



by: Cynthia Brouse

# the Maud squad



Against all odds, *Lucy Maud Montgomery* has become the prototypical pop-cult figure of 20th-century literature. Nearly 100 years after writing *Anne of Green Gables*, she brings together the high-brow and the low, the academic and the fan, the virtual and the merely fictional

to as “the Author.” You can buy a book or a postcard in the tiny bookstore, but, in contrast to the other sites, there are no Anne ashtrays, no “Freckle Frenzy” ice cream, no rides to amuse the kids. Some sightseers refuse to pay the two bucks, and turn back at the door.

I happily fork over my toonie because I’m a bit of a fan, though I like to think I’m not one of those people who’d call the homestead a “sacred site.” Nevertheless, like generations of girls, when I read *Anne of Green Gables* at the age of 10, I understood for the first time that a book could make me cry, and I asked for the other seven books in the series at Christmas and birthdays, reading and rereading them well into adulthood. Of course, Montgomery’s sweet, humorous novels about feisty young women in P.E.I. have been best-sellers for nearly a century. But since the mid-1980s, when three unrelated factors came together to fan the Montgomery flames, a different spin on the author has emerged: today she’s the cornerstone of her own mini-industry, one that goes beyond selling novels, or even souvenirs. The writer who rejected modernity has turned into a postmodern icon in the way her work and her life are commodified and consumed.

In fact, since creating the little red-haired orphan, Montgomery has become one of the few literary figures who bring together both high- and low-brow culture. From Ontario to Sweden, university professors have devoted their life’s work to the author, aligning themselves with the little girls who identify with the lonely, loquacious heroine, the thousands of Japanese visitors to P.E.I. who mysteriously seem to have absorbed Anne with their miso soup, and the residents of the Island who make their living selling a version of Montgomery’s imagination. (Today, the author gets her own entry in the P.E.I. *Visitors Guide*, along with Beaches, Golf and Dining.)

Montgomery is not the only writer with a cult following, but she may be unique among celebrity authors. Shakespeare attracts sightseers and sells tie pins and dishtowels; Jane Austen draws Janeites from around the globe together on the Internet; Robert Service helped rescue the economy of a small town; Virginia Woolf’s letters and journals engender biography after biography; Ernest Hemingway generates academic conferences and countless doctoral theses; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle inspires a weird conflation of the fictional with the real. But Montgomery is the only young people’s writer – possibly the only writer of any kind – who does all of these things simultaneously. And while Frodo Baggins, Nancy Drew, Huckleberry Finn and Harry

Potter may give Anne a run for her money, only she, like the Mounties, stands in for a nation.

The pleasant June weekend of the biennial conference of the L.M. Montgomery Institute in Charlottetown is a crucible for this mixture of attention, where fans and academics from Tokyo and Texas and Australia rub shoulders, along with tourism workers, filmmakers, and Montgomery’s descendants and their lawyers. We all want a piece of her, and though there are as many reasons for being here as there are people – from the loopy to the learned – we’re bound together by some kind of glue. Perhaps it’s a hangover from our childhood attachment – the book/author as comfort food, to which we turn as we would to Mom’s macaroni and cheese.

Whatever it is, if that glue binds the popular to the profound, it also binds reality to illusion – especially when you make the leap from Green Gables to the hole in the ground. In Anne Land, nothing is what it seems.

“Get this,” says Karen Macfarlane, an English professor at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax and a conference presenter, as she unpacks her things in the University of P.E.I. residence. We attended the last conference together, and have met up again for this one. “They’ve scheduled a torchlight walk through the homestead site. This is the stuff I hate, but I’ll go just so I can regale my academic colleagues with all the kitschy things that go on here. They’re *way* more cynical than I am.” At her first conference Macfarlane was astonished to find people at the registration desk wearing red braids and straw hats.

On the surface, this is an academic conference – as evidenced by papers that deal with the Bakhtinian dialogic structure of *Anne of Green Gables* or the synecdochic status of Anne’s red hair. Some are dry and impenetrable; others provide insight into not only the writer’s life and work but also the social history captured in her books, her influence on women’s memoir and her impact as a pop culture artifact (a scholarly book arising from the 2000 conference called *Making Avonlea: L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture*, edited by Irene Gammel, will be published this month). Topics have included everything from the significance of tuberculosis in Montgomery’s stories to the way the novels’ cover illustrations have reflected attitudes toward women and girls across different eras and cultures.

But the conference also attracts a sizable contingent of “Kindred Spirits” – fans of Montgomery who have Internet handles such as Miriam of the Haunted Spring or Frank of

the Big Smoke, who plan tea parties in cyberspace, celebrate Kindred Day and appear to have an intense personal relationship with the author, sometimes even using the novels as precepts for living. Some Kindred Spirits present conference papers, too, often quite thoughtful ones. But the more serious researchers at the conference are occasionally taken aback by the atmosphere of reverence toward the author and by the sentimental or unscholarly quality of a few of the presentations.

Outside the plenary sessions, merchants from Kindred Spirits of P.E.I. sell Anne dolls, Anne stationery and copies of a book called



Green Gables (previous page), the mythical home of a fictional person, leaves little scope for the imagination. But the ruins of the house where Montgomery actually lived (left) evoke a powerful presence

*Anne’s World, Maud’s World: The Sacred Sites of L.M. Montgomery*. This year, the wackiest presentations include one on Montgomery’s astrological chart and a wildly unscientific paper that suggests she died of mercury poisoning from her dental fillings. (What actually caused her death in 1942 at the age of 67 is a little murky, and suicide rumours may or may not be quashed when Mary Rubio of the University of Guelph publishes her long-awaited biography next year. “I know what happened,” Rubio tells me cryptically, but won’t elaborate.)

If some academics are skeptical of the Kindred Spirits, the feeling can be mutual. There’s a minor flap over the presence of Laura Robinson, the English professor whose paper about lesbian desire in the Anne books made national headlines on a slow news day two years ago. Detecting a homoerotic subtext in a literary work is a fairly unremarkable practice in academia, and Robinson wasn’t the first to do it with Montgomery’s oeuvre. But this year, she’s dealing with lesbian desire between real people: in her journals, Montgomery described with vehement abhorrence the unwelcome ardour of a female fan, whom she called a “pervert.” The fact that she did not always rebuff the young woman, accepting an invitation to visit and even sleeping in the same

bed with her, prompts vigorous discussion.

Someone on the panel refers to a Montgomery character who was “just a secretary.” A voice in the audience behind me hisses, “We’re not secretaries; we’re administrative assistants.” Later, I speak to a group of Kindred Spirits, including the slighted administrative assistant, who are all from the Maritimes. They become thin-lipped when I mention Robinson’s work: “Oh, come off it,” says one of them. But they tell me they find most of the academics’ pronouncements at the conference “inspiring.”

For example, everybody seems to love Jen-

nifer Litster, a historian who has recently completed her PhD at the University of Edinburgh on the Scottish context of Montgomery and her work, and who can cite endless Montgomery lore off the top of her head, chapter and verse. She attended the inaugural conference, in 1994. “I didn’t really fit in at first,” she says. “Here I was, this sarcastic 24-year-old whisky-drinking Scot all dressed in black.” A self-avowed contrarian when it comes to Montgomery, Litster insists, “I don’t know all there is to know about Montgomery because I worship her. I know so much because it’s my area of study.”

But it’s hard to tell the difference on the humid afternoon we spend together in the Cavendish cemetery, where Montgomery and many of her relatives and contemporaries are buried. “I’m going to sound like one of those crazy people, but these are all my friends,” says Litster, gesturing at the mossy tombstones. “That guy there? Montgomery used to taunt him in school for having red hair. She called him ‘Cavendish Carrots.’” Litster grins. “Which means that Montgomery may not have written herself into Anne, but into [Anne’s nemesis] Gilbert Blythe.”

Perhaps the conference works because of the blurring between the different types of

Photograph from CP

participant. At times the fan and the academic seem equally peculiar: whether motivated by adoration or by intellectual curiosity, they share an encyclopedic knowledge – and a sense of ownership – of a narrow subject, devote enormous amounts of time to it, practically commit related texts to memory and create their own jargon.

The fuzzy line between fan and scholar has also become easier to accommodate because of recent trends in literary criticism. Before the 1970s, when academia barely took CanLit and women writers seriously, let alone children's books or romance fiction, a graduate student who proposed doing research on Montgomery would have been laughed at. It was only in the 1980s that the rise of reader-response and feminist literary criticism and the serious analysis of both children's books and popular culture, especially "girl culture," built up the author's "scholarly capital." The ivory tower acknowledged what generations of readers had always known: not only was *Anne of Green Gables* an elegantly crafted story, but it was also, at some level, radical. Anne (as well as Montgomery's other heroines, such as the budding writer Emily Byrd Starr) was one of our only intrepid, articulate girl role models, an outsider who subverted the mores of a rigid rural community yet won over its members through the sheer force of her personality – at a time when a personality was the last thing a girl was supposed to have. Add to that the fact that many of Montgomery's characters were matriarchs and single women who adopted children, and suddenly rural Canada of a century ago seemed remarkably of the moment.

Meanwhile, thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu were busily erasing the distinction between high-brow and mass culture, deeming the popular worthy of study for what it tells us about ourselves – and encouraging scholars to admit not only that they study the "social grammars" and "interdiscursive formations" of, say, soap operas, but that they also like to watch them. This influence was apparent at the conference two years ago in a paper by Brenda Weber, now at the University of Kentucky. She confided that she'd received her first Anne books from her grandmother when she was a little girl in Phoenix, Arizona, and that she can't separate her love for the novels from the love she felt for her relative.

It was a risky premise for a scholarly paper; professors who once found it hard to have their Montgomery work taken seriously could be forgiven for wanting to distance

themselves from such an approach. But Weber went on to argue persuasively for her right to make a critical study of the texts while publicly acknowledging her emotional attachment to them: "The subject matter we read is less important than the manner in which we read it," she said.

There is the danger, of course, that too much emotional attachment can transform a schoolgirl romance into a hallowed text. "I'd rather teach the bloody Bible," a professor tells me at a dinner party in Halifax; she removed *Anne* from her children's lit syllabus because her students were incapable of looking at it critically. More than once at the conference, I hear people speak of "indoctrinating" children into the world of Anne. I catch myself making the same comment about my niece. At earlier symposiums, even mild criticism of Montgomery was sometimes met with outrage.

Still, this year, some academics I talk to say the atmosphere has matured. I hear more good-natured guffaws, from all participants, over the author's conservatism (at one point she opposed female suffrage) and her sometimes purple prose than I did two years ago. (Even on the *Kindred Spirits* listserv, fans admit they might not get along with Maud if she showed up for tea, since they belong to ethnic or religious groups to which she apparently felt superior.) Says Janice Fiamengo, an English professor at the University of Saskatchewan, "Obviously you can stifle debate and the furtherance of knowledge if you demand everything be respectful and adoring, and that does happen to a small extent. But there are a lot of people doing very serious work here."

Serious or frivolous, the glue that binds the disparate "Montgomery people" was strengthened not only by an evolution in criticism in the 1980s, but also by two other events that occurred about the same time. Since 1919,

numerous *Anne* movies had led to periodic surges in interest, and Kevin Sullivan's 1985 made-for-TV *Anne of Green Gables*, its two sequels and the *Road to Avonlea* series did the trick again. They were some of the most successful Canadian television exports ever made, though they took tremendous liberties with Montgomery's stories. In fact, some of the younger fans and scholars came to Montgomery through the TV shows, not the novels. But what really focused renewed attention on Montgomery, particularly on the part of the middle-aged women at the conference (fewer than 10 per cent of those attending are men) was the publication of her journals, edited by Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston. When the first volume emerged, also in 1985, the startling contrast between Anne's life and Montgomery's made many readers see the novels in a different light – and fired up the academic engines. The New Criticism school, which held that a text should be studied in isolation from its author's life and intentions, was giving way to the notion of intertextuality – where a book's context is the real story. As Fiamengo puts it, Montgomery has become a "text" that is even more interesting than her fiction.

The journals reveal that Montgomery's daily life was to some extent also a fiction; as the wife of a small-town Presbyterian minister, she felt she had to present a facade to the parishioners, never revealing her husband's mental illness, her own exhaustion, boredom, depression, isolation and legal troubles or the follies of her eldest son, lest gossip ensue. Adding another complicating layer is the fact that, like all diarists, Montgomery was an unreliable narrator: she prepared her journals for eventual publication, recopying the earlier versions, excising some passages, and, as Irene Gammel demonstrates at this year's conference, fashioning the events of her life into highly constructed narratives long after they



Two views of L.M. Montgomery's grave: The rural crossroads where the author grew up, and where she is now buried with her husband, today features a wax museum, the Anne Shirley Motel, a Petro-Canada station and a golf course

“It’s truly bizarre to see Maud *and* Anne running around in a village that never existed,” says one Montgomery scholar on a visit to “Avonlea Village.” Nevertheless, he poses for photos with both actors and purchases Anne toenail clippers

presence at the conference of Montgomery’s relatives – they don’t want to offend. In fact, a number of scholars also worry about the control that Montgomery’s heirs and the University of Guelph exert over her papers and its effect on their ability to conduct research.

Butler’s full-time job is to try to manage the commercial uses to which Montgomery’s imaginings are put, from Anne key chains to the Kevin Sullivan films (lawsuits stemming from the films continue to volley back and forth). If the Montgomery industry can be likened to those around Jane Austen or Shakespeare, her creation is akin to Mickey Mouse.

Tourists have been coming to the Island in search of Anne since shortly after the first of the novels was published in 1908, especially to Green Gables, though Montgomery never lived in that house. She used the setting of the building and the grounds, which belonged to her elderly cousins, as the basis for the home of Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert (the brother and sister who adopt Anne), and modelled the village of Avonlea after Cavendish, but acknowledged she’d made a loose translation. “It seems of no use to protest that it is not ‘Green Gables,’” she wrote in 1929, “– that Green Gables was a purely imaginary place. Tourists by the hundred come here.” Myrtle Webb, the cousin who by then had inherited the house, soon began taking in paying guests.

It’s hard to blame the people of Cavendish for this conflation of fantasy and reality, since Montgomery’s readers would have made their pilgrimages whether or not anybody had invited them. Capitalizing on this phenomenon made good economic sense. Starting in 1936, the Cavendish seashore was expropriated, the gables of the Webb house were painted green and the whole thing was turned into a national park. Today if you amble down the leafy path Montgomery called Lover’s Lane, you’ll find netting in the trees to prevent you from being pelted by errant golf balls flying off the Green Gables golf course.

Montgomery herself was conflicted about the writer as tourist attraction. Her honeymoon in 1911 had been, in fact, a tour of literary sites in Britain. After seeing the Abbotsford, Scotland, house where Sir Walter Scott had lived, she wrote in her journal, “The rooms were filled by a chattering crowd, harangued by a glib guide. I wondered if Scott would have liked this – to see his home overrun by a horde of curious sight seers. I am sure I would not.”

Still, Montgomery co-operated in her transformation into a celebrity. Holly Pike of Newfoundland’s Memorial University points out that the author created a congenial media

persona and wrote sequel after sequel at the behest of her publisher (even though Anne, she told a friend, had begun to weigh on her “like an incubus”). She also made P.E.I. a character in her novels, contributing to *its* celebrity, so that soon people wanted to visit the Land of Anne even though they’d never read the books – “a sure indicator,” writes Pike, “of Montgomery’s and Anne’s entrance into the status of pop culture icon.” Both P.E.I. and Anne are now famous for being famous.

The test of that iconic status is its susceptibility to parody. At the tail end of this year’s conference program, after the goodbye reception, one item is inserted in small print: a 25-minute film called *Picking Lucy’s Brain*. Part of the small but entertaining anti-Anne backlash genre, the film parodies both slasher flicks and Montgomery tourism by raising the author from her grave. Unable to speak in other than grunts, the undead Montgomery is chained to her typewriter at one of the heritage sites by the “Tourism Control Division” (“She wants to write another book, I can see it in her eyes!”) with a Japanese tourist having her picture taken in the foreground.

Everyone at the screening laughs hysterically, including Kate Macdonald Butler and one of the legal representatives of the Heirs of L.M. Montgomery Inc., as well as the senior Montgomery scholars. Perhaps it’s either laugh or cry – because the joke, after all, is on us.

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard described what he called “simulacra”: copies of things that no longer exist – or never did to start with, as in his example of Disneyland’s Main Street U.S.A. – which leave us feeling that nothing is real anymore. In the past few years, the theme-parking of the Green Gables site has pushed it even further in the direction of the unreal. All of the farm’s outbuildings have long since disappeared; now there’s a big new barn with a farming museum, a theatre, a café, washrooms masquerading as a woodshed, and of course the obligatory gift shop.

Although the short film that all visitors see in the welcome centre explains that Green Gables is based on a fictional location, many tourists – some of whom had never heard of Anne before visiting P.E.I. – think she was a real person, or that Montgomery lived here. Even the diehard fans have been known to cry out when they see “Anne’s Room,” “There’s the slate that Anne broke over Gilbert’s head! There’s her dress with the puffed sleeves!” despite the fact that Anne and Gilbert weren’t real people.

I walk across the narrow hall to “Marilla Cuthbert’s Room,” where the character’s infa-

mous amethyst brooch (or the “*amnesty* brooch,” as our young tour guide pronounces it) glitters in the sunlight pouring through the lace curtains onto the old bureau. I find myself musing that the hall wallpaper, a sensual floral print in Georgia O’Keeffe colours, would probably have made the prim Marilla blush. Then I remember that Marilla is a character in a novel, and mentally slap myself. “During your visit to Green Gables,” says the narrator of the welcome film, “use your imagination, and perhaps you too can ... catch a glimpse of Anne’s spirit.” But there’s really nothing left for my imagination to conjure up.

This sort of thing irks some academics mightily, but there is a perverse pleasure to be found in the inherent ironies. On a warm Sunday afternoon, I drive the half-hour from Charlottetown to Cavendish with Jennifer Litster and Ben Lefebvre, a puckish young man who has recently finished his master’s thesis on Montgomery at the University of Guelph – and who is the only man to give a paper at this year’s conference. Just down the road from Green Gables, the privately run “Avonlea: Village of Anne of Green Gables,” opened in 1999, is an awkward pastiche of locations from both Montgomery’s and Anne’s lives. There’s a real church that was moved from a nearby town, and a fishing shanty, though the seashore is a kilometre away. In the actual schoolhouse where Montgomery taught, transported from yet another village, an actor playing the writer bores children silly by rambling on about her life story. But in and among Anne of Green Gables Chocolates, the Raspberry Cordial Bottling Co. and the barn are actors playing the characters Montgomery created.

“It’s truly bizarre to see Maud *and* Anne running around in a village that never existed in this form, even in the novels,” says Lefebvre, shaking his head, though his appreciation for camp has him posing for photos with both actors and purchasing Anne toenail clippers. When we come across a performer playing Avonlea town gossip Mrs. Rachel Lynde, he and Litster take the poor woman to task on a point of authenticity in her portrayal. Minutes later, in the church, Lefebvre sits down at a piano and begins to play the treacly theme from Kevin Sullivan’s *Anne* series (which makes me a tad misty-eyed). “Sometimes,” admits Lefebvre, “I’m a little embarrassed at how much I’m enjoying myself.”

A cynic would say that academics simply justify their love for pop culture by clothing it in a lot of theoretical jargon. I’m not that cynical – some of the academics I meet at the conference are a pretty unsentimental lot. But

even they seem to soften their attitudes as the weekend unfolds.

A bus takes us to Park Corner for a reception at Silver Bush, the former home of Montgomery’s uncle and aunt John and Annie Campbell, which is now named for another of the novels, *Pat of Silver Bush*, and run as a museum by their great-grandson, George Campbell. Some Japanese tourists choose to get married in the parlour, where Montgomery wed the Rev. Ewan Macdonald. The wedding package includes the hymn that was played at Montgomery’s ceremony, reproduced on the original organ, as well as a horse-and-buggy ride with “Matthew Cuthbert” as the driver. (“The Japanese are a little confused,” explains Kate Macdonald Butler.)

It certainly seems an inauspicious start for a marriage. At Montgomery’s wedding dinner in that house, she later recalled in her journal, she felt that “if I could have torn the wedding ring from my finger and so freed myself I would have done it!” Though she claimed the mood passed, she went on to endure, by her account, an unhappy marriage to a man who barely read a word she wrote.

We reboard the bus and drive to the homestead site for the torchlight walk, pursued not only by mosquitoes but also by a CBC cameraman and reporter. Karen Macfarlane, who was so cynical about this event beforehand, says later, “At first I thought it sounded like some kind of Ku Klux Klan parade,” and in fact that’s exactly what we will look like on *The National* the next night. But it doesn’t feel that way at the moment. John and Jennie Macneill have simply put torches in the ground so that we can see, and they give us a guided tour.

OK – maybe for me there *is* something sacred about the hole in the ground. “Ruins,” writes Parks Canada historian James de Jonge in *Making Avonlea*, “can reveal a powerful story.” The fact that the house is missing doesn’t make the story any less compelling: Montgomery was brought up by her maternal grandparents on this farm after her mother died and her father decamped to the Prairies and started a new family. She cut short her education and teaching career to look after her grandmother, publishing four novels while helping run the local post office out of the kitchen. Because she wasn’t a male, the house was willed to her uncle. Before her grandmother’s funeral was over, she had arranged to move out and marry, at the age of 36, after a five-year engagement.

The house had been poorly maintained and was never lived in again; after the success of *Anne*, it began to attract sightseers who

carted away bits of shingle and old pots. Apparently irritated with both his niece and the tourists, her uncle John Macneill (the current John's grandfather) tore the place down. "It became a myth that the author lived at Green Gables," says Jennie Macneill. "The old folks who remembered she had actually lived on our farm were all dead." Then came the first volume of the journals, which Jennie and John read avidly. "We realized this was our heritage, and we thought it was time folks found out how much she loved her grandfather's place, and how much it influenced her writing," says Jennie.

Nobody seems to know what will happen to this place when Jennie and John are gone. None of their four children could make a living from it. If it were designated a National Historic Site, some funding might be made available, but not for operations. So far nothing has come of the Macneills' application. For one thing, it's rare for a person to have more than one site designated in her honour: Montgomery herself is already officially a "National Historic Person," and the manse at Leaskdale, Ontario, where Montgomery went to live after her marriage, was designated a National Historic Site in 1997. (The "Maud-slept-here" phenomenon has spread in Ontario: the church in Norval where Montgomery's husband also served has been known to prop a stuffed Maud in the front pew. And in Bala, where she once stayed briefly and set the only one of her 20 novels that was not P.E.I.-based, the local museum re-enacts her arrival for a two-week vacation 80 years ago, complete with actors playing the author, her husband and two sons in a vintage car.)

In any case, it's anyone's guess whether others would be able to resist, as the Macneills have, the temptation to recreate the missing house. What makes the site distinctive is exactly what makes it unprofitable. In fact, there's a good chance that if the house had never been torn down, the site would now be the theme park Green Gables has become.

"We didn't rebuild the old house," says John, a slim, gentle man with a soft voice, "because we didn't want to make it commercial." He smiles at us. "This is for special people." Some of us "special people" likely squirm at the characterization, and others probably feel quite chuffed, but we all pay close attention. "We wanted you to be able to use your imagination, because that's what Maud did."

And I believe that's what we all do on this chilly June night. I don't think Karen Macfarlane is just being polite as she hangs on John's every word – he describes how he excavated the cellar, which had all but disappeared in the overgrowth, and struggled to keep alive the one original apple tree in the yard. As for me, I'm imagining the author gazing from the window of her little white room onto her beloved orchard, dreaming of literary success. I picture her drawing water from the well as she created the little girl who became my imaginary friend. And I think of the intense loneliness of the brown-haired orphan Maud, who resigned herself to marrying a man she didn't love because she saw no other option.

That's a lot of scope for the imagination for only two bucks. While Green Gables takes an imaginary creation and fills in the details for us, the homestead presents the literal foundation of something that was real but has succumbed to decay, allowing us to picture it for ourselves. The absence of the house evokes a powerful presence.

Standing in the firelit gloom at the homestead, we swat bugs and try to ignore the TV cameras as Jennie tells the story of Montgomery's life in Cavendish. A slender, white-haired woman with big pale blue eyes and a clear, strong delivery, she manages to seem both regal and girlish. "I don't need to tell you folks this, but I will anyway," she begins, and although we all know the story very well, we don't mind listening to it one more time.

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