Anne Made Me Gay: When Kindred Spirits Get Naked

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Do you get weak in the knees at the sight of gingham? Do you have an attraction to red-heads that you’ve never fully explored? Did Anne and her devotion to her bosom friends … turn you gay?

—Rowe, Anne Made Me Gay Call for Submissions

It’s been over a hundred years since she burst onto the scene, and plucky red-headed heroine Anne Shirley still has a powerful hold on readers’ hearts the world over. Mark Twain called her “delightful.” Canadian literary greats like Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro acknowledge their affection for Anne. As I write this, the newly minted Duchess of Cambridge is visiting Anne’s adopted home, Prince Edward Island; she chose PEI as a stop on her first Canadian tour because she loved Anne as a girl and wanted to experience “something of a sentimental journey” (Haggarty).

I grew up reading the Anne of Green Gables books, like any good Canadian girl. I remember the day my dad brought them to me. I was home from school with a fever and feeling pretty low. The first chapter was kind of hard to get into for a nine year old; it was mainly comprised of old people talking. But the moment Anne Shirley stepped on to the page in Chapter Two—with her hyperbole, her lack of boundaries, and her tricky carpet bag—I knew I’d found a friend for life.

I wasn’t nearly so outgoing as Anne, nor so chatty. But I did have a vivid imagination, a flair for the dramatic, and a very romantic disposition, just like my literary heroine. As a young person, Anne was a role model to me. She was unapologetically intelligent, an ambitious scholar, a loyal friend, and a scrappy fighter. She was an outsider who longed to fit.
She was unapologetically intelligent, an ambitious scholar, a loyal friend, and a scrappy fighter. She was an outsider who longed to fit in but was reluctant to change who she was in order to do so. Also, she REALLY loved Diana and I totally, totally understood.

I didn’t just love Anne … I LOVED Anne.

It wasn’t until I was a young adult that I began to realize the full impact Anne and Diana’s intense romantic friendship had on my lesbionic development. I remember it first hit me while I was reading Tipping the Velvet by Sarah Waters, a steamy lesbian historical fiction novel set in 1890s London. On the surface, aside from the corsets, Waters’s novel has little in common with Anne; but the idea that Nan and Kitty’s romantic friendship was a gateway to a full-blown lesbian love affair opened my eyes to what I had subconsciously hoped would happen to Anne and Diana. At its core, for me, Tipping the Velvet was like the ultimate Anne/Diana slash fiction. And I could not get enough. I went back to Anne and started to see the books in a whole new light—a sort of rainbow-coloured light.

Here are some hints that Anne may have played a part in your queer awakening too:

1. You read the parts of the books where Anne and Diana declared their never-ending love for one another over and over.
2. When the movie came out, you watched the parts where Anne and Diana declared their never-ending love for one another over and over. You actually wore out this part of the VHS tape that you recorded off the CBC.
3. In both the books and the films, you skipped the parts where Gilbert and Anne got together because really, who cares?

My obsession with Anne renewed, I created a subtle and delicate presentation about romantic friendship in the nineteenth century called Anne and Diana Were TOTALLY DOING IT. In the piece, I played an academic who claimed that L. M. Montgomery had left hidden messages in her texts that clearly indicated, to the queer-conscious reader, that Anne and her bosom friend were … more than friends. The piece—including my faux research, PowerPoint slides, and speculative re-enactments based on the Anne books—premiered at the Hysteria Festival in 2005 and went on to be presented at the Edgy Women Festival in Montreal and the Loud and Queer Festival in Edmonton. It was healthy to get a little Anne out of my system, but the warm reception the piece received only served to whet my appetite for all things gay Anne.

I started to look online for others like myself, queer Anne fans who knew that Anne probably wasn’t gay but who felt that our gayness may have been triggered by Anne and her passionate, romantic friendship with her bosom friend and other kindred spirits like Katherine Brooke (the prickly teacher from Anne of Windy Poplars and Anne of Green Gables: The Sequel) and Leslie Moore (the tragic, beautiful neighbour from Anne’s House of Dreams). I found hidden pockets of erotic fan fiction, passionate Anne/Diana conversations in forums, and more than one video mash-up of Anne and Diana scenes from the iconic eighties films, set to stirring music.

I also discovered that I was not the first to suggest that Anne and Diana were in love. The subject has been taken up in numerous critical texts, including Laura Robinson’s informative paper Bosom Friends: Lesbian Desire in L.M. Montgomery’s Anne Books. Robinson, also a redhead, points out that “Montgomery’s novels underscore the fact that, at the turn of the twentieth century, heterosexuality was indeed compulsory” but that the novels likewise “establish women’s homosocial relationships as the central concern” (19) and these relationships effectively “present a quiet challenge to traditional patriarchy” (19–20).

Some scholars have focused on the question as to whether or not Anne herself was indeed a lesbian or further that her maker, Montgomery, may have been a lesbian. While this is all very interesting it is not entirely relevant. In these cases, it seems prudent to privilege Anne’s influence over her sexual identification because, finally, debating the sexual proclivity of a fictional character is a theoretical haystack. In the end, “Anne manages, in matters of sexuality as in everything else, to disturb complacent attitudes” (26), and it is for this reason the contemporary queer woman finds herself in Anne—in more ways than one.

When the 100th Anne-versary of Anne of Green Gables rolled around in 2008, there were a variety of celebrations taking place across the country to mark the occasion. But I soon noticed a glaring omission—there were no celebrations for queer lovers of Anne. I knew there was a community of lesbian Anne lovers out there, who all felt our gay little hearts beat a little faster when Anne and Diana held hands over the brook and promised they’d never marry. And clearly we queer Anne fans needed a safe space to really let our Anne/Diana freak flag fly.

I jokingly suggested to Moynan King, who was at the time working as a dramaturg on my historical lesbian play Kiss with Your Teeth, that we should “do something” to celebrate 100 years of Anne. Moynan called my bluff and immediately started to devise a series of lesbian tableaux featuring our beloved Anne. We decided that a cabaret style show fea-
turing artists on the theme of Anne’s influence on our bur-
geoning queerness would be the way to go and, inspired by
my original Anne performance, that a faux academic styled
conference presentation would contextualize the pieces. Then
followed much debate between the two of us as to whether
the show should be called Anne Turned Me Gay or Anne
Made Me Gay. Obviously we went with the latter—the right
decision, I believe. We made some calls and put out a call for
submissions and then one night, in November of 2008, we
presented Anne Made Me Gay: When Kindred Spirits Get Naked, an
evening of Sapphic poetry, performance art, tableaux vivants,
video, and song at Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times Theatre.

We sold out. Clearly, Anne made a LOT of people gay.
The ephemeral nature of cabaret performance makes it
difficult both to record and to reproduce. Fortunately, we
had photographer Mondo Lulu there that night and he cap-
tured the evening in style.

We wanted the audience to have the opportunity to feel
like they were part of the action, so we created a gingham-
backed photobooth area where audience members could don
Anne’s red braids and pose. Moynan (or, as she was known for
the evening, “Moy-anne”) King went first in the photobooth,
to set an example.

Performance artist Juana Awad helped set the tone for
the evening by reading Victorian era romantic-friendship-
themed poetry to willing listeners in the lobby before the show.

Moynan both created authentic Victorian undergarments
and choreographed tableaux vivants that appeared throughout
the evening. Over the course of their encounter, Anne (Natha-
lie Claude), through the power of image (and currant wine),
leads the other two (Natalie Mathieson and Sasha Kovacs) on
a journey of erotic discovery.
The tableaux provided a lovely, romantic counterbalance to the rest of the evening, as they were interspersed throughout the show. As the host, I spent most of the night blushing in the dark behind the gingham-clad podium.

Spoken word artist and musician Evalyn Parry has been an ardent Anne fan since childhood. She shared her “Anne in my Mind” song, before blowing us all away with her “original audition video” for the CBC *Anne of Green Gables* mini-series. In Evalyn’s video, she took Anne’s performance to the next level—by making out with Diana. Evalyn also revealed that she had in fact auditioned for the role of Anne in the CBC movie as a youth.

Avant-garde burlesque troupe, The Scandelles, contributed their video of what Anne would be like as a phone sex worker. “And I’ll talk and talk and talk and talk …”

Moynan thought we should include some “actual facts” and “real research” in the evening. So we brought in the brilliant Professor Kym Bird from York University to raise the tone with a PowerPoint presentation on Amy Redpath Roddick who, unlike Anne, was a real person and was also more likely to be an actual lesbian, given her intimate friendship with her “companion” Rose.

Naturally, *Anne and Diana Were TOTALLY DOING IT* came next. In the speculative re-enactment section, Liz Pounsett (Anne) and Renée Olbert (Diana) helped prove my theory about what was really going down under the goose down.

Lindy Zucker, who was not an Anne fan prior to creating the piece, added that for her, the sketch was inspired by what she describes as “Anne’s own questionable sanity.” As she said: “I had never seen *Anne of Green Gables* until Mariko and I got together to brainstorm on a piece for this cabaret. I couldn’t believe what I was watching. I actually think that Anne is crazy.” Mariko describes the 1985 *Anne of Green Gables* film as “my first lesbian TV moment. I just remember watching it as a kid and thinking, ‘Is anyone else getting this? This girl is in LOVE with this girl. This is cool with everyone?’”
Next, the lovely, artfully dishevelled Rose Cullis treated us to a few new additions to Anne’s vocabulary. In Rose’s piece, *The Importance of Naming Things*, Anne talks about discovering a book of erotica on Mr. Thomas’s nightstand and how it taught her a lot of salacious new words. Rose’s piece was inspired by Anne’s talkative tendencies, the way she was always challenging social mores and her need to come up with just the right words to name and describe the beauty of the world. As Rose said, “I was always very moved by Anne’s resilient ebullience—by her ability to hold fast to an enthusiastic engagement in the world, despite the efforts of small-minded people to silence her and force her to follow established rules of social conduct. I identified with Anne’s sensitivity to words, and my own problems with ‘keeping my mouth shut’ have got me into trouble plenty of times.”

Anne’s innocent delight in her new words—and how she would like to teach them to her beloved Diana—made for a performance that was part arousing, part unsettling.

Then the hilarious Dayna McLeod tucked her dress up into her pantyhose and brought the house down with *That’s Right, Diana Barry—You Needed Me*, an Anne of Green Gables/Anne Murray Karaoke Mash-up performance.

There was only one way for the show to end; corsets in the air! Extraordinary aerialist Rebecca Leonard’s piece *Cat’s Cradle* took Anne to a whole other level, both in a metaphoric sense and in a stupid pun sense.

At the end of her performance, Rebecca lifted Nathalie-Anne up off the ground for a kiss. A shiver of ecstasy shot through the crowd and a collective sigh rose up. And then … the show was over.

It’s funny, looking back. Right up until the moment the lights went down, I wasn’t sure it was going to work. As we hung gingham all over the lobby and decked the halls with bouquets of fake flowers, I silently prayed to Anne that it would all come together. Or that everyone would just get really drunk on currant wine. As it turns out, both happened. And the result was magic.

For an Anne fetishist like me, that one night of *Anne Made Me Gay* was every satisfying slash fiction dream I have had about Anne come true … and more. It was, as Anne herself would say, an epoch in my life—and I hope in the lives of our audience members as well.
Rosemary Rowe is a Vancouver-based playwright and performer whose plays and cabaret pieces have been produced on stages across Canada. Recent credits include Camp Victoria (Lunchbox Theatre Stage One Festival, Calgary), The Magic W*ng (Loud n’ Queer Festival, Edmonton), Session 12 (Solo Collective’s Solo Flights Festival, Vancouver), and Anne Made Me Gay: When Kindred Spirits Get Naked (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto). Rose is also the writer and co-creator of the internationally acclaimed lesbian web comedy Seeking Simone (www.seekingsimone.com).

Rose’s personal blog, CreampuffRevolution.com, landed her a spot as a national finalist on CBC Radio’s Canada Writes—on the same day as her wedding. She did not win. But she did get married.