

# 'Anne of Green Gables' Was a Terrible Mother

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Credit KJ Dell'Antonia

She is a terrible mother.

That quirky Anne Shirley who ruled our hearts in childhood, the very one with the adorably auburn hair and the devoted handsome love of her life, the girl with the perfect combination of feistiness and gentleness that is desirable in all that is womanhood. The one who scaled fences and then fainted with true femininity from the pain, who cracked a slate over Gilbert's head. She even gave up her writing career to be a mother seven times over ("I'm writing living epistles now.") On the surface, she did all the right things, but the sad and sorry truth is this:

Anne Shirley Blythe was, a horrible, terrible, no-good mother.

I didn't realize it until I became a mother, of course, and was indoctrinated into the rules of what it means to be a good, modern-day mother. But now that I know, there is simply no going back to my rosy, innocent love of Ann-with-an-e.

Because the proof is right there on the page, near the end of the saga of the Anne series, in a little book called “Rainbow Valley,” a delightful story of Anne and the antics of her brood living in Ingleside, near a picturesque valley where they cooked their own trout from the bountiful brooks and fashioned chewing gum from the trees.

The book opens with one of the town’s busybodies, Ms. Cornelia — a church-going, man-hating elderly woman who, in a didn’t-see-it-coming twist, has married one of the town’s cantankerous, atheist gentlemen after he shaves his bizarrely long beard — scurrying to visit Anne, who is now properly married to her Gilbert, of course, and the mother of their six living children. Anne and Gilbert, the book explains, have just returned from a three-month trip to Europe for some medical conferences.

A. Three. Month. Trip. To Europe.

The scene is set with Anne and her live-in cook and nanny, Susan (Red Flag No. 1: her *live-in nanny*) sitting on their porch “enjoying the charm of the cat’s light,” with two of Anne’s children, including her youngest, Rilla, who is only 6 years old. (The other children are off playing alone in the valley. Red Flag No. 2: *alone*.) Susan, it is explained, “reigned supreme” at the Ingleside estate, where even Anne herself “rarely questioned” the old woman’s authority. And yes, that would be Red Flag No. 3.

Anne and Susan enjoy a good old-fashioned gals’ gab fest with Ms. Cornelia, getting caught up on three months’ worth of gossip from the town (because remember, Anne was gone, for three whole months, alone, without her children, in another country) as the summer sun sets around them.

But when all is said and done and Ms. Cornelia says her goodbyes and hurries along her way down the dusty village path, the moment that shocked me, the Ultimate Red Flag of Bad Motherhood, occurs. After Ms. Cornelia’s departure, the following scene goes down, all nonchalantly:

“Susan proceeded to put Rilla in bed and Anne sat on the veranda steps under the early stars and dreamed her incorrigible dreams and learned all over for the hundredth happy time what a moonrise splendor and sheen could be on Four Winds harbor.”

Wait. What just happened?

You mean to tell me that Anne, who has just got back from Europe and hasn’t seen her children for three whole months, is just lounging about looking at the stars while another woman puts her baby to bed?

And you mean to tell me that this was totally seen as a normal scene for L.M. Montgomery to throw down, like it wasn’t a big deal, and that no one wouldn’t even blink twice, because, of course, it would be perfectly acceptable to leave your six children to jet off to Europe for three months and then daydream on your porch all alone the night you get back while someone else deals with the bedtime crisis of your beloved offspring?

How the motherhood times have changed, my friends. And maybe I can still learn a thing or two from Anne, who remains my kindred spirit, after all.