



Looking Glass Lore

Jeffrey Canton, editor



Why Canadian Writers Love Emily of New Moon

by Jeffery Canton

One of the most interesting chapters in Arlene Perly Rae's *Everybody's Favourites: Canadians Talk About Books That Changed Their Lives* focuses on L.M. Montgomery's Emily trilogy -- *Emily of New Moon* (1923), *Emily Climbs* (1925) and *Emily's Quest* (1927). Adult novelists Alice Munro, Anne Shortall and Jane Urquhart, critic Val Ross, children's book writers Budge Wilson and Kit Pearson all eloquently describe the effect that these three books had on their subsequent careers as writers. In *Writing Stories, Making Pictures: Biographies of 150 Canadian Children's Authors and Illustrators*, Mary Alice Downie and Claire Mackay also testify to the influence of the Emily books.

There is little doubt that L.M. Montgomery is the single most influential writer in the Canadian children's literature canon. Over and over again, children's and adult writers alike cite her 1908 classic, *Anne of Green Gables* and its sequels as well as books like *The Blue Castle*, *Jane of Lantern Hill* and *The Story Girl*. But it is the Emily books that seem to have had the most pervasive influence on contemporary Canadian writers.

In Sheila Egoff's classic overview of Canadian children's literature, *The Republic of Childhood*, *Anne of Green Gables* is the only one of Montgomery's works included in Egoff's evaluation, and Anne herself receives only the most cursory of nods. However, in *The New Republic of Childhood*, written with Judith Saltman, Montgomery is re-evaluated and we discover a greater interest in and appreciation for Emily than for Anne. Egoff and Saltman include a quote from the venerable author herself, circa 1920, who, after writing seven Anne novels, wanted to be finished with the red-headed heroine: "I am done with Anne forever. I swear it as a dark and deadly vow. I want to create a new heroine..." (p.37) "She is indeed altogether different from Anne, physically and emotionally," write Egoff and Saltman. "She has 'black hair and purplish gray eyes' and is far more introspective and creative than her more popular rival. The Emily books have a greater continuity than the episodic Anne series, for at the core of them is Emily's desire to be a writer... The great difference between the Anne and the Emily books can be found in the character of Emily. Unlike Anne, she will not lose the personal qualities that made her so attractive as a child, nor will she give up her literary aspirations. At the end of *Emily's Quest* one feels that her forthcoming marriage will nurture her ambitions to be a writer rather than impede them..." (p.37)

I came to Montgomery as an adult reader. Montgomery just wasn't popular fare with boys who were serious readers, and she probably doesn't fare any better with boys today. Indeed, not one male writer cites Montgomery's books as an influence in *Everybody's Favourites*. Though I grew up in a household full of copies of the Anne books, I never had any desire to read about Montgomery's red-headed spitfire. The only Anne in my life was the comic book heroine, *Little Orphan Annie*. By the time I did read *Anne of Green Gables*, I already had had some sense of who and what she was all about. Like many Canadians, I experienced Anne first as a theatre-goer (I just adored the musical as a teenager and at one point knew all the lyrics!) and I'd seen the popular made-for-television mini-series. And I have to admit that I didn't like *Anne of Green Gables*, not one bit. I found Montgomery's prose devastatingly sentimental and awash with a strain of Christian morality that I just couldn't stomach. What, I had to wonder, was all the fuss about?

I decided that I'd try reading *Emily of New Moon* and give L.M. a second chance. But I didn't start the



Emily books with great hopes as I'd been quite disappointed by Montgomery the first time round. Of course, I also came to Emily with the knowledge that writers like Alice Munro, Jane Urquhart, Val Ross, Kit Pearson and Budge Wilson had all been greatly moved by these books. Could I really be unable to find something of the magic that each of these writers had once discovered in Montgomery's pages?

Emily of New Moon and its sequels have indeed made me re-evaluate my opinion of L.M. Montgomery. Not that I am going to go back and read through the Anne books or suddenly decide that the life for me is in Avonlea! Spunky Emily Byrd Starr and the family and friends who surround her have, however, provided me with a thoroughly rich imaginative experience that I am rather sorry only to be experiencing now. I finally understand what it is about these three books that has so moved more than three generations of readers young and old.

Watching Emily Starr grow and develop as a writer is certainly the most engaging aspect of the Emily books -- young readers should be encouraged to read these novels to discover just how much work it takes to be a writer. But I also watched with fascination as Emily worked her way into the hearts of even the proudest members of the Murray clan. I adored her fights with the tempestuous Ilse and her friendships with the irrepressible Perry and the artistically-minded Teddy. I couldn't stand Dean Priest and the way he worked himself into Emily's soul and I cried just as hard as Emily did when Mr. Carpenter, her beloved teacher and mentor, died. Aunt Elizabeth, Aunt Laura, Aunt Nancy and Aunt Ruth have become part of my family too. I am looking forward to meeting new friends and being re-acquainted with old ones when visiting New Moon and Priest Pond and Lofty John's bush again and again when I read and re-read my Emily books. Any adult who has voracious young readers in his or her life should introduce them to Emily Starr -- and that goes for boys too!

What is it about the Emily books that will delight a reader coming to them for the first time? As Arlene Perly Rae writes in *Everybody's Favourites*, "These are engrossing and beautifully written stories about growth, integrity and self-actualization whose writing, themes and captivating central character I relished when I first encountered them years ago, and still find equally illuminating. It cannot be a coincidence. So many women -- most of them writers -- love a particular set of books about a Canadian orphan, a gifted, stubborn, passionate, introspective and romantic heroine who is, and this is most important, determined to become a writer. Like her creator, Emily never relinquishes that dream." (p. 91)

For Alice Munro, it's the hidden depths of *Emily of New Moon* that were the most revealing: "What mattered to me finally in this book, what was to matter most to me from then on, was knowing more about that life than I'd been told, and more than I can tell." (p. 95) Kit Pearson describes Emily as the "best portrayal of a creative child that I have ever read." (p.95) These books inspired Budge Wilson to write down her thoughts, feelings and stories in "Jimmy-books" -- blank notebooks -- of her own. Like Emily, Budge (albeit at 21 and not 14) judged her own journals as "over-emotional drivel" and burned them in the kitchen stove! According to Val Ross, *Emily of New Moon* "is probably a child's first introduction to literary criticism, because it eavesdrops on Emily going over her bad poetry and discarding the most purple excesses." (p.98)

I'd like to thank Arlene Perly Rae for bringing these writers together and the writers for sharing their experience of this book with me. I've not only developed a new respect for Lucy Maud, but I have discovered a series of books that I will remember always. Jane Urquhart's observations on the Emily books come closest to my own, and I'll close with her eloquent summing up of the series. Writes Urquhart, "This is what Montgomery has given us, then, in Emily, particularly Emily Climbs, a portrait of the young creative spirit of this country at adolescence -- a time that is both immensely fertile and heartbreakingly fragile. Out of the raw materials of the best of her own life, she has created a world in which that young spirit can flourish and has peopled it with characters who either assist or resist the heroine and her calling, but who are, nevertheless, always drawn with great love. And she has given us a landscape, both inner and outer, that we are able to recognize as our own." (p.102)



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