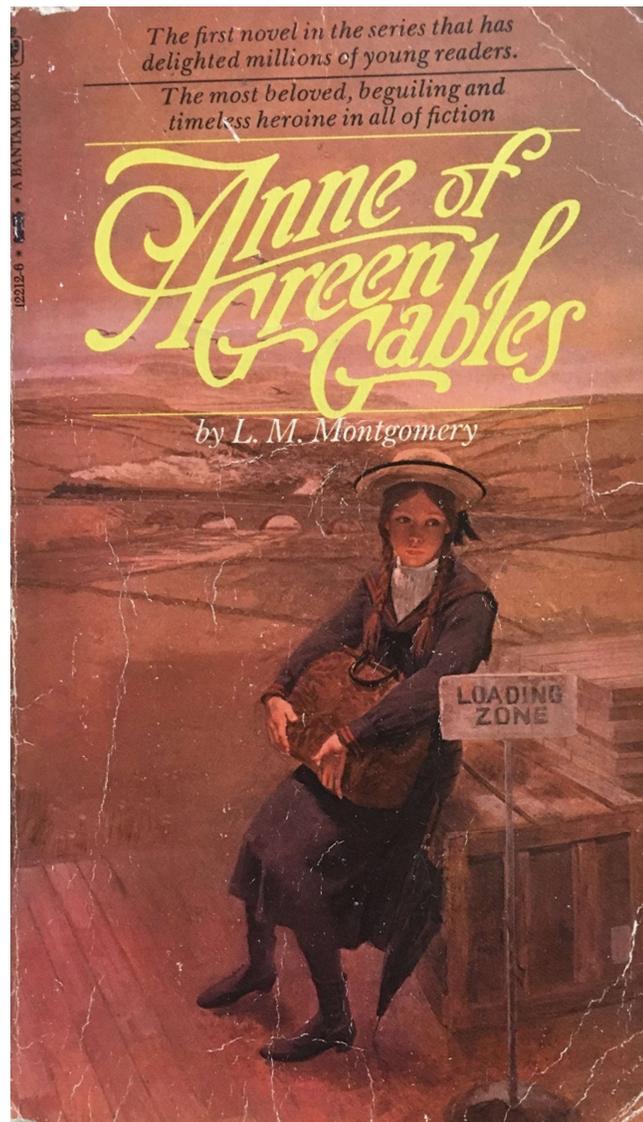


## L. M. Montgomery (1874-1942): *Anne of Green Gables* (1908)



Anne Shirley is weird, smart, proud, talks too much, reads a lot, loses her temper, holds grudges, makes humiliating mistakes, and is an odd misfit even among her friends. In other words, more like my childhood self than unlike. Her imagination expands her world and enchants it, yet can drive her to tears as she dreads ills that have not befallen or terrify her when taking a well-known path through the woods after dark. Bookish, awkward, romantic, intense--that's Anne, and I loved her for it. She's able to make friends in unexpected places and find beauty almost anywhere. Her inner life is so rich she is rarely bored. She's unapologetically good at school, and her years-long competition with Gilbert Blythe, the other star pupil, drives her to excel even in subjects

she loathes. Even though she delays her education to help Marilla, the woman who adopted her, Anne completes her college degree.

Although a favorite scene will always be Anne cracking her slate on Gilbert's head (I'm beginning to sense a theme of my identifying with girls behaving badly), I remember being particularly struck by two other scenes.

In the first, Anne is fretting about going over to have tea with the minister's wife, Mrs. Allan, at the manse (Chapter 22, "Anne Is Invited Out to Tea"):

"...But oh, Marilla, it's a solemn occasion too. I feel so anxious. What if I shouldn't behave properly? You know I never had tea at a manse before, and I'm not sure that I know all the rules of etiquette, although I've been studying the rules given in the Etiquette Department of the Family Herald ever since I came here. I'm so afraid I'll do something silly or forget to do something I should do. Would it be good manners to take a second helping of anything if you wanted to *very* much?"

"The trouble with you, Anne, is that you're thinking too much about yourself. You should just think of Mrs. Allan and what would be nicest and most agreeable to her," said Marilla, hitting for once in her life on a very sound and pithy piece of advice. Anne instantly realized this.

I, too, was struck by this piece of excellent advice. Like Anne, I worried about behaving properly, but I did not (do not!) always perceive social cues. Marilla's advice to stop thinking about oneself and instead focus on the other person gives a guide to releasing self-consciousness and treating the other with courtesy. I'm not saying that I've been a model of social ease ever since, but that the advice has stuck with me and been helpful, both as correction and direction.

The second scene occurs in *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), in Chapter 20, "The Way It Often Happens." Anne plays impromptu hostess to a writer she has long admired, Mrs. Charlotte E. Morgan. Because it is Anne, she has been interrupted while shifting feathers from one mattress ticking to another and so is covered in down; she has no food in the house to put before a guest; she has inadvertently dyed her nose red. Remarkably, none of these circumstances dominate my memory of the chapter. Instead, I was impressed by what a normal person Mrs. Charlotte E. Morgan is: "a short, stout, gray-haired lady in a tweed suit." This woman, this well-known writer, sits down in Anne's house and talks with her and Diana, eats chicken, and enjoys plum preserves. It is true she is charming conversationalist and fascinating storyteller, but the idea that a Real Writer might just enjoy visiting people and talking with them seemed wonderful to me. I'm not sure what I thought writers did when they weren't writing the books I loved, but seeing one portrayed living her life as anyone else might made an indelible impression. It helped me imagine myself as a writer one day, too.