

LITTLE WOMEN



Louisa May Alcott

*With an Introduction and Notes
by Camille Cauti*

George Stade
Consulting Editorial Director



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS
NEW YORK

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FROM THE PAGES OF *LITTLE WOMEN*

“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents.” (page 11)

“I’m the man of the family now Papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone.” (page 14)

“I’ll try and be what he loves to call me, ‘a little woman,’ and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else.” (page 18)

Boys are trying enough to human patience, goodness knows, but girls are infinitely more so. (page 71)

“Little girls shouldn’t ask questions.” (page 76)

“Housekeeping ain’t no joke.” (page 114)

“Have regular hours for work and play, make each day both useful and pleasant, and prove that you understand the worth of time by employing it well. Then youth will be delightful, old age will bring few regrets, and life become a beautiful success, in spite of poverty.”

(page 121)

“Wouldn’t it be fun if all the castles in the air which we make could come true, and we could live in them?” (page 143)

“People don’t have fortunes left them in that style nowadays, men have to work and women to marry for money. It’s a dreadfully unjust world.” (page 158)

She could not speak, but she did “hold on,” and the warm grasp of the friendly human hand comforted her sore heart, and seemed to lead her nearer to the Divine arm which alone could uphold her in her trouble. (page 183)

“Beth is my conscience, and I *can’t* give her up. I can’t! I can’t!”

(page 183)

Jo's face was a study next day, for the secret rather weighed upon her, and she found it hard not to look mysterious and important. Meg observed it, but did not trouble herself to make inquiries, for she had learned that the best way to manage Jo was by the law of contraries, so she felt sure of being told everything if she did not ask. (page 202)

It takes people a long time to learn the difference between talent and genius, especially ambitious young men and women. (page 250)

Amy sailed away to find the Old World, which is always new and beautiful to young eyes, while her father and friend watched her from the shore, fervently hoping that none but gentle fortunes would befall the happy-hearted girl, who waved her hand to them till they could see nothing but the summer sunshine dazzling on the sea. (page 302)

"Girls are so queer you never know what they mean. They say no when they mean yes, and drive a man out of his wits just for the fun of it." (pages 351-352)

Little they cared what anybody thought, for they were enjoying the happy hour that seldom comes but once in any life, the magical moment which bestows youth on the old, beauty on the plain, wealth on the poor, and gives human hearts a foretaste of heaven. (page 457)

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Published by Barnes & Noble Books
122 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10011

www.barnesandnoble.com/classics

Little Women, or, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, was published in two volumes
in October 1868 and April 1869, respectively. They were combined
into a single volume in 1880.

Published in 2004 with new Introduction, Notes, Biography, Chronology,
Inspired By, Comments & Questions, and for Further Reading.

Introduction, Notes, and For Further Reading
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Note on Louisa May Alcott, The World of Louisa May Alcott and *Little
Women*, Inspired by *Little Women*, and Comments & Questions
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Little Women
ISBN-13: 978-1-59308-108-9 ISBN-10: 1-59308-108-1
eISBN : 978-1-411-43257-4
LC Control Number 2003112463

Produced and published in conjunction with:
Fine Creative Media, Inc.
322 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10001

Michael J. Fine, President and Publisher

Printed in the United States of America
QM
7 9 10 8



LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

Louisa May Alcott was born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, the second of four daughters of Amos Bronson and Abigail Alcott. Her mother, known in the family as “Abba,” was from a distinguished Boston family. Her father, a self-educated son of farmers, was an educator and reformer; his controversial and often unpopular teaching philosophies kept him from steady employment and the family (Louisa called it the “Pathetic Family”) continually on the edge of poverty. The Alcotts often relied upon the generosity of family and friends, including American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, who frequently provided financial support.

When Louisa was two, the family moved to Boston to be near Abba’s family and Emerson. They would move frequently between Boston and Concord for the rest of Louisa’s life. Bronson Alcott became part of a group of writers and philosophers known as the Transcendentalist Club, which included Emerson and writer Henry David Thoreau, both of whom Louisa idolized. Throughout her life Louisa was brash and moody, with a quick tongue that often angered her father.

Alcott wrote her first stories at age fifteen, during what she called her “sentimental period.” As a teenager, she pursued many dramatic and literary endeavors: producing and acting in family theatricals; creating a series of tales for Emerson’s young daughter, Ellen, which she called *Flowing Fables*; and founding a family newspaper, the *Olive Leaf*. Her first published work was the poem “Sunlight,” which appeared pseudonymously in *Peterson’s Magazine* in 1851.

Louisa’s father didn’t earn sufficient income to support the family, so Louisa, her mother, and her sisters worked—Abba as one of the nation’s first social workers, the girls at sewing and teaching. Alcott viewed herself as a pillar of financial and emotional support to her female relatives. She was devastated in 1858 when her younger sister, Elizabeth, died of scarlet fever and her elder sister, Ann, announced her engagement.

During the American Civil War, Alcott moved briefly to Washington, D.C., to work as a Union Army nurse, until a bout with typhoid cut her service short. While convalescing, she reworked her letters to her family into a series called *Hospital Sketches*; published in 1863, it brought her favorable notice as a writer. Over the next several years she published a number of children’s collections and anonymously wrote fantastic and gothic tales. In 1867 she was offered the editorship of the children’s magazine *Merry’s Museum*. The following year, commissioned by the publisher Roberts Brothers, she wrote *Little Women* in six weeks. With the publication of *Little Women*, Alcott gained immense fame and achieved long-sought financial security for herself and her family. The sequel *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo’s Boys* was published in 1871.

Always active in the suffrage movement, in 1879 Alcott became the first woman to vote in Concord. When her sister May died in childbirth the same year, Alcott adopted the baby, a girl named Lulu. Alcott’s health declined greatly during this period, due to the lingering effects of mercury in the treatment she had received for typhoid fever during the Civil War. Too weak to write extensively, Alcott would publish and republish her children’s story collections until her death. The feminist-leaning *Jo’s Boys* was also published during this period, in 1886. Louisa May Alcott died March 28, 1888, two days after the death of her father. She is buried with her parents.

THE WORLD OF LOUISA MAY

ALCOTT AND *LITTLE WOMEN*

- 1832 Louisa May Alcott is born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, on November 29, her father's birthday; she is the second of four children of Abigail "Abba" Alcott and Amos Bronson, a teacher and educational reformer. Also born this year are Horatio Alger and Lewis Carroll; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who will become one of Alcott's favorite authors, dies.
- 1834 Struggling financially and in search of work, Bronson moves his family to Boston, nearer the support of longtime friend Ralph Waldo Emerson and Abba's family. Bronson opens the Temple School, based on his controversial teaching methods.
- 1835 Abba gives birth to her third child, Elizabeth Sewall Alcott. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 5 known as Mark Twain, is born.
- 1836 Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, and other philosophical and literary scholars in the area form what becomes known as the Transcendentalist Club. Emerson publishes *Nature*, an essay explaining the philosophy of transcendentalism, which asserts God's existence in man and nature, and individual intuition as the highest source of knowledge.
- 1837 Victoria becomes queen of England.
- 1838 Charles Dickens's novels *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839) attain great popularity.
- 1840 Forced to close the Temple School—parents alarmed by Bronson's teaching methods and his admittance of a mulatto child have withdrawn their children—Bronson Alcott moves his family to Concord, Massachusetts, where Emerson and Thoreau live. Louisa attends the Concord Academy, run by Thoreau and his brother. The fourth and final Alcott child, Abigail May (called May), is born.
- 1841 Emerson publishes *Essays*.
- 1843 Bronson cofounds a utopian communal farm, Fruitlands, in the rural town of Harvard, Massachusetts; he and his family live there until the experiment fails in 1844.
- 1844 Emerson publishes *Essays: Second Series*.
- 1845 With an inheritance left to Abba, the family purchases a house in Concord, named Hillside, where Alcott finally has a room of her own.
- 1847 The novels *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë are published.

- 1848 Alcott creates the *Flower Fables* stories for Emerson's young daughter Ellen. Later in the year Alcott writes her first adult story, "The Rival Painters: A Tale of Rome." The Alcotts move back to Boston, where Abba finds employment as one of the nation's first social workers.
- 1849 Alcott creates a family newspaper called the *Olive Leaf*. Publication begins of Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*. Alcott writes her first novel, *The Inheritance*, which is not published until 1996.
- 1850 Emerson's *Representative Men* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* are published.
- 1851 *Peterson's Magazine* publishes Alcott's poem "Sunlight" under the pseudonym Flora Fairfield; it is her first published work. To help support their family, Alcott and her sisters find jobs teaching and sewing. Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* are published.
- 1852 The Boston periodical the *Olive Branch* publishes "The Rival Painters: A Tale of Rome." Hawthorne purchases Hillside, giving the Alcotts some financial security. Alcott and her sister Anna open a school in the parlor of their home in Boston. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is published.
- 1853 Bronson goes on a lecture tour in the Midwest.
- 1854 Alcott's *Flower Fables*, dedicated to Ellen Emerson, is published; her short story "The Rival Prima Donnas" appears in the *Saturday Evening Gazette*. Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* is published.
- 1855 The family moves to Walpole, New Hampshire, although Alcott remains in Boston, teaching; she attends lectures by the liberal clergyman and reformer Theodore Parker. She spends the summer in Walpole, where she organizes the Walpole Amateur Dramatic Company. The first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* appears.
- 1857 The Alcott family returns to Concord; with money from friends, including Emerson, they purchase Orchard House (where Alcott will later write *Little Women*).
- 1858 Elizabeth Alcott dies of scarlet fever. Anna announces her engagement to John Pratt, whom she will marry in 1860. Alcott is greatly unsettled by the loss of her two sisters.
- 1859 Bronson becomes superintendent of schools in Concord, receiving a salary of \$100 per year. Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* is published.
- 1860 Alcott writes her novel *Moods*. The Boston Theater Company produces her play *Nat Bachelor's Pleasure Trip*. Abraham Lincoln becomes president of the United States. Publication begins of Dickens's *Great Expectations*.
- 1861 Alcott starts work on an autobiographical novel, tentatively titled *Success* (it will be published in 1873 as *Work: A Story of Experience*). The American Civil War begins.
- Henry David Thoreau dies, and Alcott writes the poem "Thoreau's Flute" in his honor. At

1862 the end of the year she travels to Washington, D.C., to serve as a Union Army nurse.

1863 Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* anonymously serializes Alcott's story, "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," and awards her a prize of \$100. After working as a nurse for only six weeks, Alcott becomes seriously ill with typhoid; she returns to Concord where she receives treatment with calomel, a medicine containing mercury that permanently damages her health. While convalescing, Alcott reworks her wartime letters to her family into a collection titled *Hospital Sketches*; it is serialized in the *Boston Commonwealth*, an abolitionist paper, and published in book form later in the year to great praise. Alcott receives almost \$600 from writing this year. Over the next several years she will write many gothic stories, either anonymously or under a pseudonym.

1864 *The Rose Family: A Fairy Tale* and *On Picket Duty, and Other Tales* are published in January. In December *Moods* is published but is not well received. Horatio Alger publishes his first boys' book, *Frank's Campaign*.

1865 Bronson leaves his superintendent post. Anna and John give birth to a child, who will become Alcott's heir. Alcott travels to Europe as an assistant to an invalid, Anna Weld; there she meets Ladislas Wisniewski, the inspiration for Laurie in *Little Women*. The Confederates surrender at Appomattox, marking the end of the Civil War. Lincoln is assassinated on

April 14. Lewis Carroll publishes *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

1867 Alcott accepts editorship of the children's magazine *Merry's Museum* for \$500 per year.

1868 She moves from Boston to Concord to care for her family while continuing her editorship; she will continue to move back and forth between the two cities until her death. Thomas Niles of the publisher Roberts Brothers commissions Alcott to write a book for girls; she completes the first part of *Little Women* in six weeks, and it is published to great acclaim. Bolstered by its success, she writes an equally popular second part at the rate of a chapter per day.

1869 The second part of *Little Women* is published under the title *Good Wives*. Alcott travels to Canada and Maine to recover her health, compromised by the rapid pace with which she wrote *Little Women*. She receives \$8,500 in royalties and pays all her family's debts.

1870 Her novel *An Old-Fashioned Girl* is published. Alcott travels to Europe with her sister May. Anna's husband, John Pratt, dies. Charles Dickens dies.

1871 Still in Europe, Alcott writes *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys*, a sequel to *Little Women* published this year. She and May return to Boston later in the year. Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* is published.

1872 Publication begins in the *Christian Union* of Alcott's autobiographical novel *Work*. Alcott will publish copiously until her death, producing, among other volumes, many short-story collections.

- 1873 Alcott attends the debates on suffrage in Boston with her father.
- 1875 She attends Vassar's tenth anniversary and the Women's Congress in Syracuse, New York. Her novel *Eight Cousins* is published in book form. She travels to New York City for Christmas, visiting the Tombs, the Newsboys' Home, and the Randall's Island orphanage, where she draws experience for her novel *Rose in Bloom*. May returns to Europe.
- 1876 Alcott protests the centennial celebrations at Concord because women are prohibited from participating. *Rose in Bloom* is published. Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* appears.
- 1877 Alcott's *A Modern Mephistopheles* is published anonymously as part of the Roberts Brothers No Name series. Alcott and her sister Anna purchase the Thoreau house in Concord, where they move with their father and ailing mother; later this year Abba Alcott dies.
- 1878 May marries Ernest Nieriker in London, but the Alcotts can not attend the wedding. Alcott's *Under the Lilacs* is published in book form.
- 1879 Alcott becomes the first woman to register to vote in Concord. Her sister May dies of complications from childbirth.
- 1880 Alcott undertakes the care of her namesake, May's infant daughter, Louisa May Nieriker, called Lulu. She ceases work on the novel *Diana and Persis* (published posthumously in 1978). Her novel *Jack and Jill* and the revised *Moods* are published. Bronson Alcott founds the Concord School of Philosophy. Too sick to write extensively, Alcott authorizes publication of many collections of previously published stories over the next several years.
- 1882 Ralph Waldo Emerson dies. Bronson suffers a stroke and gives up teaching. Virginia Woolf and James Joyce are born.
- 1884 Alcott's health begins to decline severely, a result of the mercury treatment she had received for her typhoid in 1863; she seeks medical treatment throughout the Northeast. Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is published.
- 1885 D. H. Lawrence, Sinclair Lewis, and Ezra Pound are born.
- 1886 Alcott publishes the sequel to *Little Men*, the feminist novel *Jo's Boys, and How They Turned Out*, which took her great effort to write. Henry James's *The Bostonians* is published.
- 1888 Alcott visits her father, who is near death. Bronson Alcott dies on March 4. Louisa May Alcott dies on March 6 and is buried with her parents.
- 1893 A collection of Alcott's plays, *Comic Tragedies Written by "Jo" and "Meg" and Acted by the "Little Women,"* is published. Anna Alcott Pratt dies.

INTRODUCTION

On March 22, 1927, the *New York Times* printed the results of a poll of high-school students who had been asked, “What book has interested you most?” The respondents overwhelmingly chose *Little Women* as their favorite, as the book that had most influenced them, surpassing even the Bible, which stalled at the number two position. Pause a moment to absorb this: Fifty-eight years after its publication in full, Louisa May Alcott’s domestic novel *Little Women* bore more influence on the lives and thought processes of American high-school students than did the Bible. *Little Women*, as John Lennon would claim of the Beatles forty years later, was more popular than Jesus. Although one may want to interpret this poll primarily as an indication of the increasingly secular interests of twentieth-century American youth, one must allow that, with all the other choices of reading matter available, beating out the Bible is clearly a tremendous feat. As related proof of *Little Women*’s influence, John Bunyan’s unusual 1684 religious allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—which is the March family’s favorite book and guide to life in *Little Women*, and which provides an organizing framework for Alcott’s novel—came in at number three in the poll. I do believe Bunyan must thank Louisa May Alcott for his book’s second wind.

In remarking that *Little Women* has been an incredibly popular text, a commentator risks making a gigantic understatement. Part one of the novel, released on September 30, 1868, sold out its first print run in four weeks (at \$1.25 a book—some sources note that the price was jacked up to \$1.50 after the book’s ability to sell had been proved), though its generally positive early reviews had not yet labeled the story a must-read. Part two, released on April 14, 1869, also sold out quickly, even with the dramatic increase in its initial print run. In 1932, a few years after the novel went into the public domain (meaning that any publishing firm could print it), its long-authorized publisher, Boston’s Little, Brown and Company, reported having sold a total of more than 1,500,000 copies since 1898—thirty years after the book was first published. *Little Women* was also an international phenomenon. *Publishers’ Weekly* noted in 1929 that, in addition to its longstanding popularity in England, *Little Women* had been translated into French, German, Dutch, Greek, and Chinese (it was a favored Chinese New Year gift). By 1969, one hundred years after the publication of the full text, the list of translations included Arabic, Bengali, Indonesian, Irish, Japanese, Russian, Swedish, and Urdu. On a more personal level, by the end of 1869 Louisa May Alcott had attained clear celebrity status at age thirty-six; her widespread fame far surpassed that of her well-known philosopher father, Amos Bronson Alcott (just as the first part of *Little Women* had far outsold his own 1868 offering, an essay collection called *Tablets*).

Prior to *Little Women*, Alcott had written primarily for adults, with the exception of *Flower Fables*, an 1854 collection of children’s fairy stories (Alcott also edited a monthly children’s periodical, *Merry’s Museum*). In 1863 she had begun publishing sensational Gothic-style stories in newspapers and magazines, anonymously or under a pseudonym, mainly to earn the ready money that the popular narratives commanded. Her serious novel *Moods* (1864) had met with neither critical esteem nor commercial notice; but the success of *Little Women* turned its author into a revered, wealthy children’s book writer. The book’s popularity would seem to have been nearly ordained when one considers the circumstances of its birth and its contractual engineering. Both its publisher and its author envisioned *Little Women* primarily (if hopefully) as a moneymaking venture. The origin

publisher, Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers, had to persuade Alcott to write a tale for girls to compete with a new type of boys' book by prolific novelists such as Horatio Alger (*Ragged Dick*) and Oliver Optic (*Poor and Proud*), which were in wide demand. Novels like these introduced a genre of children's fiction written as entertainment, not mainly for moral instruction—a somewhat controversial innovation at the time. Alcott resisted the idea of writing a girls' book; she doubted both her interest in a project for a young female audience and her ability to write it effectively. She claimed that she didn't know how to accomplish the task: She wasn't even especially concerned with the lives of girls outside her own household of four sisters. As a way to overcome her reservations, Alcott would eventually mine her own family's experiences as the basis for *Little Women's* March sisters, their characterizations, and many of their pastimes, conflicts, and daily duties. Alcott finally convinced herself that “lively, simple books are very much needed for girls, and perhaps I can supply the need.”

The promise of earning more money to assist her financially struggling family also helped Alcott agree to the project. Niles offered her royalties (a percentage of future sales) rather than a simple flat author's fee paid upon acceptance of the manuscript. This was a fantastic deal: In *Little Women* novelist Jo March is thrilled to be paid \$300 for her first novel; although Alcott, as a better-known writer, would have received a larger flat fee than this, her royalties plan would earn her \$8,500 by the end of 1869 alone. Despite Alcott's and Niles's initial fears that the novel's opening chapters were too dull, and thus wouldn't sell the book well, the first part of her fictional experiment—detailing the homey adventures through which the four New England March sisters begin to mature during one year of the American Civil War—was an immediate, unqualified best-seller.

All these numbers, statistics, and editions clearly indicate that *Little Women* has universal appeal. One strong reason is the story's essentially domestic, apolitical nature. After determining that her inclusion of too many controversial ideas about marriage had hurt sales of *Moods*, Alcott decided to make her girls' book idea-free: “My next book shall have no *ideas* in it, only facts, and the people shall be as ordinary as possible.” Most readers would agree that Alcott doesn't necessarily hold to such a strict scheme—she repeatedly reinforces her moral ideas about self-sacrifice and altruism—but overall the novel does place plot considerations above politics, cultural or otherwise. For example, *Little Women* is set during the Civil War, but Alcott declines to comment on this potentially polarizing topic, even though she had disturbing firsthand experience of its effects as a nurse in Washington, D.C. (she had previously published her wartime observations and opinions in *Hospital Sketches*, written for adults and published in 1863). Her grueling, gruesome nursing duties left Alcott sickened and exhausted, and she was forced to return home after spending only six weeks tending to injured and dying soldiers. Although Mr. March in *Little Women* ministers to Union troops, the novel includes very little commentary on his experiences in doing so, or even on the causes or goals of the war. Alcott instead substitutes general praise for the soldiers and demonstrates the supportive sewing and knitting work that women like the Marches performed on the domestic front. Similarly, contemporary controversial reform issues such as the abolition of slavery, which was very close to the Alcott family heart, are also left untouched in the novel. We know that Jo is a great believer in social reform—she allows a mixed-race child to attend her school, and she is vocal about women's rights—but Alcott doesn't give us many details. Jo makes several feminist declarations, but her own family and friends constitute her main audience, and she ultimately ends up living much more conventionally than she previously had forecast. A practical-minded author, Alcott specifically chose not to proselytize for her beliefs lest she risk alienating potential book buyers from different regions.

of the United States—consumers who, given her royalties arrangement, could provide her living.

The author's strategy of ordinariness worked. An early anonymous review in the *Nation* (October 2 1868) quietly praises *Little Women* as "an agreeable little story, which is not only very well adapted to the readers for whom it is especially intended, but may also be read with pleasure by older people." The reviewer labels the March girls "healthy types,... drawn with a certain cleverness" yet complains of the text's lack of "what painters call atmosphere," its over-reliance upon local color, and, strangely, "things and people [in the novel] ... remaining, under all circumstances, somewhat too persistent in themselves." As has often been the case with extremely popular books, this early review did not anticipate its subject's wild success. Another anonymous review, from the December 1868 issue of *Arthur's Home Magazine*, gives advice that has been followed for generations: "Parents desiring a Christmas book for a girl from ten to sixteen years cannot do better than to purchase this."

Alcott hinted at the end of the first part of *Little Women* that a sequel might be forthcoming "depend[ing] upon the reception given to the first act of the domestic drama" (page 229). She included this teaser even though she would later claim, upon learning that a second installment was in fact demanded of her, that she disliked the very idea of sequels. Part two of *Little Women*, originally titled *Good Wives* to portend the girls' development as married women, begins with the eldest sister Meg's marriage. Upon its release, *Little Women*, part two, was hailed as extending the March story by "loading the palate without sickishness" (by an anonymous reviewer in *Commonwealth*, April 2 1869), although some might have cause to argue such an assessment. A review in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (May 1, 1869) praises the ideal families the book portrays and predicts that life will imitate art: "Thousands of young people will read [Alcott's] story of these healthy, happy homes, and their standard of home and happiness must in many cases be raised." The first part of this prediction has certainly come true; the second, although something to hope for in general, seems a bit much to ask even of this wholesome novel.

The sequel was written to appease Alcott's many fans, who had been begging the author for more information about the March sisters' future experiences—namely whom, and how well, they married. Although as a feminist Alcott personally resented the implication that her March girls' future happiness depended upon marriage as an end in itself, she did succeed in pairing off most of her characters, although not in the neat ways her romantic readers had desired or even anticipated. Alcott's unusual choices in this regard mystified and disappointed not only many of her contemporaries and nineteenth-century admirers but generations of girls to follow, who wanted the outspoken, independent, ambitious second sister, Jo, married off according to their own fancy—not to mention future generations of feminist literary critics who bemoaned Alcott's decision to marry her off at all.

Alcott absorbed much of her reform interests from her mother, Abigail "Abba" Alcott (nee May Marmee in *Little Women* is an idealized version of Abba. Whereas Marmee represses her anger for the good of her family, Abba was known for her sharp tongue and occasional inability to get along with her neighbors. Abba actively participated in various contemporary reform movements, agitating against slavery and for temperance and women's rights, among other causes, and providing an excellent example of activism for her daughters. Even more than Marmee does, Abba Alcott worked and struggled to keep her family financially afloat; the shabby-genteel aspect of the March household stems from the Alcotts' own straitened financial circumstances. Papa Alcott, unlike Papa March, however, was not absent on such a selfless mission as army chaplaincy. Writer and educator Bronson Alcott was associated with the original group of New England transcendental philosophers, and he tended in practice to worry more about how his family conformed to his social theories than about its

livelihood.

The transcendentalism Bronson Alcott espoused was an extremely influential quasi-religious American philosophical movement that flourished in the 1830s and '40s, most neatly summed up in Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature*. As a behavioral program, transcendentalism promoted living simply, in intellectual fellowship with other like-minded thinkers and in close contact with nature, and keeping one's body pure by avoiding alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and often, as in the case of the Alcott family, meat. As an explanatory counterpart to these lifestyle recommendations, transcendentalism's more mystical aspects emphasized human beings' metaphysical, intuitive spiritual core, which, in turn, evidenced mankind's inherent personal divinity. The reverence for nature, manual labor, and self-reliance took its most notable form in Henry David Thoreau's famous Walden Pond experiment in self-sufficiency (1845-1847). Emerson and Thoreau, friends of Bronson Alcott (Emerson had provided funds toward the Alcott family's support), were two of young Louisa's romantic crushes; some scholars have suggested Emerson as a partial model for Professor Friedrich Bhaer in *Little Women*. Bronson Alcott raised his daughters according to his own transcendentalist-influenced educational beliefs, encouraging stringent self-analysis from them starting at an early age through written assessments of their behavior and development that they would produce about themselves for his perusal.

Bronson Alcott seemed to have absolved himself of nearly all financial responsibility toward his wife and children; this would have been scandalous or unforgivable at the time in most social circles, except that he styled himself as a genius—a philosopher, not a worker. Yet a family cannot live on social and educational theories alone. At one point, around the time of his ill-fated utopian communal living project, Fruitlands (1843), Bronson seriously considered formally abandoning his wife and young children; his abstract intellectual nature led him to raise the issue with them as a matter for family debate. Facets of Bronson Alcott do appear in *Father March*: His favorite place is his study, and he loves his books and discussing philosophy. But a reader who knows that Bronson Alcott's own family skills left much to be desired will find even more poignant *Father March*'s gentle strength and paternal perfection, as well as the confidence his daughters have in his emotional support and devotion to his family.

The eldest March sister, Meg, is based on Alcott's oldest sister, Anna. Alcott uses her own dismay at the rupture of the family household brought about by Anna's wedding to parallel Jo's (and Meg's) resistance to Meg's marriage in *Little Women*. The prototype for shy Beth March was the third Alcott sister, Elizabeth ("Lizzie"), who, similar to Beth, had contracted scarlet fever after nursing a neighbor in 1856. Lizzie never fully recovered; doctors suggested various physical and mental sources, including hysteria, for her continued frailty. She slowly wasted away over a period of two years, eventually refusing even to eat. Alcott's youngest sister, Abba May, served as the model for the petulant, spoiled, and beautiful Amy March, an artist like her real-life counterpart. May's somewhat naive published illustrations for the first edition of *Little Women* unfortunately met with widespread critical disapproval (an early reviewer called the engravings "indifferently executed" and "betray[ing] ... a want of anatomical knowledge"). However, she later studied painting in Europe (a trip financed through Louisa's earnings from writing), lived in the Montmartre neighborhood of Paris near the experimental Impressionist painters of the day, and became acquainted with American Impressionist artist Mary Cassatt. May's skills improved, and her artwork ultimately was accepted into Paris salons and galleries in 1877 and 1879. Alcott claimed to have based Theodore "Laurie" Laurence, Jo's best friend and neighbor, on two of her own admirers: her friend Alfred Whitman and Polish revolutionary

Ladislas Wisniewski, who escorted Alcott around Paris during her 1865 European travels.

Louisa May Alcott based Jo on herself. Consequently Jo is the most fully realized, complete character and, not surprisingly, the one most beloved by Alcott's readers across generations and most inspirational for these readers' own fantasies and ambitions. The character shares the author's November birth month, strong concerns about women's claims to independence and artistic expression, and the desire to be a writer and to broaden her experience through travel far from her provincial New England home. The titles of Jo's sensational stories are identical to some of Alcott's own early efforts. Louisa and Jo share the title of their first published story, "The Rival Painters," for example; Louisa's version appeared in print in 1852. Even the cylindrical pillow Jo uses as a silence marker for her approachability in part two of the novel—if Jo stands it on end next to her on the sofa it means she's in a good mood; lying flat, the cushion signifies the opposite and serves notice that her family shouldn't disturb her—echoes Alcott's own "mood pillow," which remains on display at Orchard House, a former Alcott family residence in Concord, Massachusetts, that is now a museum.

Critics have often remarked upon the more masculine aspects (for her time) of Jo's characterization: her boyish nickname, her husky voice, her desire to play only the male roles in family theatricals, the "gentlemanly" linen collar she wears, her natural use of the phrase "I'm your man," her restless spirit, her ambition to do something splendid with her life, her desire for fame, her love of such sports as running and riding. Jo claims she wants to marry Meg herself to keep her in the family. She doesn't care much for the company of other girls, with the exception of her sisters, of course, and she positively loathes girlish gossip; instead, she appreciates "good strong words that mean something" (p. 43). (When Amy forces Jo to accompany her on social calls in chapter 29, Jo's humorous mockery of the girls they visit makes for one of the novel's most unforgettable episodes.) Unlike her more traditional, ladylike sisters, Jo understands the need for social reform on a number of issues affecting women's autonomy. Not inclined to domestic responsibility—or skill, for that matter—Jo views her future published stories as her children.

Jo's masculine identification may begin to explain why at the end of the novel she opens a school for boys instead of for girls, which her social beliefs might dictate as appropriately reparative. Her empathy with the male gender seems to preclude any sympathy she might have for her fellow young women, and her decision to open a boys' school, even given her unorthodox admission policies, is a fairly conventional one. Jo, depicted throughout *Little Women* as an eccentric, outrageous, unconventional character, makes some customary choices in the end and is certainly no radical. Although her husband may be unexpected, she marries nonetheless. Overall, Jo's feminism and masculinity have suggested to some later commentators that a latent homosexuality lies beneath her surface, and, by extension, beneath her creator's as well. Alcott's own disinclination to marry and her devotion to feminist reform work and agitation have led these critics to question her sexual preferences.

Once one begins to think further about Alcott's novel, certain contradictions emerge, particularly for more recent readers. There were always things about the March sisters that puzzled me, for example. The family complains of being poor, and indeed can't even afford to buy each other Christmas presents, yet they keep a servant, the faithful Hannah. How impoverished, then, could the Marches be? The family's financial situation must have been very bad indeed for Aunt March to offer to adopt one of the daughters, thus the Marches' priorities are very interesting. Would it have been unseemly in their social circles for the family not to employ a servant? Is Hannah another charity case? That is, was it more important for the Marches to spend what extra money they did have to provide another person

with a livelihood than to spend it on material luxuries (even if, as is the case with their Christmas breakfast, donated to a truly impoverished immigrant family, those material luxuries were food)?

Clearly the Marches are not as poor as Meg thinks they are. The sisters' Christian-inspired self-sacrifice, however, can seem at times to border on masochism, which may lead one to question the girls' motivations. Are they so generous and accommodating because they want to be, for altruism's sake? Are they competing with each other in trying to please their impossibly good mother, the judge of their virtuousness? Or have they come to enjoy abnegation for what it represents: their worthiness to God and society? Beth and Jo's selflessness competitions—when, for example, Jo wins a writing contest and offers Beth a trip away with her spoils—at times suggest the elaborate sacrifices of medieval saints. Beth, a household saint in her homely shrine, wears a metaphorical hair shirt and practically flagellates herself daily, even within her transcendental universe. One wonders how much Beth's fate itself is actually a sacrifice in Alcott's mind. Such a typical Marmee maxim as "a kiss for a blow is always best" is a bit disturbing when taken with her other advice as a reinforcement of the need for female sacrifice, even if it does echo New Testament doctrines to turn the other cheek.

Marmee displays her tremendous devotion to God in a few preachy monologues, particularly in chapter 9, yet the family, although clearly Protestant, is not described as belonging to any particular sect—perhaps another extension of the novel's planned universality. As important as religion seems to be in their lives, the Marches offer little formal worship; they do not attend church services, for example, and their relationship to God seems very general, represented through praying privately and singing religious hymns, and imitating Bunyan's questing hero, Christian, from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Aesthetic Amy's fascination with the colorful, exotic Roman Catholicism of Aunt March's French maid is thus understandable, and Marmee does not reject out of hand the religious objects, such as rosary beads and a devotional print of the Virgin Mary, that Amy brings back from her aunt's house.

The March girls' relationship with their mother is noteworthy for how it reinforces a rather claustrophobic household dynamic. Although many readers, particularly mothers, may find it touching that Meg reserves the "first kiss" that concludes her marriage ceremony for her mother, most others will note the utter strangeness of this choice. Marmee happily accepts what should be the new husband's right. What's going on here? Marmee's total love sometimes seems to negate her daughters' desire for adult romantic relationships, which they instead seem to fear. Marmee's fully embraced devotion unsettles the normal course of the girls' adolescent development from sheltered dependence into autonomous adulthood; indeed, the thought of one sister leaving the nest throws the household into emotional turmoil. Of course, nineteenth-century families thought of themselves differently than twenty-first-century families do, but Meg's kiss is still quite unusual. Jo swears she will never pop the family's heretofore hermetic bubble, as Meg has done through marriage, yet she quickly moves to New York City to work and to try her talents as a writer. Proximity, apparently, does not define the word *abandonment* in the March household; rather, the commencement of a separate conjugal life does. Jo seems to realize the danger—and demonstrates her progress from self-centered idealist to a more thoughtful, practical type—when she notes late in part two, "Mothers are the best lovers in the world, but... I'd like to try all kinds" (p. 422).

Marmee tells her daughters early on that being chosen and loved by a good husband is the best thing that could ever happen to them. Of course, this is better than being chosen by a bad one, but many readers may secretly wish that someone like Alcott hadn't written such things! We know the author didn't achieve this vaunted feminine ideal herself—she served instead as her family's caretaker to the

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