

Editorial: On literary debts

Two articles in this issue deal with the web of connections between one book and another: links between the work of L.M. Montgomery and the creations of other writers, particularly Kate Douglas Wiggin; and echoes within one of Montgomery's books (*Rainbow Valley*) of details used for different effects in another (*Anne of Green Gables*). These discussions raise a wider issue: the question of literary debts.

A year ago, the media created a furor about the remarkable similarities between a current best seller, *The Ladies of Missalonghi*, and a novel by L.M. Montgomery, *The Blue Castle*. The discussion stirred by this controversy focused on the use of direct quotation, and the echoing of plot motifs, the way that literary works echo, reflect, use, comment upon, or break away from earlier books. Literary critics have termed this phenomenon "intertextuality". Recent criticism frequently comments upon the way writers consciously or unconsciously build on a previous universe of books. The American critic Harold Bloom, in *Anxiety of Influence*, stresses the desire of American writers in particular *not* to copy their literary forebears, and he enumerates strategies for avoiding direct echoing. Feminist critics, on the other hand, studying the work of women writers of popular literature particularly in the 19th century, note the recurrence of borrowing. In some cases, the repetition of names and phrases was perceived as a tribute rather than an invasion of rights. Neither motifs nor phrases were considered sacrosanct. We might speculate that this general tendency to borrow reflects the conditioning of women, to respect authority and pattern themselves on their elders – as against the emphasis in boys' education on independence and striking out along a self-made path. Thus women writers felt quite free to copy others' plots and motifs throughout the 19th century – and L.M. Montgomery among many others clearly echoes such writers as the Brontës, Dickens, and Tennyson.

When, as late as 1921, Lady Byng, wife of Canada's Governor-General, published with McClelland & Stewart in Toronto, a novel titled *Anne of the Marshland*, no one raised an eyebrow at that echoing title.

International copyright conventions, being worked out at the turn of the 20th century, created a different situation. Borrowing became unacceptable – an illegal appropriation of another's intellectual property. The extension of the print media into movies brought further changes. The greatest income to

be derived from best-sellers was often through the sale of movie rights. And when movie rights sell, the plot and characters are the elements usually translated into film, not the actual words of the book. Yet neither plot nor characterization can be copyrighted – only the words can be. From this phenomenon rises current sensitivity over copying others' plots.

Shades of Shakespeare! No one in his day took exception to his heavy borrowing, nor did critics of a later day worry over the host of imitations spawned by his work. Literary borrowing, conscious or otherwise, has led to a wonderfully connected world of books. For young readers in particular there is a joyful reassurance in hearing echoes of familiar names. There is a deep sense of communality of books, of illustrations which Darcia Labrosse, one of Québec's foremost illustrators, describes in a very rich interview conducted by Françoise Lepage. Labrosse evokes literary debts of another kind, to cartoons, to school books, to Pop Art, to adventure movies. This sense of re-entering a familiar world is one source of the popularity of "series" novels and illustrated books. It also enriches the pleasure of reading new works by such writers as Jean Little and Janet Lunn, who (as Jan Andrews' article reminds us) frankly invite young readers to remember *The secret garden* and *Anne of Green Gables* as they lead the way into their own admirable books.