymous with notions of authenticity or period setting, which speaks to audience expectations and industry definitions of the genre.

3 Includes references to wholesomeness, innocence, family values, and lack of swearing, violence, or sex.

4 Includes references to family-friendly content and stories oriented around family or children.

*Table 4: What were your reasons for choosing* **Road to Avonlea?**

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=47* |
|---|---|---|
| Period setting/detail/look | 15 | 32 |
| Family series | 15 | 32 |
| Morals, values portrayed | 10 | 21 |
| Not overdone/preachy/sappy | 6 | 13 |
| No sex, drugs, violence, swearing | 6 | 13 |

N.B. n=47 comes from adding n=31 (those who responded different from) and n=16 (those who responded both different from and similar to). Respondents more certain of *Road to Avonlea*'s difference from other series were more likely to mention its portrayal of values as what made it different than those respondents who saw the series as having similarities to other series. Respondents who thought *Road to Avonlea* was both different from and similar to other shows largely identified the period setting as what made it different.

*Table 5: How is* **Road to Avonlea** *different from other television series?*

Significantly, the fans participating in this study did not choose *Road to Avonlea* exclusively on the basis that it represents family entertainment. Additional factors were involved, emanating from the sample profile and related to the series' use of period setting and its connection to Montgomery.

## Gender and Genre

The findings of my study indicated that *Road to Avonlea* met expectations not only as a period piece but also as a family drama. Indeed, 22 percent of

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=19* |
|---|---|---|
| Family series | 10 | 53 |
| Themes/stories/plots | 5 | 26 |
| Period setting/look/detail | 3 | 16 |
| Morals, values | 2 | 11 |

N.B. n=19 comes from adding n=16 (those who responded both different from and similar to) and n=3 (those who responded similar to). Respondents who did not think the series was entirely different found the series similar to others in theme, story, and family-friendly content and different only when it came to period setting.

*Table 6: How is* **Road to Avonlea** *similar to other television series?*

the respondents stated that they chose the series because it had family-friendly content with stories oriented around families and children, while 36 percent picked it for portraying values that were wholesome and innocent (see Table 4). Of the 62 percent of respondents who said the series was unique, 32 percent cited *Road to Avonlea*'s family focus, 21 percent its wholesome values, and thirteen percent its lack of sex, violence, and swearing (see Table 5). The series seemed to satisfy desires for content that other genres did not.

Paradoxically, what made the series unique for some fans made it familiar for others. More than half (53 percent) of those respondents who said *Road to Avonlea* was similar to other television programs cited its status as a family show, while just over a quarter (26 percent) regarded the themes, stories, and plots as similar to other shows (see Table 6). Taken together, respondents' comments suggest that *Road to Avonlea* was both different from and similar to other series, as a consequence of its unique period setting and its use of familiar themes and family-friendly content. For instance, one respondent noted that the series is "a family drama, like many other shows, but deals with a different era." Another remarked that the series "shows us the life growing up in a beautiful, yet country setting. However, the characters on *Avonlea* go through the same problems of growing up as do characters in other shows." A third viewer observed that "all stories have similar underlying themes just different times and places." All in all, these results support my contention that the series offers stories and situations common to domestic melodrama and therefore familiar to many television viewers (Kotsopoulos, "Avonlea as Main Street" 174-76). The transposition of these familiar situations into a period setting makes the series both accessible and exotic, satisfying viewers' expectations of emotional familiarity and visual pleasure.

The respondents indicated an attraction to a diverse array of programming, but those shows receiving the most mentions as favourites showed similarities to *Road to Avonlea* in content and generic conventions (see Table 7). Nearly a quarter of the participants also named *Buffy the Vampire*

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=46* |
|---|---|---|
| *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* | 11 | 24 |
| *Friends* | 10 | 22 |
| *Wind at My Back* | 10 | 22 |
| *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* | 9 | 19.5 |
| *Will and Grace* | 7 | 15 |
| *Christy* | 6 | 13 |

N.B. Four respondents did not offer an answer, making for a sample of n=46. Only series receiving more than five mentions are listed.

***Table 7: What other television series do you consider favourites?***

*Slayer* (1997-2003), closely followed by *Friends* (1994-2004), as favourites. Despite coming from wildly different genres — horror and situation comedy, respectively — both series are similar to *Road to Avonlea* in that they feature female characters in lead roles and focus on their relationships with other characters (lovers, friends, and family) and their efforts at self-actualization in a serialized format. Sullivan Entertainment's *Wind at My Back* (1996-2001) tied with *Friends* and was followed by *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998). *Wind at My Back* and *Dr. Quinn*, along with the Christian-based drama *Christy* (1994-1995), showed fans' preference for period dramas featuring women as main characters. Looking at the top six shows (to get on the list, a series had to receive at least five mentions), we see that the crime drama — probably the most prolific genre on television at the time of the survey — is noticeably absent. Instead, we find situation comedies, horror-based soap operas, and period dramas, all with female-friendly points of view.

Often the assumption about series such as *Road to Avonlea* is that the period setting constructs a conservative viewpoint that supports family values, in the sense in which the Christian Right has appropriated the term as referring to the nuclear family headed by a bread-winning patriarch. But these shows that fans mention as favourites challenge this hypothesis since they feature liberal representations of independent female characters and non-traditional family arrangements involving the bonds of friendship over those of blood. Similar claims can be made for *Road to Avonlea*'s inclusion of a range of independent-minded female role models as well as family situations that do not conform to the nuclear type (Lefebvre 178-79, 182). In fact, only one family out of five households — Alec and Janet's — can qualify as typically nuclear. As head of the family, Alec manages the family farm while wife Janet minds hearth, home, and their four children, whereas *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Will and Grace* (1998-present), and *Friends* portray gay and lesbian characters and include central storylines about non-marital sexual relationships and explicitly queer romances in arguably matter-of-fact ways.

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=23* |
|---|---|---|
| Identification with her | 10 | 43 |
| Watching her character grow and mature | 10 | 43 |
| Her strength of character[1] | 5 | 22 |
| She has flaws that make her real | 4 | 17 |
| Watching her find a place in the world | 2 | 9 |

[1] Includes her sense of independence, honesty, willfulness, and ability to speak her mind.

*Table 8: What are the reasons given for choosing Felicity as favourite female character?*

When asked who their favourite female character was, fans exhibited the strongest attachment to Felicity, the oldest daughter of Alec and Janet King, middle-class land-owning farmers. Of the 47 percent of respondents who chose her, 43 percent said she was a favourite because they identified with her (see Table 8). (The second favourite, matriarch Hetty King, was a distant 14 percent.) Given the profile of the sample, this finding was expected, since Felicity would be approximately the same age as the highest age demographic represented in the sample — the 50 percent who were between the ages of 15 and 24. Indeed, as a young heterosexual woman from an Anglo-Celtic, middle-class household struggling with life choices concerning education, career, and romance, Felicity nicely fits the sample's profile. Fans who reported being the same age as Felicity when they started watching the series also identified with her dilemmas and saw themselves represented in her. Of these same respondents, 43 percent also said she was their favourite because they enjoyed watching her grow up and mature. Throughout the course of the series, viewers watch Felicity grow from a vain and haughty schoolgirl to a mature and responsible woman. She works hard at her studies and makes decisions about her education; she develops an interest in boys that is fraught with both heartache and joy. As she searches for a fulfilling career, she learns about herself and about what is important to her in a life-partner. In other words, Felicity encounters the challenges, the dreams, and the fears that would be exceedingly familiar to the majority of respondents since they have in common her youth, her class background, and her sexual orientation. As one respondent put it, "I was going through career dilemmas about the same time she did . . . so I was able to identify with her." Another noted that Felicity is "an intelligent young woman trying to find her place in the world, which I can relate to."

Such comments confirm Andrew Higson's contention that costume dramas construct a "modern past," dramatizing contemporary dilemmas against a period backdrop (113). Like Sullivan's *Anne of Green Gables* miniseries, *Road to Avonlea* incorporates late-twentieth-century Western notions of womanhood in the construction of not only Felicity but all the central female characters, even the most traditionally domestic example of womanhood, Janet King. Janet's life as a farmer's wife is presented as a

deliberate choice on her part rather than as an inevitable or natural role for a woman of her era and background. Similarly, from novel to screen, Felicity's character undergoes an ideological makeover: where her novelistic predecessor is keen on growing up to become a good housekeeper skilled in the domestic arts, her television incarnation becomes concerned with satisfying her heart's desire in both a fulfilling career and heterosexual romance. Felicity's attempt to balance career ambitions with a love relationship invokes contemporary sensibilities. She is updated, in other words: by Western liberal-feminist standards, she becomes a modern-day role model appropriate for girls of today. Felicity's career choices involve the desire to help people, whether as a physician or a foundling-home operator. Arguably, the care-giving side to these choices makes Felicity's narrative arc palatable to viewers who may be more conservative in their views about appropriate roles for women. In any case, Felicity's popularity within this sample of female fans attests to their ability to connect with her and her struggles, despite the Edwardian-Canadian setting. As costume drama, the specifics of time and place recede into the background, making Felicity's storyline transhistorical yet contemporary (see Landy, *Film, Politics and Gramsci* 135). The female fans' experience of the series as a liberal feminist romance did not emerge in press reviews of the series and therefore speaks to the sample's profile and the way in which context interacts with text to produce relevant interpretations.

Moreover, fans' strong identification with Felicity supports feminist film critics' claim about costume dramas: that these films create an affinity between women's past and present struggles (see Bruzzi). To be sure, these struggles are those of white, middle-class women who seek expression outside the traditional confines of domesticity and therefore firmly situate these representations within a liberal feminist framework. Along these lines, Stella Bruzzi discusses what she terms the "liberal method" of costume drama, which "concentrates on finding a political and ideological affinity between the struggles of women in the present and figures from the past" (233). The heroine of such a film, writes Bruzzi, is "both historical and contemporary, her struggle (with herself, her family and men) both parochial and perennial" (234). This reading of *Road to Avonlea* as a liberal-feminist romance fits with arguments made about the *Anne of Green Gables* adaptations that precede this series. According to both Trinna S. Frever and Ann F. Howey, career and marriage are simultaneously possible for the televisual Anne but not so for the novelistic Anne (and only with great emotional cost for the real-life Montgomery). Yet in her television incarnation, Anne can have it all: she is a modern woman as easily at home in 1905 as in 1985. The novels are thus adapted for an audience who wants Anne to have both career and marriage. As Frever puts it, "the creation of a heroine who pursues both marriage and career simultaneously speaks to contemporary visions of womanhood" (47).

Given the series' export success,[17] one might wonder just how *Road to Avonlea*'s liberal portrayal of womanhood is received in more conservative contexts where a fulfilling career may not be regarded as a gender-appropriate goal for women. The central female characters all exhibit maternal, care-giving qualities, oftentimes even in their choice of career, which may offset the cultural discount of liberal feminism. However, a second possibility also exists. Thinking about the female characters in the series, Deborah Nathan, who worked on *Road to Avonlea* for four years as senior story editor, writer, and associate producer, noted that

> I always find when you work in period, you can say a lot more [and] more effectively a lot of times than you can when you work in contemporary time. I think because people look at things that are in the past and they place them in a different context in their brains. . . . I think when you see it placed in the context of the past, it's almost like you can distance yourself maybe from your own beliefs and mores of your time to look at it more rationally and go, oh well, that's not a bad idea.

Nathan suggests that the displacement of the story into another historical period provides distance from the contemporary situation — otherwise, the story may be too close for comfort. In other words, the period setting allows for the safe expression of ideas about gender that may be potentially alienating or threatening if placed in the present.

### Attitudes Toward Era and Place

Several questions on the survey foregrounded issues pertaining to the use of period setting within popular culture — specifically, the attendant implications for historical consciousness, wish-fulfillment, and nostalgia. Responses showed ambivalence regarding Avonlea's relationship to reality (see Table 9). Some fans — 28.5 percent of them — thought Avonlea was an accurate depiction of a community in that era but that it bore no resemblance to today. Almost as many believed Avonlea was either like real life or not like real life at 26.5 percent each, while eighteen percent claimed that Avonlea resembled real life in some ways but not in others. These responses show that costume drama furnishes a paradoxical viewing experience that is at once relevant and escapist. Looking at the results together, the idea that Avonlea does not bear a relationship to real life today garners a majority of the sample at 55 percent, suggesting that fans experience the setting as a fantasy removed from their day-to-day reality. The fact that these fans experience Avonlea as remote from their lives may account for why two-thirds of the respondents said they would choose to live there if they could. Comments here illustrate the new meanings Avonlea assumes as a fantasy response to concerns about forms of life in the late twentieth century.

Of those respondents who said Avonlea was not like real life, 58 per-

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=49* |
|---|---|---|
| Like that era but not like today | 14 | 28.5 |
| Not like real life | 13 | 26.5 |
| Like real life | 13 | 26.5 |
| Both | 9 | 18 |
| No answer | 1 | N/A |
| Totals | 50 | 100 |

*Table 9: How would you compare the community of Avonlea to real life?*

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=36* |
|---|---|---|
| Close-knit community[1] | 21 | 58 |
| Like era but not like today[2] | 14 | 39 |
| Idealized / idealistic[3] | 7 | 19 |

[1] Includes a sense of community, the fact that everyone knows everyone, the importance of community over self, looking out for each other and helping each other out, or pulling together as a community. "Close-knit" is a term that respondents often used to describe Avonlea.

[2] Includes not like today because we don't know our own neighbours, our lives are too fast-paced, busy, and competitive, and we live in cities and are not born into communities.

[3] Includes an ideal of what a town should be like or an idealized view of the era.

N.B. n=36 comes from combining n=13 (not like real life), n=9 (both) and n=14 (like that era but not like today) in Table 9.

*Table 10: What are the reasons given for why Avonlea is not like real life?*

cent cited its sense of community and close-knit ties as what made it alien from reality (see Table 10). These fans described Avonlea as a community whose citizens know their neighbours, look out for and help each other, put the needs of the community ahead of those of the individual, and pull together when needed, especially in a crisis. One respondent expressed it particularly well:

> Avonlea seems an ideal. Although the community fights among themselves, each member seems important. Each member does its [sic] part to help. . . . For example, when the Dale Cannery burned, all the community members came to help with clothing, food, etc., even though they were on opposite sides of the amalgamation issue. They care about each other at heart, and among its best members, the community of Avonlea is more important than self. In real life, although people might have good intentions, it never seems to work as well as it did in Avonlea. Self is emphasized over community. We often don't worry as much about others.

Thirty-nine percent of these respondents said that the depiction of Avonlea was specific to that era but not like today for two main reasons: one, because life in the city means that neighbours do not know each other, and

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=32* |
|---|---|---|
| Simplicity/lifestyle | 12 | 37.5 |
| Sense of community | 8 | 25 |
| Lives or wishes to live in small town | 4 | 12.5 |
| Christian/old-fashioned ways | 3 | 9 |
| The people | 3 | 9 |
| Beauty of setting/PEI | 3 | 9 |
| Family ties | 3 | 9 |

N.B. Eight respondents said they would miss modern conveniences — 25 percent, where n=32.

*Table 11: What are the reasons given for living in Avonlea if it were possible?*

two, because life is fast-paced, busy, and competitive. As one fan put it, "These days, neighbours come home from work and hide inside till they have to go fight traffic again." Another lamented that, "nowadays, people are too busy to have the same time to share with their neighbours," while one respondent remarked that "you have to look much harder for [community] in these complex modern times. The characters on the show were born into Avonlea, but real people nowadays have to create it for themselves if they want it." Nineteen percent thought that the depiction was an idealized view of both the era and the community and therefore was not like real life. "Avonlea is very much an idealized community," offered one participant, "more because we don't see the ugliness of turn-of-the-century life than because it is inauthentic."[18]

Fans who considered the series like real life did so for two reasons: first, the characters were like real people they might encounter in daily life and were portrayed realistically with flaws (59 percent); and second, the series aptly dramatized life in a typical small town (54.5 percent). Overall, the results suggest that fans found the characters recognizable and the small-town setting familiar. However, there were aspects of the way of living — that is, the slower pace and cohesiveness of the community — that did not parallel respondents' experiences but nevertheless formed a large part of Avonlea's appeal. To put it another way, what made Avonlea different from respondents' lives is also what made Avonlea attractive to them. As one fan noted, "I don't think we really have communities like that, at least in my world, but we could learn something from it." When asked if respondents would choose to live in Avonlea if given the choice, two-thirds of respondents (67 percent) replied that they would, citing simplicity of lifestyle (37.5 percent) and the sense of community (25 percent) as the top reasons (see Table 11). In other words, if desire is the absence of fulfillment, then Avonlea exists as a fantasy because of an apparent lack. This finding echoes Janice A. Radway's groundbreaking work in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984) about female readers and

popular fiction. Radway might have been writing about romance generally — not just the Harlequin kind — when she concluded that her readers' response "to the romantic form can be characterized by the expression of repressed emotions deriving from dissatisfaction with the status quo and a utopian longing for a better life" (221).

Along these lines, fan responses to *Road to Avonlea* establish an ethical contrast between life in Avonlea and life in urban-contemporary Canada and the U.S. This contrast demonstrates a romance with community from the vantage point of the late twentieth century and suggests a crisis of values for these fans. Imagining a life in Avonlea, one respondent wrote,

> I would have to be a tomboy or recluse, but yes. It's a wonderful place, and a far cry from how I have lived my life. It would be both a comfort and challenge. I could learn so much daily. There is a more natural way there, lots of land, no cars. . . . Food is made at home. . . . They have fairs and festivals, and no one laughs at you when you go. People actually have to talk to each other. . . . It would force me to find a place for myself and be part of the community.

Another fan noted that the reason she would choose to live in Avonlea if she could was "the absence of a sense of community in my real life." Sharing this sentiment, one respondent remarked that, "as the cities grew bigger, people as a community grew apart, and the closeness we see in *Road to Avonlea* does not really exist any more." These fans establish an ethical contrast between the past they see depicted in the series and their experiences of the contemporary world, pointing to nostalgia's potential as a beneficial sentiment and a critical stance — or the "retrospective radicalism" Williams had in mind in *The Country and the City*. Significantly, the affective appeal of the Avonlea fantasy does not focus on the depiction of family life but on the portrayal of an attractive lifestyle involving a sense of community.

However, one quarter of the respondents who said they would live in Avonlea expressed concerns over the lack of modern conveniences. "I think I'm a very modern person," wrote one fan. "But I'd love to live in a beautiful place and have a simple little cottage surrounded by roses. I would just want to have a computer, television, bathroom and telephone inside that cottage." Apparently, *Road to Avonlea* constructs a world that, save for the absence of such modern conveniences, is easily inhabitable by any contemporary white woman coming from a middle-class background and living in a Canadian or American city. Of the third that would not live in Avonlea given the choice, 69 percent cited the lack of modern conveniences as the top reason (see Table 12). Other reasons indicated some understanding of the realities of the period. Nineteen percent of fans cited the lack of privacy found in small rural communities, the situation for women at the time — including the absence of suffrage — and the harshness of the era, naming concerns about disease and sanitation.

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=16* |
|---|---|---|
| Lack of modern conveniences | 10 | 69 |
| Lack of privacy | 3 | 19 |
| Harsh realities of era | 3 | 19 |
| Women's issues[1] | 3 | 19 |

[1] Includes concerns about cumbersome clothing as well as fewer freedoms and opportunities for women.

*Table 12: What are the reasons given for not living in Avonlea?*

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=47* |
|---|---|---|
| Personal/interpersonal | 12 | 25.5 |
| Threats to way of life | 8 | 17 |
| Problems appropriate to era or small town | 8 | 17 |
| Problems like today | 7 | 15 |

N.B. Only items receiving more than five responses are listed. Three respondents did not provide answers.

*Table 13: What kinds of problems/conflicts arise in Avonlea?*

In further defining the Avonlea community, respondents were asked to identify the kinds of problems or conflicts that arise in the series and to discuss in what manner these are resolved (see Table 13). Just over a quarter cited problems of a personal or interpersonal nature, while seventeen percent named threats to the community's way of life, including the march of progress, the proposed amalgamation with the larger town of Carmody, and the destruction of the Avonlea cannery. Another seventeen percent identified the problems as appropriate to the setting, while fifteen percent said Avonlea's residents encountered situations one might find today. These results again show a degree of ambivalence regarding the series' relationship to reality with problems specific to the particular setting versus problems that could be contemporary. By and large, respondents explained that conflicts are resolved in cooperation with other people, which involved discussion and negotiation, eventually arriving at a compromise (30 percent), or community and family members setting aside differences to help out — pulling together, in other words (45 percent). This type of conflict resolution likely contributed to creating the sense of community that fans identified as a chief attraction of the setting. Additionally, the emphasis on talk versus action illustrates the series' strong connection to domestic melodrama.

When asked in an open-ended question what respondents felt was *Road to Avonlea*'s moral, lesson, or message, fans' overwhelming sense was that the series portrayed the importance of relationships to other people, whether

| | *Number* | *Percentage of n=47* |
|---|---|---|
| Importance of family | 17 | 36 |
| Importance of community | 12 | 25.5 |
| Responsibility to/treatment of other people[1] | 11 | 23 |
| Better lifestyle[2] | 10 | 21 |
| Family values[3] | 9 | 19 |
| Importance of friends | 8 | 17 |
| Responsibility to self/conduct of self[4] | 8 | 17 |
| A message but not preachy[5] | 6 | 12 |
| No answer/no message | 3 | N/A |
| Life has its trials | 2 | 4 |

[1] Includes helping and doing good things for people as well as working together and getting along despite differences.
[2] Includes innocence, simplicity, slowing down, and appreciating beauty as components of the way we should live.
[3] Due to the specifically conservative rhetoric around "family values," I have designated this a separate category from "importance of family."
[4] Includes being true to yourself, being honest, and taking responsibility for decisions.
[5] Includes references to messages being subtle, not explicit or preachy.

*Table 14: What is* **Road to Avonlea's** *moral/lesson/message?*

family, community, or friends (see Table 14). Over half (55 percent) named the significance of family or family values, while nearly half (48.5 percent) identified the importance of community and discussed issues pertaining to the treatment of other people, including working together despite differences, supporting loved ones, treating others with respect, and generally helping people. Just over one-fifth of the respondents thought that the series had something to say about finding a better way of living — slowing down, appreciating beauty, and living more simply. These findings correspond to those that articulate fans' keen appreciation of the characters' interrelationships and their descriptions of Avonlea as a community in general and as one they would enjoy inhabiting. Overall, fans' discussion and description of the social bonds found in the series indicate that its community sensibility garnered a considerable level of approval and attachment.

Consequently, for many fans, *Road to Avonlea* catalyzes an ethical contrast in their own minds between the lives they lead and the lives of the characters, signifying a crisis in values. To sum up using a comment from one respondent, "Most of us live in a much bigger, noisier world, where people, relationships, and a sense of community are lost in the busy rush of deadlines, mounting costs of life and 'me' attitudes." In other words, the Romantic longing for simplicity, stronger social bonds, a sense of collective responsibility and agency, as well as a closer connection to the natural world points out the deficiencies of the present, making forms of life the central issue. Avonlea symbolizes all that is apparently missing from contemporary, urban, middle-class life and demonstrates the continuing presence —

and indeed relevance — of the Romantic imagination at the turn of the twenty-first century. The Romantic critique of the atomized individual alienated from nature and community and caught up in the social machine is abundantly evident in fans' responses: their enchantment with Avonlea is proportionate to their disenchantment with the contemporary world. To some degree, this situation mirrors Montgomery's own disenchantment with her contemporary world and the thematic concerns of some of her fiction (see Fiamengo; Karr; MacLulich, "*Anne of Green Gables*"; MacLulich, "L.M. Montgomery's"). Still, the findings demonstrate that interpretations of Avonlea, whether in our time or another's, are acutely attuned to the needs of the moment.

## Conclusion

Taken together, these responses suggest not so much a lack of historical consciousness but rather an appreciation of the fantasy offered. This claim raises questions regarding the degree to which *Road to Avonlea* and television series like it contribute to historical amnesia. For instance, K.L. Poe has argued that Sullivan Entertainment's three *Anne of Green Gables* miniseries update period setting to the point of anachronism, particularly with respect to women's past struggles (152). But what is more likely, as this study suggests, is that the amnesia is temporary, wedded to suspension of disbelief rather than a long-term state of affairs. The overall ambivalence about setting also suggests a reading strategy best described as "off-modern," a term Svetlana Boym uses to refer to

> a tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia. . . . The adverb *off* confuses our sense of direction; it makes us explore sideshadows and back alleys rather than the straight road of progress; it allows us to take a detour from the deterministic narrative of twentieth-century history. (xvi-xvii)

For Boym, the off-modern represents a zigzag that explores hybrids of the past and the present. Neither backward-looking nor forward-looking, the off-modern refuses the wholesale uncritical adoption of newness on the one hand and tradition on the other and in its place substitutes a nostalgia that non-prescriptively rethinks our relationship to the past in order to redefine the project of modernity (31). For female fans in this study, Avonlea's appeal is not the product of a regressive nostalgia that rejects modernity in favour of tradition, as should already be evident in their reception of Felicity. Rather, that appeal is based on a critical engagement with forms of life, on comparing and contrasting what was better "back then" versus what is better right now. While *Road to Avonlea* is selective about the past and does not promote historical understanding, this does not negate the possibility of critical reflection in the interpretive moment.

The responses also suggest that nostalgia is never as simple as a yearning for the "good old days" because desire and its fulfillment within popular culture is complicated, involving a process of displacement and substitution. *Road to Avonlea* displaces disenchantment with the present into an enchantment with the past, substituting an idealized romantic "back then" for a less-than-ideal now. Therefore, the critique of the present is a latent one that happens via a process of displacement and substitution rather than being available manifestly through the text. In other words, making the critique evident requires work on the part of viewers, as responses to the survey suggest. The period setting provides respondents with the opportunity to be critical about the present in ways only indirectly expressed within the television series itself. Along these lines, nostalgia serves the purpose of clarifying personal and collective values, setting up an ethical contrast between the imagined past and the lived present. Analyzing fan responses demonstrates that Avonlea endures in the popular imagination due to its cultural malleability and its historical responsiveness. These characteristics make it possible for Avonlea to continue to function as symbolic wish-fulfillment, providing an ethical contrast between realities lived and realities desired. As long as there is disenchantment in the world, Avonlea will continue to enchant.


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## Notes

1 The Disney Channel aired the second miniseries as *Anne of Avonlea: The Continuing Story of Anne of Green of Gables*, while the CBC and PBS retained its original title, *Anne of Green Gables: The Sequel*. Moreover, *Road to Avonlea* aired as *Avonlea* on the Disney Channel.

2 A web ring at http://w.webring.com/hub?ring=avonlea is a portal to numerous *Road to Avonlea* websites.

3 As of November 2003, Yahoo was host to 75 *Road to Avonlea*-related groups.

4 For examples, visit http://avonlea0.tripod.com/harmonysroadtoavonleafanfiction/ or http://www.fanfiction.net/list.php?categoryid=307.

5 One of the few such studies I am aware of is Helen Taylor's study of female fans of *Gone with the Wind*, both the novel and the film.

6 Eighty-four percent chose "White European" to describe themselves, while eight percent chose "Asian" and another eight percent chose "Other." Thirty percent indicated

that they were married, while two percent indicated they had a partner or were in a common-law relationship.

7 Sixty-six percent American and 30 percent Canadian, with the remaining four percent identifying other nationalities.

8 Of the female respondents, 50 percent were ages fifteen to 24, 32 percent were 25 to 39, and eighteen percent were 40 to 59.

9 Work situation: student — 40 percent; professional/managerial — twenty percent; office worker — fourteen percent; other — ten percent; homemaker — six percent; unemployed — six percent; freelancer — four percent.

10 Highest level of education achieved: university/college — 62 percent; high school — 26 percent; graduate school — six percent; public school — six percent.

11 Of those 36 respondents who were aware of the series from its first run, 26 were able to indicate in what season. First season — 73 percent; third season — fifteen percent; second season — eight percent; fourth season — four percent; sixth season — four percent.

12 Fifteen percent also reported watching episodes of the series on video.

13 Marcia Landy provides a useful definition of costume drama: "Unlike the historical films, which claim to re-enact the lives and actions of prominent individuals [e.g., military heroes, monarchs, composers, etc.] with some accuracy, the costume dramas are fictional and play loosely with historical contexts, transposing history into romance" (*British Genres* 210). The costume drama uses all the outward trappings of the historical film (i.e., the period setting, the costumes, the mise-en-scène, etc.), but it does not claim to document historical events or the lives of historical figures. As in *Road to Avonlea*, characters and situations are purely imaginary, with the historical setting functioning as a pastoral, sometimes dramatic, backdrop for romance and adventure.

14 Others reported watching with friends (28 percent), family (22 percent), parents (eleven percent), and children (eleven percent). For this question, respondents were allowed to offer more than one answer.

15 E-mail to the author, 24 Jan. 2002. Johnson was one of the executives representing the Disney Channel. In a later e-mail dated 22 Aug. 2002, Johnson explained that Disney always knew that its audience was "weighted female" but did not recall if "our [audience] research ever broke it down by gender."

16 Thirty percent indicated that the series was both similar to and different from other television programs, while only six percent stated that the series was similar.

17 *Road to Avonlea* had been exported to over 150 countries by 1996 (McLaughlin). Moreover, Sullivan Entertainment has noted that its programs do well in conservative countries partly because of their ability to pass easily through censorship boards (Rice-Barker). In 2000, *Stories from the Island*, as the series was known in Iran, captured a stunning 75 percent of the viewing audience on that country's state broadcaster (York).

18 Fans did not raise the lack of cultural or ethnic diversity in the series as a factor that made Avonlea "not like real life" or "not like today." Elsewhere I have argued that this lack of diversity makes the series' fantasy of social cohesion easy to maintain ("Our Avonlea" 103-04) and easy to circulate ("Avonlea as Main Street" 184-88).

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