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The ‘Niceness’ of Belonging: A Critical Review of Irene Gammel, ed. *Making Avonlea: L. M. Montgomery and Popular Culture*. University of Toronto Press 2002.

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Anne of Green Gables is one of those books you feel almost guilty liking, because so many other people seem to like it as well. If it’s that popular, you feel, it can’t possibly be good, or good for you.

(Margaret Atwood *L. M. Montgomery and Canadian Culture* 222)

In her introduction to the collection of essays in *Making Avonlea*, editor Irene Gammel points to the enduring popularity of L. M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). Gammel asserts “no other Canadian author has been able to create and sustain an industry that has supported an entire provincial economy for decades through tourism, consumer items, musicals and films. No other author has had Montgomery’s sustained power to export Canadian literature and culture around the world” (3). In view of the popularity of Montgomery’s writing both in Canada and internationally, the essays in this collection attempt to account for and query Montgomery’s “universality”— what is it that makes Montgomery’s literary landscape “equally popular in cultures as diverse as Canada, Japan, Germany, and Iran?” (12)

Ubiquitous in nineteenth-century British literature are orphan figures and outsiders; the young Montgomery had these models to draw on as an avid reader and aspiring writer at the turn of the century. There are also Canadian literary precedents of Anne Shirley — the

orphan girl who was supposed to be a boy but transforms from solitary outsider to community icon. For example, in Thomas McCulloch's *The Letters of Mephibosheth Stepsure* (1860), the young orphan Mephibosheth makes a similar transition from outsider to community leader; in his transformation we may read the values of Atlantic Canadian settler society. As Ann F. Howey notes in "Anne Shirley, Sullivan, and the Lady of Shalott," in a line continuing through Montgomery to the present we may read the isolated female artist figure in representations by Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro.

In addition to the continuing publication of *Anne of Green Gables*, many of Montgomery's subsequent story collections and novels such as the *Emily* series have been recently reprinted. Like *Anne*, these works have been adapted for film, lending credence to Gammel's insistence that Montgomery, as a writer of popular stories and novels, is an icon of Canadian culture. Therefore, according to Gammel, her writing serves as a representation of Canadian cultural values of her time and place. Furthermore, her international status demands attention to the Montgomery corpus as representing values and desires beyond Canadian boundaries.

The eclectic collection of essays comprising *Making Avonlea* follows Irene Gammel's earlier editorial collaboration with Elizabeth Epperly, *L. M. Montgomery and the Shaping of Canadian Culture* (1999). This first collection, its editors assert, is "the first systematic effort to investigate the question of the Canadianess of Montgomery's writing." Extending the section on Montgomery and popular culture in the earlier collection, *Making Avonlea* calls into question the traditional academic "polarization between high and low culture" which has tended to pay little attention to Canada's popular fiction. Exceptions to this exclusion are writers such as Ralph Connor and Nellie McClung

who wrote for both national and international popular audiences during the same early twentieth-century decades in which Montgomery produced her work. These early twentieth-century popular writers have received critical attention as a result of the burgeoning of Canadian literary studies since the early 1970s. However, the publication of Montgomery's journals and letters in the 1980s and conferences focussed on Montgomery's work held in the 1990s have had a dramatic impact on academic reception of her work.

The influence of the L. M. Montgomery Institute at the University of Prince Edward Island has boosted both popular interest in and scholarly research on her writing. The Institute's web site, [www.LMMontgomery.ca](http://www.LMMontgomery.ca), includes a "visitors' book" where readers can comment on their readings of Montgomery's books. This visitor's site comprises an ever-increasing list of names and comments numbering well into the thousands. On the academic side, in 2002 the Institute hosted the International L. M. Montgomery and Popular Culture Symposium at the University of Prince Edward Island. The papers selected for *Making Avonlea* were solicited from presenters at this conference and scholarly publications such as *Canadian Children's Literature/Litterateur canadienne pour la jeunesse* and *English Studies in Canada*. As Gammel asserts, although the book does not present one particular theme or unified theoretical stance, it hopes to further the understanding of popular culture as it has been analyzed by cultural theorists such as John Fiske, Pierre Bourdieu, John Frow and Dawn H. Currie.

*Making Avonlea* is divided into three sections: "Mapping Avonlea: Cultural Value and Iconography"; "Viewing Avonlea: Film, Television, Drama and Musical"; "Touring Avonlea: Landscape, Tourism, and Spin-Off Products." A useful bibliography at the end of the collection

lists both primary and secondary sources referred to in the contributors' essays. They range from Carole Gerson's "reception study" of Montgomery's writing both outside and inside academe to subjective accounts of popular "spin-offs" such as Tara McPhail's "Making Anne and Emily Dolls," and Tara Nogler's account of "My Life as Anne in Japan." This range from the academic to the personal formalizes the aim of this collection — the application of cultural theory's challenge to value distinctions between high and low genres and intellectual and popular cultures.

### **Mapping Avonlea**

In the first section, contributions cover topics from Carole Gerson's careful study of the reception and attitudes towards Montgomery's work during the past four decades to Cecily Devereux's examination of the debate about lesbianism in Montgomery's representations of desire for "bosom friends." Brenda R. Weber's "Confessions of a Kindred Spirit" is a personalized life-writing of her discovery of the Anne and Emily novels in girlhood, and her present seeking to span the emotional devotion of the fan with the intellectual rigour of the academic to decipher "cultural codes of meaning." Juliet McMaster explores the encoding of social control and female identity in attitudes towards hair in the Anne and Emily novels, asserting that "hair is a synecdoche for the whole person." Margaret Steffler compares the life writing of Montgomery's journals with the Anne and Emily characters in her fiction. Elizabeth Epperly introduces a little-known aspect of Montgomery's talent — her photography. Extending forty years, this visual record is further evidence of Montgomery's Romantic view of nature and the human spirit. Andrea McKenzie examines interna-

tional images of Montgomery's Emily series, explicating book covers of various translations for their encodings of the female according to cultural values. In the last essay in this first section, Irene Gammel examines erotic landscapes in Montgomery's *Emily* novels. Montgomery's own description of her visual inspiration calls it the "flash," igniting what Gammel sees as the erotic landscapes of her writing. She contends that the "flash" is the "key to Montgomery's popularity across different time periods, cultures, and nationalities."

### **Viewing Avonlea**

As this section's title suggests, the essays here focus mainly on adaptations of Montgomery's writing for film, television, and stage. The issue of adaptation and its positive or negative effects on both Montgomery's original texts and contemporary reception of them forms the main focus of several essays in this section. Drawing on critical response to Kevin Sullivan's three film versions, *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Sequel*, and *The Continuing Story*, Eleanor Hersey concludes that despite their departures from the original texts, "[j]ust as we have worked hard to claim recognition for the academic seriousness and the artistic complexity of Montgomery's popular novels, so we should show the same respect to Sullivan's popular films." K. L. Poe, on the other hand, decries "Sullivan's Anne" for the disempowerment of the female figure in his films. Ann F. Howey contends that whether "Sullivan was right to make these changes...is debatable." Furthermore, that scholars and other critics carry on the debate about Sullivan's film adaptations "marks Montgomery's success in creating an enduring popular heroine." Both Christopher Gittings and Benjamin Lefebvre criticize the film adaptations as coproductions in which he who pays the

piper calls the tune, so to speak. As a result, the series the *Road to Avonlea* reproduces the values of the Disney Channel, and the film version *Emily of New Moon* exudes cultural codes that represent present views of Canadian reality that include the Irish, Micmac and French Canadian presences, whereas Montgomery's original texts did not. George Belliveau discusses various film and stage adaptations of *Anne of Green Gables* from 1919 to 1998, focussing on the 1998 stage production for young audiences. He contends that the latter "propels Anne into new creative territory, making her come alive on stage with the strategies of a televisual age." The last in this section, Carrie MacMillan's essay presents a subjective "snapshot" describing the international appeal of the "longest-running musical in Canadian history"—*Anne of Green Gables: The Musical*. While the stage production of *Emily* at PEI's Confederation Centre of the Arts was discontinued after two seasons, "Anne has finished thirty-six years and keeps going...forever young."

### Touring Avonlea

Janice Fiamengo considers "a theory of the popular landscape in *Anne of Green Gables*." Fiamengo argues that "Anne's popularity tells us something about our contradictory desires for an authentic connection to the land." The landscape of Avonlea evokes a "before time," the representation of which appeals to readers of many cultures. In her unlikely comparison of Montgomery's popularity to that of Shakespeare and his subsequent move in the high classics of a later age, E. Holly Pike contends that "Montgomery wrote a popular culture genre, the girl's book, thereby, like Shakespeare, failing to meet contemporary 'artistic' or 'academic' standards, but appealing to a broad

audience.” Pike relies heavily on the Montgomery scrapbook archive, and the site of Avonlea/Cavendish in the commodification of Montgomery’s characters and landscapes. James De Jonge’s essay describes the evolution of Montgomery’s Cavendish home as an historical site. He observes that a “common thread in the recent development of the Cavendish home site and Green Gables is the emphasis on interpreting the life and career of L. M. Montgomery rather than her fictional world — a shift influenced in part by the publication of her extensive journals.” In her essay, “Consumable Avonlea: The Commodification of the Green Gables Mythology,” Jeanette Lynes attempts to “mediate between the two directions” of Montgomery’s legacy — the legitimization of Montgomery’s work in the academy by feminist scholarship, and its continuing strong presence in popular culture. This essay explores the Anne consumerism according to John Fiske’s three levels of commodification in popular culture.

The last three essays in the final section are expressions of personal experience with the commodification of Anne in popular culture in Canada and elsewhere. Tara McPhail discusses making Anne and Emily dolls and the empowerment of identification in owning one. Tara Nogler, “a shy but excitable redhead,” who grew up on PEI writes about her experiences as Anne in Hokkaido’s Canadian World, Japan’s recreation of Avonlea as a theme park. Daniele Allard focusses her field research into Japanese attitudes towards Anne according to the society’s *taishu bunka* (shared culture) and the proliferation of Anne Clubs in Japan. Alice van der Klei discusses Internet versions of North American Anne Clubs and “kindred identity.” As epilogue to the collection of essays in *Making Avonlea*, editor Gammel has included an excerpt from a letter sent by an Anne devotee, Beate Nock, from Germany. In the uncritical manner of popular readers, Nock conveys



her identification with the Anne character.

Thus, the final note in *Making Avonlea: L. M. Montgomery and Popular Culture* is a popular one sounded by an Anne fan from the international readership of Montgomery's writing. Interestingly, although the final sentence of Gammel's introduction insists that the collection is a "journey from small-town Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, through a popular culture empire that spans the world," there are sufficient "academic" essays to legitimize the volume as a scholarly contribution to writing on Montgomery's work. However, Gammel's comment comparing Montgomery readership to a culture empire is unfortunate in view of the development of postcolonialism in world literary studies; a culture empire based on the values of Montgomery's historical-political context would resemble those of the nineteenth-century British Empire. Moreover, the collection as a whole would have benefited from the inclusion of an explication of popular culture theory and theorists in the context of Canadian literary culture, thus clarifying the collection's aim of challenging value distinctions between high and low genres and academic and popular cultures.

The continuing appeal of Montgomery's work both at home and abroad is undeniable. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the present global context is one of physical and psychological displacement and the resulting loss of identity experienced by many. The appeal of the Anne character is partly her insight into her own situation of loss: "It's a million times nicer to be Anne of Green Gables than Anne of nowhere in particular, isn't it?" (*Anne of Green Gables* 60). Perhaps it is the enduring "niceness" of belonging that appeals to the international human subject's desire for identification on both levels of literary culture — academic and popular.

**Works Cited**

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