

Canadian Writers: Lucy Maud and Emily Byrd

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Lucy Maud Montgomery considered herself a writer for the young although her books also engage adults, both those who encounter her works for the first time and those who reread books that delighted them as children. Since Montgomery intended her stories for young people, certain thematic and stylistic characteristics inevitably arise, but because these stories are children's *literature* the works have a lasting quality that survives the maturation of the reader and the passage of time.

When her friend and literary correspondent Ephriam Weber complained that Anne's success in school was "too extra-ordinary", Montgomery offered this explanation:

... the book was written for *girls* and must please them to be a *financial* success. They would insist on some such development and I can't afford -- yet, at least -- to defy too openly the standards of my public. Someday I shall try to write a book that satisfies me wholly. In a book for the young it wouldn't do to have the hero "fail tremendously", as you say. They couldn't understand or sympathize with that. It would take older people. I do not think I'll ever be able to write stories for mature people. My gift such as it is seems to lie along literature for the young.

For her young audience she wrote tales with child-heroines who succeeded in winning respect from their peers and superiors though confronted with the problems all children face. Anne, for example, has great difficulty being "good", often meeting calamity through well-intentioned deeds. Both Emily and Anne are orphaned, a conscious or unconscious fear that most children experience. Children also worry about the future. L. M. Montgomery reassured her young readers in the sequels to *Anne of Green Gables*, *Emily of New Moon*, and *Pat of Silver Bush* that the heroine would grow up to find happiness and success. The unattractive and unloved would become beautiful and loved (*The Blue Castle*). Those who had lived with a grudge or whose lives had been stained by misunderstanding would eventually find peace and understanding (*A Tangled Web*).

In return for satisfying her audience, L. M. Montgomery achieved

financial success. In *The Green Gables Letters*, an interesting collection of letters written to Ephriam Weber between 1905 and 1909, when she was enjoying her first steady success, Montgomery wrote of her progress selling poems to increasingly prestigious magazines and included bits of advice to Mr. Weber on how to "break in" to various magazines. "Breaking in" invariably involved writing for the audience of the particular magazine. Many of Montgomery's first stories were sold to Sunday school magazines and were tailored to their requirements, but her tailoring was not without misgivings as she complained in her diary:

I like doing these, but I should like it better if I didn't have to drag a moral into most of them. They won't sell without it, as a rule. So in the moral must go, broad or subtle, as suits the fibre of the particular editor I have in view. The kind of juvenile story I like best to write -- and read, too, for the matter of that -- is a good jolly one, "art for art's sake" or rather "fun for fun's sake," with no insidious moral hidden away in it like a pill in a spoonful of jam!²

Many of Montgomery's "moralistic" stories were collected into *Further Chronicles of Avonlea*, republished after her death. She preferred the sort of story the Story Girl tells in *The Story Girl* and *The Golden Road*. These were folk tales and stories of fun and adventure, the kind Montgomery's Great Aunt Mary Lawson might have told. Emily of New Moon's tale, "The Woman Who Spanked the King", which wins Emily a job offer in New York, is one of Aunt Mary's stories. Montgomery's biographer, Hilda Ridley, claims that *The Story Girl* was her most personally satisfying work.

The sequels to *Anne of Green Gables* were written at the request of the publishers. Montgomery confessed to Weber in a letter dated September 10, 1908, that her new Anne book was not as artistically satisfying as the original. "The new book was", she claimed, "built rather than created".

But I am really convinced that it is not so good from an *artistic* standpoint, though it may prove popular and interesting enough. . . . The publishers wanted this--and I'm awfully afraid if the thing takes, they'll want me to write her through college. The idea makes me sick. I feel like the magician in the Eastern story who became the slave of the "jinn" he had conjured out of a bottle. If I'm to be dragged at Anne's chariot wheels the rest of my life I'll bitterly repent having "created" her.³

Anne was the subject of six novels and eventually grew into the middle-aged mother of six children, one of whom was killed in World War One. In her last Anne book, we suspect L. M. Montgomery of murderous intentions when she makes Anne dangerously ill and suggests that her condition is feeble -- too feeble for any more books!

It is unfair to accuse Montgomery of rank commercialism. She was a craftsman and wrote well regardless of the inspiration. To dismiss as a pot-boiler (even though she might have called it so herself) any piece she wrote to satisfy her market suggests that a writer's serious thoughts are

confined to works in which he allows his muse complete freedom. Writers are not always their own best critics nor is the market always the best judge of a writer's work. In Montgomery's case, her own favourite books, *The Story Girl* and *The Golden Road*, and the most popular, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Anne of Avonlea*, and *Anne of the Island*, are inferior, in my opinion, to the Emily books, and it is on the strength of these that Montgomery's reputation as a children's novelist must rest.

In *Emily of New Moon*, *Emily Climbs*, and *Emily's Quest*, L. M. Montgomery tempers the romantic fantasies of a book for girls with autobiographical notes from the life of a struggling young writer. The resultant trilogy fascinates the young reader and holds the interest of the adult. As Emily matures as a woman and as a writer, she must resolve the large questions of the human condition, and, in this, the books move into the realm of literature.

Because of their autobiographical nature, the "Emily" books hold a special interest for Montgomery's readers. She thoroughly disapproved of biographies and forbade her friend Weber to "write her life":

So "if I die before you do, you'll write my life?" No, you won't! Nobody shall. . . . Biography is a *screaming farce*. No man or woman was *ever* truly depicted. Biographies, even the best, are one -- or at most two-sided -- and every human being has half a dozen different sides. It must always be that way until some medium of communication is found for "soul moods".⁴

The creation of Emily Byrd Starr afforded L. M. Montgomery an opportunity for a wide range of soul worlds. Since many of the facts of Emily's life correspond with Montgomery's own, perhaps we can assume that they shared as well a few of the "soul moods". Hilda Ridley suggests that such a liberty is not entirely misguided.

Lucy Montgomery, without doubt, drew largely on her own experiences in all her work, but it should be remembered that to her the world of imagination was almost as real as that of concrete fact, and in drawing upon the events of her past life she often recorded episodes that belonged as much to this realm as to her ordinary, everyday life.⁵

Emily Byrd Starr's writer-father was much resented by the Murrays of Blair Water whose youngest daughter, Juliet, had disgraced herself by marrying. According to the Presbyterian ethic of Montgomery's milieu, writers are irresponsible dreamers (see *Jane of Lantern Hill* and *The Story Girl*) and earn only grudging respect when they achieve financial success. They are always adored by Montgomery's heroines for their sensitivity to suffering and joy and for their appreciation of nature (*Blue Castle*). Even their understanding of religion is different from the accepted social view. Emily contrasts "Father's God" with "Aunt Elizabeth's God". But the heroine always finds a society of "kindred souls" to compensate for the insensitivity of the larger society. As a fledgling writer Emily enters this hostile society, but is protected by the understanding of Dean Priest and Cousin Jimmy, and comforted by the memory of her writer-father. Both of her champions are also

outsiders by virtue of infirmities which make them "different". Dean Priest suffers from a crooked back and Cousin Jimmy is considered "simple" because he hasn't been "quite right" since being pushed in a well as a child. Jimmy supplies Emily with note-books, a luxury in Presbyterian New Moon, and defends her before Aunt Elizabeth when she is attacked by a vindictive teacher.

The acknowledgement that society is not receptive to the poet marks a development in Montgomery's attitude to her young audience. Her earlier heroine, Anne, had a flair for writing too, and although Marilla scolded her occasionally, she never faced the hostility Emily encounters. Both Anne and Emily write wildly romantic tales and choose exotic names for their heroines. (A fault shared by L. M. Montgomery; see *The Story Girl* and *Chronicles of Avonlea*.) They both learn, however, to exercise artistic restraint. Anne is told to write only of what she knows and to criticize her own work sharply.⁶ Emily's Mr. Carpenter, on reviewing all of her work, finds ten good lines. He becomes a stern critic of Emily's work, far beyond the role of teacher. Montgomery suggests in *Emily of New Moon* that the child writer is father unto the man-writer and as such must not be sheltered from the trials and hardships of life and literature -- a marked change from the Anne books. Mr. Carpenter says:

I think there's *something* trying to speak through you -- but you'll have to make yourself a fit instrument for it. You've got to work hard and sacrifice -- by gad, girl, you've chosen a jealous goddess. And she never lets her votaries go -- not even when she shuts her ears forever to their plea.⁷

The writer writes because he is compelled to write. Anne's writing is the extension of her lively imagination but Emily's is a vocation. When Mr. Carpenter reads Emily's frank description of him, he exclaims, "By gad, it's literature, *literature* -- and you're only thirteen!"⁸ Mr. Carpenter tells Emily at the end of *Emily of New Moon* that she must climb: "If it's *in* you to climb you must -- there are those who must lift their eyes to the hills -- they can't breathe properly in the valleys!"⁹ *Emily Climbs* is the story of Emily's literary development through her teenage years, and *Emily's Quest* tells of her final conflict as she struggles to reconcile her vocation with the demands of womanhood.

Aside from their literary gifts, Emily of New Moon and Lucy Maud Montgomery share many similarities. Both were aware of death in early childhood. Emily's description of the death of her mother corresponds almost word-for-word with the description in Montgomery's biography of her childhood memory of her mother's death. Mr. Carpenter remarks on reading Emily's poetry that she "knows something of death", while Anne, though an orphan, is seemingly unaware of death except in her abstract imaginings. Emily and Lucy were both solitary children who imagined playmates. Emily held long conversations with "Emily-in-the-glass", and Lucy christened her reflection in the bookshelves "Katie Maurice". All children understand loneliness -- even if their only experience is the occasional exclusion from playground games. L. M. Montgomery offers her personal solution, a retreat into the imagination.

In her later books, Montgomery allows her heroines more suffering and consequently greater strength to overcome it. Anne is immediately loved and accepted by her schoolmates; Emily, like young Lucy, is teased about her high button boots and baby apron and persecuted because "you ain't a bit like us". Childhood prejudice is painful and it is a mark of Montgomery's literary progress that she skilfully copes with it in her later novels. The devotion of Anne and Diana is far less realistic than the stormy friendship of Emily and Iise. Emily had "loved" Rhoda Stuart with the same sentimentality that colours Anne and Diana's friendship -- only to discover Rhoda unworthy. Emily's friendship with Iise allows for Iise's quick temper and Emily's stubborn pride.

Emily's discoveries about writing parallel her discoveries about life. In a sense her literary progress provides a framework for the three novels while her growing maturity supplies the supporting interest and detail. One of the most dramatic examples of the close relationship of personal and literary growth occurs in *Emily's Quest*. When Emily becomes engaged to marry Dean Priest, her cousin, friend, confidant, and critic from early childhood, she senses that her marriage will end her literary career. Dean has always praised her writing but has laughed at her for taking "these trifles" seriously. Since Dean saved Emily's life as a child he has always half-jokingly half-seriously claimed that her life belongs to him. Montgomery does not admit the right of one person to possess or dominate another, and characters who try to do so in her novels are always foiled. Teddy Kent's mother, in her attempt to possess her son, jealously discourages the friendship between Emily and Teddy. This conflict mirrors the Emily-Dean relationship.

Dean's greatest crime is to lie to Emily about her writing. In his jealousy of her work, he discourages Emily who, in faith, burns her first book. Emily agrees to give up her writing and marry Dean even though she loves someone else. Of course, Montgomery cannot let this happen. To change the course of events, she gives Emily the gift of "second sight". Emily is able, with this gift, to prevent Teddy from sailing on a boat that sinks. The incident makes Emily realize how close she is "spiritually" to Teddy and how wrong of her it would be to marry anyone else. Unfortunately, Emily's pride and Mrs. Kent's jealousy delay the mutual discovery of their love until many years later, but Emily learns two significant things. She cannot give up her writing nor can she deny her heart, both important aspects of L. M. Montgomery's own experience.

Anne does give up her writing. When Gilbert suggests that she has sacrificed, Anne replies that her family is more important than the "few children's stories" she wrote, an attitude Montgomery certainly never shared. Despite her busy life as a minister's wife and a mother, Montgomery always found time for her writing. She always acknowledged the right of both men and women to fulfill their destinies. "Sex", she maintained, "seems to me to enter very little into the question. There is no sex in mind, I do believe, and --'let each one find his own', and her own, in business as well as matrimony."¹⁰

One of the most striking qualities Emily shows is her compassion.

Even though Mrs. Kent has greatly wronged her, and even though Dean has lied to her, Emily is able to forgive them readily because she can see that pain and weakness have motivated them. Compassion was Mr. Carpenter's most valuable lesson. Carpenter saw himself in Emily's satire of old Peter DeGeer and chastized her sadly:

There is a place for satire -- there are gangrenes that can only be burned out -- but leave the burning to the great geniuses. It's better to heal than hurt. We failures know that. . . . When *I* am dead say, "He was a failure, and none knew it more truly or *felt* it more bitterly than himself." Be merciful to the failures, Emily. Satirise wickedness if you must -- but pity weakness. ¹¹

Mr. Carpenter's last lesson is delivered on his death bed in *Emily's Quest*. He makes her promise that she will write to please only herself:

Keep that -- and you'll be -- all right. No use trying to please everybody. No use trying to please -- critics. Live under your own hat. Don't be -- led away -- by those howls about realism. Remember -- pine woods are just as real as -- pigsties -- and a darn sight pleasanter to be in. You'll get there -- sometime -- you have the root -- of the matter -- in you. And don't -- tell the world -- everything. That's what the -- matter -- with our -- literature. Lost the charm of mystery -- and reserve. ¹²

Neither Emily nor Montgomery write of pigsties, but Montgomery does write of pain with compassion and truth, romance tempered with the realism of experience. While Emily's lapse from the writer's faith is only temporary, it is an important element in her growth. Emily must justify her decision to write in her own fashion. While she has the moral courage to believe she is right, she must have some form of tangible success and finally the approval of her family. Predictably, this comes for Emily because of her maturity and compassion. When Aunt Elizabeth breaks her leg, Emily entertains her with daily chapters from a novel she writes. Aunt Elizabeth, who has always been highly suspicious of Emily's stories, does not disapprove of this story because the characters are so life-like it seems *true*. Aunt Elizabeth is determined that Nicholas Applegath is "too much like old Douglas Courcy of Shrewsbury", a gentleman Emily has never met. L. M. Montgomery faced similar problems:

Ever since my first book was published . . . I have been persecuted by the question "Was so-and-so the original of such-and-such in your book?" . . . Now for my own part, I have never . . . met one human being who could, as a whole, be put into a book without injuring it. Any artist knows that to paint *exactly* from life is to give a false impression of the subject. *Study* from life, he must . . . "making use of the real to perfect the ideal". But the ideal, his ideal, must be behind and beyond it all. The writer must *create* his characters, or they will not be life-like. ¹³

Both Emily and L. M. Montgomery received contradictory reviews. One of the most significant for Emily is the one from Janet Royal in New

York. Miss Royal had been angry when Emily refused her offer of a position in New York:

What can you ever do here that is worthwhile, child? . . . You can't get material here -- there's no atmosphere.¹⁴

Emily replied that she would create her own atmosphere,

And as for material -- people *live* here just the same as anywhere else -- suffer and enjoy and sin and aspire just as they do in New York . . . Some fountain of living water would dry up in my soul if I left the land I love.¹⁵

Miss Royal's letter affirms Emily's understanding of the nature of her literary gift:

You were right not to come to New York. . . . You could never have written the *Moral of the Rose* here. Wild roses don't grow on city streets. And your story is like a wild rose, dear, all sweetness and unexpectedness, with sly little thorns of wit and satire. It has power, delicacy, understanding. It's not just story-telling, there's some magicry in it. Emily Byrd Starr, where do you get your uncanny understanding of human nature -- you infant.¹⁶

Aunt Elizabeth pronounces the final dictum: "Well I never believed that such a pack of lies could sound as much like the real truth as that book does."¹⁷

The novel is justified, the *Canadian* novel is justified, and Emily has found success. L. M. Montgomery, in the Emily trilogy, has successfully expanded the themes of her novels for girls to create a work of literature that sensitively explores the problems and conflicts facing the young Canadian female novelist in a society which places a literary career second to the role of wife and mother. The work, though fiction, is successful in its truth-telling because Montgomery wrote from her own understanding of life and literature.

Her financial success and popularity are no more important than her place in Canadian literature as a novelist of the first rank. Canadians have paid tribute to L. M. Montgomery in their fashion. In 1935 King George V conferred upon her the decoration "Officer of the British Empire" (OBE). In the contest held by *The Family Herald and Weekly Star* (1925), she was declared second only to Charles Dickens in a list which included the greatest and most popular writers of the present and the past.¹⁸ Her first and most famous novel *Anne of Green Gables* was performed as a musical at the opening of the Charlottetown Centre for the Arts and was part of Canada's display at the World Exposition in Japan, 1970. The Canadian National Railway has honoured her by christening one of its largest ships *Lucy Maud Montgomery*; on its daily run to Newfoundland, this vessel bears the name of Canadian letters on the high seas. And Canadian letters bear the name of Lucy Maud Montgomery in the form of an eight cent stamp, issued in honour of her centenary year.

NOTES

- ¹L. M. Montgomery, *The Green Gables Letters* ed. Wilfrid Eggleston (Toronto: Ryerson, 1960), p. 73.
- ²Hilda M. Ridley, *The Story of L. M. Montgomery* (London: Harrap & Co., 1956), p. 75.
- ³L. M. Montgomery, *The Green Gables Letters*, ed. Wilfrid Eggleston, p. 74.
- ⁴*Ibid.*, p. 58.
- ⁵Hilda M. Ridley, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
- ⁶L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1968), p. 272.
- ⁷L. M. Montgomery, *Emily of New Moon* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923), p. 348.
- ⁸*Ibid.*, p. 349.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, p. 350.
- ¹⁰L. M. Montgomery, *The Green Gables Letters*, ed. W. Eggleston, p. 91.
- ¹¹L. M. Montgomery, *Emily Climbs* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1925), p. 21.
- ¹²L. M. Montgomery, *Emily's Quest* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1927), p. 33.
- ¹³H. M. Ridley, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-6.
- ¹⁴L. M. Montgomery, *Emily Climbs*, p. 298.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 298-300.
- ¹⁶L. M. Montgomery, *Emily's Quest*, pp. 242-3.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 248.
- ¹⁸From the dust jacket of the 1927 edition.

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