

Remodeling *An Old-Fashioned Girl*

Troubling Girlhood in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*

In L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Marilla asks the orphan Anne to tell her story, wanting to know, specifically, if the women who had foster-mothered Anne had been good to her. Anne replies: "Oh, they *meant* to be—I know they meant to be just as good and kind as possible" (41, original italics). Marilla thinks about Anne's responses: "What a starved, unloved life she had had—a life of drudgery and poverty and neglect; for Marilla was shrewd enough to read between the lines of Anne's history and divine the truth" (41). Anne's traumatic history and her refusal to speak it dramatically reveal what is often repressed in traditional literary constructions of girlhood. Abuse or neglect or trauma is frequently the backdrop for many girl heroines in English girls' fiction from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century in America, Britain, and Canada. Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856) depicts the May family in the aftermath of their mother's tragic and untimely death. Louisa May Alcott's March sisters deal with economic hardship and their father's absence because of the civil war in *Little Women* (1868–69). In Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), Dorothy is an orphan raised by her humourless aunt and uncle in a barren landscape. Frances Hodgson Burnett's Mary from *The Secret Garden* (1911) is first neglected then orphaned and unwanted. While the circumstance of the stories is one of unhappiness, this emotion is, for the most part, actively suppressed in girls' stories. Instead, like Pollyanna playing the Glad Game, the girls learn to emphasize optimism and happiness.

While the novel has been largely dismissed by literary critics, Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1912) clearly and simplistically articulates the central message to girls in many girls' stories, variously expressed as "grin and bear it," "rest content with your lot," "count your blessings." (See Cadogan and Craig, Foster and Simon, and O'Keefe for more in-depth discussions.) Poor and orphaned like many of her literary forebears, Pollyanna plays the "Glad Game," working to find reason to be glad in the most trying of circumstances. By labouring so hard to be glad, Pollyanna reveals that gladness is not a given. It is work, and it is necessary for survival. Like Pollyanna, then, the traditional heroine of a girls' story must learn to be happy and upbeat, despite her material conditions. These stories then present models of feminine behaviour to their young female readers, in effect potentially teaching readers that good girls are optimistic and cheerful.¹

Ann-Marie MacDonald's novel *Fall on Your Knees* pays homage to the tradition of girls' stories that teaches young females how to accommodate happily to the world around them.² MacDonald is no stranger to revising literary traditions. In her award-winning play, *Good Night Desdemona*, (*Good Morning Juliet*), MacDonald rewrites two of Shakespeare's most famous heroines, allowing them greater power and substance. Similarly, in the process of creating the four Piper girls who read and imitate girls' stories, MacDonald's novel shows how the girls inevitably revise the cultural scripts which they inherit. The Piper girls necessarily comprehend and articulate their own circumstances through the models of girlhood available to them, particularly Louisa May Alcott's *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870) and *Little Women*, and L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. Inevitably, as the girls attempt to emulate the model, they remodel it. MacDonald's narrator highlights how the retelling of the story necessarily alters it by pointing out that "Every time Frances tells the true story, the story gets a little truer" (249). As critics such as Jennifer Andrews and Hilary Buri have noted, *Fall On Your Knees* opens up a world of abuse, oppression, and despair. In doing so, it locates new scripts for articulating that which has been typically elided in girls' stories: abuse, incest, and racism. MacDonald's latest novel, *The Way the Crow Flies* (2003), also revisits and revises an ideology of traditional girlhood by depicting young girls as abusers and murderers. Unlike the cruel and almost hopeless world of *The Way the Crow Flies*, *Fall on Your Knees* may present a bleak world of intolerance as Sheldon Currie suggests (111), but, in diverging from the girls' story traditions that it acknowledges as sources, it also suggests a successful method for change—continually

remodeling inherited traditions. Unlike the overt message of its predecessors, *Fall On Your Knees* does not encourage or allow the heroines to rest content with their lot; they must actively seek to change it.

Cultural Inheritances

Girls' stories influence MacDonald's heroines. As Susan Hekman points out in a discussion of the subject's agency, the cultural scripts we inherit are the tools by which we define and understand ourselves. Arguing that the subject can only express itself through discursive formations already available, Hekman explains that

subjects piece together distinctive combinations, that is, individual subjectivities, from the discursive mix available to them. This does not mean that each subject chooses the elements of that discursive mix that match his/her pre-givensubjectivity. Rather, it entails that subjectivities are products of the discourses present to subjects, not removed from or preceding them. (203)

Thus, girl heroines that a girl encounters in her reading might shape her understanding of herself, as one discursive identity available to her. While this view of the subject might suggest that the subject is an unwitting victim of the discourses at play on him or her, agency is arguably inevitable. Each subject is a product of multiple discourses, rather than a mere reflection of just one. An individual girl is not duped into aping one particular image of girlhood; indeed, as much as she might want to or try, she can never replicate unaltered a specific reproduction of girlhood that is, itself, a reproduction of girlhood, and on *ad infinitum*. I will discuss this in more detail momentarily.

The sheer number of books mentioned in *Fall on Your Knees* is testament to the importance of inherited cultural scripts: Hansel and Gretel, Aesop's Fables, *Water Babies*, "every girls' book you could ever think of from *Little Women* to *Anne of Green Gables* . . ." (100), fairy tales, *The Bobbsey Twins*, *Great Expectations*, *What Katy Did*, *Pollyanna*, *Arabian Nights*, and *Jane Eyre*, and this list is but a sampling of the children's literature. As Hekman would suggest, the Piper girls make sense of their life, in part, through what they have read. Materia kills herself in the oven, so that she is half in "like the witch in Hansel and Gretel" (2), says the narrator. When Frances drags Lily off to the abandoned mine, she explains that dead men are in it, "and diamonds." Lily responds by making a connection to literature: "Like in Aladdin" (266). Kathleen describes Rose's unlikely pink ruffled dress as a "Pollyanna" dress, a hilarious reference as Rose, no happy Pollyanna figure,

becomes the cynical transgendered blues singer, Doc Rose, demonstrating both the pressure to conform and just how far what is accepted as “real life” diverges from fiction. The fiction within MacDonald’s fiction reveals that individuals can only understand and express themselves in terms of available discourses.

Rose’s unlikely pink outfit demonstrates how MacDonald’s novel both employs and deviates from the children’s tales it invokes. As Judith Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*, our identities are continually reproduced or performed in order for a sense of identity to be established. However, identity cannot be reproduced unchanged; not only can we never reproduce a discursive subjectivity exactly, we are never self-identical. That failure to reproduce ourselves exactly demonstrates the inevitability of change and is therefore the site of agency. By both attempting to emulate and thus necessarily revising *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, *Little Women*, and *Anne of Green Gables*, the girls in MacDonald’s novel show the continual need to repeat one’s identity, such as “girl,” and the inevitable failure of the repetition. In doing so, this novel troubles the construction of girlhood as an identity and an ideology. As Katarzyna Rukszte argues, MacDonald’s novel “queers” identity in that it “challenges the stability of normative categories” (19). While Rukszte focuses primarily on multi-cultural identities in her article, her argument can easily be extended to familial identity. *Fall On Your Knees* uncovers the abuses, pain, and secrets, and the host of emotional responses to them, that traditional constructions of girlhood have not only tended to cloak but also narrowed to a required cheerfulness. Frances, the sister who most embodies a revised girlhood script, literally rewrites the ending of *Jane Eyre* by adding “an epilogue, wherein Mr. Rochester’s hand, severed and lost in the fire, comes back to life and strangles their infant child” (224). While funny, this ending reflects not only the abusive patriarchal power in the Piper girls’ lives, but the need to revise the traditional happy ending to account for lived experience.

The Traditions of Girlhood and Familism

One of the dominant impulses of traditional girls’ stories is the heroine’s attempt to locate some type of family support, in such orphan tales as *Anne of Green Gables*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Pollyanna*, and/or achieve familial approbation, in such domestic novels as *The Daisy Chain* and *Little Women*. Family support and love is the solution to the heroine’s problems, even when the family is also the source of the heroine’s problems.³ Familism as an ideology

is rarely questioned in the tradition of girls' stories, either within the works or by critics, because these books, variously called "family chronicles" or "domestic novels," are clearly vehicles for naturalizing familial ideology. In *The Anti-Social Family*, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh argue that the family is not just a social institution but also an ideology in Western society. As an ideology, familism is anti-social, Barrett and McIntosh claim, because it privileges the family unit over the community at large. They point out that the family demarks and enforces gender and class inequality. Furthermore, the family unit can easily be the site of abuse that becomes difficult to escape:

The exclusion of outsiders and turning in to the little family group may seem attractive when it works well and when the family does satisfy its members' needs. But the little enclosed group can also be a trap, a prison whose walls and bars are constructed of the ideas of domestic privacy and autonomy. (Barrett and McIntosh 56)

Girls' stories tend to uphold and transmit the ideology of family, at least overtly. Representations of girlhood traditionally require conformity to a domestic role and to patriarchal rule. Discussing novels of female adolescence, Annis Pratt agrees:

The many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels that dealt with feminine conduct became a highly popular way of inculcating the norms of womanhood into young readers, mixing fiction and prescription in a manner that fascinated them while pleasing their parents. These novels prescribed submission to suffering and sadism as an appropriate way to prepare a young girl for life. (13)

In his discussion of Alcott's depiction of family in *Little Women*, Humphrey Carpenter suggests that the tales are often more complicated than Pratt would allow: *Little Women* "castigates family life for imposing suffering, and yet asserts that only in the family can sanity be found" (93). Other critics, such as Shirley Foster and Judy Simons, do not question the familism that underwrites these domestic novels.⁴

In stories as different as *What Katy Did*, *Pollyanna*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Jane Eyre*, all mentioned in *Fall On Your Knees*, the girls ultimately locate their identity solidly within the bosom of family. In *What Katy Did*, rebellious Katy falls from a swing and becomes an invalid; in this position, she comes to understand herself as the enviable centre of family life and the helpmate of her father. In *Pollyanna*, the heroine's accident helps to bring together her rigid aunt and the doctor, ending the novel with a marriage and the promise of the nuclear family. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane providentially

finds her cousins and inheritance, all through family connections she did not realize she had. This new family leads to her independence and ultimate fulfillment. In *Anne of Green Gables*, the heroine never locates her place in an actual, biological family, but sacrifices her schooling to maintain her adoptive mother in a move that signifies the establishment of familial relations once and for all. This sacrifice likens her to Katy and Pollyanna, in that a restriction (an immobilizing accident or sacrificing a scholarship) leads to a strong familial pay off. Although abusive, or absent, or unfulfilling to each heroine initially, family is ultimately constructed as the reward.

In its revision of girls' stories, *Fall On Your Knees* exposes the familism in the tradition by detailing how it operates to keep the Piper girls in thrall to the abusive patriarch. In so doing, McDonald's novel reveals the abuses that familial ideology works to keep secret, and thus rewrites the girls' story to suggest that, rather than the solution, family as ideology might be the problem.

An Old-Fashioned Girl: Cheerful Hard Work

The ironic references to the book *An Old-Fashioned Girl* indicate how MacDonald's girls' story revises the girls' story tradition. For being such a good girl, Mercedes receives from her father a porcelain figurine, named *An Old-Fashioned Girl* presumably after Alcott's didactic novel. Alcott's Polly, the old-fashioned girl of the title, is ostensibly "not intended as a perfect model"; yet, in the preface to the book, Alcott evinces the hope that Polly will be an improvement on contemporary girlhood (v-vi). The poor country cousin of the Shaw family, Polly is set up as a foil to the two wealthy and terribly spoiled contemporary girls, Fanny and Maud, and their mischievous brother, Tom. While Fanny has fine clothing and grown-up flirtations, Polly dresses simply, primarily because she does not have the means for fancy dress. Through embracing "the sunny side of poverty and work" (265), she establishes a business teaching youngsters piano, and sets up housekeeping on her own. She is plain, hardworking, charitable, diligently cheerful, and rather boring, especially when compared to the scandalously flirtatious Fanny and the gambling, dapper Tom. When the patriarch of the Shaw family goes bankrupt, Polly guides the whole family to a simple, yet more admirable and charitable, lifestyle. Alcott's message is clear: money and freedom spoil children, causing them to disdain family and disrespect the patriarch. On the other hand, strife rallies the family together. Moreover, the patriarch should always be valorized, even, or especially, in the moment when the family's precarious dependency on him is revealed in bankruptcy.

Picking up on Alcott's messages about girlhood and the family, in MacDonald's novel, James presents Mercedes, the hardworking Polly-style sister, with the "Old-Fashioned Girl" figurine after the death of both her sister, Kathleen, and her mother, Materia. This gift shows that he has retracted his earlier convictions that his daughter Kathleen would be "a modern girl": "James had read about the 'New Woman.' That's what my daughter's going to be" (60). Kathleen's demise encourages James to return to An Old-Fashioned Girl as a literal model for his other daughter, Mercedes. Kathleen, the "New Woman," did not adhere to the tenets of familism or proper girlhood. No domestic role model, she leaves home in pursuit of her own career, and she initiates a lesbian romance with a woman of colour.⁵ Not surprisingly, the "New Woman" must be punished: in *Fall on Your Knees*, by rape and death. The "Old-Fashioned Girl," Mercedes, is ostensibly rewarded, even though the reader sees that Mercedes' commitment to family is misguided and her rewards meagre.

The repeated image of the figurine shows the extent to which the novel revises the traditions of girlhood it represents. After James presents the model to Mercedes, she proudly displays the statuette on her dresser where it reminds her "how nice her daddy is" (232), an ironic comment as James is the paragon of the abusive patriarch, having raped Kathleen and Frances, for example. To be worthy of the title An Old-Fashioned Girl, one must glorify the patriarchal power without question, just as Polly encourages the Shaw family to do after the patriarch's bankruptcy, "learning from misfortune how much they loved one another" (302).

The figurine next appears when saintly Lily, angry at Frances, smashes it on the floor, breaking it. That she destroys the Old-Fashioned Girl in her rage is appropriate as this expressed rage is not typical of old-fashioned girls' stories, where girls learn instead to repress their anger, as Jo must in *Little Women*. The saintly mother Marmee in *Little Women* explains to Jo her own need to repress anger: "I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo, but I have learned not to show it" (Alcott, *Little Women* 75). Similarly, even when Polly might justifiably feel anger because the Shaw children are rummaging through her possessions and laughing at them, she merely tells them she will not forgive them, "then as if afraid of saying too much, ran out of the room" (Alcott, *Old-Fashioned* 83). Of course she forgives them, but anger must be repressed, justifiable or not. Significantly, in *Fall on Your Knees*, Frances literally remodels the model when she "fixes" it: "The Old-Fashioned Girl has a parasol for a head and a head for a parasol. She is

daintily holding up her own head of ringlets to the sun while the insensate yellow parasol is implanted in the empty neck like a flag" (257). Not only does she literally remodel it, but Frances is also the metaphorically remodeled Old-Fashioned Girl. At the speakeasy, she performs vaudeville acts and prostitutes herself, "a pint-size whore with a parasol" (304), recalling the figurine, and she boasts, "I've got what ain't in books" (288), as if to emphasize her difference from characters like Alcott's Polly.

The refashioned figurine next returns when James reaches into the hope chest, where the disfigured figurine is stored. He wants to retrieve his bayonet in order to kill the man he suspects of interfering with Frances, but he pulls out the figurine instead. Appropriately, since Frances has become a prostitute, James asks: "What happened to The Old-Fashioned Girl?" (369). Overturning her role as the patient do-gooder Polly, Mercedes responds to her drunken father's appearance with a gun by pushing him down the stairs, because she is afraid he intends to harm Frances. No good-natured old-fashioned girls can exist in the world MacDonalld creates. As Rukszto argues, this moment is a turning point, one where the father is finally defeated by "his daughters' agency" (29), decidedly not a feature of the traditional girls' story.

The statuette's next appearance directly establishes a connection with Frances. When Frances insists that Lily must leave the Piper house for New York, Lily is outraged. This moment is ironic, as Lily responds, "This isn't a story, Frances" (450). The reader knows that, of course, it is a story, but one that differs radically from the traditional ones about girls. Furthermore, Lily pummels Frances, forgetting that "Frances is not a book, or a porcelain figurine" (450–51). Frances is not as breakable as the original statuette, yet she is a remodeled girl. Instead of labouring quietly for little pay, doing charitable work, and having reverence for patriarchs, Frances performs loudly, prostitutes herself, and demonstrates no respect for her father. She does so for self-sacrificial reasons that are quite different than those which emerge in the tradition of girls' stories: rather than working to "render home what it should be" as Alcott claims the Old-Fashioned Girl should (vi), Frances works to provide the funds for Lily's escape from home and the dangers of the family.

Little Women: Saintly Self-Sacrifice

While *An Old-Fashioned Girl* forms a leitmotif throughout the novel, the comparisons to girls' books such as *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* also trouble the traditions of girlhood. *Fall On Your Knees* rewrites Louisa

May Alcott's *Little Women*. It is a family chronicle of four girls—Kathleen, Mercedes, Frances, and Lily—just as *Little Women* chronicled the lives of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. The patriarch is away at war for a time in both. Both Kathleen and Jo pursue their ambitions in New York City: Kathleen as an opera singer, and Jo as a writer and governess. Both girls meet their romantic partners in New York: for Jo, a dusty professor; for Kathleen, a black pianist who also happens to be female. Kathleen, like Jo, is decidedly ungirlish: she shows “an alarming tendency to play with boys. . . . for ever banishing herself from the society of girls” (41). These similarities highlight how MacDonald's novel diverges from the traditions of little womanhood represented by Alcott. *Little Women* recounts the lives of the four sisters as they learn to rest content with the hardship of their relative poverty and as they grow into proper sacrificial womanhood. Upon the father's return from the war, he comments with approbation on Meg's rough hands, Jo's pale and worried face, Beth's slipping away, and Amy's sacrifice (208–09); obviously, hard work, suffering and self-deprivation are the hallmarks of little womanhood. One of the messages of *Little Women* is drawn from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a book that forms a leitmotif throughout *Little Women*: one can only achieve salvation through struggle and suffering.⁶

Tellingly, the Piper girls play “Little Women” in the chapter entitled “Little Women”: “Mercedes would be motherly Meg, and Frances would be tomboy Jo who cuts off her hair but gets married in the end, and Lily would be delicate Beth who was so nice and then she died” (199). While the girls readily adopt roles from the fiction they have read, MacDonald's fiction fulfills none of these destinies. Mercedes becomes dry “leather lips,” the brutal spinster schoolteacher with nary a maternal bone in her body. Frances does cut off all her hair (289), but not for any laudable purpose. Alcott's Jo snips her mane in order to raise funds for their ill father in the war, whereas Frances bobs her hair in part to be fashionable and to appeal to men sexually. Delicate and invalided Lily does not die like Beth; indeed, she proves the strongest as she walks from Cape Breton to New York City and is the only surviving sister at the end of the narrative. Moreover, the girls' game of “Little Women” transmogrifies into “Little Women Doing the Stations of the Cross.” They revise the Protestant story with the addition of their Catholic experience. Finally, the Piper girls discard “Little Women” altogether and role-play female saints, exposing the connection between these two representations of model girlhood.

Little Women stays inaccessible to the girls, necessarily and thankfully.

That they cannot finally become the models they emulate allows them the agency to construct themselves differently. The limitations of the scripts they inherit is revealed by the pretend food that they feed each other in moments of bewildering pain. After James rapes Kathleen, she returns home, silent and pregnant, to be confined to the attic:

Frances and Mercedes have been allowed in to read to her and to bring her trays of food. They have read *Black Beauty*, *Treasure Island*, *Bleak House*, *Jane Eyre*, *What Katy Did*, *Little Women*, and every story in *The Children's Treasury of Saints and Martyrs*. . . . They also get their mother to search out recipes for the invalid food found in *What Katy Did* and *Little Women*. "Blancmange" seems to be the favourite of languishing girls. They never do find out what it is. "White eat." What would that taste like? (146)

Similarly, after Kathleen's gory death and the fallout, Frances cannot get warm or eat. Mercedes turns to the scripts before her in order to cope: she "feeds [Frances] pretend blancmange. 'Pretend' because the dish is unavailable to them outside the realm of fiction" (150). Mercedes frantically attempts to emulate the model that she might have seen in *Little Women*: the eldest sister, Meg, sends blancmange to the ailing next-door neighbour boy, Laurie (Alcott, *Little Women* 46). After Frances is sexually abused by her father, she creates a white dough of flour and water and sucks on it: "White eat"? Frances has learned from fiction to eat blancmange when one is ailing, thus she indirectly reveals the hurt that is not directly addressed until much later in the novel, the hurt that she has no language for except "blancmange." Similarly, after Frances' baby has supposedly died, Mercedes brings her a tray of pretend food: "Frances looks at the tray while Mercedes identifies its contents, 'Blancmange, treacle, mead and mutton—'" (447). Frances points out that the tray is empty, and Mercedes bursts into tears. The childhood games that allowed them to know they were hurt yet still escape the pain into a fictional world is gone. They must locate direct expression. Even so, as Frances is dying, Mercedes brings her their dolls and tells the story of "two tiny girls with tartan housecoats and cinnamon toast." Moreover, the text reveals Mercedes' thoughts as she tries to comfort Frances: "A flagon of port or would you prefer blancmange?" (557). This pretend offering is unspoken now, but the reference to food that belongs only to the world of fiction for these characters at once reveals the necessary following of tradition and the ultimate impossibility of doing so. Mercedes continues to express her anguish through reference to blancmange, yet MacDonald's story revises the tradition by showing that parts of it, represented by

blancmange, are inaccessible. Moreover, MacDonald's focus on blancmange—a bland pudding of milk, sugar, and starch—highlights the content of traditional girls' stories: sweet, bland, white. As critics such as Melanie A. Stevenson have argued, MacDonald explores racialized identity in this novel, highlighting the abuses resulting from notions of "racial purity." The girls' story tradition that MacDonald's novel cites and draws upon is exclusively and significantly white. MacDonald refuses to allow her heroines to serve "white eat" for her readers.

Anne of Green Gables: No Place Like Home

Not only does MacDonald's novel embrace and rewrite *An Old-Fashioned Girl* and *Little Women*, but it also revisits Canadian girlhood by its references and similarities to Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. Orphaned Anne arrives at Green Gables, the home of elderly siblings, Marilla and Matthew, only to discover that a mistake was made: they wanted to adopt a boy, not a girl. The novel recounts Anne's tribulations on her path to acceptance at Green Gables. The similarities between the two novels are numerous. Kathleen is a red-head like Anne. She is humiliated in front of her class, as Anne is and as Amy is in *Little Women*. Where Anne is punished for cracking a slate over Gilbert's head and Amy for possessing a contraband food, Kathleen is ostensibly punished for reading a book, once again demonstrating the threatening power of reading in MacDonald's novel. The narrator reveals that Kathleen is actually punished for her personality, her haughty difference from the other girls that the schoolteacher despises; Kathleen lacks the agency in her crime that Anne and Amy possess.

Fall on Your Knees and *Anne of Green Gables* also highlight the ability of representations of femininity to influence readers. Both Anne and Frances attempt to model themselves after their heroines by cutting their hair. Motivated by the desire to be like the raven-haired beauties about whom she reads, Anne attempts to dye her hair black; when it turns green instead, she is forced to cut it short. Expressing more agency in her haircutting, Frances wants to be like short-haired, feisty movie heroines. Red-haired Frances also echoes Anne, even phonetically, but especially in her outrageous exploits and scrapes and her inevitable loveableness. However, Frances is a major rewriting of Anne. Rather than an overly-earnest, well-intentioned orphan who inadvertently exposes others' hypocrisy, Frances is an ironic and unrepentant delinquent, hell-bent on exposing hypocrisy and injustice. Like Anne, Frances also receives acceptance, and receives it because of her

defiant refusal to be anything other than what she is. Montgomery's Anne pleads with Marilla: "I'll try to do and be anything you want me, if you'll only keep me" (47). Frances offers no such promises, and yet she mysteriously reaches acceptance in her community, and with the reader, even though she has transgressed major taboos: sexually assaulting a young man, becoming a prostitute, and being pregnant out of wedlock, for example. As the sister that has tried so hard to fulfill expectations, Mercedes feels betrayed by the community's response to Frances: "It is not fair that Frances should bask in Daddy's affection and the approval of sundry shopkeepers for something that ought to have her hiding her face in shame" (436). MacDonald clearly revises the ideology of girlhood with her portrayal of Frances.

Mercedes also bears similarities to Anne, with the telling difference of displaying a greater passivity than Anne. Because of alcohol, Mercedes is separated from her best friend, Helen, just as Anne was forced to part with Diana. Anne inadvertently got Diana drunk, which led to their separation. Mercedes' loss is more passive; she is not responsible. Helen's father simply does not want his daughter being friends with a bootlegger's daughter. Furthermore, Mercedes turns down a scholarship to Saint Francis Xavier University, just as Anne turns down a scholarship to Redmond College in Halifax. Both do so to devote themselves to their families. However, Anne's sacrifice is also a signifier of her final acceptance at Green Gables, arguably a sacrifice to celebrate as she finally and undeniably has a home. For Mercedes, the sacrifice is for her family, but she gains nothing from it. Mercedes' sacrifice shows a damaging effect of family ties; she is bound in an unfulfilling manner to her father and Frances and evinces a passive acceptance of her role. Of course, Mercedes adopts this behaviour precisely because she is actively modeling herself after girls' story heroines.

While Kathleen, Frances, and Mercedes share qualities with Anne, the Anne of *Fall on Your Knees* is Anthony, the orphan from Halifax, just as Anne was an orphan from Nova Scotia. Anthony reveals the extent to which *Fall on Your Knees* remodels traditional girlhood—while girls have been her central concern throughout, MacDonald ends her story with a male, a mixed-race man who sports in the first syllable of his name, the name of the most famous Canadian storygirl, but a male nonetheless. In moving from girls to a boy, and from white and black to a mixture of white, black, and "in-between Lebanese," MacDonald's novel challenges the familism that has been responsible not only for the racism, but also the sexual, emotional, and physical abuse in the Piper family. By the introduction of Anthony, this

novel evades the trap of biological essentialism by insisting that one does not have to be biologically female in order to be the hopeful protagonist of a girls' story.

Overcoming Familism

Frances' child, Anthony is the symbol of hope and affirmation. By his exile from the Piper family, Anthony manages to evade the abuse, incest, and racial oppressions that infect the Pipers. Anthony's success as a well-adjusted, open-minded young academic of ethnomusicology suggests that being estranged from family might be the solution to the cycle of abuse. Whereas the dominant theme in *Anne of Green Gables* is acceptance—Anne struggles to be accepted at Green Gables—in *Fall on Your Knees*, it is both acceptance and escape. Anthony gives us hope because he has been excluded from the abusive traditions and conventions which are now being revealed to him in the telling of the narrative. Yet, he also receives acceptance into the family by his inclusion in the family tree and in the tale we have just heard.

The last-second revelation that, at the beginning of the book, Lily is telling the story is the novel's liberatory moment, the escape from oppression, the final agency. The final words of the novel are Lily's: "sit down and have a cuppa tea till I tell you about your mother" (566). These words lead the reader back to page one: "They're all dead now." In those first few pages, a first-person voice is speaking to a "you," and apparently showing photographs, both real and memory snapshots. MacDonald is working from a tradition here as well. Margaret Laurence's female *Bildungsroman*, *The Diviners*, is structured in part by memory snapshots and is also a circular narrative; in the final words of the novel, Morag finishes writing the book we have just read. Similarly, in *Fall On Your Knees*, after reading to the ending, the reader can picture the novel's initial voice as Lily's telling the family history to Anthony, a history that began "[a] long time ago before you were born" (7). The reader is thus aligned with Anthony, the mixed-race man, bearing witness to the Piper family story.

Aware of the importance of reading and story-telling for interpreting oneself, this novel labours to teach its own readers, embodied in Anthony. Through Lily and then the omniscient narrator, this novel teaches Anthony and the reader a revised, more inclusive history, both Anthony's individual one and a collective Canadian one. The circularity of the narrative means that the story is always in the process of being told, and it highlights a sense

of orality because the story is always being spoken. The focus on an oral tradition, which MacDonald emphasizes with the “a long time ago” folk tale style, works to refuse fixing identity or capturing the story once and for all. *Fall On Your Knees* shows that we need traditions in order to express and understand ourselves, but it emphasizes that we need to keep those traditions, and our identities, open, in flux, in process, in order to intervene in the kind of abuses and oppressions and intolerances that permeate this novel. Moreover, by emphasizing the limitations of the traditions and establishing itself within these traditions, this novel acknowledges its own limitations and thus avoids establishing itself as the final unchanging fixed authority. Through this circular ending, MacDonald’s novel effectively exposes the ideological workings of the girls’ story tradition by revealing the clash between the Piper girls’ reading and their lived experience. By revealing the pernicious effects of familism, *Fall On Your Knees* rewrites the girls’ story tradition, educating a new generation of readers about the strength and survival of girls in the face of almost unspeakable, but finally spoken, abuse.

NOTES

- 1 I do not wish to simplify the complex messages of girls’ stories and thus contribute to what Beverly Lyon Clarke regards as the dismissive attitude of academics towards children’s literature (Clarke 2). I am here discussing the overt or dominant messages of the texts. Clearly, the novels are riven with other meanings that readers and critics have recognized. While some critics such as Deborah O’Keefe argue that the girls tend to move from feisty to docile over the course of classic girls’ stories (see also Pratt and Segal), other critics, such as Shirley Foster and Judy Simons wrestle with the complexity of the books’ messages, suggesting that the works both uphold and subvert dominant social beliefs, for example. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser sums up the dominant views in Alcott criticism by stating that “[m]ost scholars now perceive a radical, visionary, or at least revisionary impulse in her fiction” (xii). Similarly, Mary Rubio establishes a position that other Montgomery scholars echo: “Montgomery both works within the traditional literary genre of domestic romance and yet circumvents its restrictive conventions when she critiques her society” (Rubio 8). MacDonald’s novel picks up on and rewrites its predecessors’ ambivalence by clearly showing the damaging effects of girls’ stories central messages: the focus on gladness and submission to the patriarch.
- 2 Of course, the girls’ stories that MacDonald’s novel treats also emerge from and revise a tradition that precedes them. Humphrey Carpenter points out that Charlotte Yonge’s *The Daisy Chain* was a precursor to Alcott’s *Little Women*, which then influenced the creation of other girls’ books, such as *Anne of Green Gables* (Carpenter 93–94, 98 and note 77, 227). For further detail, see Karen Sands-O’Connor’s discussion of the debts Alcott owes to Yonge, and Temma Berg’s discussion of how Montgomery rewrites Alcott by altering sisterhood to friendship.

- 3 Again, while this may be the overt message, the girls' stories often gesture to other quiet messages. See Claudia Nelson's "Family Circle or Vicious Circle?" for an assessment of how Alcott subtly undercuts the patriarchal figure in her fiction. MacDonald's novel makes blatant these subtle messages.
- 4 Foster and Simons attempt to exalt American girls' fiction over English girls' fiction by claiming that in the American tradition, girls are not "bound by an overriding concept of domestic duty" (18), and that American girls are not "located within a familial context" (18). They mistakenly cite Canadian *Anne of Green Gables* as an example of this American feature. Moreover, both *Anne* and *Little Women*, their two examples, are irrefutably domestic novels, even though they provide room for the heroine to blossom outside of traditional roles. Anne desires a home; Jo finds comfort in the bosom of her family.
- 5 Arguably, Rose is a transgendered man, and therefore Kathleen is actually in a heterosexual relationship, a reading that problematizes sexuality and biological essentialism even more than most critics have done. Regardless of the interpretation here, Kathleen is clearly straying from a traditional path in her romance.
- 6 Once again, I will state that this is not the only message that Alcott's ironic rewriting of Bunyan produces. See Karla Walters and Linda K. Kerber for two relevant detailed discussions.

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