

Anne of Green Gables and L.M Montgomery

Why is L.M Montgomery, to this day, one of the best-known Canadian Authors, and how did growing up Canadian affect her writing?

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L.M. Montgomery, the author of the famous *Anne of Green Gables*, may have been both depressed and suicidal. Both the author and many of her books are far more than they initially appear, in fact, with darker themes and hidden secrets. Montgomery's personal life was interesting and quite dramatic for someone living on the tiny island of PEI. She wrote many books with strong, deep themes and morals. These writings were deeply inspired by her own life and personal sorrows, deepening their meaning and significance. Of course, due to her fame, she has forever impacted Canadian writing and tourism, making it bigger and better than ever before. L.M. Montgomery is one of Canada's best known authors because of her thrilling personal life, *Anne of Green Gables* and her many other works, the connections that can be drawn between her life and her writing, and her impact on Canada.

Given her most famous novel was set in quaint PEI and followed the life of a cheerful young girl, you might assume Montgomery's life was fairly tame, as well. But that would be far from the truth. Shortly after she was born, on November 30, 1874, in Clifton,—now New London—PEI, things were already taking a turn for the worse. Her mother, Clara Woolner Macneill, died of tuberculosis when Montgomery was just twenty-one months old. Montgomery claims her first memory was of seeing her mother's corpse. "I did not feel any sorrow," she writes in her autobiography, *The Alpine Path: The Story of My Career*, "for I did not know what any of it meant. I was only vaguely troubled. Why was Mother so still? And why was Father crying? I reached down and laid my baby hand against Mother's cheek. Even yet, I can still feel the coldness of that touch." Possibly due to the tragedy of his wife's death, Hugh John Montgomery moved west to Prince Albert, leaving his daughter to live with her grandparents. She grew up in quaint, cheery PEI, but one can't help but think even the beginnings of Montgomery's life were steeped in tragedy...

Montgomery's life was not always so dark, of course. As she grew, she immediately began to write, and this brought her great joy. Her first published work was a poem titled "On Cape Le Force," which made its way into the *Charlottetown Patriot* in 1890. As she enrolled in and completed a teacher's training course, she continued to publish short stories and poems, making decent money from it. From 1895 to 1896, Montgomery studied English literature at the Halifax Ladies' College at Dalhousie College, continuing to write all the while. But her life would not stay calm for long. As per the expectations of the time, Montgomery was expected to marry and have children, and she had put it off long enough. Furthermore, she did not have much say in who she was to wed. Her family chose her distant cousin Edwin Simpson to be her husband. This was devastating for the young author. Her heart belonged to Hermann Leard, a farmer, even after he died of influenza in 1899. Needless to say, she broke off the engagement with Edward. Instead, she chose to marry the minister Ewen Macdonald in

1911, shortly after her grandmother's death. They had three sons: Chester, Hugh (who was stillborn), and Stuart, in 1912, 1914 and 1915. For the next 30 years, even while raising children, Montgomery wrote nearly constantly. The worst was behind her. Montgomery lived peacefully until the age of 67, when she died on April 24, 1942, in Toronto.

Now, you may wonder when *Anne of Green Gables* was written, in this tumultuous life of Montgomery's. That, however, is a bit complicated. The book itself was published in 1908, in the lull between her engagement to Simpson and her marriage to Ewen. However, the manuscript was completed in 1905, but it was rejected by every publisher Montgomery sent it to. She kept it in a hat box until 1907, when she finally secured a publishing deal with L.C Page in Boston. It was a success. *Anne of Green Gables* sold over 19,000 copies in the first five months, and was reprinted 10 times in the first year. Especially in Japan and Poland, both of which were hit hard during World War 2, the themes of resilience and finding yourself were appreciated, giving the series instant popularity it retains to this day. Globally, *Anne of Green Gables* alone has been translated into 36 or more languages, along with braille, and adapted more than 2 dozen times. Altogether, over 50 million copies of all of Montgomery's work have been sold globally. This includes more than 500 short stories, 21 novels, 12 short story collections, 2 poetry collections, a collection of letters and journals, and 1 non-fiction book. This enormous body of work is made slightly more believable when you look at some of the quotes from Montgomery's journals. "I love books," she wrote when she was just fourteen. "I hope when I grow up to be able to have lots of them." In her autobiography, she says, "I cannot remember a time when I was not writing, or did not mean to be a writer." Clearly, her long and decorated writing career was a dream come true.

Many of Montgomery's famous books, *Anne of Green Gables* particularly, took inspiration from their author's life. Anne's very existence was inspired by Montgomery hearing about a couple meaning to adopt an orphaned boy and getting a girl. Like Anne, Montgomery loved the beauty of PEI more than anything—the island is the setting for 20 of her 21 novels. Events from her life are also mirrored, as her most famous protagonist took a teacher's course and often mused about how wonderful it would be to marry a minister, both of which Montgomery did. On a darker note, because she was so distant from her parents, Montgomery often thought of herself as an orphan, distracting herself with books and romanticism, like Anne. Anne also suffered similar tragedies to her author—just as Montgomery's grandmother and grandfather died fairly unexpectedly, Anne's one and only father figure, Matthew, dies suddenly near the end of *Anne of Green Gables*. This is not exclusive to *Anne of Green Gables*, though. Many of her novels have themes of motherhood, orphaned protagonists, or children in loveless

relationships, as well as other darker undertones. Her novel *The Blue Castle* was banned in some libraries for its themes of religious hypocrisy, and for showing the life of an unwed mother. Suffice it to say, there was more to Montgomery's novels than empty cheer; there was a deeper, darker side to it all, as she drew from the rich well of inspiration her life provided her. This, I think, is one of the many reasons she is one of Canada's best-known authors.

As Montgomery grew older, it seemed she could no longer use her writing as a way to escape her demons. The author's death, previously assumed to be due to heart failure, is now considered to have possibly been a suicide. In 2008, on the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Anne of Green Gables*, Montgomery's granddaughter, Kate MacDonald Butler stepped forward, and voiced the family's suspicions. To quote the Canadian Encyclopedia, "*She explained that her father —Montgomery's youngest son, Stuart Macdonald— had found a note by his mother's bedside asking for "forgiveness."* This note had been kept secret by the family ever since. Macdonald Butler stated that the family's motive for coming forward with the news was to help lift some of the stigma surrounding mental illness. She noted that Montgomery, like her husband Ewen, also suffered from depression, and that 'she was isolated, sad and filled with worry and dread for much of her life.' This was especially true in her later years when Ewen's condition was more pronounced." In my research, I have found that the possible suicide note read as follows, "*I have lost my mind by spells and I do not dare to think what I may do in those spells. May God forgive me and I hope everyone else will forgive me even if they cannot understand. My position is too awful to endure and nobody realizes it. What an end to a life in which I tried always to do my best in spite of many mistakes.*"

However, despite how cut-and-dry this may seem, some do debate if Montgomery's death was really intentional. University of Guelph professor Mary Rubio, a leading authority on the author and her work, argues the note may instead be part of a diary. On the top of the note was written the number "176", which she believes to be the page number of this diary entry, which Montgomery perhaps planned to transcribe by typewriter. However, Rubio said that not only was Montgomery dependent on barbiturates, she agrees Montgomery was "suffering unbearable psychological pain." A month before her death, Montgomery had told a friend, "she had doubts that she would still be there in a week." In her biography, *Lucy Maud Montgomery: The Gift of Wings*, Rubio has this to say, "Maud's comment... tips the evidence in the direction of a premeditated death by someone who was in the grips of a major depressive episode, and may or may not have understood that she was dependent on drugs that were killing her."

As for the reason for her depression, we do not know, but her misfortunes were many, especially in her later years. Montgomery's own son, Chester Macdonald lived in her basement and was reportedly cruel to her, only intensifying the pain that later forced her to rely on sedatives. Montgomery's husband, Ewen, was admitted to a sanatorium in 1934. She died only eight years later, sad and alone.

However, even if Montgomery's life and work may have taken a toll on the writer herself, it certainly was best for Canada. Before *Anne of Green Gables* was published, most people outside of Canada were unaware the tiny island of PEI even existed, but by 1935, Montgomery had been named an Officer of both the Order of the British Empire and the Artistic Institute of France, bringing Canada's smallest province to the world stage. She is the first Canadian woman to be a member of the British Society of the Arts and has been labeled a Person of Historical Significance in Canada. In 1924, the *Toronto Star* declared Montgomery one of the twelve greatest women in Canada, and on Canada Day of 1999, she was deemed one of the top 20 Canadian heroes. Because of her lengthy list of titles, many places have been glorified through association with her, including L.M Montgomery Park, named for its proximity to her Toronto home in 1983. Her home in Leaksdale, Ontario, and the Green Gables area in Cavendish, PEI were named National Historical Sites in 1997 and 2004, and her manse in Norval, Ontario was purchased by the L.M Montgomery Heritage Society in 2017, to be turned into a museum. Out of all these places, the Green Gables Heritage Place alone garners over 125,000 visitors annually, boosting PEI's tourism industry immensely. "*Anne of Green Gables: The Musical*" holds the Guinness World Record for "longest running annual musical theatre production," and between 1965 and 2015, over 2.1 million have seen the musical in Charlottetown alone. Because of its fame, *Anne of Green Gables* has become a registered trademark, co-owned by the island of PEI and Montgomery's heirs. In 2024, a \$1 coin was issued to mark 150 years since Montgomery's birth. This author's biggest achievement, in the grand scheme of things, was simply putting Canada on the map.

As you can see, Montgomery was an interesting historical figure and writer, largely because of her personal life, writing, the connection between both, and her impact on Canada. Her life was treacherous and tragic, making her interesting to research. Her writings center around themes of motherhood and self-discovery, but still vary in tone, characters, and plot. She brought aspects of her personal life into her novels and poems, stifling her fears of judgement. Because of her fabulous, lush writing and prose, she has become famous, and helped Canada seem important in the eyes of the world. I advise you all to read *Anne of Green Gables*, now that you have heard my take on it. While some may dismiss it as simply a cheery, feel-good-book, it can be that and much more, revealing deeper lessons all of us could stand to learn.

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