

woman's relative powerlessness and inexperience at interpreting others' motives, against a devious government agent and a murderous hoodlum.

These novels showcase the mechanics of detection in a variety of ways guaranteed to hold the attention of most children. There are lots of opportunities to absorb problem-solving strategies which could be applied to everyday lives. Young detectives like Polly and Stevie and Tom are worthy role models in another sense: because juvenile detectives cannot be expected to have the knowledge of adult crime investigators we often learn that they have picked up skills by reading! (In a nice twist McClintock's villain, masquerading as a good guy, explains how he knows so much about searching houses by claiming to read mystery novels.) Well-crafted stories like Woodson's, Bailey's and McClintock's may serve as a springboard to the great literary detective writers like Sayers and James. As long as Canada produces authors like Bailey, Woodson, MacGregor and McClintock, the future of this genre looks pretty bright.

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The Subtle Subversions of L.M. Montgomery

At the Altar: Matrimonial Tales. L.M. Montgomery. Ed. Rea Wilmshurst. McClelland & Stewart, 1994. 248 pp. \$24.99 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-6173-0. *Christmas With Anne and Other Holiday Stories.* L.M. Montgomery. Ed. Rea Wilmshurst. McClelland & Stewart, 1995. 224 pp. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-6199-4.

Since the publication of her journals ... Montgomery seems much more interesting as a person and worthy of attention as a writer. Is it because we now know of the occasional despair that lay behind the sweetness and light of most of her writing?

Afterword to *At the Altar* 221

Rea Wilmshurst has published articles on and co-authored a preliminary bibliography of Montgomery's works. With the publication of *Christmas With Anne and Other Holiday Stories* and *At the Altar: Matrimonial Tales*, Wilmshurst adds to a growing series devoted to the revival of Montgomery's short stories. Along with the other short story collections — all of them containing previously unpublished or generally inaccessible material by Montgomery — *Christmas With Anne* and *At the Altar* will be appreciated not only for the stories themselves, but also for the accompanying illustrations. Of particular interest are the illustrations in *At the Altar*, which are reproduced from the original publications.

The stories in *Christmas With Anne* and *At the Altar* are assembled according to the themes of the holiday season and marriage. Wilmshurst argues in her Afterword to *At the Altar* that Montgomery's stories seem to "fall naturally into certain categories," and so ought to be grouped thematically (220). Wilmshurst's thematic titles, however, could create the erroneous impression that the stories are

merely skilful variations on inflexible subjects. To the contrary, Montgomery's tales are often narrative frameworks for her cynical observations on women's experiences in the male-dominated society of the early twentieth century.

Some of Wilmshurst's comments in her Introduction and Afterword to *At the Altar* problematize a potentially reductive interpretation of Montgomery's "happily ever after" narratives. For all their "apparent simplicity," Wilmshurst argues, the stories are complex (216). Although Montgomery wrote positive stories about women and marriage, Wilmshurst points out that Montgomery found her own marriage to be difficult at times, as is recorded in her journals (Introduction to *At the Altar* vii). And even though many of the spinsters in Montgomery's tales are independent and active women (ix-x), others are subject to the tyranny of parents and relatives (x-xi). On the other hand, Wilmshurst's Introduction to *Christmas With Anne* does not draw attention to Montgomery's subversive subtexts, and instead emphasizes the morals embedded in Montgomery's seasonal tales. In both collections, Wilmshurst underestimates the extent of Montgomery's subtle attacks on the social conventions and stereotypes that limited women's power in Montgomery's day.

Although many of the stories in *At the Altar* are optimistic, Montgomery grounds her narratives in social realism. Women's futures, the tales seem to imply, depend on men—women are limited to either marriage or spinsterhood. In "A Dinner of Herbs," a spinster named Robin Lyle is resented by her sister-in-law, and feels that marriage is an escape from a house where she is made to feel unwelcome (21-2). When asked why she should marry at all "in this day of woman's emancipation," Robin replies, "The trouble is — I'm not emancipated" (24). Similarly, in "Jessamine," spinster Jessamine Stacy lives in her brother's home as an unpaid servant: "Jessamine found herself in the position of maid-of-all-work and kitchen drudge for board and clothes" (34-5).

The stories in *Christmas With Anne*, while they seem less complex than the matrimonial tales, also expose social injustices against women. In "Christmas at Red Butte," the differences between men's and women's economic power are underlined by a young boy's comment that he can support his family because he is a man: "Of course if I was only a girl I couldn't" (19). In "The End of the Young Family Feud," women are commodified when Uncle William declares that his brother "must be prepared to hand over one of his girls to [him] as a token of his forgiveness" (43). And in "Clorinda's Gifts," a girl loses a chance at a job because her aunt wants her as a companion (80-1, 86-7).

Both Montgomery's seasonal and matrimonial tales, then, have more significance as studies in women's experiences of oppression than can be inferred from the innocent-sounding titles of the collections. The stories should therefore not be seen simply as charming little entertainments; Montgomery's criticisms of social convention and her explorations of the often harsh realities of women will make these tales invaluable to Montgomery fans and scholars alike.

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