



Classics in Short No.71: Anne of Green Gables

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Classics in Short

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Brian Alderson on L M Montgomery's **Anne of Green Gables**.

?Waifs of the World? abound in Storyland, but few more profitably than the centenarian **Anne of Green Gables**

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No pro

in the inky trade likes to pass up a good idea for a story and by 1904 the Canadian, Lucy Maud Montgomery (Maud to those who knew her), was indeed quite a pro. Her first effusion, a thirty-nine stanza ballad, had been published in a local paper just before her sixteenth birthday in 1890 and from then on came forth a seemingly unstoppable flow of verses and stories for magazines, whose requirements she studied carefully. In 1901 she went to Halifax, Nova Scotia and spent a year there working as proof-reader and journalist for a sister paper of the Halifax **Chronicle**.

Instant inspiration

thus followed her discovery of a news story which she noted as *?Elderly couple apply to orphan asylum for a boy. By mistake a girl is sent them?* and she began developing the potential of that event, setting it on Prince Edward Island, Canada?s smallest province. It was there that Maud had been born and brought up and it is generally acknowledged that something of her own childhood and much of her love for the place is celebrated in the book that finally emerged in 1908 as **Anne of Green Gables**.

You?d have to be an unenterprising pro

not to have made the most of the small drama that engendered the book. And, in recognising that, it is proper to envisage the impact that the book?s opening would have had on Maud?s earliest readers, lacking the benefit of knowing *?what happened next?* which now derives from Anne?s worldwide fame as classic heroine. (It is said that in Japan sales of the Avonlea series top twenty million copies.) Suspense is engendered straightaway as the curtain-twitching Mrs Rachel Lynde wonders why Matthew Cuthbert is taking the buggy into town dressed in his best suit of clothes when he ought to be sowing turnips. With his discovery of Anne, bereft on the station platform, suspense is further heightened over what her fate will be once he gets back home and has to reveal to his grim, spinster sister, Marilla, the mistake that has occurred.

The normally hen-pecked Matthew

shows unprecedented steel in nudging Marilla to an unwilling acceptance that Anne should stay at Green Gables and what follows becomes an extended justification of his faith in the child. On the ride home from the station he had been astonished (as perhaps are many readers too) by her loquaciousness and by her command of a vocabulary beyond any discourse to be found among Avonlea?s citizens, and through this he perceives a resilience of spirit that demands

sympathy and nurture. (I do not find the explanation of how she gained her intellectual capacities, as given in the recently published prequel to **Green Gables** [reviewed above on p.25], very convincing.)

And so the book evolves

into that familiar form of *Bildungsroman* where, episode by episode over some five years, Anne proves herself to be capable of reform from a jabbering air-head to a mature and responsible young lady, winning a scholarship and all set to start training to become a teacher. She makes a notable place for herself in the activities of the small-town populus ? such that one is occasionally reminded of life at Ambridge before sex was invented ? and, willy-nilly, as the book concludes, Maud?s enthusiastic audience is yelling for more. (She does not seem to have been as keen on the idea as her publishers and came to see the saga as a burden ? and one which eventually led to a nine-year court-case over their unauthorised use of inferior copy.)

In a letter

to a youthful Mary Baldwin ? she who later married the Rt Hon Harold Wilson ? Maud confessed to dissatisfaction with much of her own work and remarked that her own favourite among her books was not **Green Gables** but a yet more autobiographical sister-story: **Emily of New Moon**, published in 1923. She also implies that both books were not really conceived as ?for children? (and indeed the first publication of **Green Gables** as a Penguin saw it published by Kaye Webb in her ?Peacocks? ? an early stab at a YA series ? and the whole Avonlea ?chariot?, at whose wheels Maud saw herself dragged, surely belongs with such bestselling middlebrow vehicles as the ?Whiteoaks? collection by that other Canadian, Mazo de la Roche).

What saves Green Gables

from being just another tale of everyday country folk is not Anne?s *Bildungsroman* at all, but that of Marilla. Anne?s volatile character and her rather forced long-term antagonism towards he who will become the Boy-Friend are stuff of a hundred such narratives ? carried along by Maud?s often vivacious and sometimes satiric writing. But stern Marilla, unwilling to compromise on the entrenched proprieties of those in her station, is a character to be reckoned with. Her creator may occasionally give us authorial insights into her burgeoning recognition of Anne?s qualities and her growing love for her as the daughter she could never have: ?dismayed at suddenly finding herself inclined to laugh?, or, later, ?holding [Anne] tenderly to her heart, wishing she need never let her go?, and it is this transformation in her character that powers the book beyond the ruck.

And ruck there was indeed.

Anne of Green Gables was in no way original as a tale of an outcast girl finding a way for herself in ?the wide, wide world?. Those very words belong to the title of one of the earliest manifestations of the genre (first published in New York in 1850): six-hundred pages devoted to the tearful and prayerful adventurings of Eleanor (coincidence) Montgomery after she is sent to her gruesome Aunt Fortune when her feckless father and ailing mother head off for Europe. That book was a bestseller in both America and Britain (mocked by Kingsley in **The Water Babies**) and was to be followed by others of the same kidney ? mostly American: Martha Finley and **Elsie Dinsmore**, whose tribulations ran to thirty volumes; the still-honoured sequence involving the ?little women? whose father was away at the war; Katy and her doings; and the ineffable Pollyanna.

For our purposes here though,

the most intriguing is Kate Douglas Wiggin?s **Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm**. First published in 1903, this bestseller treats of the exile of an all-too rumbustious member of an all-too large family to the chill care of two maiden aunts. (We first experience *her* garrulity, as we did Anne?s, on the buggy-ride to her new quarters.) Like Anne she is irrepressible; like Anne she is shown maturing through several years in her adoptive town, winning everyone?s esteem; and like Anne she thaws the icy disciplines of Aunt Miranda, a much less attractive personage than Marilla. Did Maud, I wonder, up in the Island, writing the first classic Canadian girlhood story, earlier encounter the work of Kate Douglas down in the

States? Is Rebecca an influential New England relative of Anne?

The cover illustration by Lauren Bishop is from the 2008 Centenary Edition published by Puffin (978 0 14 138424 5) at £9.99 hbk.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.



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