

# ANNE SHIRLEY: WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO CANADA?

A century after it was written, *Anne of Green Gables* continues to influence how people view Canada. Does Anne Shirley, the book's heroine, deserve to remain a Canadian icon?

By Allan Lynch

In 2008, one of the best-known Canadians turns 100. And while she never existed, 135,000 people annually trek to her "home," a national historic site. Such is the peculiar fame of Canada's best-selling literary star, Anne Shirley, or as she is better known, Anne of Green Gables.

Since her story was first published in Boston and London in 1908, Anne Shirley has enjoyed

a success and celebrity given to no other Canadian, real or imagined. While many people dismiss this Lucy Maud Montgomery tale as just a children's book, its popularity is staggering. In Canada, a book is considered a best-seller when it sells 5,000 copies. In its first century, *Anne of Green Gables* has sold more than 50 million copies and never been out of print.

The early success of *Anne of Green Gables*

encouraged Montgomery to write seven more Anne novels. In turn, *Anne of Green Gables* has inspired three Canadian-made-for-television movies (including *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Sequel* and *The Continuing Story*), at least two Hollywood movies, the popular CBC television series *Road to Avonlea*, and Canada's longest-running musical. *Anne of Green Gables – The Musical*, has been a main-



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ILLUSTRATION: SANDY NEGRAS

stay at the Charlottetown Festival for 43 years and has been seen by more than 2.25 million people in Charlottetown and another million on tour in Canada, the United States, England and Japan.

While the character of Anne Shirley, the orphan girl with carrot-coloured hair and a temper to match, leads her life in the strict social confines and narrow geography of rural Prince Edward Island, *Anne of Green Gables* has gone on wider and wilder adventures. Its translation into Swedish in 1909 prompted Astrid Lindgren, the author of *Pippi Longstocking*, to spend a whole summer playing Anne of Green Gables with her sisters. Mark Twain described Anne as “the dearest and most lovable child in fiction since the immortal Alice [in *Wonderland*].” During World War II, the Polish Resistance conducted a flourishing black market in copies of the book. At the same time, a copy of *Anne of Green Gables* left with a friend in Japan by New Brunswick missionary Loretta Shaw, who had to flee the country, was subsequently translated into Japanese. That was to prove providential to a generation of orphans in

post-war Japan. According to Elizabeth DeBlois, director of the L. M. Montgomery Institute at the University of Prince Edward Island, the only academic institute for a Canadian novelist, Anne’s story has “an intimate connection with the Japanese people. After the war, when Japan was absolutely devastated, they were looking for works of literature to help inspire optimism and hope within the population, and that is when *Anne of Green Gables* was introduced. For so many Japanese, it holds a special place.”

Anne’s intrigues didn’t stop with the war’s end. In the 1950s, *Anne of Green Gables* became entangled in an investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee. According to the Canadian actor, comedian and playwright Don Harron, he and composer Norman Campbell were working on a television musical based on the Anne books in Toronto. The program, which went to air in March 1956, almost didn’t. “During the writing, I kept going back and forth to New York doing television shows,” Harron recalls. At one point, I was there for an extended stay and I sent my lyrics through the CBC office in New

York, which was in the United Nations building. The lyrics never got to Toronto. We found out through the CBC rep that the McCarthy Committee was investigating the UN and, as part of it, the CBC. When they heard about *red soil* and *red hair*, they blocked transmission of the lyrics.” He laughs. “It was ridiculous.”

Eight years later, in 1964, Queen Elizabeth II attended the opening of the Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown. “Wayne and Shuster were doing a variety show,” says Harron. “They asked Norman Campbell if they could use his song ‘Anne of Green Gables.’ When the Queen went backstage, she neglected to tell Johnny Wayne how funny he was. She just said, ‘That is a pretty tune. Where is the rest of the show?’ So Mavor Moore, the artistic director of the Charlottetown Festival, phoned me in California and said, ‘That’s a royal command.’” The stage musical was born.

Anne’s popularity arises from the universality of the story, says DeBlois. “In a sense, everybody can identify with something in Anne’s world. We’re not all orphans, thank goodness, but a lot of people can sympathize



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with the things she's looking for in life because they're things everybody wants. She wants a home. She wants people to love her and she wants friends. Who doesn't want those things? It's a universal message."

While the message hasn't changed, some Islanders tend to think the character of Anne of Green Gables is a bit overdone. Two Island comedians, Rob MacDonald and David Moses, created a satirical sketch comedy revue called *Annekenstein*. Originally entitled *The Sad and Lonesome, Most Gruesome, Horrible, Miserable Death of Lucy Maud*, the satire pokes fun at all aspects of the Island's obsession with Anne. It includes "The World's Fastest Anne," which attempts to reproduce the popular musical, complete with songs, choreography and costume changes, in less than five minutes, setting what many younger Islanders see as an appropriate time limit to the story.

DeBlois is aware of this indifference or disdain. "Some people say she's overdone, but perhaps she has been popularized the wrong way," she suggests. "It's about looking beyond the braids."

For Kevin Sullivan, president of Sullivan Entertainment, who produced the *Road to*

*Avonlea* television series and has a new film set in the pre-Green Gables period, Anne is "a cultural icon. She represents a time and a place people don't want to let go of. The world Montgomery created had boundaries to it. We live in a world with no boundaries – physical, moral, etc. – and the world Montgomery conjured up is an antidote to the world we live in today. People hold that, need that and cherish it, and that's why Anne has easily made her way around the world, because she's feisty and outspoken, but she has an incredibly tender heart and is able to change people's lives."

As devoted as he is to the Anne story, Sullivan recognizes how passion for a beloved character can get out of hand. "The fact that she's endured has made her part of our vernacular. Anne has passed into the world as everybody's common denominator. Anne is on a par now with Joan of Arc, Cinderella or Snow White. She's a classic, and I suppose in some way when you have people like me making films about her it exacerbates the situation. I think there's a risk of turning it into a Mainstreet USA confection. People see the copy of the copy of the copy in their heads of a cute little feisty girl with red hair."

It's this perceived cuteness that most bothers Anne devotees. "I never did see Anne as a goody two-shoes because any kid who takes a slate and slams it over somebody's head because of their temper can't be," says actress Megan Follows. Follows, who at age 16 played Anne Shirley in the *Anne of Green Gables* TV movies, disagrees with those who dismiss *Anne of Green Gables* as a pretty period piece. A self-described *Wizard of Oz* fan who only read *Anne of Green Gables* when she auditioned for the role, Follows believes Anne's story tackles the challenges of gender and class. "It's easy to put a Pollyanna stamp on Anne, but I think it's a generalization which does a disservice to what Lucy Maud wrote. The sense of the authoritative voice of the elders, or the rigid black-and-white environment that that child comes into, is not romanticized. What that little girl does out of necessity, and for her survival, is create an extremely rich inner life. And it's her saving grace. It saves her when she's up against a tremendous amount of rejection, and what she falls back on – and what I would imagine is what Lucy Maud herself fell back on – is her creative spirit and the fact that she could see a tremendous amount of



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beauty in times and environments that could have been quite stark.”

Don Harron considers the book to be “a feminist statement. Anne is the loser who comes out on top,” he says. “The fact that she doesn’t take any crap from the boys makes her a feminist hero.”

The former governor general Adrienne Clarkson, who is on the international advisory board of the L. M. Montgomery Institute, agrees. “I think it is a feminist book. Anne makes sacrifices in the book. Anne does not go straight on to teachers’ college because Marilla is left alone when Matthew dies and she decides she’ll stay home and help Marilla. But that in no way holds her up because later on she goes to college after she’s got everything settled. She manages to make that balance between the personal and the professional, which is still a lesson to everyone.”

Clarkson says that at age 10, “I identified with her. To me she was somebody who helped me – and I think does help a lot of immigrants’ children – understand what Canada was like. To me it [the book] was kind of an ancestor.” In her own book, *Heart Matters*, Clarkson explains, “The Anne books gave me fictional

parents and grandparents who belonged in the place I had come to as a stranger. They helped me to become Canadian. And all of the Anne books taught me a lot about what a young Canadian woman could be.”

Toronto author, journalist and broadcaster Robert Fulford was a boy when he was introduced to Anne. He read the book to keep up with his sisters and mother, who loved the character of Anne. Later, as an adult reading *Anne of Green Gables* to his children, Fulford found a deeper message. “She is a symbol for all the people who feel they have no place in the world and came here by error. She is one of those characters who can actually face that down and say, ‘I’m here, deal with me.’ It is that which makes Anne a heroic figure.”

Equally important, for Fulford, is Montgomery’s impact on Canadian culture. “Over a number of generations she planted in the minds of Canadians the idea that notable and valuable works of literature could be written about this country. In order to make a literature you have to think it’s possible. Just like in order to go into business you have to see someone else do it to provide the model.”

The drawback to the character of Anne is

the way she plays into the mythology Canadians have of Canada and how the rest of the world views Canada as a result. “There’s a downside to a tremendous amount of Canadian literature, which is that authors don’t regard cities as part of our culture,” says Fulford. “Our culture exists in the country. We’ve had a number of painters in Canada who have caught the imaginations of people over the years. Quebec, Maritime, Ontario painters, every one of them has painted the wilderness or the rural world. There is no beloved painter of a city in Canada. America has about 100 because the American culture knows and accepts that it’s an urban culture. Now we are physically and demographically an urban culture. Anybody can look at the numbers and see most of us live in cities. But the culture we embrace is not that. ... Cities don’t seem so important to us.”

Critics may fault Lucy Maud Montgomery for the perpetuation of this Canadian fictional ideal, but should we blame her? Perhaps the continued fascination with *Anne of Green Gables* is simply a testament to the author’s talent and imagination. In *Anne Shirley* she created a character who has remained popular, controversial and much talked about even at 100. ■



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