



A Conversation with Catherine Reid



Author of *The Landscapes of Anne of Green Gables: The Enchanting Island that Inspired L. M. Montgomery*

Q: How did the natural landscapes surrounding Lucy Maud Montgomery inspire her to create Anne Shirley, a character who took great notice of the natural world?

A: In Montgomery's time, children spent far more of their waking hours outside rather than in ("we fairly lived in the woods," Montgomery writes in her journal), whether harvesting crops and handling livestock, or amusing themselves with berrying, fishing, swimming, gathering mayflowers on spring outings, picking gum off spruce trees for chewing, or putting crickets on tiny leashes, as do the boys at the Avonlea school. Montgomery took this knowledge of the natural world even further, however, and gave all her same attributes to Anne—her vivid imagination, her love of nature-based poetry (they knew many of the same poems by heart), and her sense of flowers and trees as beings with feelings, giving them names and seeing them as sisters. Anne is an idealized version of the young Maud, completely at home in and energized by the natural world. As a result, her presence is far larger than that of a simply fascinating girl; she embodies the very stuff of life, as in the epigraph from Robert Browning that Montgomery uses for the novel—"The good stars met in your horoscope / Made you of spirit and fire and dew."

Q: What it is about Prince Edward Island that makes it so special?

A: With its red cliffs, white dunes, and sandy beaches, its rolling hills and lush farmland,

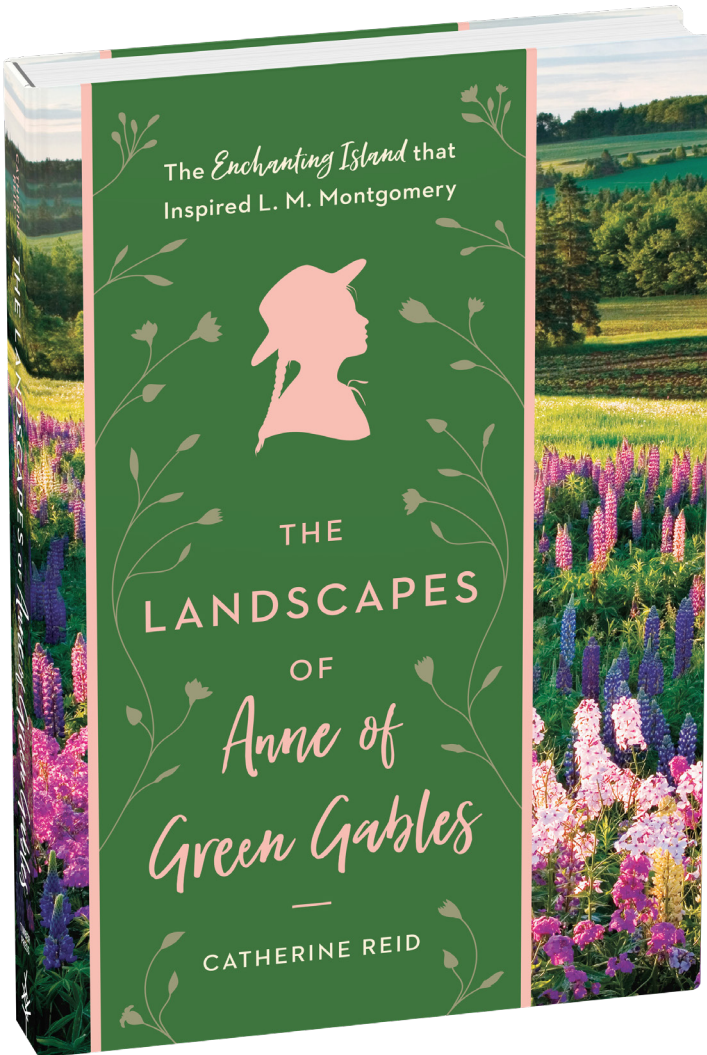
its marshes and forests and bays, Prince Edward Island is as unique in its beauty as Anne Shirley sees it. The surrounding sea tempers the climate, while the Gulf Stream flows near enough to the north to make the water warm enough for swimming in the summer. The iron-rich soil turns red when exposed, giving the dirt roads and freshly plowed fields their distinct color. And the features that Anne Shirley loved—the birch paths and fern-lined trails, the wildflowers and fir trees, the blossoming orchards in spring and the vibrant colors of autumn—are as present now as they were then. It's much easier to get to the island today than it was in her time, but that hasn't altered the pastoral feel of the countryside. With farming, tourism, and fishing as the main industries, the pace picks up with the influx of summer visitors, but that hasn't altered a way of life governed by tides and storms, sunrise and sunset.

Q: If I visit Prince Edward Island today, will I see the places Anne Shirley saw—the Lake of Shining Waters, the Haunted Wood, the Birch Path, and Lover's Lane? And if the island is much different, how has it changed?

A: Avonlea, where Anne goes to live with Matthew and Marilla, is based on the very real town of Cavendish, where Montgomery lived with her grandparents after her mother died when she was almost two. The Cuthberts' house, Green Gables, was based on a nearby house Montgomery knew well, and which was subsequently purchased by Canada's National Park Service. Many of the familiar landmarks in the book—the house, the fields, the brook, the Haunted Wood, Lover's Lane—can be found here, preserved either by the Park Service or some of Montgomery's relatives. Of course, the

“This is not just a book filled with beautiful photos; it’s a satisfyingly rich and layered combination of the visual and intellectual. Readers will gain a new appreciation not only for Montgomery but also for the landscape that meant so much to her.”

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trees aren't the originals, new ones growing in each time the older forest is cut, and you have to block out the adjacent golf course and nearby tourist attractions to enter a 19th-century world. But wander down Lover's Lane or the Balsam Hollow Trail, or walk along a stream like the one Anne and her friends crossed on the old log bridge, and it's easy to see Anne traveling across such land. Violet Vale, and the Birch Path and Willowmere, and maybe even Anne and Diana signaling each other after dark with candles from their bedroom windows feel not far away. Everything, in fact, feels so faithful to the story that visitors often have a hard time remembering that Anne Shirley wasn't real. Her creator, however, was! To get more of a sense of Montgomery's life, and thus some of the influences that helped shape Anne's, it's necessary to drive several miles to the west, to Park Corner. Here Montgomery's relatives have made a museum of Silver Bush, the home of her favorite cousins. You'll also find the body of water that inspired Montgomery's Lake of Shining Waters, and you can get into a buggy driven by a Matthew Cuthbert-lookalike to be momentarily transported into a world much like Anne Shirley's.

Q: Do you find that same inspiration from the landscape in your own work? How does this compare with your own process?

A: I know this experience well, and I very much identify with Montgomery, to the degree in which I find solace and sustenance in the natural world. It's where I feel most alert and attentive and animated—and where I'm most able to think through writing projects. The noise and busyness of daily life falls away when I'm simply focusing on what my senses are taking in of the sounds and smells and sights. I may not write aloud while I walk, as people described seeing Montgomery do, but I do find myself composing sentences in my mind, some of them triggered by something I've seen, others arising simply because of the openness I feel upon entering the woods, a readiness to be surprised by something new or unlikely. A good walk can set me up for hours of writing, while a lack of time outside can make me feel bereft of original thought.



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Catherine Reid is available for interviews upon request.
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