

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

Losing the plot as an idol grows up

Nearly every woman writer I know was indelibly influenced by three childhood idols: Jane Austen, Josephine March from *Little Women*, and Anne Shirley, the heroine of *Anne of Green Gables*.

When one returns to these treasured tomes as adults, however, one is often startled to discover that their messages were not as progressive as we had remembered. Both Josephine and Anne solemnly take the advice of condescending men: steer clear of the "lady novelist" trap and write instead about domestic subjects close to hand.

From Anne and Jane Austen's heroines we learn that intelligence in a woman is no obstacle to her finding a husband - so long as she is also pretty. And Anne always got her way by crying.

But when film adaptations of these novels attempt to modernise the stories, the results are mixed. In the case of last year's controversial film version of *Mansfield Park*, screenwriter/director Patricia Rozema turned the Fanny Price character into a promising young writer. It was a felicitous embellishment arising naturally and organically from the character.

At other times the result is awkward and forced, as is the case with a long-awaited new mini-series, *Anne of Green Gables: The Continuing Story*. (PBS. Part Two airs on Sunday, June 30, at 9pm ET. Part One has already aired in some regions; check local listings.)

In this most disorienting, un-Anne-like storyline, which takes place at the onset of the first world war,

the Titian-haired heroine discovers that her husband Gilbert has been taken by the Germans as a prisoner of war.

Anne dons military dress, becomes a spy, and dodges bullets in France to rescue him. What's her strategy? In her words: "I am not leaving until I turn up every single floorboard to find out what I can about my husband." Unfortunately, much of the film has Anne doing just that.

This is the third *Anne of Green Gables* mini-series produced by Kevin Sullivan, who gained a fanatical following after his previous Anne adaptations (in 1986 and 1987).

Sullivan wrote the original screenplay for this third instalment, rather than basing it on the Lucy Maude Montgomery novels. Anne and the other characters are barely recognisable here, having been used for their brand-name recognition to market this boring war film.

Sullivan was able to reassemble many of the child actors who appeared in the two previous productions, and who are now well into adulthood. The old cast provides a sense of continuity and familiarity. On the other hand, the reunion looms with unease and awkwardness, as if the actors are embarrassed to see one another again.

What we have here is the *Godfather III* problem. The Anne productions' momentum ended ages ago, but the creators succumbed to that Hollywood disease, trilogy-compulsion.

Actress Megan Follows has always played Anne with a hint of cockiness, as if to remind us that she was selected for this role through a highly publicised

talent search from a pool of 3,000 applicants. She was 17 at the outset of this series, and was the consummate child Anne, giving just the right tone of earnest vanity to such lines as: "If you'll call me Anne with an E, I'll reconcile myself to not being called Cordelia."

As an adult, however, Follows has lost her grip on the character, for which she can hardly be blamed.

The First World War was an unfunny war if there ever was one, and the entire Anne ethos falls apart. Her ethereal, positive-attitude act is downright cartoon-like here. When a soldier abandons his wife and infant to die, the most vituperative insult she can muster is: "Wait till I get my hands on you!"

This mini-series reminds me of an anecdote Michael Caine has been telling on the interview circuit about his soon-to-be-published spy novel. He claims that he had to rewrite the manuscript because, in the first draft, he lost track of the plot and accidentally killed the protagonist twice.

That seems to be what is happening in this third Anne instalment. The plot is so fraught with indecision that I felt as though I were witnessing a meeting about a story rather than a finished product.

For example, a handsome US rake figures prominently in Anne's life, but he fails to make a move on her. In the context of the film, it comes across as a sloppy oversight, as if the writers either forgot about him, or decided halfway through filming that this was to be a children's film.

Legend has it that Canadian author Lucy Maude Montgomery got the idea for *Anne of Green Gables* from a newspaper item that read: "Elderly couple apply to orphan home for a boy; by mistake a girl is sent to them."

L.M. Montgomery managed to squeeze eight novels out of a one-line concept but, truth be told, even the original Anne books became

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