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Interpreting war through monuments and stories: lifelong reading and L.M. Montgomery's Rilla of Ingleside

Interpretare la guerra attraverso monumenti e storie: lettura permanente e Rilla of Ingleside di L.M. Montgomery

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Abstract (EN)

More than a century after its conclusion, the impact of World War I remains consequential. This article addresses how this war has been commemorated, from the abstract expressions of national sorrow in war memorials and cenotaphs and Tombs of Unknown Soldiers to the individual particularities and grounded local reactions that are best evoked in a novel. Moving from the abstract to the specific, it investigates one articulation of living through the War years, in this case on the Canadian Home Front. L.M. Montgomery's Rilla of Ingleside was written for young readers. It has never gone out of print since its initial publication in 1921 and continues to be read today. The article similarly narrows the readership of this novel to a single example through a tightly defined autoethnographic case study of the author's ongoing relationship with this book, which began in 1961. What can we learn about lifelong reading from interrogating a single reader's introspection concerning a single title? How can we apply the particularity of these insights to a broader understanding of how reading inflects our lives?

Keywords: World War I, Rilla of Ingleside, case study, lifelong reading, autoethnography

Abstract (IT)

A oltre un secolo dalla sua conclusione, l'impatto della Prima guerra mondiale continua a produrre effetti significativi. Il presente articolo esamina le modalità attraverso cui questa guerra è stata commemorata: dalle espressioni astratte del lutto nazionale nei memoriali di guerra, nei cenotafi e nelle Tombe del Milite Ignoto, fino alle specificità individuali e alle reazioni locali, radicate nei contesti, che trovano nella forma romanzesca una delle modalità più efficaci di evocazione. Procedendo dall'astratto al particolare, il contributo indaga una specifica articolazione dell'esperienza vissuta durante gli anni della guerra, in questo caso sul fronte interno canadese. Rilla of Ingleside di L.M. Montgomery fu scritto per un pubblico di giovani lettori. Il romanzo, mai uscito di catalogo dalla sua prima pubblicazione nel 1921, continua a essere letto ancora oggi. Analogamente, l'articolo restringe il campo di osservazione del pubblico di lettori del romanzo a un singolo caso, attraverso uno studio autoetnografico rigorosamente delimitato del rapporto continuativo dell'autrice con quest'opera, iniziato nel 1961. Che cosa possiamo apprendere sulla lettura lungo l'arco della vita interrogando l'introspezione di una singola lettrice in relazione a un singolo titolo? In che modo è possibile applicare la specificità di tali intuizioni a una comprensione più ampia di come la lettura incida sulle nostre vite?

Parole chiave: Prima Guerra mondiale, Rilla di Ingleside, studio di caso, lettura per tutta la vita, autoetnografia

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1. Introduction

World War I changed the world in lasting and fundamental ways. Its significance may be described as monumental, in both the figurative and the literal meanings of the word. Surely few global events have been commemorated so broadly across many countries, with war memorials in innumerable small villages and cenotaphs in great cities. These edifices acknowledge the sacrifices of the war in largely abstract terms, just as the many Tombs of Unknown Soldiers pay respect to Everyman.

But the war did not occur in the abstract; it evolved as an accumulation of singular decisions and individual experiences. Public memorials, great and small, present a collective version of those distinctive events. For singularity, we must turn to other arts. One form of communication that is designed to convey definite and individual details is narrative, and one form of narrative that invites diverse interpreters to engage at the level of singular specificity is the novel. A novel can present fine details of a particular localised culture while remaining open to readers from elsewhere. As well as highlighting some of the collected values and abstractions of that specific community, its concrete grounding in a local setting permits it to describe causes, consequences, and random fluctuations in how a set of events develops. It can make a feature of arguments as common meanings are worked out. It may be addressed to a wide variety of readers, including the young, and it may become part of a lifelong cycle of returns and rereadings.

One Canadian novel for young readers performs this challenge in very precise ways, and its account of changing attitudes and accumulating social values through the years between 1914 and 1919 plays a potent role in sharpening our understanding of more abstract expressions of Canadian identity. *Rilla of Ingleside*, by L.M. Montgomery (2010), first published in 1921, is the concluding volume in the series that began with *Anne of Green Gables*. Rilla is Anne's youngest child, and the book recounts her growth over the four-plus years of World War I.

A novel as successful as *Rilla of Ingleside* has a broad readership, but, of course, every reader brings a singular repertoire to the book and reaps a distinctive experience, which shifts again on a later rereading. A public awareness of a book accumulates from multiple private experiences. Reading, as Barbara Bausch observes:

> modulates our relationship to ourselves and the world; it creates connections across time and space and is a site of society's self-understanding. However, reading is a black box that is difficult to fully apprehend: the act of reading produces something that cannot be derived from what is read alone (2025, p. 7).

In this article, I explore the interface between some of the abstract ways societies (and Canada in particular) represent and remember the events and implications of a major event like World War I and the particularities of how the fictional community of Glen St. Mary experienced that war. I also cross the borderline between public interpretations of that novel and the level of specificity of a single reader encountering the book at intervals over many decades. The purpose of this single focus on the shifting engagement of a single reader over a long timespan is to analyse how a book read in childhood may infuse adult understanding thereafter.

The reader whose internal responses are most accessible to me is, of course, myself. No doubt, I represent the smallest (and most convenient) convenience sample possible, but an auto-investigation has merits as well as weaknesses and it is important to be clear about both.

2. An autoethnographic case study approach

Interrogating my own reading experience with this novel allows me a degree of access to deep and tacit responses otherwise unavailable for inspection. It permits me to delve deeper into Bausch's "black box" than is possible for me to achieve with anyone else. Only with my own reading history am I able to probe what cannot be articulated – emergent responses, non-verbal images, sounds, cadences, and atmospheres. Addressing the work of other readers is confined to the limits of what they can find ways to express in a kind of translation of their private and implicit reactions; autoethnography makes more room for the tacit (Adams & Hermann, 2025, p. 3). I acknowledge that my explicit responses develop within a mental echo chamber of further "unspeakable" reverberations that are not eliminated simply because I cannot find ways to convert them into words. Additionally, the longitudinal advantages of a self-study are unmatchable by any realistic project involving other readers; in this case, I am able to reflect on many decades of living alongside an awareness of this novel.

I applied a larger version of this autoethnographic approach to a broad study of my own childhood reading materials (Mackey, 2016) and found it a generative route towards a public and expansive account of early literacy development, though, of course, with many caveats. A review of my book highlights the value of the singular case study, describing it as:

> a multidisciplinary analytical treatise that illuminates not only her path to literacy in a particular place and time but also a set of axioms and procedures that enables her readers to think about the complexities of literacy more generally as well as with other particular children in other particular places and times" (Keeling & Pollard, 2018, p. 206).

Of course, this approach is liable to errors caused by misremembering and outright forgetting. Its very eccentricities can reduce its generic value (though I argue that any single reading will come with its own set of associated idiosyncrasies, so it is not a problem that can readily be eliminated, and there is utility in explicitly acknowledging it). I do my best not to suppress responses that show me in an unflattering light, but the risk of unconsciously working to display my best readerly face can never be ruled out. And, at best, it is but one single example of a reader at work. Nevertheless, I believe this particular case is worth pursuing for the questions it raises.

As it happens, I have unusually explicit memories of some of my encounters with *Rilla of Ingleside*, and I draw on these singularities in order to illuminate more general points. I do not suggest that my own reading offers greater insights than others, and I cite other interpretations in the usual academic way. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that just as a novel offers a platform for communicating a distinctive set of events and experiences, so each reading of that novel is also unique. Aggregates and averages are important, but they are compiled from accumulated individual reports. A single reader's lifetime encounters with a single book, first read in childhood, may offer a productive case study for exploring larger questions.

I begin with some generalities concerning the Canadian experience of World War I and then turn to the single expression of some of those experiences that is *Rilla of Ingleside*. I subsequently narrow the focus even further by presentingsingular examples of my encounters with Montgomery's novel over time – and also of particular reading events in my life, some involving other texts that were infused and inflected by *Rilla*. Finally, I return to a broader lens to explore the place of individual readings in a larger literary context.

3. Canada's record of World War I

Although no battles were fought on Canadian soil, World War I was the source of many significant changes in Canadian society: socially, politically, financially, emotionally. The physical symbols of that epic conflict are ubiquitous across the country and also on the European battle sites: the war memorials; the military cemeteries; the multitudinous range of institutions bearing the word "memorial" in their nomenclature. All were constructed to incorporate and express the inexpressible: the scale of the widespread slaughter and the devastation of the consequent grief.

Sculptures, plaques, and assorted other images often render conceptual forms out of individual and personal models. David Macfarlane explicates the role of cenotaphs and memorial ceremonies and marches: what they really commemorate is an unfillable absence, a nothing:

> They substantiate. . . what never was to be, after the war was over. The best were gone by 1917, or doomed, and what the world would have been had they not died is anyone's guess. The war left their things unfinished: enterprises conceived, projects initiated, routes surveyed, engagements announced. And that's where it ended. Their fiancées waited for them forever, their mail went unanswered, their deals never closed. Their plans were left in rough draft, their sentences unfinished (1991 p. 189).

The gaps created by the millions of deaths of World War I persist through generations: lost brothers result in missing cousins through the line of descent. One of my brothers bears the name of our great-uncle who died in 1916 as a 19-year-old Sergeant in the Quebec Infantry and who is commemorated at Vimy. We are the grandchildren of his sister, but this uncle has no direct descendants of his own. Such echoes out of absence reverberate in many families, and, of course, not just in Canada.

The domestic realities of family bereavements, the economic fallout of the loss of a generation of young men, the physical and social devastation of vast swathes of Europe, and the first efforts to organize international institutions to prevent future wars were all consequences of the War. The British Empire was also altered. "The end of the First World War represented the beginning of a new era in the history of the British Empire, which was transformed into a regular international community, raising the importance of the overseas autonomous territories" (Valkoun, 2021, n.p.) The Dominion of Canada gained greater sovereignty through the 1931 Statute of Westminster. In contrast, its near neighbour, the Dominion of Newfoundland, where I grew up, could not repay its war debts and lost its independent status of self-government between 1932 and 1949, at which time it joined Canada as a province. Although she could not, of course, predict the detailed outcomes, Montgomery articulates a clear, explicit, and almost present-tense awareness that Canada's place and status on the world stage were being altered by how the country participated on the battlefield. She presents this knowledge as an argument for the righteousness of the war, despite its devastating impact.

4. A war story for girls

Despite the expression of such international implications, Rilla Blythe's war story is, in many ways, very humdrum, extremely local, and removed from what is conventionally considered as the main action of the conflict. Her three brothers enlist, and her two sisters work for the Red Cross in Nova Scotia, but Rilla represents the Home Front, back in Prince Edward Island. She takes in a motherless baby whose father is fighting overseas. She runs a branch of the Junior Red Cross. She conducts a nebulous romance with a highly eligible young soldier, though almost all their conversation occurs offstage, and Rilla can never quite gauge if this relationship is serious or a side-show.

The Ingleside experience of the war is conducted at a remove, and via excruciating time-lapses. Victories and defeats and casualty lists are conveyed, well after the event, by newspapers and letters; and then confirmed by long-distance phone calls to Charlottetown. Montgomery locates the agonizing wait for news in Glen St. Mary with temporal and geographical particularity: "There was just one great event every day – the coming of the mail. Even Susan admitted that from the time the mail-courier's buggy rumbled over the little bridge between the station and the village until the papers were brought home and read, she could not work properly" (Montgomery, 2010, p. 105). Days pass before the death of a major character is confirmed – long enough for the Blythe family to get their hopes up, so that the delayed news is perhaps even more crushing when it finally arrives.

Montgomery said that she wrote *Rilla* to describe how Canadian girls reacted to the War with "bravery, patience and self-sacrifice," and that the book belongs to these readers. A blurb on the dust jacket of my copy of the book captures her explanation, written in 1921: "[M]y other books were written for anyone who might like to read them: but 'Rilla' was written for the girls of the great young land I love, whose destiny it will be their duty and privilege to shape and share."

Benjamin Lefebvre has helpfully collected a set of contemporary reviews of *Rilla*, and while a few recognize the historical weight of this book, many of them simply opt for descriptions such as "wholesome" (2014, pp. 226, 230, 231, 234, 235), or "sunny" (2014, pp. 226, 232), "a charming little story for girls" (2014, p. 234) and "just the book to place in the hands of one's daughter" (2014, p. 234). Certainly, it was in the expectation of reading a girls' book that I first picked up this novel at the age of 12; at the time it had already been in print for 40 years. And, as a girl raised in the conventions of 1950s North America, I responded to this gendered message in terms that Montgomery herself would have recognised.

Notably, the book has remained in print in the 65 years since my first encounter with it, despite the dismissive tone of many of these early characterizations of its impact. Andrea McKenzie astutely points out the surprising longevity of what was initially presented and received as a lightweight romance for adolescents:

> Montgomery's text does not need recovering; it has been with us, read, and in print since the War. Montgomery thus holds a unique place in women's war literature and in Canadian war literature: she is perhaps the only English-speaking woman and the only Canadian author, male or female, to have written a contemporary war book that has maintained its place in popular culture since the War. She has also given us a uniquely Canadian version of war myths, focused on women and community, in place of male-combatant, British-based myths (2018, pp. 343–344).

5. Rilla's world

Montgomery not only named her specific, individual characters, she also supplied them with histories already known to her readers. Rilla, the youngest child of Anne Shirley and Gilbert Blythe, is born within the pages of *Anne of Ingleside* (a late insert into the series, published in 1939); she appears as a small child on the outskirts of the lively group of friends who romp through the chapters of *Rainbow Valley* (1919); and, at the outset of *Rilla*, she claims a birthright of participation and privilege that we recognize from earlier stories.

But in this novel, which Montgomery began to write on March 11, 1919 (Waterston & Waterston, 2016, p. v), a mere four months after the signing of the Armistice, Rilla's vision of the alluring potential of young adulthood is undermined by the devastation of global war. Again, the details are highly particularized. Rilla's adoption of a war baby may theoretically move her into the iconic territory of an abstracted wartime maternal figure. In the quotidian details of the narrative world, however, she brings home a baby in a soup tureen – the only available receptacle large enough to convey him. She is dogged in looking after him correctly, but it takes her many months to learn any genuine love for him. In similar ways, Rilla's friend and mentor, Gertrude Oliver, has prophetic war dreams fraught with symbolism – but another, humbler portent of victory and defeat in Europe lies in the mock-sinister doings of the Blythe family's bipolar cat, Dr. Jekyll-and-Mr. Hyde.

These quirky details are part of the network of particularities that makes a novel distinctive. Another important element is the timeframe of the characters inside their story. Jerome Bruner has eloquently pointed out that the inhabitants of a narrative live in their own present tense, with a relationship to the future that is best described in terms of the subjunctive mode, that is "trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties" (1986, p. 26). Characters in a narrative believe, they hope, they expect, they fear what is to come. But what they cannot do, by the very nature of the conditions of their composition, is *know* what happens next. If I describe *Rilla of Ingleside* as a novel set in the four years of World War I, basic historical knowledge makes it difficult for readers to overlook their own sense of the beginning-middle-end-ness of that war. But the characters do not know – cannot know – the end of the story in a realist novel. Furthermore, a successful novel not only places its characters in this situation but also entangles the readerly commitment of its interpreters in that unknowingness. At no moment in my entire history of encounters with *Rilla of Ingleside* was I not aware, at least vaguely, that Rilla's side emerged victorious. Yet as a reader, I am invariably caught up with her in the agony of suspense that dominates so many pages of the book. Richard Gerrig calls such readerly suspense "anomalous" (1998, p. 79) but it is entirely comprehensible if readers subscribe to the world view that is made possible in narrative terms through the perspectives of the characters.

6. My life with Rilla

Over the course of a long life, I have read *Rilla of Ingleside* a number of times. My repeated experiences with this book are, of course, private, highly specific, often difficult to articulate, and/or, even more often, simply forgotten. Nevertheless, just as a novel expresses public events in individual terms, so the responses of a single reader may contribute to a broader clarification of how a novel can move between personal and public reverberations.

I remember my first reading of the book only in general terms, but three post-reading experiences are vivid in my mind. I am still mortified to recall the first: my conversation with a classmate when we were both 13. She was reading *Rilla* for the first time, and I stupidly asked her if Walter had died yet. He had not, and she was rightly angry that I had destroyed the emotional impact of that crucial development for her (I was equally horrified with myself).

In high school, age 16, I studied World War I in my history class and found Montgomery had been a reasonably reliable guide to the ebbs and flows of the military events. My history teacher was a man of opinions and treated us to a scathing rebuttal of the reckless military strategists whose blunders led to so many needless deaths and injuries. Montgomery had already humanized some of those questions for me and I undoubtedly paid a different quality of attention to the textbook as a consequence. She does not, however, critique the essential necessity of fighting for the mother country of Britain and the home country of Canada, no matter how much she grieves the damage. She is also a relatively uncritical imbiber of the propaganda generated throughout the war, and she does not hesitate to skew the narrative accordingly. For example, the book's main purveyor of a pacifist perspective is presented not just as misguided but also, and more damagingly, as a fundamentally ridiculous human being. Yet while these perspectives render the book historically limiting in some important ways, they also offer readers lively access to the mind-frames of the era.

A year after my high school history class, as a first-year undergraduate, I experienced one of the most vivid interpretive upheavals of my entire life. Sitting in a university classroom, bored with the English 100 lecture, I was browsing the course anthology when I came across Wilfred Owen's agonised poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1968, p. 55). I had never heard of Owen, and he probably never imagined an implied reader like me. Growing up in Newfoundland, a jurisdiction utterly devastated by World War I, I was constantly surrounded by war memorials and commemorative plaques that commanded communal respect for the glories of sacrifice; indeed, the classroom where I sat was part of "Memorial University," named in tribute to the fallen. As a reader of *Rilla*, I registered the sacrifices in a general way but also absorbed a dominant theme of the book – that the war was justified and that it would have been worthwhile for Canada and Canadians if a new world order could be created.

I started reading Owen's poem through the frame of this naïve stance of the righteous war, but by the time I reached the end, I was startled into a new and corrosive awareness. Montgomery is detailed in her account of Glen St. Mary but much more remote and abstract in her rendition of the horrors of the battlefield. She does not ignore this theme, but she offers a sanitized version. Owen does not flinch; his soldiers are caught in a paralysis of endless and horrible present participles: stumbling, floundering, drowning, guttering, choking, smothering, writhing, gargling. Even as he heightens the horrors, he is scathing about the purpose. All this brutality serves a massive lie: that it is sweet and good to die for your country. Such bitterness was cataclysmic for me in the moment. The idea that such suffering had simply been wasted was new and very disturbing to me. Perhaps *Rilla* had enclosed me in a time-warping bubble. It was written and published before the caustic revelations of the 1920s became broadspread. Many subscribers to the idea of the Great War as grimly necessary were disillusioned over the years, but *Rilla* predates that social shift.

My experience with *Rilla*, in all its limitations, coursed through my encounter with Owen, and my response to the novel was, in turn, forever changed, *in absentia*. I could never again read it as a completely innocent subscriber to its nationalistic subtext and its uncritical absorption of wartime propaganda. The book changes shape once the authority of news sources is undercut, haunted by the questions that proliferated in the 1920s: Is that really true? Who says so? Who benefits if people believe this version? What other evidence is available?

Owen's poetry was a form of public pleading, and my visceral response to "Dulce et Decorum Est" represented both political and literary reactions. A decade later, a more private event also altered my reading of *Rilla* – not only how I did read it but even how I could read it. My own handsome dark-haired brother (a musician rather than a poet) died suddenly in his early 20s, at an age very close to Walter's. I think most readers of the novel would agree that the agony of losing a beloved brother is a major motif, but such a public conclusion is a different reaction from the activation of that anguish in directly personal terms. My own experience now suffuses every page of the book, whether or not Walter is present. To me, it is now permanently electrified by the inescapable current of my own lifelong mourning for a lost brother.

I don't reread *Rilla* very often, but I would have said my responses to it had settled. Then I picked the book up again in the winter of 2026, as I thought about writing this article. This time current events shaped yet another changed reading. I was living, at a remove, through the dailiness of the ICE siege of Minneapolis in the United States of America, which was prominent on every screen. Information was conveyed immediately rather than delayed by exigencies of the printing press and the rail transport system; each new spectator video of the confrontations was available for viewing by everyone at once. As I watched, read, and listened, I was also questioning whether the separatist faction in the Canadian province of Alberta (where I live) would succeed in opening the doors to a Trump incursion. I was reading the exhortations of the former Canadian MP Charlie Angus, whose "Elbows Up!" campaign recruits Canadians to resist American assumptions about turning Canada into a 51st state. I was resonating to a recurring theme of his calls for action: a revitalization of earlier alliances between Canada and Europe. His exhortations frequently include references to Canada's immediate leap into action in defence of Europe in the two world wars; a line regularly repeated by Angus is that very many Canadian families, like my own, have an uncle buried in a European military cemetery (see Angus, 2026).

It is no accident that I describe these reactions through the use of present participles; as Owen also clearly experienced, there was a frustrating element of *ongoingness*, an absence of solutions, to the issues haunting daily life. In short, in the winter of 2026 I was newly placed, not only to register but also to feel on my own pulse the relentless suspense and tension that is such a feature of life in Glen St. Mary during World War I. I noticed anew the characters' lack of control over events that will change their lives irrevocably. These elements were always in the book, but my attention was altered by shifts in the framework of my own daily life. No longer was I simply engaging in the kind of routine "suspension of knowing the ending" that comes with subscribing to the subjunctive mode of a compelling story. Beyond that habitual agreement to join the space-time continuum of the characters, I was responding to a condition in the fiction that was illuminated and invigorated by my awareness of my own real-life uncertainty, during that January, about vital outcomes of other people's far-off actions, remote and violent.

7. The mutability of reading

It is a truism to suggest that circumstances alter readings, but the process is more two-way than we sometimes acknowledge. As an adult, one who has been familiar with Rilla's story since the age of 12, I approach life events as a reader of books – of *Rilla of Ingleside* and many, many others that inflect and filter how I react to the world. Occasionally, something happens to render the lens of a particular book visible; my reassessment of Montgomery's attitudes after reading Wilfred Owen is a clear example of at least one kind of recalibration. We sometimes refer to the impact of intertextuality when describing such phenomena, but I believe a metaphor of porosity works better than the mechanistic concept of linking between two discrete entities. As a teenager, I read my history textbook via my time with *Rilla*, and when I returned to that novel, the new knowledge of World War I moved off the page of the textbook and back into the chapters of the novel. Rather than describing how the reading of one book transfers to the experience of another by evoking notions of between, it is perhaps more accurate to think in terms of one experience seeping through another – at least for books that make a significant impression on a reader.

Such seepage is also part of how books move into life and vice versa. My father said my grandmother grieved for her brother for the rest of her life. Long before I could bring my own life experience of sibling loss to bear on this awareness of her suffering, Walter Blythe helped me understand the enormity of such a death. Since I was 12, I have possessed at least one basic human metric for multiplying a single military casualty up to the vastness of a war cemetery. My grandmother never talked about her brother with me, but my literary and affective engagement with a fiction provided me, even as a child, with a human measure for the catastrophe of World War I.

At another level, I use the human measure of my own private meaning-making with books as a base unit for scaling up to broader considerations of the role of reading itself as one route into greater understanding of the world. My own choice is fiction; other readers may select memoirs or certain kinds of history. In all these cases, readers may come away with two vital insights. However eloquent the available abstractions, a human scale is one important measure for developing one kind of true awareness of the nature of the world. And the example of one's own reading should not be taken as the only representative of that human measurement (registering the huge variety of readerly response remains vital), but it offers one (circumstantial and singular) route into the depth and reach of cumulative literary encounters.

For young people especially, reading such works permits them to learn about human ways of being that offer access to the world that are equivalent in deep significance to one's own life experiences but that are formed by different events and priorities. Such new perspectives, gained through emotional and intellectual commitment to a narrative world may help reshape an adolescent mind.

8. Reading the world through Rilla

"*Rilla of Ingleside*," says Owen Dudley Edwards,

> is L.M. Montgomery's *War and Peace*… To say that Montgomery is no Tolstoi is irrelevant snobbiness: neither is anyone else. And if Montgomery's Canada is no Russia, the societies are comparable in their vastness, their diffuseness, their centrifugal forces, the youth of their expansion, the antiquity of some of their traditions, the alienation of their intellectuals (2014, p. 163).

One need not subscribe wholeheartedly to Edwards' comparison to acknowledge the power of a story to present very complex social, cultural, and emotional truths. Although Rilla is the romantic heroine of the book, the larger account of the war is often filtered through the consciousness of Susan Baker, the Ingleside housemaid and an honorary member of the Blythe family. Over the course of the war years, Susan expands the scope of her attention from the social doings of Glen St. Mary, to the world at war. She scrutinizes the reports, judges the decisions, assesses the politicians and the generals, and often serves as a knowledgeable narrator of global events for young readers of the novel. Edwards says, "Montgomery is no philosopher of history akin to Tolstoi, yet her focus on Susan Baker, the maid-of-all-work, seems unconsciously to answer Tolstoi's demand for the kind of sources historians should seek" (2014, p. 164).

Susan is an elderly, unmarried, working-class woman of very firm opinions, and, from time to time in the book, she also provides comic relief (as in her enraged response when she finally receives a proposal of marriage). Her larger role, however, is to serve as the book's focaliser, both for events overseas and also for the impact of these events on local Canadian society. Over the course of the novel, Rilla develops from a shallow, vain adolescent into what her mother describes as "a capable, womanly girl" (2010, p. 327), acquiring a degree of patience and resilience unimaginable at the start of the book. But Susan's development, from a woman of narrow and local interests and grudges to a student of the sweep of historical perspectives and an increasingly engaged citizen, is one of the most interesting dynamics of the novel. When the tide appears to turn at the Marne River in mid1918, Susan, for the first time in many days, raises the flag outside Ingleside. At this point, Montgomery pays tribute to her fortitude:

> The wind whipped her grey hair about her face and the gingham apron that shrouded her from head to foot was cut on lines of economy, not of grace; yet somehow, just then, Susan made an imposing figure. She was one of the women – courageous, unquailing, patient, heroic – who had made victory possible. In her, they all saluted the symbol for which their dearest had fought (Montgomery, 2010, p. 314).

As a 12-year-old reader, I was radically more inclined to favour the young and attractive characters in my books. Montgomery's achievement in bringing a callow pre-teen like me to a position of genuine readerly respect for a character like Susan is substantial. This accomplishment perhaps helps to place *Rilla of Ingleside* firmly in my lifelong mental toolkit for grasping the scope of the catastrophe represented by World War I. Over the years, I have read many other accounts of this cataclysm, but I have never felt it necessary to jettison major components of this early reading experience (though the vacuous romance does not survive well). Montgomery's time-bound adherence to the necessity and virtues of this war is educational in its own right; the novel almost certainly reflects how many people still thought in its early aftermath. In illuminating contrast, I gleaned perspectives on the American Civil War from my adolescent reading of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) that were very pernicious indeed and that called for radical undoing as I moved into adulthood. *Rilla* has its significant blind spots and its unblushing sentimentalities, but it tells a far more truthful story.

9. The role of early reading experiences

Beloved childhood reading is not always perceived as an essential pillar in how we develop adult understanding. Rita Felski says, "Attachment doesn't get much respect in academia. It is often outsourced to others – naïve readers, gullible consumers, small-town patriots, too-needy lovers – and treated as a cause for concern, a regrettable, if common, human software malfunction" (2020, p. 2). In Felski's terms, my epiphany with Wilfred Owen is respectable enough, especially for a 17-year-old making an early venture into the world of literary reading. That the juvenile sensibilities of *Rilla of Ingleside* provided me with ground to stand on while I came to terms with the poem's radical reworking of much of what the novel taught me is an essential element of that interpretive revolution in my reading life. In academic terms, however, a novel for girls is often perceived as shallow background reading (a kind of soft underbelly), best shunted to a kind of hinterland, rendered invisible or, at most, shamefaced.

Rilla of Ingleside is notable for providing a higher level of transferrable content knowledge than many novels written for young people. Yet apprentice readers gain much of their awareness of the social currents and structures of a particular world from their stories, even when such understanding is rather more amorphous than *Rilla*'s chronology of important battles in World War I. It is not unusual for them to read more sophisticated selections through the lenses developed in the literature of their childhood and adolescence.

Issues relating to how early reading experiences feed into later life choices are under-explored, in part because the longitudinal information that might illuminate these questions is so diffuse and so difficult to collect and assess. A principled self-study offers one partial tool for advancing these investigations. The limitations are real and must be acknowledged: the auto-researchers interested in the self-awareness engendered by such a project are unlikely to represent the full miscellaneous spread of "young readers" at large; the potential for retrospective self-improvement, for presenting the best version of recollected youthful responses, is very great and must be resisted; and the weight of all that has been forgotten can never be calculated in the final balance of what is remembered.

At another, more profound level, it is only by making room for the mysterious workings that occur beyond our conscious reckoning and our capacity to articulate, inside the private experiences of a single human mind, that we can address the alchemy that makes fiction out of real events in the first place. Novelist and poet Michael Crummey evokes the creative processes that inform historical fiction writing, turning the past tense of "what happened" into the subjunctive of "how it was experienced." He describes how "novels do what straight history cannot – creating interior lives, motivations, foibles, desires, and fears for the dead. Making visible the dark matter at the heart of human history that we can sense but otherwise cannot see or touch" (2019, p. 39). That such "sensing" of inchoate dark matter is equally difficult for a reader to verbalise is perhaps not surprising; and an account of reading that allows for the completely inexpressible is perhaps more faithful to the wholeness of the experience.

We need to know more than we do about how early textual encounters linger into adulthood, both in explicit terms and also in the more shadowy forms implied by Crummey. How does youthful engagement with written text shape developing worldviews, create longlasting blind spots (those contented slaves in *Gone with the Wind*!), open significant doors, and/or develop invisible barriers? If we believe that reading matters, if we think it offers more than a pleasant way to pass the time, then how it matters is a question of broad importance. A singular account of one reader's engagement with one book over a lifetime may offer hints that lead to insights of general value.

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