

THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW “ROAD TO AVONLEA”

Family Rivalry. Gail Hamilton. HarperCollins Publishers, 1992. 124 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647403-9; **May the Best Man Win.** Gail Hamilton. HarperCollins Publishers, 1992. 122 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647398-9; **Dreamer of Dreams.** Heather Conkie. HarperCollins Publishers, 1992. 131 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647394-6; **It’s Just a Stage.** Amy Jo Cooper. HarperCollins Publishers, 1992. 101 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647389-X; **Misfits and Miracles.** Lind Zwicker. HarperCollins Publishers, 1992. 123 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647390-3.

Books are usually written in a solitary fashion, far removed from the hustle surrounding the creation of television and film. The above storybooks are an exception that proves the wisdom of the rule.

The Road to Avonlea storybooks are based on the television series of the same name. Making a tv show, of course, always involves a lot of people, as evidenced just by the writing credits for an episode I recently watched on CBC: besides the writer of the “teleplay,” there was a story editor and an assistant story editor plus producers and a director making their mark somewhere along the way—and perhaps even actors requesting character or dialogue changes. At the end of the closing credits came “Adapted from the novels ... by Lucy Maud Montgomery.”

The best parts of this “Kevin Sullivan Production,” however, come from another department: the great countryside and pretty costumes and sets are visual delights. The writing itself suffers from a sentimental gloss, which is something it appears The Disney Channel, one of the coproducers, favoured (1), making the turn-of-the-century stories more gently nostalgic than vitally real. Still, the series is not only popular here in Canada: it’s sold all over the world, undoubtedly reinforcing the perception of Canada as a place with great scenery.

From out of all this came the present books—written, in all cases but one, by yet somebody else.

The short, straightforward sentences that are the house style are workaday, with none of the artistry of Montgomery’s prose. The storylines themselves made little impact and I kept thinking about an eleven-year-old friend who had spoken enthusiastically about the earlier books in the series; I tried to discover the same interest but ended up just feeling too old. I suppose the Harlequin Romances I read at that age were worse.

Each book is self-contained and mainly dialogue driven, with no room for developing intriguing side shoots. A central plot keeps the story clearly rolling. In *May the Best Man Win*, things happen around Aunt Olivia and her relationship to both Jasper Dale, a shy photographer, and Edwin Clark, a beau from long ago. The series of mishaps and misunderstandings that occur as she is courted by both is at the level of slapstick, with the result that both characters and plot seem

designed to make us laugh. Edwin, for instance, is straight out of a melodrama. When he first appears, he cheats poor Teddy Armstrong out of a much needed nickel: The Villain! Later, when Edwin begs Olivia to let him see her again, he strikes “a suitably pleading pose.”

We're also told how we should interpret events: behind everything there's a lesson that is spelled out for dullards. After the reconciliation between Alec and Roger in *Family Rivalry* it's that “Brothers and sisters were precious, no matter how annoying they might become at times.” Well, of course, such lessons are preferable to the ones I learnt about tall dark strangers being the answer to all life's troubles.

The books are so undistinguished that nothing is left to resonate after reading them. In fact, I was so disappointed at their blandness that I went in search of “the real thing”: Montgomery's *The Story Girl* and *The Golden Road*, the main sources for the tv series and hence for the storybooks. The best that can be said about the latter is that perhaps they will give other readers the idea of turning to Montgomery's glorious meandering prose.

The two books centre on Sara Stanley, as do the HarperCollins' series. But how much more exciting is Montgomery's magnificent storyteller, who bewitches with her rainbow-coloured voice; how ordinary is the other. In *It's Just a Stage*, in anticipation of meeting her cousin, a famous actress, the Kevin Sullivan/HarperCollins' Sara rehearses a mere and mundane seven words for weeks: “It's nice to meet you, Miss Plumtree.” She says the words “sweetly.”

Of course, the original tv series couldn't follow the Montgomery books line by line. One can appreciate the need to limit the number of characters at times, so that the snowstorm that happened to all the children in *The Golden Road* is made more manageable in *Misfits and Miracles*, where just Sara is lost. The whole weaving in and out of characters and events that Montgomery does so skilfully isn't possible in either the teleplays or the subsequent storybooks, where all the energy goes towards actively contributing to a single theme which is clearly resolved by the end of each episode.

But some changes do really matter. I expect the story conferences that reduced *The Story Girl's* age from fourteen to twelve would alone tell a great deal about what went wrong with these adaptations. It all seems such a wasted effort when there's the original Lucy Maud Montgomery books, glorious still.

NOTES

- 1 “Major creative decisions involve CBC and Disney ... Although there are some differences of interpretation—Disney tends toward ‘sentimentality’—the three make ‘a happy team,’ Sullivan says.” From a Canadian Press report by Stephen Nicholls, *The Globe and Mail*, January 3, 1990.

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