

**Dr. Sara Jamieson**

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- I am delighted to be able to share in celebrating this exhibit commemorating the legacy of Lucy Maud Montgomery on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth on November 30, 1874
  - most of my teaching and research is focused on contemporary Canadian writing, so I welcome this opportunity to talk about Montgomery, whose work was central to my reading life as a girl growing up in Brantford, Ontario
  - Montgomery was the author of more than 500 stories, 21 novels, two poetry collections, and numerous articles and essays in newspapers and magazines
  - but, of course, she is best remembered as the creator of Anne Shirley, a character whom no less a figure than Mark Twain called “the dearest and most moving and delightful child of fiction since the immortal Alice”
  - Anne of Green Gables* was an instant bestseller and has never been out of print since its first publication in 1908; translated into 36 languages, it has had a global reach that is, I think, unsurpassed by any other Canadian book; rightfully occupies a central place in the exhibit we are celebrating today
  - my own youthful engagement with Montgomery’s work was all about Anne; I can remember gulping down the seven books in the series, one after another
  - at that time I was blithely unaware of what writing all of those Anne books cost Montgomery, both professionally and personally, nor was I aware of her own rather ambivalent relationship with her most beloved character
  - trapped into producing sequel after sequel by the unfavourable terms of her contract with an unscrupulous publisher and by the pressure of an adoring but demanding reading public, Montgomery feared she would be “dragged at Anne’s chariot wheels for the rest of [her] life,” and she was sometimes frustrated and resentful at not being able to start new projects as often as she would have liked to
  - at other times, though, continuing to write about Anne was a source of comfort for Montgomery, allowing an imaginative escape from the disappointments and difficulties of her life, which included lengthy and bitter lawsuits against her publisher, worries about her children’s future in a world riven by two world wars, caring for a husband suffering from a mental illness that became
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increasingly severe while struggling herself not only with depression but with an addiction to the bromides and barbiturates that were prescribed to alleviate it

-as the accompanying website for this exhibit makes clear, it's important to set the sunniness and optimism for which *Anne of Green Gables* is often celebrated against the sense of despair that haunted Montgomery throughout her life and that makes her achievements as a writer all the more remarkable

-looking at the pieces in this exhibit has made me think about books as crafted things, and about how our engagement with the words on the pages between their covers is shaped by the look, the feel, and the smell of those covers and pages

-this sense of connection with the materiality of books is something that Montgomery herself felt very deeply

-in a 1917 essay called "My Favourite Bookshelf," she describes the "shabby old bookcase" where she kept her most treasured books, the ones that she has "read and re-read so often that they have acquired an aroma and a personality of their own, quite irrespective of their contents"

-Montgomery owned a lot of books, but she says in that same essay that these favourites were the only ones she "would make a desperate effort to save if the house were on fire"

-I vividly remember the aroma and personality of my own first copy of *Anne of Green Gables*: it was given to me by my mother, who had received it as a Christmas gift in the late 1940s, when she was 8 or 9 years old

-it had dark teal blue covers with the title and author's name written in dull gold lettering; it probably had once been covered by a dust jacket that been removed and lost long before, but otherwise it was in excellent condition

-that book was lost in a fire that destroyed the apartment building that my partner and I were living in 20 years ago; in looking around for things to save, we had to prioritize the cat, a choice that Montgomery, as a life-long devotee of cats, would surely have understood

-of course, that was a trade book, a very different thing from the book art we are celebrating tonight

-the art of making books was not unfamiliar to Montgomery

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-like those other literary children, the Brontës, Montgomery's first attempts toward writing a book went hand in hand with making a book

-living with her maternal grandparents in Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, she began keeping a diary at the age of nine, starting a habit of journalizing that she kept up for her entire life, until she died at 67

-that first diary was written on the only paper available to her: discarded "letter bills" from the village post office that was housed in her grandparents' home; she tied the papers together with thread and enclosed them in red covers

-anyone who has read Montgomery's 1923 novel *Emily of New Moon* will recognize this activity as something that Emily Starr also does; one of those details from Montgomery's own childhood that found its way into her fiction

-in some ways, Emily Starr is very similar to Anne Shirley: both are orphans, both are adopted into homes in which they feel unwanted and unloved, at least initially; both are highly imaginative and good with words; but where Emily differs from Anne is in her driving ambition, even as a child, to become a published author

-an ambition she shares with her creator; for Emily, as for the young Montgomery, writing is a compulsion, something she feels she must do, using whatever scraps of paper she can find

-I'd like to conclude my remarks by saying a few words about a couple of specific pieces in the exhibit

-book art is not my area of expertise, but I can share some of the thoughts that exhibit raised for me concerning its connections with Montgomery's work and its legacy

-one stand-out for me is Joanna Hiemstra's *Dear Old World*, which assembles fragments of text from *Anne of Green Gables* into a found poem that looks very experimental and modern; these are qualities that Montgomery's work is not generally known for and the perceived conventionality of her work did have a negative effect on its reception in certain quarters

-remember that her writing life spanned the transition from the late Victorian period to the mid-twentieth century, a time coinciding with the rise of modernism, when literary tastemakers in Canada felt that for Canadian literature to be taken seriously around the world, it had to be more

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modernist and manly than the kind of things that Montgomery was writing, and that it shouldn't talk about nature so much; as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, Montgomery's work was increasingly perceived as out of step with this agenda: too popular, too geared towards children, too feminine -despite her success, Montgomery was disappointed that her work, especially her poetry, was not taken more seriously as literature; she very much wanted to be seen as more than simply a children's author

-in view of this, I found it amusing to see her work recuperated and transformed in Hiemstra's piece into something very modern looking

-in Hiemstra's design of ocean waves I can't help but see a kind of visual echo of that famous Hokusai print of the ocean with Mount Fuji in the background

-this piece is not the only one in the exhibit that evokes Japanese art, Japanese paper-making techniques

-the other one that I'll focus on is Arielle VanderSchans' *Crazy Quilt: Anne of Green Gables*

-I really like how VanderSchans' evocation of a quilt affirms the domestic sphere that is so prominent in the novel, the household work through which women achieved their authority in the community (on the very first page we learn that Rachel Lynde's unquestioned status as a towering figure in Avonlea is partly based on the fact that she has knitted 16 cotton warp quilts)

-VanderSchan's quilt design is constructed from patches of Japanese tissue paper

-the piece evokes the kinds of decorative covers that Japanese readers often use to protect their books, and their privacy

-I think we can see this piece as a nod to the popularity of *Anne of Green Gables* in Japan ever since it was translated into Japanese in the 1950s, a time when the many children who had lost their families in the Second World War found resonance and hope in Montgomery's story of an orphan whose suffering is rewarded with a happy and loving home

-talking about Montgomery's popularity in Japan returns me to something I mentioned at the beginning of my talk: the global reach of Montgomery's work, which is loved in a lot of other places besides Japan and sometimes for similar reasons

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- before it was translated into Japanese, *Anne of Green Gables* was translated into Polish; the book has long had a devoted following in Poland where it was embraced in the belief that it could help to heal a national psyche traumatized by war and political turbulence
  - more recently, the novel has found an enthusiastic readership in Iran, another place scarred by revolution and political and cultural upheaval
  - according to scholar Andrew O'Malley, readers in Iran celebrate Anne not so much for her free-spiritedness and eccentricity, but for the family and communal bonds that she forms, and her perseverance and survival in the face of difficult circumstances
  - that Montgomery's novel still speaks to so many readers all over the world, that it continues to sustain so many different interpretations as those readers adapt it to their own cultural circumstances, is a key aspect of Montgomery's important and enduring legacy, and one that this exhibit appropriately captures
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