

## “If I were Anne”: how Sweden brought *Anne of Green Gables* to the Palestinian classroom<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Sweden’s teachers have a history of engaging children through literature into the humanistic endeavor of developing self-esteem and a positive attitude to life. The Canadian classic *Anne of Green Gables* written by Lucy Maud Montgomery in 1908 is one of the works of literature where a pedagogy has been developed to further these aims. The Swedish organization Diakonia has been instrumental in promoting these same ideals of empowering children through literature. While in Palestine I became familiar with Diakonia’s activities with local educators and in this article I examine how Palestinian teachers use this methodology with their Arabic copy of *Anne of Green Gables*.

**Key words:** Literature. Empowerment. Palestine. Applied Pedagogy. “Anne of Green” Gables.

In Spring 2009 *The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award* was awarded to the *Tamer Institute for Community Education*, promoters of reading active on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The jury’s reasons: “With perseverance, audacity and resourcefulness, the Tamer Institute has, for two decades, stimulated Palestinian children’s and young adult’s love of

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of this article, readers will find Mary McDonald-Rissanen’s account on her compromise with education and her strong beliefs in the powers of a system devoted to enable students with the best knowledge and expertise can give. We strongly recommend its reading.

<sup>2</sup> Mary McDonald-Rissanen is an English lecturer at the University of Tampere, Finland, where she defended her doctoral dissertation at the department of comparative literature. Her earlier licentiate dissertation on two Prince Edward Island (Canada) diarists, L. M. Montgomery and her farm wife grandmother Amy Darby Tanton Andrew, was defended with Dr Gabriella Åhmansson (Uppsala University, Sweden) and Dr Päivi Lappalainen (University of Turku, Finland) as public examiners. This research led to her doctoral dissertation *Sandstone Diaries – Prince Edward Island Women’s Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Life Writing*. Professor Irene Gammel (Ryerson University, Canada) publically examined this dissertation and wrote: “this dissertation is written and argued with great energy and passion, and makes for fascinating reading by introducing and analyzing new subjects for the first time as well as presenting an effective frame for their critical exploration”. In December 2013 McGill-Queen’s University Press, Canada will publish Dr. McDonald-Rissanen’s book *In the Interval of the Wave Prince Edward Island Women’s Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Life Writing*.

Dr McDonald-Rissanen was born and brought up in Prince Edward Island where she is a summer resident. She has previously published the following articles on Montgomery and other PEI women diarists. “The Landscapes of Lucy Maud Montgomery” (2000); “Pulling back the thin veil - the poetic discourse of Lucy Maud Montgomery” (2001); “Veils and Gaps: The private worlds of LM Montgomery and Amy Andrew” (2005); “Imaging the Past: Atlantic Canada and Popular Representations” (2005) and “Writing Home: Pioneer Emma Chadwick Stretch’s Portrayal of Life in 19th Century Rural Prince Edward Island” (2006). Forthcoming (Spring 2014): “Crooked Ribs, Modern Martyrs, and Dull Days” University of Alberta Press, Canada in *Connecting Texts and Generations: Canadian Women’s Writing/Textes and generations en contact: écritures des femmes du Canada*.

reading and their creativity. Under difficult circumstances, the Institute carries out reading promotion of an unusual breadth and versatility. In the spirit of Astrid Lindgren, the Tamer Institute acknowledges the power of words and the strength of books, stories and imagination as important keys to self-esteem, tolerance and the courage to face life.” (<http://www.alma.se/en/Award-winners/tamer-english/>).

A few weeks before this announcement I was in Palestine visiting the *National Institute for Education and Training* (NIET) in Ramallah chasing up the details for this paper when I met Ruba Totah, Tamer’s programme coordinator of children’s literature and I later visited the Tamer Institute in downtown Ramallah and met its general director Rinad Qubbaj. It was obvious that a very sophisticated infrastructure was in place for disseminating books and promoting creative activities which engaged children with literature.

My curiosity with the how Palestinian educators use *Anne of Green Gables* in the classroom was aroused a few years earlier but it was my new contact with Tamer that assured me that Montgomery’s book was just one of many works of literature translated into Arabic to empower children and help them face their difficult situation.

But my journey to discover how literature is part of Palestinian classroom activity, and more specifically my intention to explore the focus of the lessons using *Anne of Green Gables*, became a very intriguing journey indeed. It all began like so many encounters abroad with my revealing my place of birth, Prince Edward Island, which I share with the author of *Anne of Green Gables* and the actual setting of this and many other LM Montgomery novels.

Shahnaz Far, the director of the NIET (National Institute for Education and Training) on hearing where I was from related her visions of the Island and her wonderful Anne to me and soon after Shahnaz arranged a meeting where I found myself sitting face to face with literature professor Dr Mahmoud Atshan from the local Birzeit University who lectures on *Anne of Green Gables* to his students; Safa’ Abu Assab, programme manager for Children’s Literature and Palestine Programmes from Diakonia Jerusalem, and Leila Batran, the dynamic force behind the whole project and who supplied me with her English translation of the Arabic teacher’s guide to *Anne of Green Gables*. This meeting was held in NIET’s library which housed multiple Arabic copies of *Anne of Green Gables* alongside other children’s book for which they had developed a similar pedagogic approach.

This was spring 2006 and my project to involve Palestinian educators in the LM Montgomery Institute activity and specifically the 2008 conference *Anne of Green Gables*

and the *Idea of the Classic* came to an abrupt halt when I approached the Canadian Representative Office in Ramallah for funding. I was warned that engaging with Palestinians who had just elected a Hamas government could result in a hefty fine and possible jail sentence for me. When I brought this news back to my friends at NIET they had a great laugh and said yes, “We are all terrorists.”

### **Diakonia giving hope through books**

The name **Diakonia** often surfaces when talking about translating and disseminating children’s literature, and in supporting institutions like Tamer. Diakonia is a Christian development organization based in Sweden working together with local partners for a sustainable change for the most vulnerable people of the world. Diakonia purchased thousands of Arabic language copies of *Anne of Green Gables* from Dar Al-Mun publishers in Sweden, furnishing the Palestinian Ministry of Education schools and many libraries in Palestine with *Anne* as well as numerous other titles. Ulla Lundqvist, a Swedish educational trainer, developed the activities in the teacher’s guide for *Anne of Green Gables* and further engaged with other trainers like Leila Batran, and thus the project advanced.

My plan is to outline some of the activities suggested to teachers for using *Anne of Green Gables* in the classroom as well as comment on these activities within the Middle East context. I would finally like to examine how literature has been woven in the curriculum as a way for children to cope in difficult circumstances such as war.

My Palestinian contacts indicated that many of the works of literature used with children in class are selected specifically to give hope to children. For instance, works from South Africa point out the triumph of overcoming the apartheid regime and consequently of South Africans establishing their own independent state. This is a dream Palestinian children readily identify with.

So the triumph of an orphan protagonist like *Anne* who overturns the established social order of her new home village, Avonlea, eventually leads to her own belonging to that same community. These themes give hope to vulnerable children everywhere but especially to Palestinian children.

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Much has been written on children, war, and empowering children to deal with their lives in war circumstances. The United Nations High Commissions for Human Rights’ 1959

“Declaration of the Rights of the Child” proclaimed by the General Assembly states that, “mankind owes to the child the best it has to give.” Furthermore, Principle 2 reads: “the child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity. In the enactment of laws for this purpose, the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration.” But oftentimes the reality speaks otherwise.

Already in 1987 Finnish psychology Professor Raija-Leena Punamäki’s study for the **Tampere Peace Research Institute** entitled *Children Under Conflict, The Attitudes and Emotional Life of Israeli and Palestinian Children* stated that these children approved of war as a means of solving problems: 94% of Israeli children wanted to be good soldiers and 87% and 92% of Israeli and Palestinian children were ready to die for their respective countries.

Israeli and Palestinian children are movingly similar in describing their feelings and experiences regarding the Middle East War, says Punamäki. She continues: “But Palestinian children in the West Bank were the most unsheltered and most exposed to violence and the stress of military occupation to them and their families.”(171) One might contest this finding with the fact that the Palestinian children in Gaza nowadays are even more unsheltered and exposed to violence than their West Bank compatriots.

Where is this ‘special protection’ called for in Principal 2 of the “Declaration of the Rights of the Child,” one may ask. Palestine is not an isolated case, nor have wars in the past and present been kind to children.

## **Sweden – a home for Finnish children during World War II**

How Sweden reached out to children in oppressed circumstances through literature echoed a kind of humanism I identified with Sweden and children of another time and place, namely how Sweden reached out to Finnish children during the Second World War.

In my search at the **Finnish Institute for Children’s Literature** on the topic of children, literature, and war I was struck by an analysis in Finnish writer Tove Jansson’s 1947 comic strip “Moomintroll and the End of the World” by Ratkirch and Söderling. The authors claim that in this post-World War II story Jansson was subliminally processing the fact that 70,000 Finnish children were sent abroad, mainly to Sweden, to avoid the horrors of

war and were given there the care their Finnish parents could not give at home because of the war and the threat of the bombings.

At the 2006 LM Montgomery international conference one of those Finnish children who had been evacuated to Sweden 60 years earlier was in the audience. She had written the first essay about her orphan years in Sweden in Finnish authors' Suvi Ahola and Satu Koskimies book on Finnish readers of Montgomery's fictive orphan girls *Anne* and *Emily*. Ulpu Aario wrote of her 1944 experience as a four year old shipped off to Sweden. She was born soon after her father's death in 1939, and after the death of her care-giving grandmother her own mother had no choice but to send her to Sweden. In Ulpu's touching story, which prefaces how *Anne of Green Gables* gave her hope in that situation, she recalls sitting on the floor of the cargo plane that took her away from her Finnish home to her new Swedish one.

Ulpu's story is vivid with vignettes like the one of her as the naked child traumatized by the flood of doctors, and another of inoculations before her being sent to Stockholm with a tag around her neck. From there young Ulpu was transported further north to Vännä, to the Zakrisson family, who were looking forward to a young boy to keep their 12 year old son company. The farming family came to the station in their horse and wagon to fetch their boy, but as no boy was to be found, only a four year old girl who spoke no Swedish, the train moved on. Little Ulpu spent the night at the home of the train conductor and was sent to the Zakrissons the next day. Mother Zakrisson was ready to send the girl away but Father Zakrisson felt she had suffered enough and there she stayed for two and a half years. Ulpu's story bears a strong resemblance to the other great orphan saga of *Anne* and her arrival of *Green Gables*.

Years later, back in Finland and reflecting on the experience, Ulpu writes: "I found comfort as a child from the *Anne* books as I felt we shared a common fate, *Anne at Green Gables* and myself in Sweden".

### **Children surviving in unending wars**

One major difference between wars such as Second World War and the Middle East is that the volatile situation in the Middle East has gone on for generations, and not as Kate Agnew and Geoff Fax say in their book *Children at War –From First World War to the Gulf War*, that most wars have been wars of a specific duration.

Palestinian educators fall into the category of having to deal with educating pupils to deal with an ongoing war situation. Palestinian children do have a literature of their own focusing on their Palestinian reality. Elizabeth Laird and Sonia Nimr's 2003 *A Little Peace of Ground* (2003, p. 79) tells the story of a Palestinian boy living under Israeli military occupation:

One of the soldiers looked up and saw Karim fixing his eyes on him intently. Trying to look casual Karim turned and walked away. There was no telling what any of them would do if they felt threatened or were irritated. Being only 12 years old was no protection. Kids younger than him were shot all the time. These guys' fingers seemed to hover permanently on their triggers.

*A Little Peace of Ground* is a fictive account of Palestinian children's vision of their reality and one insight into their way of contending with the dilemma of war and Israeli occupation.

Hamida Bosmajian provides a sharp reminder of not dealing with past atrocities in *Sparing the Child – Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust*. Beyond simply exposing the realities of war and all its atrocities, specific procedures as part of education are instrumental for guiding young people into a brighter tomorrow.

The pedagogy and activities below based on the novel *Anne of Green Gables* exemplifies a step in helping children contend with the Palestinian situation. Although such classroom activities may appear as a band aid to the horror outside the classroom, the curriculum suspends children in a state of empowerment, one which has the potential to open their minds to other worlds and see hope for a possible better place than the one that is now theirs.

But for the interactive reading objectives of the Palestinian organizations - Tamer and NIET - books that tackle subjects such as national identity, diversity, equal opportunities, and children's rights - subjects that provide space for the growth and development of children's morals, values, and community participation - are a priority.

*Anne* fits very well into this paradigm of the individual adjusting to the community and establishing a position of belonging. Palestinian instructors see *Anne* as being a very realistic person, an orphan whose adjustment to the community is not unproblematic, one many Palestinian children can identify with. *Anne* offers a point of departure for questioning and

acting out their own situation, not always didactically but in creative and thought provoking ways.

### **The Project**

The curriculum project is based on LM Montgomery's novel *Anne of Green Gables* and is entitled "If you were *Anne*."

### **Hypothetical scenarios emphasizing forgiveness**

This hypothetical scenario comes midway in a series of 10 activities for students from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades. The section's aim is to help students achieve a better understanding of the book. "If you were *Anne*, would you apologize to Rachel Lynde (a neighbour who is suspicious of *Anne* and openly rude to the new orphan child)?" reads the teacher's instruction manual. "If you were Marilla (*Anne*'s newly adopted mother), what would you do when *Anne* refused to apologize," both hypothetical scenarios focus on the importance of forgiveness.

### **Speculation on the story within**

Prior to these thought provoking issues students were directed by their teacher to examine the triumphant red hair girl on the cover and then guess what the book is about.

### **Reading, retelling, and recording**

Before long students are reading various sections of the book and are retelling the story to their classmates who in turn write it down.

### **Acting out *Anne of Green Gables***

From here the students acquaint themselves with the names of the book's characters and adopt a character for themselves from the book. The student selects from a list of eight

different situations the one s/he wants to join and the drama begins after a few minutes of preparation.

### **Questions of argumentation and psychological probing**

Sections entitled: “Questions of argumentation: psychological probing” and “Summing up questions” conclude the activities. Here the profoundness of interrogating literature and seeking its relevance in the textual representations of *Anne* to their own Palestinian situation are most obvious: “Why didn’t Mathew get married?,” “Why was Anne so attached to Diana?,” “Why did Anne have such an extreme tendency to imagination?” and “Do you find a character like Anne plausible in the Palestinian environment?” are just some of the questions that illustrate the power of literature, together with such pedagogical interrogation, to question attitudes towards marriage, friendship, and imagination. There is also the opportunity to draw on cultural comparisons of present day Palestine to rural early 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada.

### **Theme and symbolism in *Anne***

In the final sections of the curriculum project the teacher directs the students to examine the theme and symbolic elements of *Anne*.

### **Creative writing**

A creative writing activity culminates the project as “If I were *Anne*” evolves into “I am *Anne*.” The instructions read: “Collaboration, re-establishing the story, option, and reconstruction” and students are instructed to “write the chapters of a Palestinian novel whose hero is a Palestinian girl who resembles *Anne* in her personality and the circumstances of her life.” The instructions stipulate that the names of the characters should be in Arabic, the environment should resemble that of the students, and they should write about incidents and problems they have actually lived through.

### **Publishing Palestinian *Anne***



Each of the book's chapters produced by the students will eventually be presented as an independent book with its own cover. The instructions continue: "the students must all agree in their hero's fertile imagination, her high (pride) self-esteem, her enthusiasm".

Children and crisis resolution of all kinds - bullying, divorce, accidents, war - all drive much of our literature. Lassén Seger says, children undergo through literature a metamorphosis as part of the reading experience, both wild and uncivilized child metamorphs as well as more innocent, playful, and rebellious ones. For the Palestinian students *Anne* is a kind of metamorph who gives Palestinian children a reason to ponder the world beyond their own, to extract models, channel their thoughts, and exercise their creativity as *Anne* herself did.

Beyond the sense of personal redemption Martha Westwater claims in *Giant Despair meets Hopeful – Kristevian Readings in Adolescent Fiction* the power of fiction to sustain and preserve the ethical and social values of community life.

There is the hope in this project that these tasks practiced in class will one day transfer to the society at large and students will be prepared for negotiation and forgiveness. Though a literature based pedagogy children will be empowered to resolve issues that have haunted them through their short lives.

No doubt this is what the more peace loving nations like Sweden have in mind when they ask Palestinian children to reflect on "If I were *Anne*..."<sup>3</sup> Here Palestinian children are reading and thinking about *Anne of Green Gables* as an attempt to recuperate their childhood, one lost to more adult concerns.

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<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Anna Nordenstam and Ann Boglind for their paper "To Teach Students about *Anne of Green Gables* Today" at this same conference. I gained a deeper understanding of how literature is an important part of the Swedish national curriculum for educating teachers. "Anne" as a source of inspiration for children to love life has driven Swedes in their own education and has also spilled over in their engagement with other nations. Palestine is one example of this emancipatory project to read with ones head and heart.

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### **“If I were Anne”: como os suecos trouxeram *Anne of Green Gables* às salas de aula da Palestina**

**Resumo:** Os professores da Suécia possuem um histórico de engajamento das crianças, através da literatura, visando ao desenvolvimento da autoestima e de atitudes positivas em relação à vida. O clássico canadense, *Anne of Green Gables*, escrito por Lucy Maud Montgomery, em 1908, foi uma das obras de literatura que deram suporte a esses professores para que desenvolvessem esse trabalho com as crianças. A organização sueca Diakonia tem desempenhado um papel importante na promoção desses ideais de promoção da autoestima das crianças por meio da literatura. Quando estive na Palestina, me familiarizei com as atividades da Diakonia com os educadores locais. Neste artigo, examino como os professores palestinos utilizam esta metodologia, com a cópia em árabe de *Anne of Green Gables*.

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura. Capacitação. Palestina. Pedagogia Aplicada. “Anne of Green Gables”.

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## ANNEX

**Finnish education**

I have the privilege of working in a Finnish university where I can witness firsthand the strengths of Finnish education. In order to be admitted to university, students must have good grades in their matriculation examination which they complete after 12 years in comprehensive school, and generally the last three of those years are in high school (in Finnish, lukio). In order to be admitted to university one must take an entrance examination for that faculty/school they hope to be admitted to. All education in Finland is tuition free, including university, so there is not the same financial burden regarding fees that students in other countries experience.

Generally students come to university with good language skills in several foreign languages, with primarily English as their first foreign language which they began in grade 3, at the age 9. Finland is a bilingual country and as most of my students are native Finnish speakers. They have a very strong background in their mother tongue and have also studied Swedish, the other official, for at least 5 years. Many of my students have shorter courses in other languages as well - French, Spanish, German and Russian being the most popular.

At the Language Centre of Tampere University, where I am a lecturer, we offer all the above languages: Finnish and Swedish are compulsory and English is the most popular language. The other languages we offer are German, French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Latin and until quite recently Portuguese, Italian and Arabic. Our emphasis in the higher level courses is on academic and professional skills and we work in collaboration with the schools of our students in order to offer meaningful courses. Personally I have specialized in courses for students of media, education, the humanities, and social sciences. I am well aware that without the diligent work of their English teachers in school I would not be able to do such sophisticated work as I do with my students. The Finnish school system has given these students a solid basis, good working habits, and the ability to further develop their potential.

**Mary McDonald-Rissanen, PhD.**