

as “equity,” “traction,” “black swan events,” the “Pareto Principle,” “zombie companies,” telling the difference between “angel investors” and “venture capitalists,” and finally, how to come up with an “exit strategy” if your company goes bust. She remains positive: “After all, if plan A doesn’t work, there are twenty-five more letters in the alphabet.”

Boss Bitch leaves the reader with sage, albeit brutally honest advice. Lapin argues first and foremost that a competent and assertive woman should be tough and resilient. She takes inspiration from Eleanor Roosevelt: “A woman is like a teabag; you never know how strong it is until it’s in hot water.”

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THE BLUE CASTLE

L.M. Montgomery
Toronto: Tundra Books, reprint 2019

REVIEWED BY LESLEY STRUTT

Most well-read Canadians are familiar with Lucy Maud Montgomery. Her *Anne of Green Gables* series was a phenomenal success and gave Montgomery fame beyond her wildest dreams. However, until *CWS* offered me *The Blue Castle* to review I had never thought of L.M. Montgomery as a feminist writer.

The Blue Castle is a well-crafted and wholly delightful book. Montgomery’s descriptions of setting are vivid and poetic. Her character develop-

ment propels the story forward and her control of mood and pace is exceptional. *The Blue Castle* is a romance with a hard-won happy-ever-after ending. After an extraordinary event that shakes Valency Stirling’s world, she breaks all the rules and dares to become herself.

However, *The Blue Castle* offers the reader much more than just good writing. From the first page, *The Blue Castle* tackles a central theme of early feminism—women are not as treated equal to men. Valency Stirling is born into an upper middle-class family and has no need to work; in fact, she would never have been allowed to work. Having a purposeful life for most women of that era meant being married and having children. At twenty-nine, Valency is facing “hopeless old maidenhood” in a community “where the unmarried [women] are simply those who have failed to get a man.” She is a spinster with little to do to give herself purpose and meaning other than to look after her mother in her old age. Valency is trapped by what society considers acceptable behaviour for a woman, and she can’t bear it. Every moment of her future life, in her estimation, is horrid and dismal.

This definition of a woman’s worth may seem tinged with an outmoded kind of victimhood, but “*you’re nothing without a man*” is a theme that played out well into the 1960s in Canada. The setting for *The Blue Castle* is Ontario in the 1920’s. Full suffrage was not granted in Canada until 1918, and a woman still could not own property in some provinces. (Quebec only gave women the right to own property in 1964.)

Nevertheless, it’s important to ask what does a book written in the 1920s have to offer feminists in the twenty-first century? The answer lies in Valency’s courage to stand up for herself, to be true to who she really is, and to break out from the stifling

environment in which she is living.

In contemporary life, a woman’s sense of self worth depends not so much on society’s judgement or rules around success as it does on her fulfilled personhood. *The Blue Castle* illustrates this theme extremely well. In the last pages of the book, the conventionally successful Olive writes to her fiancé, “It’s really disgusting that Doss’s (Valency’s childhood nickname) crazy adventures should have turned out like this. It makes one feel there is no use in behaving properly.” Until the very end of the story, Valency’s family has deemed her mad in the sense of *out of her mind*, and they wonder at one point if they should have her committed, all because she broke out of the acceptable mold. What Olive fails to understand is that even after the crisis that knocks Valency’s world sideways, it takes all her courage to become herself, fully expressed, empowered and alive.

Women today still must summon their courage to go against society’s norms, whether this be in a developed or a developing country. To know one’s own worth and to live accordingly often requires being willing to face exclusion and discrimination by one’s peers and even one’s own family.

On a final note, I’d like to propose that Montgomery’s romantic conclusion to *The Blue Castle* is also relevant for contemporary feminists. She portrays Valency as truly happy in her life. *The Blue Castle* offers readers the hope that a woman can experience full partnership in an honest relationship based on self respect, respect for each other, and the enjoyment of living the adventure of life together however it shows up. It’s a message that is as valuable today as it was when *The Blue Castle* was written.

I would recommend *The Blue Castle* to any reader who enjoys a tale with social commentary without sacrificing any of the pleasure of a good story.

Lesley Strutt is a writer living in Merrickville, Ontario. She has a PhD from McGill and her writing includes poetry, essays, an award-winning play, and novels. Her debut YA novel, On the Edge, was published by Inanna Publications and Education, 2019. Her first full poetry collection Window Ledge is forthcoming with Inanna in 2020.

L.M. MONTGOMERY AND THE MATTER OF NATURE(S)

Rita Bode and Jean Mitchell, Eds.
Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018

REVIEWED BY ANIKO
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This book of essays is a product of the ninth biennial international conference of the L.M. Montgomery Institute based at the University of Prince Edward Island. The Institute is dedicated to the study of the life and works of the celebrated author of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). Given our heightened awareness of environmental issues, and the growing interdisciplinary fields of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, the authors provide a timely reflection on nature in writings from a century ago. "The collection, [...], includes literary, anthropological, gender, ecological, legal, queer, and postcolonial perspectives which provoke new critical entries into Montgomery's work in the context of the matter of nature."

Catriona Sandilands' queer ecological analysis of the "Pat" books: *Pat of Silver Bush* (1933) and *Mistress Pat* (1935) draws parallels with Jane Rule's novel *After the Fire* (1989). The books share themes of fire and islands and gendered social relations

and a deep connection with a sense of space. Rita Bode in her chapter "L.M. Montgomery's 'Indoors and Out': Imagining Organic Architecture" builds on this in a more urban context. However, Prince Edward Island clearly remained "in her blood" long after Montgomery's move to Ontario. Jennifer H. Litster's chapter "Going Back with L.M. Montgomery to PEI", draws on descriptions of the weather and agriculture and varying perspectives on observing and controlling nature.

Elizabeth Rollins Epperly highlights Montgomery's bridging of various landscapes and forms of nature, "a pattern of metaphors dependent on, and reflecting, her ideas about nature and human interaction with 'it.'" Both Epperly and the following author Jean Mitchell, comment on the healing power of nature. Mitchell focuses in particular on "the nineteenth-century recognition of nature's therapeutic properties as a source of energy for depleted nerves," a concern for Montgomery throughout her adult life. This belief in the restorative powers of nature is revealed in her Muskoka based book *The Blue Castle* (1926).

Another chapter explores natural law theory within children's literature (see Kate Sutherland's "The Education of Emily: Tempering a Force of Nature through Lessons in Law"). Montgomery herself was embroiled in legal troubles for many years, first with her original publisher based in Boston, and later in Ontario due to an automobile accident involving her husband. These battles are chronicled in great detail in her journals, and Sutherland sees her affinity with natural law ultimately reflected in her fiction.

Tara K. Parmiter delves into "The Spirit of Inquiry: Nature Study and the Sense of Wonder in L.M. Montgomery's Anne Books". This topic will resonate with all readers/

viewers of *Anne*. The orphan theme is explored by Paul Keen, invoking the 'nature vs. nurture' debates. He is particularly interested in "the ways that L.M. Montgomery uses the figure of the orphan in *Anne of Green Gables* to challenge the binary limitations" of this concept. Interestingly, orphans feature in some of Montgomery's other books, including *Rainbow Valley* (1919), but portrayed quite differently from *Anne*.

"Kindred spirits" is another memorable expression throughout the *Anne* series, drawn out in Laura M. Robinson's chapter. She explores close friendships in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917) and *The Blue Castle* and the changing nature of kinship, including challenges to the patriarchal family.

The final two chapters both explore empathy in Montgomery's work. Lesley D. Clement takes the approach of 'poetic sensibility' which allows Montgomery's characters to "have the capacity to develop an intimate relationship with nature... including that of empathy." She harkens back to a journal entry where Montgomery expresses a prescient concern for human impact on the natural world. Idette Noome brings this anxiety closer to home with a review of the pets in Montgomery's life and books (particularly her affection for cats). She finds a rather disturbing thread of instances of animal abuse and cruelty, coupled with Montgomery's deep concern for the welfare of these pets. This theme signals Montgomery's awareness "of shifts in the diverse discourse surrounding human-animal relations that persisted throughout the nineteenth century" including animal rights legislation and the emergence of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals. Noome concludes that "Writing in a time in which human-animal relations—and indeed the relation of humans to nature in general—were becoming an increasingly contested