

In Discussion with Mary Pratt

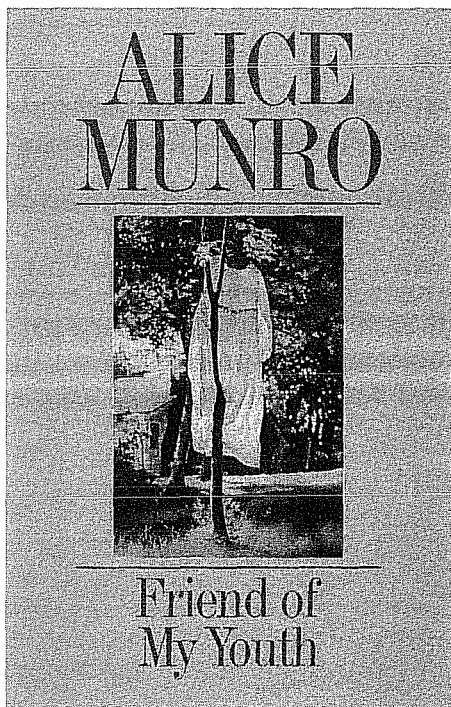
Elaine Kalman Naves

Résumé: Dans ses recherches sur l'influence de L.M. Montgomery dans les lettres canadiennes, Elaine Kalman Naves a découvert que cette influence s'exerçait bien au-delà de la littérature. Par exemple, chez Mary Pratt, célèbre artiste et femme peintre de Terre-Neuve. Dans une entrevue téléphonique, cette dernière explique le caractère particulier de l'héritage culturel qu'a légué l'auteur d'*Anne aux pignons verts*.

Summary: In researching an article for *Canadian Living* magazine about the life of L.M. Montgomery and her influence on later Canadian writers, Elaine Kalman Naves conducted a series of telephone interviews across the country. Dr. Elizabeth Epperly, currently the President of the University of Prince Edward Island, mentioned to her that Montgomery influenced not only writers, but also women in other professions, citing the case of the distinguished and well-known Newfoundland artist Mary Pratt (b. Fredericton 1935). Elaine Naves subsequently interviewed Mary Pratt by telephone on May 13, 1994, and here is part of their discussion about how powerful stories circulate in a culture. Mary Pratt's subject matter is often taken from her kitchen or house, and it reflects her interest in representing women's domestic lives.

MARY PRATT: I don't think [the fact that Montgomery had influence on writers and artists] is surprising. Adrienne Clarkson has been quoted as saying LMM was important to her ... We hit *Anne* at about the age of ten or eleven, just when [laughing] she was really going to influence us, I suppose. It was a good age to read it. I know my granddaughter was just eleven, and she read *Anne* when she was ten. We sort of read it together because I probably told Betsy [Epperly] that I planned to use Katherine as a model in some drawings and paintings that I will do. [Mary Pratt talks about the ways in which Katherine is suited to the role, as well as talking fondly about her other grandchildren and her mother.]

ELAINE NAVES: So tell me about when you read *Anne*....you said you were eleven. You know, they're bringing out all these studies now about how that age,



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the age of up till twelve, is so important in girls, and then somehow the ambition gets lost or we derail ourselves. It just occurred to me now that Anne was eleven, and you read her when you were about eleven. It's sort of a magical and significant and formative age in girls.

MARY PRATT: Well, it's an in-between. I had read *What Katy Did* when I was about seven — my grandmother had read it as a child and somehow got me the book — Collins was producing that book in a small little set, and when I graduated from Grade One, my grandmother got it for me for a present. And she had to go to no end of trouble to get it, because it wasn't easily available. My grandfather had owned a bookstore in Fredericton and somehow he managed to get this book. And I really related to Katy. Did you read that book?

ELAINE NAVES: Yes, I did.

MARY PRATT: I didn't like *What Katy Did Next* nearly as much, or *What Katy Did at School*. It was just *What Katy Did* which I thought was so great.

When I hit *Anne* — *Anne*, you see, is not nearly as active a book as *What Katy Did*. It's a much more thoughtful book. And, of course, *Anne* came to me because of myth and legend. In Fredericton *Anne* was very big. Everybody talked about the *Anne* books and it was assumed that you would read them. I went to Prince Edward Island at the age of six and we visited where Matthew was supposed to have lived, and we went around people who knew all the *Anne* books in this place where everybody read them and talked about them all the time.

So *Anne* came to me partly formed and I didn't find it as astounding. But Maud Montgomery's use of the language, especially colours really, really got to me. The wonderful sense of nature and how this child loved apple blossoms and birch trees and little brooks and lakes and things like that. Because I did, too. And what I said to my mother at the time was, "How can I make New Brunswick as important as Lucy Maud Montgomery made Prince Edward Island?"

That was my reaction to *Anne of Green Gables*. It was more that, the astounding fact that somebody from Prince Edward Island, some woman who had actually been brought up in that little Island had created this wonderful image. And I had read *Tom Sawyer* and all that before I read *Anne*. All of those books see, those American books had that American sort of realism about them, that kind of action and political awareness that was in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn* and all that, that *Anne* just didn't have. *Anne* was a person like *me*. She just went off dreaming about things [laughing heartily] and making these kinds of astounding statements, which apparently I made when I was young ... She saw things with her own eyes. And I could see that this was an important thing to do — to see with your own eyes. So, you know, it affected me as a painter. It gave me some kind of — oh, I don't know — it just gave me courage! When I knew that somebody from Prince Edward Island could do that!

I believe that because Lucy Maud Montgomery's voice was so wonderful, that I could do it, too. Somehow. Not with writing — I never thought that I would be a writer — but maybe with painting. Because I had thought that I'd be a painter from about the age of eight or nine. So that was the kind of influence, and it was

Montgomery herself as much as Anne, if you see what I mean.

ELAINE NAVES: Yes, the fact that she was a local person.

MARY PRATT: Well, she just came from next door. And I knew Prince Edward Island. I knew it — not well, but I knew it peripherally and I was buoyed up by the idea — well, of course, I was surrounded also by the legends of Bliss Carman and Charles Roberts and all these people from Fredericton. We sort of assumed, you know, that the arts were okay. When I was in Fredericton, girls who were good in the sciences and math were a kind of aberration. They were all right, I suppose, but you really wouldn't know [laughing heartily] whether you'd want to make friends with them. They were dangerous females!

ELAINE NAVES: The artist was more tame?

MARY PRATT: The artist was expected somehow. And certainly *accepted* in Fredericton. Well, Fredericton was a bit like that; [chuckle] it was a little tiny Bloomsbury! Fredericton, you know, is a funny little place. It was a very beautiful gallery. Do you know Fredericton at all?

ELAINE NAVES: I've been to Fredericton *many* times, on my way to Prince Edward Island and we *always* stopped there for the night because we liked it so much. We always strolled around the pretty parts by the river especially. It always struck me that it deserved to be visited on its own, not just as a stopover.

MARY PRATT: We lived on the river, on Waterloo Road.

ELAINE NAVES: I remember the little bookstores, and so on and I can visualize a little Bloomsbury.

MARY PRATT: There were two bookstores on Queen Street in Fredericton when I was a child. There was MacMurray's which belonged to my family and then there was Hall's which was there until about ten years ago. But MacMurray's hasn't been there for a long, long time. MacMurray's sold pianos upstairs and records and record players, and they had a little printing press as well. So it was a fascinating place for me: books and music and printing in one little establishment, owned by my mother's people. So books were of major importance.

ELAINE NAVES: Did you read the other L.M. Montgomery books at all?

MARY PRATT: Oh, yes, but I didn't like the rest of the *Anne* books very much. I preferred *Jane of Lantern Hill* and I *really* loved *The Blue Castle*. I kept it by my bed and read it when I was sick. And when Colleen McCullough copied that book — it was one of these really weird stories. In fact, my brother-in-law said to me: "Did you hear about that lady who copied the book?" That was all he said. I said, "What lady?" and he said, "Oh, I don't know."

I said, "I don't suppose it was the lady who wrote *the Thornbirds*, was it?"

And he said, "Yes, as a matter of fact, they did mention *The Thornbirds*."

And I said, "I *bet*. Because none of her books sounds like any of the other ones, and I always thought she copied them. And," I asked, "what was the book?"

And he said, "I don't know but it was about the ladies of Muskoka or something."

I said, "I don't suppose it was *The Blue Castle* ...?" [laughter]

ELAINE NAVES: So you just inferred the whole thing?

MARY PRATT: There must have been something in the air because he didn't know her name or anything. [The book discussed was *The Ladies of Missaloughi*, written by McCullough, and published by Hutchinson in 1987. Media in England, North America, Australia, and New Zealand gave the incident heavy coverage, as soon as the similarities were noticed].

ELAINE NAVES: That's like Emily [of *New Moon*] being psychic. Did you read the *Emily* books?

MARY PRATT: No, I didn't. I only read *Rilla of Ingleside* a couple of years ago because Sandra Gwyn said it was the best of them. And I don't know whether I agree or not, because I found it far better than I would have found it as a child. I wouldn't have liked it then.

ELAINE NAVES: I read *Rilla* when I was in my later teens and enjoyed it very much and I've gone back to read it. I like *Rilla*. And I also like *Anne's House of Dreams* which is when she loses the baby [MP: *Yes.*] and I found that there's depth in that. But I've been struck by the great impact that the *Emily* books have had on various Canadian writers.

MARY PRATT: A lot of people I know say the *Emily* books were better. I think Joan Clark liked the *Emily* books better than the *Anne* ones. Somebody told me that. Maybe it was Adrienne [Clarkson].

ELAINE NAVES: It's kind of nice to have people divided and have their favourites and feel passionately about them ... I would just like to get straight what it is that you're doing with these paintings right now.

MARY PRATT: Well, I'm going to do first of all a series of drawings, and one of the first images that catches my imagination is the time when Anne puts her face against the mirror. I find that a very taking little image and it's been sort of haunting me ever since. I can just imagine — in fact, I think I did it myself as a child.

It's early in the book and I think — I'm not positive but I think — it's when she's not sure that she's going to be allowed to stay. And there's a little mirror in this little bedroom where Marilla has put her. And she goes and puts her cheek against the mirror almost as if — did you ever read *The Rosary* which is a very old book [EN: No.]. It's about a little orphan who never had a Mum, you see, and she used to kiss her hand trying to figure out what it'd be like. I think it was kind of the same thing with Anne, she wanted to touch something and to put her face against her own cheek in the mirror. I think it would be an amazing image. This is the first one that I think I will probably do.

It's defined my own Anne, in the story. Probably I won't do the obvious illustrations kind of thing like the two of them getting drunk on wine, or the pigtailed turning green ... but tiny little images that are maybe just half a sentence, but twig my own imagination like that. So that I find in this book the Anne that really interests both Katherine [granddaughter] and me. Although that may be difficult. I expect I'll use my own imagination and use Katherine as a sounding board. This is what I hope to do.

ELAINE NAVES: So this is not a project with a view of illustrating an *Anne* book necessarily.

MARY PRATT: Not at all. I think, in fact, that I'll take from various L.M. Montgomery books that I've read. There are some images in *Jane* that I want ... I *hated* the movie that they made of it. To me it wasn't Jane at all, it didn't seem to me to be quite right, it wasn't my Jane of Lantern Hill at all. Of course books when we were children had no illustrations. So we weren't slanted one way or the other, and so I think it was much better that way, you were allowed your own ideas about these things.

But it's one of these things I'm really looking forward to doing, and I've scheduled my next few years not to have shows because I've been working rather desperately for shows for the past little while, and you know you get yourself on a beam like that and you don't allow yourself this other dimension. And I just feel I need to do that. I've *wanted* to do it for years and I think the time has come — especially with Katherine being just the right age and just the right child.... [Mary Pratt talks fondly about Katherine's sister. The conversation moves to children and grandchildren and then back to Montgomery.]

MARY PRATT: I love this new interest in Montgomery. It's very reassuring to me, somehow, that the world likes L.M. Montgomery.

ELAINE NAVES: Do you have any theories as to why it's happening?

MARY PRATT: Well, probably, the obvious thing is these old-fashioned values people are longing to embrace again and would like to find a way to do it. But with the world spinning off in every direction, people are finding it difficult to figure out how Anne is relevant now. They want her to be, but they're not sure she is. Well, *I'm* sure she is, but I think people are finding it difficult not to dress her up in old-fashioned clothes and set her in a time. They don't want that to be the way of it, they want her to be for now. And they just want to know how to do that. Don't you think?

ELAINE NAVES: I think that may be one thing. I think another thing is the publication of her *Journals* which are revealing her to be such an incredibly complex and fascinating person.

MARY PRATT: You mean L.M. Montgomery herself?

ELAINE NAVES: I think that's certainly behind a lot of this interest. I think the interest in the book has always been there, but I think there's a focus on her right now personally.

MARY PRATT: The Oxford University Press representative was sitting with me on a plane and he sent me copies of the *Journals* as a gift, and they're just wonderful. And I was astounded at the complexity of the woman because I had no idea she would be like that. It makes you wonder about lots of other writers whom you've not taken all that seriously. I'd just love to find out if, in fact, their lives were, at all like that. Not like that, but parallel. You know, with these terrible highs and lows.

Elaine Kalman Naves is a writer living in Montreal. Her profile of L.M. Montgomery appeared in the December 1, 1994, issue of Canadian Living, on pages 139-141. She is widely published in the periodical press, and she is also author of The Writers of Montreal (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1993).