

Addicted to Reading: L.M. Montgomery and the Value of Reading

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Résumé : Lectrice passionnée durant toute sa vie, L.M. Montgomery s'est toujours reconnue comme une fanatique de la lecture. Néanmoins, quoique « intoxiquée » par sa consommation excessive d'ouvrages imprimés de tous genres, elle notait soigneusement ses réactions de lectrice dans ses écrits intimes. Ces remarques, qui font part de ses découvertes et de ses plaisirs, apportent une connaissance particulière de la personnalité et de l'âme de L.M. Montgomery. Le présent article examine ces notes de lectures à la lumière de la théorie de la réception.

Summary: L.M. Montgomery was an avid reader of a wide range of printed materials, fiction and non-fiction, throughout her entire life, a self-confessed "book addict" who experienced "mental drunkenness" from her reading and who recorded her interaction with these texts in her journals and letters. Reading provided a large measure of her enjoyment at all stages of her life. The record of those experiences provides a window into both the individual reading experiences and her soul. This paper places those reading experiences in a methodological framework of reading theory and practice.

As part of my research on L.M. Montgomery (1874-1942) as a reader, I constructed an elaborate database with 24 primary and several secondary fields to record some 1,800 references — located in her journals, letters, and periodical pieces as well as in her fiction — to her reading experiences from the age of eight until her death in her late sixties.¹ The final product was to be in part a sophisticated, quantitative analysis of reading, complete with percentages, means, and graphs. As a novelist, Montgomery wrote *Anne of Green Gables* and many other books that remain popular fiction in the twenty-first century. She was also the wife of a Presbyterian clergyman, active in church and community groups, and the mother of two sons with whom she shared her passion for reading. Surely, with so

much evidence from such an important person whose life and work are the subject of a wide range of scholarly activity, including a biennial international conference hosted by the L.M. Montgomery Institute of the University of Prince Edward Island, this would be a significant study.

There will be no quantitative analysis, however. There were too many gaps in the record, too much evidence of incompleteness, and too many conundrums, such as how to treat multiple readings. There were also significant doubts about the value of quantitative analysis in the history of reading.² How does one quantify the Bible readings of someone who began teaching Sunday school in her teens, became a pastor's wife, and quotes the Bible more frequently in her fiction than any other source but only occasionally mentions religion in her journals and letters? What nationality is the Judeo-Christian Bible and how does one date its authorship? Is it non-fiction or in the same classification as Greek legends? Montgomery quotes Shakespeare often but makes not a single comment on her reading experience of his work in the surviving record. Her library copy of Shelley's poetry is falling apart from use but she records no comments on his poetry. The poor condition of her library copies of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and Percival C. Wren's *Beau Geste* (1928) indicate multiple readings, but these two novels receive no recognition in her journals or letters (Montgomery, "Summary List of Books"). These are only a few of the many inconsistencies between usage and record. Given these many questions as well as the impossibility of recreating the reading of such items as newspapers, magazines, encyclopedias, and seed catalogues, all mentioned by Montgomery on several occasions, it became obvious that it was not possible to quantify her reading experiences. I had become a postmodern victim, it seemed, of the inability of history to recreate the past.³

This impasse drove me back to the theoretical literature and to the research of previous scholars for guidance on how to proceed. In the maze of New Criticism, formalism, structuralism, new historicism, deconstructionism, semiotics, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-modernism, as well as studies centred on the inability of history to reconstruct the past, on the reader commanding the text, and on the author directing the reader, I was struck by how little we have learned in recent decades about real historical readers as opposed to imagined readers and reading.⁴ With so much focus on the text and its analysis as the essence of reading experience, it seems that so much that is vital to the history of reading remains largely unacknowledged and unstudied.⁵

Even with the two most popular concepts to emerge from reader-response theory — horizons of expectation and interpretative communities — there has been little debate or significant analysis of their usefulness. Hans Robert Jauss's claim, in *Towards a Theory of Aesthetic Reception* (1982), that readers ingest their reading into already formed horizons of expectations evolves from the same anti-elitist construct as the broader mentalités

which sought to capture the mental worlds of peasants, workers, and similar groups who left few archival records.⁶ Given the methodological difficulties and the fact that the *mentalité* approach never won long-term acceptance in the English-speaking world, it would seem that to recapture with similar methodology the mental constructs and taste expectations of actual readers presents insurmountable challenges if it is to move beyond cliché and stereotype. There is already significant evidence, for instance, that women's reading does not follow expected horizons and is far more complex than previously conceived (Jauss 22ff; see also Radway, *Reading the Romance*; Flint; Pykett). The study of women's reading is one area in which individual reading experiences may illuminate broader patterns of response, but it should also be noted that many readers, including Montgomery, leave more records of the actual impact of the reading than their prior horizons of expectation.

Stanley Fish's concept of interpretative communities is often referred to as the best methodology for analyzing reading, but few scholars have actually attempted such studies beyond the professorial-dominated classroom and laboratory or Janice A. Radway's assembled group of readers of romance novels ("Interpretative Communities").⁷ Couched in an academic construct, this concept also presupposes interpretation and therefore tends to exclude both non-interpretative responses, pleasure reading, and unique individual experiences. If researchers are to use this as a means of analyzing historical reading, then reading communities are more appropriate than interpretative communities. Because of the variety and vastness of the reading experiences of Maud Montgomery, it would take several reading communities to encompass these reading experiences. It is by no means certain, however, if the pursuit and delineation of such communities would significantly advance our understanding of either this individual reader or our knowledge of the history of reading.

It is time to release the history of reading from its self-serving academic straitjacket and to meet real readers in their own eras, their own spaces, and their own consciousnesses. This would include not only an understanding of the physical act of reading and what was read but also the emotional, psychological, social, cultural, and intellectual dimensions that will vary in importance from reader to reader.⁸ We must believe that individual readers are worthy of our attention and reconsider existing scholarship that has shown too little faith in these so-called "everyday readers" and too little respect for or interest in reading for pleasure. There are, however, many obstacles in the academic pursuit of historical readers and reading, especially those involving academic consciousness and values. In searching for an explanation as to why so few academics have used real readers, Molly Abel Travis points "to the arrogance of theorists and critics who feel that the benighted public is incapable of reading and actively appropriating on its own. In this scenario," she notes, "only theoreticians/

critics can be the right kind of readers, using deterministic theories but themselves not subject to determinism" (139-40n6). Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray express disappointment in their New England readers' "limited critical vocabularies" (148) and their failure to search for "deeper meaning, messages, or significance" (165). James L. Machor is similarly dismissive of readers who are "everyday individuals" and prefers review critics who more closely resemble his academic parameters and values (83n23).

The reading of most everyday readers encompasses a wide range of genres and titles, including bestsellers, which many academics regard with contempt. As Jane P. Tompkins notes, "Twentieth century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all these implicitly with womanly inferiority" ("Uncle Tom's Cabin" 82). For many such individuals, an objective, respectful analysis of everyday readers caught up in this consumer-oriented, materialistic world would require an enormous leap of faith. One important exception is provided by Jonathan Rose with his impressive study, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001), in which he demonstrates that it is possible to recapture the reading experiences of real readers even at a working-class level. His interest, however, is more on the intellectual life involved than on the reading experiences themselves.

Everyday readers commonly judge good books in the same manner as the selection committee of the Book-of-the-Month Club — by their ability to provoke an intense reaction. In *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1997), Radway notes that "What gave the editors the greatest pleasure . . . was a feeling of transport, a betweenness, a feeling of being suspended between self and the world, a state where the one flowed imperceptively into the other, a place where the boundaries and the limits were obscured" (117).⁹ Being rational and detached are cornerstones of academic consciousness: Elizabeth Flynn, for instance, states that productive interaction with the text "necessitates the stance of a detached observer who is empathetic but who does not identify with the characters or the situation depicted in the literary work" (290).

The most significant obstacles facing academics in their pursuit and understanding of historical reading experiences are the limited horizon of expectations imposed by their training and their own disciplines. Nearly all of Montgomery's reading — even of the most serious works of non-fiction — was for pleasure, yet academics routinely devalue such reading. Most historians know too little of genres, language, signs, and literary criticism. Most literary scholars know too little and place too little value on empirical research, archival evidence, and the importance of context and chronology. Both groups often place too little emphasis on the book as object. By far the most serious aspect of limited horizons involves the expect-

tation that everyday readers read or should read in a manner similar to literary critics. If they do not, as is generally the case, it is then easy to dismiss their experiences as irrelevant. Zboray and Zboray express disappointment that their New England historical readers left no evidence of line-by-line or even page-by-page encounters with the text (167). But everyday readers do not read in this manner: their reading does not involve textual analysis in the conventional literary style.

The history of reading is more than an adjunct of literary criticism, more than textual analysis, more than a creative process; it also involves context, selection, emotions, impact, and function. As such, individual reading experiences can enlighten and enhance a number of areas: biography; cultural, intellectual, and literary history and studies; as well as studies of taste and reception in the context of the history of the book. Beyond all this, it is doubtful if we can truly understand real readers without using individual case studies.

L.M. Montgomery was born in rural Prince Edward Island in 1874. After the death of her mother from tuberculosis before Maud's second birthday, she was raised by her maternal grandparents, the Macneills. Although located in a farming community some distance from even a village, the Macneill home provided a solid family base and culture. Among the printed materials subscribed to by Grandmother Macneill was *Godey's Lady's Book*, the premier women's magazine of the era. As Montgomery recalled in a journal entry of 1914, she read the serialized fiction and began to judge fashion and style from fashion plates: "I hung over them with rapture and whiled away many an hour 'picking' what ones I would have" (*Selected Journals* II [10 Jan. 1914] 142).¹⁰ The books in the house were supplemented by those shared with childhood friends, especially Nathan Lockhart. An uncle, Reverend Leander Macneill, came for summer vacations from St. John, New Brunswick, bringing with him some of the popular novels by such authors as Marie Corelli, Stanley Weyman, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and S.R. Crockett.¹¹ At school, the curriculum included Tennyson, Sir Walter Scott, Alexander Pope, T.B. Macaulay, John Milton, Shakespeare, Felicia Hemans, and many others. In her adolescence and early adult years, Montgomery borrowed encyclopedias and the works of such authors as Henry Drummond, Anthony Hope, Sir Walter Scott, Jack London, and Mrs. Humphrey Ward from the lending library of the Cavendish Literary Society. Many of the authors from these early years remained favourites throughout her life.

After training as a teacher at Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown, Montgomery taught in rural Prince Edward Island schools and spent one year at Dalhousie University in Halifax prior to the sudden death of her Grandfather Macneill in 1898. She then abandoned teaching to live with her widowed grandmother and to seriously pursue a literary career. After a long engagement, she married Ewan Macdonald in 1911, following her

grandmother's death. After a honeymoon in Britain that primarily involved pilgrimages to the locales of her favourite authors, including Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns, they resided in rural Ontario Presbyterian parishes until their retirement in Toronto in 1935.

Of all the varied aspects of L.M. Montgomery's reading experiences, I will focus in the rest of this paper on one type of reader that she represents — the reader as addict — and the manner in which this influences what she read as well as how and when she read. One consequence of this type of compulsive reading is the significant degree to which the readers are able to weave the reading experiences into the warp and woof of their lives.

"I am simply a 'book drunkard,'" 24-year-old Montgomery wrote in her journal in 1899. "Books have the same irresistible temptation for me that liquor has for its devotees. I cannot withstand them" (*Selected Journals* I [4 Apr. 1899] 235). Less than a year later, reading Anthony Hope's *Rupert of Hentzau* (1898) in one sitting rendered her "mentally drunk. I was as thoroughly intoxicated in brain as the most confirmed drunkard ever was in body" (*Selected Journals* I [14 Jan. 1900] 247). In 1905, after a two-week spree in which she read herself "stupid and soggy" with books such as Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), she confessed to her correspondent Ephraim Weber: "I must sober up from book-saturation, get work done, and take up my pen again" (*Green Gables Letters* [8 May 1905] 31). In 1901, after lugging heavy encyclopedias home two or three volumes at a time from the Cavendish Literary Society's library, she noted that, "When I get book hungry, even the whole of an encyclopedia is better than no loaf" (*Selected Journals* I [23 Aug. 1901] 263). Once the demands of marriage, motherhood, and being a clergyman's wife changed Montgomery's life in her mid-thirties, she no longer had the luxury of indulging in week-long sprees. Yet she remained a compulsive reader throughout her life, and there were still certain types of adventure and mystery novels that demanded to be read in one sitting.¹² Simply put, reading was something she could not do without.

Most addictions involve cravings, some loss of control over behaviour, and feelings of pleasure, euphoria, being transported into an altered state of consciousness or another dimension. "The reading habit," writes Victor Nell in his study of reading entrancement, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (1988), "has often been branded as a form of drug habit" (29), and people who read at least one book a week often define themselves as "reading addicts" (2).¹³ For people willing to abandon self-control and rationality, these are wonderful sensations that William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), ties to positive spiritual-like experiences. Reading addicts commonly enter these non-rational spiritual realms.

This was certainly the case for Montgomery, who like many of her generation flirted with spiritualism and read books about cosmic consciousness. She positively glows when reporting on her trances. In an unpublished letter to Weber dated 10 November 1907, Montgomery related a re-

cent experience of walking on the seashore when her soul “was filled with nameless exhilaration. I seemed borne on the wings of rapturous ecstasy into the seventh heaven. I had left this world.” In the same letter, she admitted to loving ether as an anaesthetic, which she had experienced several times at the dentist for tooth extraction. “I love the sensation of going under its influence,” she noted. “Just at the moment — when I return to consciousness — I have a fleeting *sensation* of having had the most beautiful time somewhere.” The experience, more than anything she had read or heard, convinced her of a separate existence of the soul.¹⁴ For some people, however, abandoning rationality and allowing themselves to be swept away in this manner are both uncomfortable and frightening sensations. Studies have shown that for certain readers, especially women, a reading addiction can involve feelings of guilt, both in terms of the addiction and the time devoted to the habit.¹⁵ This is not true of Montgomery, who often lamented in her journals that there was too little time to satisfy her cravings for reading.

Like many compulsive readers, Montgomery read quickly and had a good memory (see, for example, *Selected Journals* II [30 Jan. 1914] 143). For her, books were not important as objects. In an article titled “My Favourite Bookshelf” and published in 1917, she noted that she cared not whether a book came “in rags or tags or velvet gown, whether its author be known or unknown, new or old” (“Scrapbook of Reviews”).¹⁶ For compulsive readers, it is the text or the narrative that becomes gripping, absorbing, and compelling, carrying them with its vitality into another dimension. Books supply adventure, magic, enchantment, intellectual companionship, and soul-to-soul experiences with which few real human beings can compete. Hence, for compulsive readers like Montgomery, books replace people as friends to a certain degree. After an intense period of working, visiting, teaching Sunday School, and other activities in late summer 1901, a tired, lonely Montgomery concluded in her journal that she needed a fix, a “fairyland” (*Selected Journals* I [23 Aug. 1901] 262), that only the right kind of novel could supply.¹⁷

This fairyland was one of those other dimensions and was the product of being lost in a book, which, as Nell reminds us (2) and as Montgomery illustrates, can be the product of all types of books, not just adventure novels. Although not restricted to compulsive readers, experiences of becoming lost are normal for them. In the same journal entry of 1901, Montgomery goes on to describe her engagement and disengagement with this fairyland: “Novels — some delightful ones, so delightful that I could not sleep until I had . . . read until the hero had reached the end of his adventures and I came back with a mental jolt to the real world, to discover that my oil had almost burned out, that my back and eyes were aching and that I was very sleepy” (*Selected Journals* I 262). Inevitably, she was transported into the world being read, whether that be the fifteenth-century England of

Pepys's *Diary* (*Selected Journals* II [25 Feb. 1917] 210); the ancient Greece of 2,400 years ago in Grote's *History* (*Selected Journals* II [3 Jan. 1914] 141; IV [18 Dec. 1933] 247), where she was present at the death of Socrates; Washington Irving's enchanted Moorish palace, Alhambra, in Spain (*Selected Journals* I [12 Apr. 1903] 286); or Anthony Hope's 1897 adventure novel *Phroso* (*Selected Journals* I [4 Apr. 1899] 235).

Of these, Irving's *Alhambra* (1832) is the most significant and prompted more out-of-body experiences for Montgomery than any other recorded source. Irving had lived in this Granada palace and combines in his sketch its Turkish past and mythology with his own observations. "It was a volume of pure delight and I burned the heart out of a dismal day with it," Montgomery noted on her first reading. "The book seemed to me the gateway of an enchanted world. I stepped in and lo, I walked with happiness and youth and pangless pleasure again" (*Selected Journals* I [12 Apr. 1903] 286). Within two years, just the memory of the story was able to induce a visit to the castle. "For the past hour I have been lying on a couch in my den beside a dying fire," she related to Weber, "that is my *body* was lying there but my soul was far away in a dreamland imagination" (*Green Gables Letters* [8 Apr. 1906] 37). On this occasion, however, it had become *her* castle. In a letter to George MacMillan a decade later, Montgomery noted, "One does not *read* the book; one *lives* it. When I open its covers I always feel a peculiar sensation, as if I had stepped through an enchanted gateway and it had shut behind me, shutting out the real prosaic world, and shutting me in 'the land where dreams come true'" (*My Dear Mr. M.* [2 Aug. 1915] 75). She felt that it was some combination of style and content which made this book special, since other Irving stories, such as "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" or "Rip Van Winkle," did not have the same effect on her. Although she would have liked to visit this real palace, she feared that it might prevent her from visiting the imagined castle of Irving's text in the same way: "I should be so much the poorer by reason of a lost ideal," she explained (75).

One of Montgomery's other favourites was Rudyard Kipling, whose virile strength she adored. Her experience of reading his *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892), which she received as a Christmas present in 1898, provides one of her best descriptions of being lost in a book. Kipling's stories, she recorded in her journal,

thrill and pulsate and burn, they carry you along in their rush and swing, till you forget your own petty interests and cares and burst out into a broader soul-world and gain a much clearer realization of all the myriad forms of life that are beating around your own little one. And that is always good for a person even if one does slip back afterwards into the narrow bounds of one's own life. We can never be *quite* so narrow again. (*Selected Journals* I [31 Dec. 1898] 230)

This experience substantiates Nell's finding that being lost in a book leads to being wiser, braver, and more powerful. Where such reading fits within a serious/light or intensive/extensive dichotomy or scale is a complex matter. Reading involving total absorption or being transported into another dimension is certainly not light, frivolous reading. The engagement with the text is absolute: the attention is careful, the act purposeful. Yet this is not study and analysis in the conventional understanding of intensive reading. For instance, in his four-division scale used to analyze Samuel Johnson's reading, Robert DeMaria Jr. includes the category "perusal" just below "study" (7ff), but the language of DeMaria's categories — "study," "perusal," "mere," and "curious" — tends to undervalue the act of reading itself. In addition, he and several other scholars in the field employ such concepts as "amusement" and "pleasure" in narrow parameters that do not mesh with Montgomery's general reading experiences.

Her reading of two works, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays* (1841) and Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776 / 1778), does fit into a more serious scale, however. At age seventeen, she commented that "To be interested in Emerson," whom she did not always understand, "you must get right into the grooves of his thought and keep steadily in it. Then you can enjoy him. There can be no skipping or culling if you want to get at his meaning" (*Selected Journals* I [10 Jan. 1892] 75). She found Gibbon "so big and massive that he seems to suck one's individuality clean out of one — swallow one up like a huge, placid, slow-moving river" (*Selected Journals* II [5 Dec. 1919] 356). The necessary antidote to such an experience was usually to then plunge into the most frivolous novel as a way of returning to a normal state of consciousness. Yet at a Sunday School picnic in her car under the pines beside a lake, a 54-year-old Montgomery "had a gorgeous time" reading by turn chapters of Herodotus's history of Greece (410 B.C.E.) and Mary Robert Rinehart's *Tish Plays the Game* (1926), a recent novel by a bestselling author that caused tears of laughter to stream down her face. Noting that this "atrocious literary mixture was capital," she likened the experience to ingesting alternating bites of a ham sandwich and ice cream (*Selected Journals* III [19 July 1929] 399). Although the reading of each of these books involved a similar pleasure and absorption, a meaningful categorization of this reading experience seems impossible.

One aspect of Rolf Engelsing's delineation of intensive, pre-modern reading involves multiple readings, supposedly necessitated by the scarcity of texts (see Sicherman, "Sense and Sensibility" 216, 221n29 for further context). While Nell found that his modern compulsive readers rarely read books more than once, Montgomery and numerous other historical compulsive readers did. "How I do love books! Not merely to read once but over and over again," gushed an eighteen-year-old Montgomery in 1893. "I enjoy the tenth reading of a book as much as the first. Books are a delightful world in themselves. Their characters seem as real to me as my

friends in central life" (*Selected Journals* I [12 Jan. 1893] 88).¹⁷ In "My Favourite Bookshelf," she revealed that her favourite books, the books she loved as friends as opposed to other books which were mere acquaintances, had their own special shelf and had acquired "an aroma and personality all their own, quite irrespective of their contents" ("Scrapbook of Reviews"). For Montgomery, then, reading a book again was similar to inviting a dear friend over for another visit. As with friends, just being in the company of books had its own special rewards. There are, however, other dimensions to the phenomenon. Montgomery claimed that this habit began in childhood when there were too few volumes available to satisfy her voracious appetite. In an article titled "The Gay Days of Old" and published in *Farmer's Magazine*, Montgomery recalled that "I read and reread what we did have until I knew whole pages and even chapters by heart" ("Scrapbook of Reviews"). While this reading and memorization included such standard poetry as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, it also included such diverse items as Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales*, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* and *Last Days of Pompeii*, and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. This memorization occurred outside the usual classroom and Sunday School venues where memory work was a part of the curriculum. It also continued into adulthood and was, at times, a deliberate act. In 1905, a 30-year-old Montgomery was learning Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon" by heart because she wanted to "remember it in the next world" (Gillen 161).

Of the favourite books kept in a separate bookshelf during her childhood, these included a variety of genres, including poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. Later in life, there continued to be no class or genre restrictions in Montgomery's bookshelf of favourites, which she spoke of in the article "My Favourite Bookshelf" as "belonging to the household of faith," implying deeper, more complex psychological and intellectual dimensions to the ownership and reading of these volumes. There were books for every mood and need in this "motley collection": a little book of modern verse for when the mind "feels dusty and commonplace and longs for a pleasant bit of starfaring" and the "Great Poet to whom I turn when I need consolation for some deep grief or expression for some mighty emotion." She fled into travel books when she was "desperately weary of well-trodden ways." When life became too exciting or too strenuous, she yearned for the "quiet meandering book." From childhood, there were "girl's books which I love most when I feel old and sophisticated and too worldly-wise and want to stray back to the fairy realm of sweet sixteen" as well as a "boy's book of adventure which is to me manna in the wilderness when I grow tired of ordering my household with a due regard for calories and desire wildly to . . . go hunting for buried treasure or shooting grizzly bears." There were "garden books . . . which I love best when a snowstorm is howling" and historical novels for "the hours I yearn for the society of kings and queens,

garrulous and intimate and savoury." History was "for the serious hour of determined self-culture and essays for the literary bookish mood." Finally, there were "delicious ghost stories which I must read when midnight is near and the wind is keening round the eaves and the stairs are creaking and anything might be true" ("Scrapbook of Reviews"). Some might think such a list to be eclectic, but each of these genres sustained multiple readings and each genre fulfilled a different psychological need for her.

Montgomery spoke frequently of the books in her special bookcase as not only friends to visit often but as books she *lived* as opposed to simply read. They had magical powers; magic is a frequent keyword in her description of the effect of these books. In her journals and letters she always underlined *lived* to doubly emphasize the importance of both the books and the phenomenon itself. This is noteworthy because she did very little underlining in her writing. "Among the mysteries of reading," notes Nell, "the greatest is its power to absorb the reader completely and effortlessly" (73; see also 2). That is the essence of living a book. Montgomery's experiences suggest that this happened, not because she allowed the books to do so to her, as Nell would suggest, but because certain types of texts, intersecting with her personality and the circumstances of her life, had the power to alter her consciousness whether she willed it or not. After the first reading, however, subsequent visits to the same book involved a deliberate decision to reproduce the sensation. The phenomenon is not necessarily linked, as some might imagine, to sentiment, pathos, and empathy, which Montgomery did not value highly in her reading. She persistently sought such sensations because she enjoyed them. As a person for whom the imagination was one of the greatest human attributes, these experiences of a compulsive reader opened the door to limitless flights of imagination (see Karr, *Authors and Audiences* 132-33).

Two additional aspects of this compulsive rereading are of greater significance to Montgomery's more mature years. Often, Montgomery would remember an incident or a person, sometimes triggered through just memory, other times through a visit or a letter reread from long ago. Because of the importance of reading in her life, those memories often prompted a rereading of the volume associated with the memory. As Montgomery noted in 1921, "at every reading the memories and atmosphere of other readings come back and I am reading old years as well as an old book" (*Selected Journals* III [18 Oct. 1921] 21). Reading old books brought back memories, some of them very painful, of departed friends such as Frede Campbell, with whom she had shared her experiences with books.

In December 1928, Montgomery journeyed from Norval to Toronto, spent a hectic day Christmas shopping, and returned home with aching arms to crawl into bed with a newly-purchased mystery novel, Louis Bromfield's *The Case of Miss Annie Spragge*, which ranked tenth on the American best-seller list for that year. As she "stretched out [her] toes luxu-

riously," she quoted Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563): "The longest day weareth to evensong" (*Selected Journals* III [9 Dec. 1928] 385). Such a strange juxtaposition, linking twentieth-century consumer culture with a serious sixteenth-century religious work, is typical of Montgomery and may indeed be unique to the experiences of voracious, compulsive readers of her generation, who were the last to have general familiarity with such works as *Book of Martyrs*, *Paradise Lost*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the classics of the ancient world. Montgomery routinely used the substance of her reading experiences — acquired in large part from multiple reading and memory work — to articulate understanding and meaning to circumstances, to find comfort, courage, and hope, or to rationalize, justify, judge, condemn, or provide a contextual framework for a life lived. It was only because of the vast repository of her memory bank of reading experiences that she was able to interweave her life experience into them.

Many times authors provided exactly the right words to suit the occasion in her journals. After a particularly unpleasant pastoral visit to an "ignorant family" with unruly children, Montgomery used Jane Welsh Carlyle's "splendid phrase" of feeling like she had been "under a harrow" (*Selected Journals* III [19 Jan. 1923] 109). Following a terrible snowstorm in which her husband had been stranded and narrowly escaped harm in a serious accident, Montgomery noted, using a phrase from Lytton Strachey's controversial biography of Queen Victoria, that "Certainly we have been living amid alarms and excursions of late" (*Selected Journals* IV [21 Dec. 1933] 25). Using words from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, she found a woman she had met to be "stupidly good" (*Selected Journals* III [18 June 1923] 133). On another occasion, she defined her demeanour in an encounter with a woman who had recently insulted her as "splendidly null" (*Selected Journals* IV [7 July 1933] 226), a phrase from Tennyson's *Maude*.

Entire poems had the capacity to induce joy and reverie and even transport her into another dimension. During a pregnancy in 1914, riding home over terrible roads from the second church of a two-church parish, a tired and sick Montgomery had what she defined as "one of those peculiar psychological experiences I have by times": she began living Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*, a poem she had "known by heart since childhood." Montgomery explained: "I roamed through its vivid scenery. I talked with its people. Other poems followed and them I also lived." She was snatched away from her physical discomfort by "a strange, scintillating, vivid dream of unearthly delight" (*Selected Journals* II [30 Jan. 1914] 143).

As an author, Montgomery created heroines who shared her passion for, use of, and taste in books. Both Anne Shirley and Emily Starr are addicted to books, as is initially Anne's best friend Diana Barry who, according to her mother, reads too much for her own good. They are restricted in their reading as children, but by borrowing from friends and sympathetic adults they manage to overcome many obstacles. Anne begins reading Lew

Wallace's *Ben Hur* during the lunch break at school and becomes so enthralled that she continues to read it surreptitiously while pretending to focus on Canadian history until Miss Stacy discovers her and confiscates the book. On another occasion, Anne suggests that she lock an enticing novel in the jam closet and give Matthew the key with instructions to ignore her pleas and begging until she finishes her schoolwork. When Emily first arrives at New Moon, she reads an amazing array of genres and titles, all of which were favourites of Montgomery. Like Montgomery, Anne memorizes lines from many sources, especially from poetry introduced in school. For both author and characters, snippets of lines from sources ranging from the Bible and Shakespeare to Tennyson and Lewis Carroll provide the words and sentiments required for an understanding of feelings, circumstances, and happenings.

Of all the windows into Montgomery's soul, none is as important as the record of her reading experiences. Her interactions with texts as recorded in her journals and letters reveal many of her innermost thoughts and reflections more fully and more deeply than any other evidence that she bestows on researchers. Montgomery used her journal to commiserate in her personal tragedies, vent her anger, mollify her frustrations, and express both her joys and her fears. When relating her interaction with texts in these entries, this dark side disappears and a more honest and more balanced state of mind prevails. Similarly, in her letters to her two primary correspondents, George MacMillan and Ephraim Weber, she leaves the dark side and tragedies behind to engage in an honest sharing of feelings and experiences without fear of being exposed. The massive scope of these reading experiences renders meaningful quantification impractical. In the final analysis, precise percentages of such factors as the gender, nationality, genre, or period of the authors she read is less significant. What is important instead is the greater understanding that her reading experiences provide of both Montgomery as reader and of reading itself. Much still remains mysterious. The only way to a deeper understanding of compulsive and other dimensions of reading is to access the souls of individual readers through the recorded evidence of their individual reading experiences. Only then can we begin to construct theory from the evidence. The essence of everyday reading experiences — beyond the what, where, when, and how — is not interpretation or meaning but impact and use.

This paper hopefully demonstrates that rich archives do exist to be mined. The tools necessary for understanding Montgomery's reading history cannot be found in a simple blend of history and literary criticism, nor are they to be found in quantification. As with Radway's analysis of readers of modern romances, we will in fact need to abandon our obsession with the text and conventional textual analysis in order to access the experiences of actual readers (*Reading the Romance* 86). Aspects of Norman Holland's concept of organic unity of a work, his recognition of the creativity

and uniqueness of individual readers, and his ideas regarding dream worlds and fantasies — explored in his books *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1951), *Poems in Person: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature* (1973), and *5 Readers Reading* (1975) — can all be useful in assisting us in understanding both compulsive reading and being lost in a book (see also Sicherman, “Sense and Sensibility” 212-13). From Michel de Certeau, who in the words of Roger Chartier brought the “skills of the semiotician, ethnologist, and psychoanalyst” to his research and writing (40), we can learn the value of a truly multidisciplinary approach:¹⁹

The reader produces gardens that miniaturize and collate a world. . . . He deterritorializes himself, oscillating in a nowhere between what he invents and what changes him. . . . Sometimes he loses the fictive securities of reality when he reads: his escapades exile him from the assurances that give the self its location of the social checkerboard. *Who* reads, in fact? Is it I, or some part of me? (de Certeau 163)

De Certeau also believed in the centrality of the narrative. Rather than a blending of English and History, what these theorists offer is more a blending of the humanities and the social sciences. Access to an understanding of addiction, magic, the power of the narrative, and altered states of consciousness requires the tools offered by both sectors.

Notes

- 1 For a list of literary allusions in Montgomery’s fiction, see Wilmshurst, “L.M. Montgomery’s”; Wilmshurst, “Quotations and Allusions.”
- 2 For an example of quantitative research of an individual’s reading over one year, see Coclough.
- 3 For a recent treatment of this phenomenon, see Chartier.
- 4 See Tompkins, *Reader-Response*; Freund. Most studies of real readers have been from limited perspectives or are based on the small samples of data available to researchers; see, for example, DeMaria; Sicherman, “Reading and Ambition”; Zboray and Zboray.
- 5 One of the most impressive, far-reaching exceptions to this under-examined field is Sicherman’s “Sense and Sensibility.”
- 6 For the North American dimensions of this debate, see Higham and Conklin; Karr, “What Happened.”
- 7 See also Karr, *Authors and Audiences* 152-69. Sharpe’s *Reading Revolutions* is a recent example of someone who analyzes but does not actually use the concept as a research tool.
- 8 For a concerted attack on theorists and a plea for the study of real readers, see Rose, “Rereading the English Common Reader.”
- 9 For Radway’s personal struggle with this question in *A Feeling for Books*, see 12-13, 44, 118-22.
- 10 Grandmother Macneill also subscribed to *The Household* and the neighbourhood children shared *Wide Awake*, which came from another neighbour.
- 11 Although published in the 1830s and 1840s, Bulwer-Lytton’s fiction was available in so many cheap editions that titles such as *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and *Zanoni* (1842) continued to be bestsellers during this period.

- 12 The one-sitting readings were most frequently of adventure novels. A wider list includes S.R. Crockett's *The Black Douglas* (1899), Anthony Hope's *Phroso* (1897), Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Devereux* (1829), George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* (1861), and Edward Lester Pearson's non-fiction *Studies in Murder* (1924).
- 13 Nell's study tends to use the terms "addiction," "dependency," and "habit" interchangeably. For more on the nature of addiction, see Elster; Peele.
- 14 James notes the role played by nitrous oxide and ether in stimulating mystical consciousness (349).
- 15 See Nell 6, 31; Lyons. Agnes Hamilton experienced so much guilt after reading trashy novels that she deprived herself for a week and experienced the feelings of a reformed drunkard; see Sicherman, "Sense and Sensibility" 207.
- 16 For Montgomery, illustrations were also unimportant, except, she notes, for two of Anthony Hope's books; see *L.M. Montgomery's Ephraim Weber* (22 June 1936) 262.
- 17 Montgomery hungered for intellectual "intercourse with congenial souls" but had, with rare exceptions, to find it in books: "After all, books are wonderful companions" (*Selected Journals* III [16 Dec. 1922] 105). An unintellectual, unconversant husband and her position as an isolated clergyman's wife in small-town society is partly responsible for this situation, although this was also largely the case before her marriage.
- 18 For further evidence of multiple readers, see Karr, *Authors and Audiences* 46, 158.
- 19 Sharpe suggests that some academics might find the acquisition of new skills too high a price for participating in the history of the book studies (61).

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