



Little Women (Alcott)

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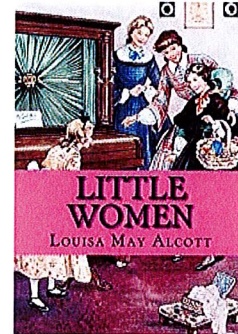
Little Women

Louisa May Alcott, 1868 and 1869

~500 pp. (varies by publisher)

Summary

Set in a small New England town during the Civil War years and Reconstruction, *Little Women* introduces Alcott's remarkable heroines, the March sisters, and above all her alter ego Jo March, with her literary ambition and independent spirit. The novel chronicles the episodes, large and small, of the sisters' progress toward adulthood: their amateur theatricals, sibling rivalries and reconciliations, friendships and romance, lessons about work and charity, and the loss of loved ones. (From the Library of America edition.)



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More

Little Women is one of the best loved books of all time. Lovely Meg, talented Jo, frail Beth, spoiled Amy: these are hard lessons of poverty and of growing up in New England during the Civil War. Through their dreams, plays, pranks, letters, illnesses, and courtships, women of all ages have become a part of this remarkable family and have felt the deep sadness when Meg leaves the circle of sisters to be married at the end of Part I. Part II, chronicles Meg's joys and mishaps as a young wife and mother, Jo's struggle to become a writer, Beth's tragedy, and Amy's artistic pursuits and unexpected romance. Based on Louise May Alcott's childhood, this lively portrait of nineteenth-century family life possesses a lasting vitality that has endeared it to generations of readers. (From the Penguin Classics edition.)

Author Bio

- Birth—November 29, 1832
- Where—Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
- Reared—Concord, Massachusetts
- Died—March 6, 1888
- Where—Boston, Massachusetts
- Education—tutored by father Bronson Alcott and by Henry David Thoreau

Alcott was a daughter of noted Transcendentalist Amos Bronson Alcott and Abigail May Alcott. Louisa's father started the Temple School; her uncle, Samuel Joseph May, was a noted abolitionist. Though of New England parentage and residence, she was born in Germantown, which is currently part of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She had three sisters: one elder (Anna Alcott Pratt) and two younger (Elizabeth Sewall Alcott and Abigail May Alcott Nieriker). The family moved to Boston in 1834 or 1835, where her father established an experimental school and joined the Transcendental Club with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

During her childhood and early adulthood, she shared her family's poverty and Transcendentalist ideals. In 1840, after several setbacks with the school, her family moved to a cottage on two acres along the Sudbury River in Concord, Massachusetts.

The Alcott family moved to the Utopian Fruitlands community for a brief interval in 1843-1844 and then, after its collapse, to rented rooms and finally to a house in Concord purchased with her mother's inheritance and help from Emerson. Alcott's early education had included lessons from the naturalist Henry David Thoreau but had chiefly been in the hands of her father. She also received some instruction from writers and educators such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller, who were all family friends.

She later described these early years in a newspaper sketch entitled "Transcendental Wild Oats," afterwards reprinted in the volume *Silver Pitchers* (1876), which relates the experiences of her family during their experiment in "plain living and high thinking" at Fruitlands.

As she grew older, she became both an abolitionist and a feminist. In 1847, the family housed a fugitive slave for one week. In 1848 Alcott read and admired the "Declaration of Sentiments" published by the Seneca Falls Convention on women's rights.

Early Writings

Due to the family's poverty, she began work at an early age as an occasional teacher, seamstress, governess, domestic helper, and writer — her first book was *Flower Fables* (1854), tales originally written for Ellen Emerson, daughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In 1860, Alcott began writing for the *Atlantic Monthly*. She was nurse in the Union Hospital at Georgetown, D.C., for six weeks in 1862-1863. Her letters home, revised and published in the *Commonwealth* and collected as *Hospital Sketches* (1863, republished with additions in 1869), garnered her first critical recognition for her observations and humor. Her novel *Moods* (1864), based on her own experience, was also promising.

A lesser-known part of her work are the passionate, fiery novels and stories she wrote, usually under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard. These works, such as *A Long Fatal Love Chase* and *Pauline's Passion and Punishment*, were known in the Victorian Era as "potboilers" or "blood-and-thunder tales." Her character Jo in *Little Women* publishes several such stories but ultimately rejects them after being told that "good

young girls should [not] see such things." Their protagonists are willful and relentless in their pursuit of their own aims, which often include revenge on those who have humiliated or thwarted them. These works achieved immediate commercial success and remain highly readable today.

Alcott also produced moralistic and wholesome stories for children, and, with the exceptions of the semi-autobiographical tale *Work* (1873), and the anonymous novelette *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1875), which attracted suspicion that it was written by Julian Hawthorne, she did not return to creating works for adults.

Success

Louisa May Alcott's overwhelming success dated from the appearance of the first part of *Little Women: or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy*, (1868) a semi-autobiographical account of her childhood years with her sisters in Concord, Massachusetts. Part two, or Part Second, also known as *Good Wives*, (1869) followed the March sisters into adulthood and their respective marriages. *Little Men* (1871) detailed Jo's life at the Plumfield School that she founded with her husband Professor Bhaer at the conclusion of Part Two of *Little Women*. *Jo's Boys* (1886) completed the "March Family Saga."

Most of her later volumes, *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag* (6 vols., 1871–1879), *Eight Cousins* and its sequel *Rose in Bloom* (1876), and others, followed in the line of *Little Women*, remaining popular with her large and loyal public.

Although the Jo character in *Little Women* was based on Louisa May Alcott, she, unlike Jo, never married. Alcott explained her "spinsterhood" in an interview with Louise Chandler Moulton, "... because I have fallen in love with so many pretty girls and never once the least bit with any man."

In 1879 her younger sister, May, died. Alcott took in May's daughter, Louisa May Nieriker ("Lulu"), who was two years old. The baby was named after her aunt, and was given the same nickname.

In her later life, Alcott became an advocate of women's suffrage and was the first woman to register to vote in Concord, Massachusetts in a school board election.

Alcott, along with Elizabeth Stoddard, Rebecca Harding Davis, Anne Moncure Crane, and others, were part of a group of female authors during the U.S. Gilded Age to address women's issues in a modern and candid manner. Their works were, as one newspaper columnist of the period commented, "among the decided 'signs of the times'" ("Review 2 – No Title" from *The Radical*, May 1868, see References below).

Despite worsening health, Alcott wrote through the rest of her life, finally succumbing to the after-effects of mercury poisoning contracted during her American Civil War service: she had received calomel treatments for the effects of typhoid. She died in Boston on March 6, 1888 at age 55, two days after visiting her father on his deathbed. Her last words were "Is it not meningitis?" (*Author bio from Wikipedia.*)

Book Reviews

(Older works have few, if any, mainstream press reviews online. See Amazon and Barnes & Noble for helpful customer reviews.)

Discussion Questions

1. In the first two chapters, the girls use John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a model for their own journey to becoming "little women." What was Alcott trying to say by using such a strongly philosophical piece of literature as the girls' model?
2. What purpose does Beth's death serve? Was Alcott simply making a sentimental novel even more so, or was this a play on morality and philosophy? Do you think Beth was intended to be a Christ figure?
3. Consider the fact that Beth will never reach sexual maturity or marry. What do you think this says about the institution of marriage and, more important, about womanhood?
4. Consider Jo's writing: While we are treated to citations from "The Pickwick Portfolio" and the family's letters to one another, we are never presented with an excerpt from Jo's many literary works, though the text tells us they are quite successful. Why is this?
5. Do you find it surprising that once Laurie is rejected by Jo, he falls in love with Amy? Do you feel his characterization is complete and he is acting within the "norm" of the personality Alcott has created for him, or does Alcott simply dispose of him once our heroine rejects him?
6. Some critics argue that the characters are masochistic. Meg is the perfect little wife, Amy is the social gold digger, and Beth is the eternally loving and patient woman. Do you believe these characterizations are masochistic? If so, do you think Alcott could have characterized them any other way while maintaining the realism of the society she lived in? And if this is true, what of Jo's character?
7. The last two chapters find Jo setting aside her budding literary career to run a school with her husband. Why do you think Alcott made her strongest feminine figure sacrifice her own life plans for her husband's?
8. Alcott was a student of transcendentalism. How and where does this philosophy affect Alcott's writing, plot, and characterization?
9. Do you believe this is a feminine or a feminist piece of work?
(Questions issued for the Random House edition.)

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