Snapshots — Me and Anne: An Album

• *Linda Ghan* •

Résumé: *"Me and Anne" de l'auteur L.R. Ghan est un essai très personnel qui examine la relation profonde et ambivalente qui l'unit à Anne de* ***la Maison aux pignons verts****. D'origine juive, née dans les plaines de l'Ouest canadien, établie maintenant au Japon après un long séjour en Jamaïque, tout semblait l'éloigner d'un personnage fictif aux antipodes de son identité culturelle. Elle croit pouvoir expliquer la raison d'être de la fascination, merveilleuse et inquiétante, qu'Anne exerce toujours sur les lecteurs de L.M. Montgomery.*

Summary: *"Me and Anne" traces the relationship between Linda Ghan, dark-haired, Jewish, child of the prairie, with red-haired Anne as she journeys from childhood dismissal (after all, PEI is about as familiar to southern prairie life as fish are to gophers), to mild interest (her diving buddies and students in Jamaica had no such regional prejudice), to respect. Now living in Japan, Ghan has discovered why Anne's character and her story appeal so strongly — cause both for celebration and for concern.*

I am a ten-year old in a small Saskatchewan town, one general store, two elevators, a synagogue, a garage, a one-room school. There is nothing between me and the horizon except a railroad track and pasture and a small clump of willow trees beside a sometimes creek. No fish though. Frogs usually. Cat-tails. I am sitting on the boardwalk of my father's general store, *Anne of Green Gables* open on my lap. Anne has just been taken in by a rather dour couple; she is hedged in by terribly correct people in a town that is already too settled. She lives on an island, but there seems to be none of the freedom that I imagine the sea to allow. Not only that, her community is entirely Protestant. Not one Jew in evidence. Nor Germans, nor Norwegians. They have been there too long, and there are too many rules, and too many answers. Poor Anne. I put the book away. It is not about me, my place, who I am. Not, for instance, the way *The Golden Pine Cone* is, with its wilderness and wolves and Indian princesses.

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I am in Jamaica. Sitting on a beach. I have just come up from a dive. One of the members of the diving club is leafing through a copy of *Anne of Green Gables* that Heather, a native of PEI, has passed on to her. Heather thought Nancy's daughter might enjoy it. I read Anne. Anne is a wonderfully touching, feisty character. I still don't relate to the dourness of her community, though. I remember dourness from my mother's German Jewish family ("those Hoffers," I remember one aunt complaining, "they're so cold"), but this was offset by the enveloping warmth and humour of my father with his Russian shtetl background. (Russian Jews and German Jews didn't like each other, any more than people from Weyburn, Saskatchewan., and Estevan, Saskatchewan, two cities each of about 10,000 pop, 50 miles apart, liked each other. Or people from Montreal and Toronto. Or Jamaica and Trinidad.)

Lucy Maud Montgomery is a fine writer, her characters engaging. I use excerpts of the book with my first-year students at the teacher's college. I begin to understand the appeal of Anne. My Jamaican students understand poverty, although they do not understand orphans. Most of them have been brought up by their grandmothers and are amazed that I haven't been as well, or that I don't have children back in Canada being brought up by my parents.

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I am back in Canada living in Montreal, struggling with understanding "du vin blanc ou du vin rouge." (I'm slow with languages.) Concordia University, where I now teach, is a microcosm of Canada's cultural diversity. Students from Japan, no matter what they come to study, want to know more about Anne. I have almost forgotten about Anne. I am reading Margaret Atwood and Adelle Wiseman and Leonard Cohen and V.S. Naipaul. They were not interested in Atwood, or Wiseman, or Cohen, or Naipaul. I learn that everyone in Japan loves Anne. Why on earth, I wonder, does anyone in Japan even know about Anne? My students have no idea why, but they know why they admire her: she is independent; she has dreams; she fights ("gambatte," the Japanese expression) to achieve her dreams; she succeeds. (She has red hair, too. Her Protestantism doesn't register.) From my students, I learn that there is a Canada Village in Hokkaido, which is a replica of "Anne's world," right down to a real live Canadian teacher in the one-room school. (You can learn English from her.) "Why?" I wonder again. Hokkaido, they tell me, is the island most like Canada with pine forests and deer and leaping salmon and snow and native Ainu trying to recapture rights. In Tokyo, there is a memorial museum dedicated to the translator of *Anne*. I learn from my Japanese students that there is a tea room beside Green Gables owned by a Japanese couple — real Japanese, as in, immigrated from Japan. My interest in Anne piques sharply because of Japan's interest in Anne.

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I am living in Mito now, a city of about one-quarter million, one hundred kilometres north of Tokyo on the east Coast. The ducks that summer over in central Canada winter over here. The mallards and the domestic geese intermarry. It's comforting.

In Mito, I meet a cousin of Terry and Mark Kamikawa, the couple who own and operate the Blue Winds Tea Room my students reported on with such enthusiasm. (Proof, once again, of the realization of a dream.) Terry and Mark visited PEI first because of Terry's interest in Anne. They have had the tea room now for eight years. During that time, Terry has also published two books in Japanese on Anne: *Anne's Cookbook* and *Anne's Daily Life Dictionary*. Harumi, my friend, has visited PEI four times. I have never been to PEI.

My first four months here, I lived with a couple, both 67, who were teenagers during the war. Because of the war, neither of them went beyond grade eight, but both were much in respect of Anne. (In any case, Anne wasn't introduced in the schools here until the '50s, so they wouldn't have met her in a textbook.) Both Mr. and Mrs. Koizumi came from very poor backgrounds; they understand "gambatte," their whole lives have been "gambatte," Mr. Koizumi breaking up rock and Mrs. Koizumi taking in sewing. Mito, a coastal town, was basically bombed flat during the war. People were starving because whatever food there was went to the soldiers. And, to make matters worse, the Koizumis feel it was a bad war. A dishonest war.

Now that I have been teaching here for three years, coordinating a new Canadian Studies Programme (my particular seminar is on Canadian children's literature — and that's another story) in a Department of Communication Studies, I have more of an understanding of Anne's popularity. Historically, women, little girls, have had limited dreams in Japan. In many of the folktales, the message is clear: children are to be obedient, to respect their parents, to care for them. In these tales, children sacrifice themselves for their parents as, we infer, the parents sacrifice for them. There is no disobedience. There is no "character." The children are faceless and personalityless. They are the child every child is supposed to be. They are a burden.

Anne is refreshing. Not only does she have dreams which she, through her own "gambateing," manages to realize, but — even better — she is not perfect. She is not an ideal. She gets into scraps and scrapes.

She is their alter ego.

The consensus among women here is that Japan is about 20 years behind Canada on consciousness of women's rights and women's issues. Women in their fifties who have had careers have almost universally had to make a choice. Marriage or career. More married women are working now because two incomes are necessary. However, the women take responsibility for all aspects of home and child care. Outside help is not an option, the large extended family is breaking down with the mobility demanded by work, and

even admitting need is often considered an admission of weakness. Women who work and have families have to "gambatte" indeed.

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A novel that I wrote set on the prairie (*A Gift of Sky*, 1988) has been translated into Japanese (1997). I have Lucy Maud Montgomery and Anne to thank: reasons for the choice of *A Gift of Sky* have a familiar ring. The central character, Sara, although dark-haired, Jewish, and from the prairie is a "gambatte" kind of girl/young woman. Sara, too, getting into scraps and scrapes, is anything but ideal. There is even an orphan, but perhaps in a reversal, he is taken in by Sara. Last but not least, she has conflict between pleasing her parents and pleasing herself. She is an alter ego.

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I am sitting under a fall blooming cherry tree looking through Anne with Japanese eyes — and distance from the prairie. I marvel, now, at the fact that Lucy Maud Montgomery was publishing books (1908) while my grandparents were breaking sod and my great grandfather was worrying about how his sons would continue to be Jewish if they cut their beards and harvested on the sabbath. (My grandfather, wisely, thought that winter would supply more Sabbaths than anyone wanted; winter, on the prairie, is a kind of sabbath.) If Montgomery had been born in Saskatchewan instead of PEI, she probably wouldn't have had the time, maybe even the inclination, to write those books. I expect her story would have been different. In the uncertainty and chaos of a pioneer period, there are fewer answers, and fewer restrictions. There is less time to pick on your children when there is a barn to raise and a school to build, potatoes to pick and pickles to put up. The neighbours, in any case, are at least a mile away, and there aren't many occasions to run into them. Not as many as you'd like. If Montgomery had been raised in Japan, though, there is every possibility that she would have written the same book then, and she would write the same book now. Restrictions continue. Village life continues. It's easy to keep tabs on your neighbours and make sure everyone follows the rules. (In fact, keeping tabs on your neighbours and making sure everyone follows the rules — all of them — is institutionalized here, but that's another story.) There are at least twenty levels of politeness, ranging from an equivalent of a "Hi ya," to "This is indeed a very great honour." My second-year students use polite language with third-year students. There is women's language, and men's language, and there is the language women are required to use with men: it is a language which acknowledges the superiority of men. For Japanese women faculty on a par with men, it is, to say the least, galling. Language, as we know, makes a difference.

Women have been making gains. Out of a faculty of thirty full-time professors, my department has five Japanese women. (As foreign faculty, I'm

not sure I would count in a female/male tally; as a foreigner, I am a different species.) Last year, the university ruled that married women could use their own names. A symposium on sexual harassment has been organized by one of the faculty members, to be held next week. Within universities, promotion is based on publication, but there are, of course, no female heads of departments, deans, etc., and among the administrators, the managers are men. Women are "office ladies," as they are throughout Japan's business world. Women who have held top administrative posts in western branch offices will not, upon returning to Japan, retain those positions. With the recession, women fear that even the gains that have been made may well be lost. Anne will live on in Japan. Girls and adult women continue to read her. In one sense, as an acknowledgement of Montgomery's ability to create a vibrant, complex character, this is a fine tribute. In another sense, when one recognizes the need — the hunger, even — that Anne as a character fulfils, it is disturbing.

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