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Louisa May Alcott: A Topsy-Turvy Woman?

Introduction

While it's true that Louisa May Alcott based her best-selling book *Little Women* on her own life growing up in Concord, MA, her childhood was not quite as idyllic as the one portrayed in the book. Despite the many and significant similarities between the real Alcott and the fictional March families, the novel is not strictly autobiographical. As Alcott scholar Harriet Reisen, author of the 2009 book *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women,* says, "She's not the little woman you thought she was, and her life was no children's book." Louisa called herself a "topsy-turvy" woman, referring not just to a life full of motion and action, but also one that turned 19th-century expectations upside down.

Photo used by permission of Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House.

Louisa May Alcott, age 25.

Much has been written about the Alcott family—their contributions to the Transcendentalist movement, their unconventional beliefs (including the shocking idea that girls should not have to wear corsets), and their famous friends and neighbors—but Louisa May Alcott was far more than just the inevitable result of her upbringing. She was, as Mary Elizabeth Williams says in her 2009 salon.com column, "Louisa May Alcott's Topsy-Turvy Life":

> . . . uncommonly clever and ambitious in a time when women were rarely prized for being either. And though she's a beloved literary heroine to generations for the book her editor described simply as "a girl's story," Alcott, it turns out, was also a. . . free-thinking, pulp fiction-writing, one-of-a-kind American icon.

The Origins of *Little Women*

Although Jo March (commonly thought of as the fictional version of Louisa) shared many attributes with Louisa—both were theatrical, imaginative, defiant, stubborn, and quick tempered—Louisa May Alcott lived a far more fascinating, turbulent, triumphant, and tragic life. She was born in 1832 to Bronson and Abigail Alcott, the second of four daughters. From an early age, Louisa was rebellious, restless, and moody. She became a serious intellectual, a feminist, and a social reformer, who supported not only abolition but, more radically, equality between the races.

(An early story of hers about an interracial marriage was rejected by *The Atlantic Monthly* as being too daring.) She also fought for women's rights, prisoners' rights, and educational reform.

Enormously talented and prolific, Louisa was unabashed to pursue writing as a career that would bring in cash, writing gothic thrillers as well as "respectable" stories for younger readers—a role she was not enamored of. "I plod away, though I don't enjoy this kind of thing," she wrote in her journal when she began *Little Women*. Later, she dismissed the book that would bring joy to generations as "moral pap for the young." Although in *Little Women*, Jo puts aside her "blood and thunder" stories as morally reprehensible, Louisa relished writing gory, sensationalistic stories under the pen name of M. Barnard, filled with violence, sex, and fantasies.

Unlike Jo's comforting and stable existence in Concord, MA, Louisa moved more than 30 times in her lifetime, mainly due to the family's dire poverty. Although the March family were the genteel poor, the Alcotts were often faced with real hunger and deprivation. Despite the fact that Louisa held many of the jobs available to young women in 19th-century New England (laundress, seamstress, lady's companion, governess, teacher), her family often survived only through the charity of others. Like Jo, Louisa had a beloved sister, Elizabeth, who died young at age 22. But Louisa also lost another sister, May (the model for Amy in the book), who died in 1879, soon after giving birth to her only child, Louisa May, called Lulu. An adoring and generous aunt, Louisa raised Lulu until her own death nine years later.

In the novel, Louisa resisted marrying Jo to the rich and handsome Laurie, despite public pressure to do so. She complained in her journal: "Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only aim and end of a woman's life." In an essay called "Happy Women," written on Valentine's Day in 1868, Louisa advised women that marriage need not be their destiny:

> One of the trials of woman-kind is the fear of being an old maid. To escape this dreadful doom, young girls rush into matrimony with a recklessness which astonishes the beholder; never pausing to remember that the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called "Mrs." instead of "Miss."

Eventually, however, the "little women" became wives and mothers, although Louisa declared that "out of perversity" she made a "funny match" for Jo by having her marry the stout, rumpled, and much older Professor Bhaer.

Unlike Jo, Louisa was romantic and nurturing, yet never married or had children of her own. Devoted to caring for her family, financially as well as domestically, Louisa spent her later years nursing first her mother and then her ailing father. Yet she also yearned to travel and be independent. In contrast to Jo's health and vibrant energy, Louisa May suffered from a myriad of symptoms that she attributed to mercury poisoning from treatment of typhoid fever, which she contracted while a nurse during the Civil War. (Another theory suggests that she had an

autoimmune disease, perhaps lupus.) Like her father, Louisa was prone to dark depressions, periods when she could not eat, socialize, or write.

Mr. March, modeled on Louisa's father, is interestingly absent for most of *Little Women*. Louisa had a complicated relationship with her father. As a child, she tried, often unsuccessfully, to please him. She resented the fact that his lofty pursuit of ideas, including a short experience in communal, egalitarian living on a farm known as Fruitlands (where the women ended up doing all the work while the men debated philosophy) made life stressful and exhausting for her, her sisters, and especially their mother. The fact that Bronson was unable (or unwilling) to support the family financially influenced Louisa's determination to earn a comfortable living—which, ironically, led her to write *Little Women*. Tension between her parents, noticeably missing from the relationship between Father and Marmee in *Little Women*, may have also helped Louisa's decision not to marry.

Abigail ("Abba") Alcott is less well-known than her husband, but like many women of her time, it was her strength that held the family together. Born to a prominent New England family, Abigail also worked outside the home to support the family, running an employment agency and as what some have called the first paid social worker in Boston. A suffragist, abolitionist, and temperance movement supporter, Abigail collaborated with her husband but was not always the dutiful wife. "Wherever I am," she wrote, "I see the yoke on women in some form or another." Echoing this sentiment in her 1876 novel *Rose in Bloom*, Louisa wrote: "I believe that it is as much a right and duty for women to do something with their lives as for men and we are not going to be satisfied with such frivolous parts as you give us."

Little Women in Print

Louisa's first book, *Flower Fables,* was published in 1854 and earned her a modest sum. Although she had been told by the Boston publisher James Fields "You can't write" and advised by him to "stick to your teaching," she continued to pursue her literary career. It was only after *Hospital Sketches* (based on Louisa's letters that she had sent home during the Civil War, while nursing the wounded in Washington, DC) was published in 1863 that she began to experience success.

Little Women was written in a mere 10 weeks and was published in September 1868, along with illustrations by Louisa's sister May. The book originally ended after Chapter 23, with the lines: "So grouped, the curtain falls upon Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Whether it ever rises again depends upon the reception given to the first act of the domestic drama called *Little Women*." Given its instant popularity, Louisa quickly wrote a sequel (in England it was called *Good Wives*), published a few months later. In 1880, both parts of the novel were published under the name *Little Women*.

Little Women was a phenomenon from the beginning. By 1869, Louisa had earned an enough money to pay off her family's entire debt. The book soon achieved its status as a classic, staying in print and selling millions of copies, as it continues to do today. When Little Brown & Company issued a special edition in 1908, forty years after its first publication, *The New York Times Book Review* wrote:

> As a rule, the classics of youth scarcely live beyond the immediate generation that welcomed their birth. It is a unique distinction of "Little Women," however, it has never grown old, never appeared antiquated to the youngsters of today, who are rather prone, as a rule, to demand somewhat different literary fare from that which satisfied their elders when they in turn were in their nonage. Librarians and booksellers alike will tell the inquirer that Miss Alcott's masterpiece are still among the works most in demand. . . .

Of course, not all reviews were favorable. The book was often dismissed as a story for children and derided for being overly sentimental, preachy, and unrealistic. In the 1960s, however, Louisa May Alcott was rediscovered as newly relevant, in sync with the emerging second wave of feminism. (The Transcendentalist movement, from Thoreau's back-to-nature treatise *Walden* and call to non-violent rebellion in *On Civil Disobedience*, to communal living, to the vegetarian and whole-grain diet that the Alcotts observed, resonated with baby boomers as they came of age.) In 1968, Elizabeth Janeway wrote, with a nod to Louisa May Alcott's appeal as a nonconformist, that *Little Women* ". . . was written by a secret rebel against the order of the world and woman's place in it, and all the girls who ever read it know it."

Little Women Today

Today, Jo—and her creator—are hailed as feminist icons. In 2016, Constance Grady wrote on vox.com, "Jo is a kind of avatar for feminist discontent, raging at housework and men and the idea that her sisters must eventually leave her to get married and start families of their own." Louisa's declaration that she'd "rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe" can be found on T-shirts, pillows, and posters. She also wrote, in an advice column, "Sisters, don't be afraid of the words, 'old maid,' for it is in your power to make this a term of honor, not reproach." As Mary Elizabeth Williams conjectures, "Imagine the fantastic blog [Louisa May Alcott] would have if she were alive today."

Little Women has been translated into over 50 languages and reimagined as a play, an opera, a ballet, and of course, as a film and on television. A 2014 Harris poll named *Little Women* as one of America's top 10 favorite books. Theodore Roosevelt adored the book, and it inspired authors as diverse as Gertrude Stein, Simone de Beauvoir, Joyce Carol Oates, Ursula K. Le Guin, Gloria Steinem, and J.K. Rowling. Orchard House, the Alcott family's home in Concord, MA, receives more than 50,000 visitors every year from all over the world.

The precise reasons for the lasting appeal of *Little Women* continue to be analyzed and debated. Each new version or anniversary revives a fresh wave of scholarship, as readers continue to embrace the book itself. It is one of the books cited in the ELA Common Core Standards, as illustrating the "complexity, quality, and range of student reading." As English professor Anne Boyd Rioux says in her 2017 blog for Literary Hub, "Why We *Do* Need Another Adaptation of *Little Women:*" "The best stories . . . are living things, and as much as we may cherish the original, the true act of love comes in the retelling. . . . The truest sign of a book's value to its readers is not only how many editions are in circulation, or how many times a treasured copy is passed down from one generation to the next, but how many times the story is retold."

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