Louisa May Alcott

# Little Women

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# LITTLE WOMEN

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT was born in 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, but grew up in Concord, Massachusetts. Educated by her father, the Transcendentalist thinker Bronson Alcott, she was influenced by the prominent men of his circle. Emerson, Hawthorne, Parker, and Thoreau. The family was usually short of money, and she worked at various tasks from sewing to writing to help to support it. The Civil War broke out in 1861, and in 1862 she began to work as a volunteer army nurse in a Union Hospital. Out of this came her first book, *Hospital Sketches* (1863); she went on to write several Gothic romances and thrillers. With the publication of *Little Women*, her first full-length novel for girls, Alcott leapt from being an obscure, struggling New England writer to becoming the best-selling American author of the century. From its first appearance in 1868 *Little Women* has never been out of print. Its financial success enabled its author to realize her greatest ambition: to rescue her improvident family from poverty and ensure their future security. It also brought her the fame she had always craved, although it could do little to relieve her ill health aggravated by early deprivation and overwork. *Little Women* was followed by *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Little Men* (1871), *Eight Cousins* (1875), *Rose in Bloom* (1876), and *Jo's Boys* (1886), amongst others. Alcott died in Boston in 1888.

VALERIE ALDERSON has spent the last forty years working with children's books, as a reviewer, editor, publisher, and, latterly, antiquarian bookseller, in between bringing up three sons. Her interest in Alcott began with her first childhood reading of *Little Women*, and over the years she has assembled a substantial library of Alcottiana.

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LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

# *Little Women*

*Edited with an Introduction and Notes by*
VALERIE ALDERSON

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# CONTENTS


| | |
|---|---|
| *Acknowledgements* | vi |
| *Introduction* | vii |
| *Note on the Text* | xxviii |
| *Select Bibliography* | xxx |
| *A Chronology of Louisa May Alcott* | xxxiii |
| LITTLE WOMEN | 1 |
| *Explanatory Notes* | 474 |

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# INTRODUCTION

In 1878 Louisa Alcott wrote to an admirer, John Preston True, that 'I never copy or "polish" so I have no manuscripts . . .'. *Little Women* was not a product of long and painstaking literary effort, each phrase refined and perfected. Rather it was the reluctant work of a few feverish weeks of writing in order to make money to pay off family debts. The idea for a story about her Pathetic Family, as she called them, had been in Alcott's mind for some years—she had even written a few stories about them such as 'A Modern Cinderella' and 'The Sisters' Trial'. Now, when the editor at Roberts Brothers of Boston, Thomas Niles, suggested she should write 'a story for girls', she resurrected the idea, dusted it down, and wrote what was to prove one of the most significant books in the history of the girls' story.

One should not underestimate the importance of Niles's contribution to the Alcott success. At the time he suggested the idea in autumn 1867, Alcott had little experience of writing for children. Admittedly her first book, *Flower Fables* (1855), had been written for Emerson's young daughter, Ellen, when the author was 16 (she was 23 when the book appeared) and had enjoyed a fleeting success. She had also recently agreed to edit a children's magazine, *Merry's Museum*, for Horace Fuller and was busy paving the way for her first issue with a collection of stories, *Morning Glories*. But despite Fuller's claim in his advertisements that she had 'no superior as a writer for youth in the country', her chief claims to fame were a controversial novel, *Moods*, and a collection of *Hospital Sketches*, first serialized in the *Commonwealth* and afterwards collected into book form, about her brief experiences as a nurse during the American Civil War. She was, however, a prolific contributor of poems, stories, and articles for the family and literary papers; she had written a successful play, and her dramatized sketches from Dickens were much in demand. What was not known was that as 'A. M. Barnard' she was profitably engaged in writing lurid romances, thrillers, and blood-and-thunder adventure tales for the more seedy papers and dime-novel series.[1]

[1] Some of these have been traced and reissued in three volumes under the editorship of

What Niles realized was that there was a gap in the market for good, readable, and entertaining stories for girls and that Alcott was the kind of writer who could fill it. The publishing firm of Roberts Brothers had been founded in 1861 by Lewis Augustine Roberts after the bookbinding firm in which he was a principal failed. At first he concentrated on producing photographic albums, but after Niles, an experienced editor, joined him in 1863, they began to build up a list of good-quality books by distinguished authors. In 1867 Niles was negotiating with Louisa Alcott's father to publish his *Tablets* when Louisa visited him to offer a new collection of fairy stories. Instead, Niles suggested the girls' story and Louisa said she'd 'try'.

Alcott put off trying for some months. In February of 1868 Niles enquired of her father how the story was progressing, and Bronson Alcott wrote to his daughter urging her to begin, but it was not till May that she started in earnest. She records in her journal for that month that she was working on it but did not 'enjoy this sort of thing' for she 'never liked girls nor knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting though I doubt it'. ('Good joke', she added later.) The first twelve chapters went off to Niles in June. Alcott noted that both she and Niles thought them 'dull', although Niles wrote to her on 16 June expressing delight: 'consider judgement as favourable'. Alcott plodded on because she believed 'lively, simple books are much needed for girls, and perhaps I can supply the need'. Niles was confident and now asked her to extend the length from two hundred to three hundred pages (it finally reached four hundred) and he also asked her to leave the ending open in anticipation of a sequel. Alcott was uncertain whether she could write another book, but she nevertheless complied, ending with the words: '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.' (The title was Niles's suggestion.)

On 15 July she mailed the completed copy, together with a set of illustrations by her youngest sister, May, hoping that the engravers would deal kindly with May's amateurish work. She also com-

Madeleine B. Stern: *Behind a Mask* (New York: Morrow, 1975), *Plots and Counterplots* (New York: Morrow, 1976), and *A Double Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 1988).

plained that she had found it difficult to pick up the threads of the story without reference to the first twelve chapters which were already with Niles. Roberts offered her $1,000 for the rights (the sum she had once hoped to achieve as an annual income from her pen). Niles, however, advised her to take the alternative of a $300 advance and a royalty of 6.66 per cent as he was now confident that the book would sell well. The gamble was to pay off, and in 1885 Alcott appended a note to her original journal entry: 'An honest publisher and a lucky author, for the copyright made her fortune and the "dull" book was the first golden egg of the ugly duckling.'

Alcott too was more confident, for she found on reading the proofs that it 'reads better than I expected . . . not a bit sensational, but simple and true . . . we really lived most of it; and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it' (Journal). She also noted that Niles had written to say that some girls who had read the manuscript had found it 'splendid' and 'as it is for them, they are the best critics, so I shall be satisfied'.

The book came out in early October and was an immediate success: so, on 1 November, Alcott began writing the sequel. She reckoned to do a chapter a day and to finish by the end of the month—a way of working which she described as going into a 'vortex'. Later in life she would often bemoan the fact that she was no longer able to sustain this near-trance-like state of frenetic writing. In fact, family troubles intervened and she did not mail the final copy until 1 January 1869. Already the girls were 'clamouring' for more, but they had to wait until April because of problems over the illustration of the new volume. Even Louisa had been forced to accept the shortcomings of May's drawings and so Niles commissioned a well-known illustrator, Hammett Billings. Louisa hated his work. A second suite of drawings was submitted, but Louisa hated these too: 'blew Niles up to such an extent that I thought he'd never come down again', she wrote to Elizabeth Greene, a friend who had illustrated *Morning Glories* for her. However, because of the 'clamouring' girls, Alcott capitulated, and Part 2 appeared 'with all faults'. By publication day it had already sold three thousand copies, with a fourth thousand in the press, while Part 1 was into its seventh thousand.

How much the success of *Little Women* owed to Niles's reading of the market and how much it was luck that the market was ready

for change and Alcott was able to fuel that change is uncertain. What is sure is that after its publication there was a sudden burgeoning of similar books, which continued into the twentieth century.

To understand the background to *Little Women*'s phenomenal success, one needs to look at contemporary fiction for girls. In both the United States and in Britain, this was predominantly Evangelical in character. Writers like Charlotte Yonge (*The Heir of Redclyffe*, 1853), Maria Charlesworth (*Ministering Children*, 1854), and Hesba Stretton (*Jessica's First Prayer*, 1866) in Britain and Mrs Cummins (*The Lamplighter*, 1850) and Elizabeth Wetherell (i.e. Susan B. Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, 1850) in America were all producing sentimental, religious tear-jerkers. The best-selling *Wide, Wide World*, whose heroine, Ellen Montgomerie, suffers much humiliation and grief in her search for spiritual and temporal perfection, was typical of the genre. (Indeed, so popular was Ellen that she spawned a whole 'library' of children's stories which she was supposed to have read in her search for improvement.)

It is clear from the text of *Little Women* that Alcott was familiar with the books of the day (for example, she has Jo crying her eyes out over *The Heir of Redclyffe*), and she introduced some of their more popular characteristics into her own work: motherly love; the strength of family ties; a good death. However, she avoided their excesses of sentiment—all that kissing and fondling, which in view of the frequent appearance of consumptive characters was medically dangerous and which also, in our post-Freudian culture, seems deeply suspect since it usually takes place either between young girls or with mature 'gentlemen'. Where Alcott differs most, though, is in her style of presentation. Ellen Montgomerie's path through *The Wide, Wide World* is leading her to the Ideal of Victorian womanhood: totally subjugated to the whims of first parents and guardians, and later husband, with no personal freedom of thought or deed, and always guilty of some fault or other. The family is seen as dominated by authoritarian fathers or brothers whose rule is absolute. One has only to consider 10-year-old Ellen's father, shunting her off on a long journey with strangers and without warning, to an aunt she has never met, scarcely even allowing her time to bid her dying mother goodbye.

Alcott's family is also theoretically dominated by Father, but for almost the whole of *Little Women*, Part 1, Father is 'away at the

war'—a convenient device for allowing her female characters to develop their own personalities. (It is rather like the device of getting the parents out of the way in the family adventure stories of the 1930s.) Even after Father returns, he is a somewhat shadowy character, offering kindly advice, but never dominating. Parents and children are held together by love, not law.

The root of the difference between *Little Women* and its contemporaries lay in the style of its telling, rather than its content. Alcott had found the key when she described it as 'simple and true' for 'we really lived most of it'. Not for her the formal, stilted speech and priggish, cardboard stereotypes of Susan B. Warner and her like. Alcott's characters were real, flesh-and-blood people and they both spoke and behaved like it. For example, one of the most poignant passages in *Little Women* is the account of Beth's death, in Part 2. Here Alcott quoted almost verbatim from some of her own journal accounts of the passing of her sister Elizabeth. The simple, unpretentious telling is in stark contrast to the over-sentimentalized piety of, for example, Little Eva's dying in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As Alcott herself said, 'Seldom, except in books, do the dying utter memorable words, see visions, or depart with beautified countenances . . .'

When the first part of *Little Women* was published it was well received by most reviewers (although there was some criticism of the drawings by May). It was not, however, welcomed quite so unequivocally by the educationists. Sunday-school teachers and librarians objected to the 'play-acting', which apparently offended their moral sensitivities; teachers objected to too much 'slang'. The slang came from Alcott's use of everyday speech for her girls, who, unlike contemporary heroines, used 'unladylike' expressions, like 'aint' and 'grub' (a favourite synonym for 'work' in the Alcott family) and 'shouted' instead of 'laughing'.

These unconventional intrusions were mostly formalized in the 1880 edition, together with numerous small word changes such as 'shoes' for 'boots', 'simper' for 'prink', and so on. More significant were the changes to character descriptions. In the 1868 edition, Marmee is described as 'a stout, motherly lady . . . She wasn't a particularly handsome person, but mothers are always lovely to their children . . .', whereas in the 1880 version she has become 'a tall motherly lady . . . She was not elegantly dressed, but a noble

woman . . .'. Laurie too changes: his 'long nose' becomes 'handsome', his 'nice teeth' become 'fine', his 'little hands and feet' become 'small' and instead of being 'as tall as' Jo, he becomes 'taller'. His 'queer little French bow' when asking Jo to dance changes to 'a gallant little bow'. Laurie was being relieved of his more foreign characteristics and transformed into the typical all-American boy, while Marmee was being given a superficially more lady-like, rather than homely, appearance.

How much Alcott had to do with these changes is uncertain, for no letters or journal notes have emerged, apart from a letter to Niles in July 1880 printed in Cheney's edition of *Life, Letters and Journals*. That edition is unreliable, and the original letter has disappeared. The year 1879, when the new edition was in preparation, and the first part of 1880 were hard times for Alcott, for her own health was very poor, interfering with her writing, and she was also greatly distressed by the death of her sister May in childbirth in December 1879. The letter to Niles spoke only of her delight in Merrill's pictures. Merrill had indeed visited her in Boston and spent a lively afternoon discussing the designs and they had obviously got on well together. 'Miss Alcott . . . had a most charming personality, and I felt at once as though I had known her all my life', he wrote in a letter to Mrs Arthur Brintell, recalling, in old age, how they had quoted from *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and recited the 'Jabberwock' 'line by line, antiphonically'.[2] It is possible that the textual changes were introduced by Niles himself, in order to establish the English copyright, for the earlier editions had been copyright only in America and were relentlessly pirated by British and European publishers, much to Alcott's annoyance. It may be significant that the original text persisted in English editions, long after the 1880 version had become standard in the States.

There had been suggestions, when the book was first published, that Alcott should take out the play-acting, but she refused to countenance such a change (just as she refused to marry Jo to Laurie), for, as she wrote to Mrs Koorders-Boeke in 1875, 'many things in my story truly happened'. When we look at her life-story, we begin to discover the truth of that statement.

[2] Letter now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

Louisa May Alcott was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania on her father's birthday, 29 November 1832. Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888) had married Abigail May (1800–77) in Boston in May 1830, shortly before opening a school in Philadelphia, where Louisa's elder sister, Anna, was born in 1831. Bronson Alcott was a self-taught philosopher and educationist with a small, but loyal, following. Abigail was the daughter of a well-established Boston family. At first all went well, but by the time of Louisa's birth the school was failing and, after a series of disasters, the family returned to Boston, where, in September 1834, Bronson set up his famous Temple School.

As in Germantown, at first all went well and the school received visits from a number of famous people. Alcott was assisted by Elizabeth Peabody, who many years later was to introduce the Kindergarten system to America, and, later, by Margaret Fuller, scholar and writer on women's suffrage. In 1835 a third daughter, Elizabeth, was born. Then, after a visit from the English writer Harriet Martineau, who was highly critical of Bronson's methods, things began to go wrong. Bronson believed in the Socratic method of teaching by question and answer, but this was to lead him into difficulties when he approached the question of 'generation' during Bible studies. In fact, he handled this primitive 'sex education' with the utmost tact, but inevitably the gossip-mongers got hold of it and blew it out of proportion. Alarmed for her own reputation, Elizabeth Peabody left, thus, unwittingly, giving credence to the rumours, and the numbers of pupils declined. Bronson, from being admired, became a subject of ridicule. The creditors foreclosed and when, after struggling on for another couple of years, Bronson enrolled a black child, the last six students were withdrawn and the school closed. Penniless, the Alcott family moved to Concord, Massachusetts, where Ralph Waldo Emerson (always a staunch friend) found them a house. Here, in July, the last of the 'little women', Abby May, was born.

Louisa had come into the world a 'cross, crying baby, bawling at the disagreeable old world',[3] and she had grown into a rebellious, hasty-tempered child, given to wild changes of mood, as Bronson

[3] Letter to Bronson Alcott, 28 Nov. 1855, commemorating their joint birthdays.

recorded in the records he kept of his children's development. She had 'all the exuberance of a powerful nature, fit for the scuffle of things', he wrote. The young Jo was already in the making.

In Concord, Bronson tended his garden and taught his growing family. He had given up all thoughts of another school and had reached the conclusion that it was demeaning for a man to work for hire (though, as his brother-in-law commented, he had no objection to profiting from the fruits of other men's labours). Louisa and Anna could remember the relative prosperity of the early Temple School days, and this was to be recalled in the 'better times' of the March family. Louisa also incorporated her father's teaching methods from those days for the school which Jo and her Professor husband were to set up at Plumtree. One of the devices which Bronson Alcott employed for teaching his children the alphabet was to form the letters with his body, and we find Professor Bhaer doing just that. Bronson also read with the family. Sometimes it was the stories by Maria Edgeworth, whom he much admired, but most of all it was from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a work which he described in his journals as 'a work of pure genius'. It had been the formative work of his childhood and he was to write in his journal for 1839 that 'It unites me with my childhood and seems to chronicle my identity. How I was rapt in it . . .' The little girls too were 'rapt' in it, especially Louisa, who used the framework for the first part of *Little Women*, even adapting part of the opening of Bunyan's Part 2 to preface her story. Like the March girls, the young Alcotts shouldered their burdens and played at journeying from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, often themselves falling into the Slough of Despond.

In 1842, after two years of grinding poverty, Emerson helped Bronson to make a journey to England to meet his admirers there who had set up a school modelled on his principles, near Richmond, Surrey. This may well have given Louisa the idea for her family of girls fending for themselves with Father away. It was certainly an important time, for it gave her mother her first taste of independence and the confidence to manage the family's affairs on her own, a confidence which she was never to lose.

When Bronson returned in the autumn, he brought two friends from England, Charles Lane (with his son) and Henry Wright.

Together they planned to set up a small community based on Transcendental principles.[4] By June the next year they had bought a run-down farm near Harvard, which they renamed 'Fruitlands', and were putting their ideas into practice. This must have been one of the best and the worst times of Alcott's life. She enjoyed the freedom of running in the fields, she even enjoyed the cold baths and the chores, but she hated Lane's teachings and his efforts to break up their family. During the summer they had plenty to eat, but as winter closed in and the crops failed, their diet became more and more restricted till they were surviving on little more than apples, squashes, and water, with sometimes a little bread. Their clothes were of linen only, for cotton was a product of slave labour and wool was the rightful property of sheep, who could not be exploited. Ever more ascetic, Lane now forbade the burning of wood fires except for cooking. Finally, cold and hunger forced Abigail to make a stand, and she arranged to move with the girls to lodgings at a nearby farm, telling Bronson he must choose between his family and his ideals. He chose the former, and from that time onwards Abigail was the driving force, often supporting the family by her own earnings alone, while Bronson philosophized and held occasional 'conversations' or made lecture tours to the West. When Abigail gave up, Louisa took over. The Fruitlands experience had left an indelible mark on her, giving her a terror of debt and a persistent belief that she must eventually shoulder the whole of the family's burdens.

After Fruitlands (which Alcott parodied much later in an extended story, *Transcendental Wild Oats*), the family moved to Still River, where Louisa had a wonderful summer. By the following winter they were back in Concord, where Abigail bought an old farmhouse, Hillside, with some of the trust money now inherited from her father. They were to stay there for nearly four years.

It was here that Louisa 'fell with a crash into girlhood and continued falling over fences, out of trees, up hill and down stairs tumbling from one year to another till strengthened by such violent

[4] American Transcendentalism was derived from the Kantian theory of the nature of experience embodied in Emerson's treatise 'Nature' (1836). Its most extreme aspects were exhibited by Bronson Alcott, whom Carlyle described as 'A Yankee Don Quixote, who guesses that *he* will bring back the Saturnian Kingdom to this forlorn earth by a life of simplicity and a diet of vegetables'.

exercise the topsy-turvey girl shot up into a topsy-turvey woman'.[5] She was turning from the quick-tempered, moody, rebellious child into a tomboyish young woman, running free in the woods, writing and performing melodramas in the barn with her sisters (these were published by Anna after Louisa's death as *Comic Tragedies*), and scribbling stories and poems. Louisa had begun writing in earnest at Fruitlands, where her journal first began to take shape, and she was also writing poems, but the move to Hillside gave her the privacy of a room of her own that she had always wanted. The Jo of *Little Women*, Part 1 is very like the Louisa of this time. In later years, Alcott wrote a short story about this whole period, 'Recollections of my Childhood', in which she recalls making the resolution: 'I *will* do something by and by. Don't care what, teach, sew, act, write, anything to help the family; and I'll be rich and famous and happy before I die, see if I won't.' Prophetic words. She was, of course, starting her apprenticeship as Jo, 'man of the family'. She was also discovering the joys of Emerson's library. After reading Goethe's *Correspondence with a Child* and *Wilhelm Meister* (both later introduced into *Little Women*) she developed a kind of hero-worship for Emerson, seeing him as a Goethe to her Bettina.

By late 1847 the debts were once again mounting, and the family moved back to Boston, where Abigail's prosperous friends found her employment as a paid charity worker. This was the Marmee of *Little Women*. The two elder girls were also working, Anna as a teacher and Louisa at sewing. Elizabeth, the shy sister, kept house, and May, the 'baby', was at school, and already developing her artistic talents. The girls kept themselves amused by acting plays, holding meetings of their 'Pickwick Club' and writing a family newspaper, *The Olive Leaf* (named after the popular newspaper *The Olive Branch*). It was all very like the March household.

Meanwhile Louisa was still 'scribbling'. In 1851 her poem 'Sunlight' was published in *Peterson's Magazine* under the name 'Flora Fairfield', and the following year a short story, 'The Rival Painters', by L.M.A. appeared in *The Olive Branch*. By 1855 she was earning a modest sum from her writing, though the sewing and teaching were still more profitable activities.

From 1856 onwards, the lives of Jo and Louisa became ever more

[5] Letter to Bronson Alcott, 28 Nov. 1855.

closely entwined, though Alcott took many liberties with time and place. Lizzie, Beth of *Little Women*, contracted scarlet fever at this time, as did May. May recovered rapidly, but Lizzie never regained her strength and began a slow decline, wasting away with what may have been consumption. She survived another two years, becoming ever weaker until her death in March 1858. The effect on Louisa was traumatic and she relived the experience through Beth's death in *Little Women*. Just before Lizzie died, the family had moved back to Concord, where they bought Orchard House. Louisa hated it, calling it 'Apple Slump', but it was the most permanent home they had known, for it remained in the family until after Abigail died in 1877. Louisa used it as a model for the Marches' house and she wrote their story there.[6]

Shortly after Lizzie's death, Anna announced her engagement to John Pratt, to Louisa's great distress. It seemed to her, as it was to do to Jo when Meg became engaged to John Brooke, that she was losing another sister and that the family group was breaking down. Later she was to recant and claim that 'we all had cause to bless the day he [John] came into the family'.

Meanwhile, the stories flew from her pen. She indulged her passion for theatre by converting 'The Rival Painters' into a play, *The Rival Prima Donnas*, which was performed in Boston. She was also much in demand for her renderings of Sairey Gamp from *Martin Chuzzlewit* and Mrs Jarley from *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Alcott would have liked to have become a professional actress, but had to content herself with amateur roles. Her stories were paying well, and she wrote to her 'dear boy' Alf Whitman in 1861 that she expected to receive '$75 or $100' from *Atlantic* for 'Debby's Debut'. Alf Whitman was a bright 15-year-old pupil of Frank Sanborn's school in Concord when Alcott first befriended him in 1857, and they formed a lasting, but entirely platonic, relationship. A year later she was writing to him again that: 'I intend to illuminate the Ledger with a blood and thunder tale as they are easy to "compoze" and are better paid than moral and elaborate works of Shakespeare, so don't be shocked if I send you a paper containing a picture of Indians, pirates, wolves, bears and distressed damsels in a grand tableau over

[6] In 1911 the house was reopened as a museum, furnished in the Alcotts' style and with a collection of their memorabilia. It is still a place of pilgrimage today.

a title like this "The Maniac Bride" or "The Bath of Blood"...' This was in June, the same month that she read an advertisement in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* for a story competition with a prize of $100. She submitted 'Pauline's Passion', her first 'lurid' romance.

By the time she heard that she had won, she was nursing in the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown. The Civil War was well under way and Louisa was anxious to take some part in it. She enrolled as a nurse, despite being unmarried, and young for the job at only 30 (35 was the usual minimum age), and was sent to Georgetown at the beginning of December. Conditions among the wounded were appalling, and she found the work arduous and shocking after her relatively sheltered life. By the end of the month she was already ailing and she succumbed to typhoid pneumonia early in the new year. Her father was sent for, but arrived too late to prevent her receiving the massive doses of calomel (mercurous chloride) that were the standard treatment of the day. The cure was worse than the disease, for she was to be haunted by the consequences of mercury poisoning for the rest of her life. As soon as possible, Bronson took her home in a nightmare journey by train. She then lay for weeks in delirium, not leaving her room until the end of March. During the illness she was shorn of her one vanity, her wonderful chestnut hair, so she well understood Jo's sorrow at losing hers. Once she had recovered some strength, she began turning her letters home into a series of *Hospital Sketches*, which were very well received. She also began work on the novel *Moods*, which she had first composed 'in a vortex' the summer before. This too was published, though abridged and edited in ways of which she disapproved.

Illness had once again plunged the family into debt, so as soon as she was able Alcott began writing furiously for money..The success of 'Pauline's Passion' led her into the 'lurid' and 'sensational' market, where easy profits were to be had as 'A. M. Barnard'. This kind of writing may not have been too distasteful to her, for LaSalle Corbell Picket recalled in her reminiscences *Across my Path* (1916) that in an interview with Alcott where they had discussed the lifelike nature of *Little Women* she had suggested that that was Alcott's 'true style'. '"Not exactly that", she replied, "I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies

and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages . . .'" When asked why not, she responded: 'How should I dare interfere with the proper greyness of old Concord?' and 'what would my good father think of me if I set folks to doing the things that I have a longing to see my people do? No, my dear, I shall always be a wretched victim to the respectable traditions of Concord.' With her quirky sense of humour she may have been playing with her interviewer, but what about those melodramatic plays, one of which appears in *Little Women*, and what too of A. M. Barnard? That was something she kept well hidden, even criticizing Jo for her sensational stories, through Professor Bhaer. After the success of *Little Women* Alcott seems to have dropped that side of her writing, for fear lest it should prejudice her new status as a writer of wholesome girls' stories, although she was to write one more, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, for Roberts Bros.' No Name series as a kind of joke. She also left an unfinished novel, *Diana and Persis*, set, like her lurid romance *A Marble Woman*, in the art world.

Meanwhile, her chief preoccupation was to earn money. She was now constantly dogged by bouts of ill health, and when she was invited to accompany another invalid, Anna Weld, on a trip to Europe, she readily accepted. They sailed for Liverpool in July 1865. On landing they travelled first to London, and then on through Germany, staying for some weeks near Wiesbaden, to take the waters, before finally settling in Vevey, Switzerland. It was here that Louisa met a young Polish boy, Ladislas Wisniewski, who was to be the model for the lighter, 'whirligig' side of Laurie's character. (The sober side she drew from her other 'boy', Alf Whitman.) From Vevey they moved again, to Nice, where Louisa, restless and bored, abandoned her charge. She went first to Paris, where she spent two weeks exploring with Ladislas, and then she travelled on to London, where she seized the opportunity to experience the City haunts of her beloved Dickens. She also visited the publishers, Routledge & Sons, to arrange for an English edition of *Moods*. She received £5 for the English rights and wryly commented that as Milton received only £10 for *Paradise Lost* she supposed she should be grateful.

Once back in Boston, she found her mother sick and the debts again mounting. Anna too was ailing and May, as usual, needing more support for her artistic studies. She fell to work at once, both

on her own account and as A. M. Barnard, so that she was soon ill again and forbidden to write for at least a month. It was August 1867 before she began again, pressed by the accumulation of bills: 'I dread debt more than the devil!' she wrote in her journal. This was when Fuller approached her to edit *Merry's Museum* and Niles suggested the girls' story.

From that time, her life changed. So did her writing. The success of *Little Women* made her a 'hot commodity' who could ask what fees she chose and who could get almost anything she wrote published without question. She owed a great deal of this success and her later wealth and popularity to Niles. He guided her through a series of books along the same pattern as *Little Women*, including two more sequels, *Little Men*, which was written during a second trip to Europe, after the death of Anna's husband, John Pratt, placed yet another financial burden on Louisa, and *Jo's Boys*, which followed much later and was the last of her girls' stories in novel form. There were also a whole series of story collections, largely compiled from her earlier writing (Alcott always tried to get paid more than once for her work) although she usually added a couple of new tales to give the illusion of freshness.

The sudden popularity which Alcott experienced had some repercussions in her private life. She was regularly invited to give talks, attend functions, meet fans. She also became closely involved with the Women's Movement in America, promoting their cause through letters and articles in newspapers and journals. This dedicated group were seeking to free women from the male domination of the time and to gain the right to live independent lives and manage their own finances. They also aimed to achieve equal voting rights with men. Alcott was particularly involved in drumming up support in Concord, where in July 1879 she proudly announced to her journal that she was the first woman to register as a voter.

She was, however, a sick woman, worn down by the stress of caring for her improvident family. Although she had become wealthy, she never seems to have wholly acknowledged the fact but to have continued to worry about financial security. In 1877 her beloved Marmee died, her passing eased by Louisa's support. Two years later, May, who had gone to Paris to study painting and met and married Ernest Nieriker, died from meningitis, almost two

months after giving birth to a daughter, Lulu. Her dying wish was that the little girl should be sent to America to be brought up by her aunt.

Alcott was for some months completely taken up with the novelty of being a surrogate mother and for the first time for many years her writing took second place. It never really regained its status with her, though she did compile a series of story collections, Lulu's Library, for her little namesake. She also began work on the final episode in the March family saga, *Jo's Boys*, which followed Jo into middle age at Plumfield, where her boys, children and pupils, were now grown up. She found it a near impossible task, for, as she said in her preface, two of the main characters, Marmee and Amy, were no longer with her. It became a distressing chore, which took four years to complete. No longer could she write in a vortex, doing a chapter a day: instead, only half an hour was often enough to bring on an attack of vertigo so severe that she had to retire to her bed. In the end, though, she did succeed in bringing down the final curtain on the 'domestic drama' and the book was published in 1886, only two years before her own death.

*Little Women* was much more than a girls' story. It became a kind of national institution. Frank Preston Stearns in his *Sketches from Concord* (1895) recalls how 'Grave merchants and lawyers on their way down town in the morning said to each other: "Have you read *Little Women*?" and laughed as they said it. The clerks in my office read it, so also did the civil engineer, and the boy in the elevator. It was the rage in '69 as *Pinafore* was in '78. It was re-published in London—a rare compliment for a book of its kind.' The fact that it was 'the rage' made it difficult for the critics to ignore it. The criticism of Part 1 had been quiet, a little carping but on the whole commendatory, and Alcott did not expect as much acclaim for Part 2. She was wrong. The *Harpers'* reviewer may have worried about the 'maturity' of the story (all those marriages); the *Ladies Repository*'s reviewer may have regretted the lack of religion, but *Godey's* claimed that 'The story of Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy is in thousands of households, and the call for a sequel to their early life was very loud . . . No commendation of the story is needed. It will be a favourite with hundreds of children these holidays.' They might have said thousands, or even millions. When the centenary of

Alcott's birth approached in 1932, the critics again began devoting their attention to the text and its author. By and large criticism had been favourable, even adulatory, for the *New York Times* could still claim in March 1927 that *Little Women* was 'one of the favourite books of American childhood, according to a poll . . . among high school classes'. *Publisher's Weekly* ran a whole series of articles celebrating the book's continuing popularity and ever-increasing sales figures. The book had found its way into translations in almost every language, not just in Europe but throughout the world, so that Japanese children were as familiar with the March family as American ones.

Alcott was included in many biographical volumes about Famous Women and Famous Authors, even in her lifetime, and she was to become the subject of several full-length books. The first of these had been Ednah Cheney's edition of *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters and Journals*. Ednah Cheney was a long-standing family friend, and when she published her compendium in 1889, only eighteen months after Alcott's death, she had made discreet cuts and alterations to some of the material. Later researchers have found changes to the journal entries and letters, some of which have now disappeared. Cheney wanted to preserve the myth of 'Louisa Alcott, the children's friend', and there was no hint of the lurid and sensational stories, although the evidence of these was recorded among the original notebooks and correspondence.

Because Cheney's version of Alcott's records was used as a starting-point for subsequent biography, it perpetuated the myth, and only later were more rigorous and discerning researchers like Madeleine Stern to reveal the other side of Alcott's writing as suggested by the *Comic Tragedies*. It was left to critics writing after the Second World War to introduce a more enlightened examination of her work. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser gives an excellent résumé of the state of modern Alcott research in an article which serves to underline this point.[7]

In a letter to Mary Channing Higginson in October 1868, soon after *Little Women* first appeared, Alcott wrote: 'I am glad my "Little Women" please you, for the book was very hastily written to order and I had my doubts about my first attempt at a girl's book.' In

[7] 'Domesticity versus Identity', *Children's Literature in Education*, 16/3 (1985).

another letter to Elizabeth Powell (March 1869) she refers to her 'stupid "Little Women" ' and, talking of the second part about to be published, she complains that 'publishers won't let authors finish up as they like but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me. "Jo" should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, *or* somebody, that I didn't dare refuse and out of perversity went and made a funny match for her . . .' And, much later, she wrote to Miss Churchill (Christmas Day 1878): '"Little Women" was written when I was ill, and to prove that I could *not* write books for girls. The publisher thought it *flat*, so did I, and neither hoped much for or from it. We found out our mistake, and since then, though I do not enjoy writing "moral tales" for the young, I do it because it pays well . . .' She then went on to suggest the most successful topics and best-paying publishers for her correspondent to use.

It is abundantly clear that Alcott's motivation did not come from reformist zeal but was entirely mercenary. Her stories were based on her own experiences or those of her friends, and she drew her characters from her immediate circle. Almost every incident in *Little Women* and her other novels for girls can either be directly traced to events she has recorded in her letters or journals, or can be found in an acquaintance's reminiscence about her.

One of the strengths of Alcott's narrative style in *Little Women* is the tension generated by her own ambivalent view of woman's role in life. On the one hand, she had observed and rebelled against the conventions of her period, for she had had ample opportunity to see how her own mother had been worn down by a succession of pregnancies (Abigail had several miscarriages, and a still birth, after Louisa was born). Fruitlands had shown how women could be exploited, reduced to mere workhorses, for Lane and the other men in the community usually sat around discussing all day, leaving Abigail to carry the burdens of cooking, laundering, cultivating the crops, and caring for the children, often with no help at all, except from Anna and Louisa. On the other hand, Alcott was aware of the value of a strong family unit held together by love, with a wise counsellor at its head.

Alcott's fear of losing her hard-won independence may well have been the reason why she never married. She did not want to be

reduced to the slavish dependence of many of the wives she knew, who were trapped in their miserable existence by the conventions of their class. Abigail, who had been brought up as a 'young lady', had discovered the drawbacks of such an upbringing when, left by her impractical husband with no money and four children to rear, she had to take in sewing from her friends. 'My girls shall have trades', she vowed, realizing that they needed some means of supporting themselves outside marriage. Alcott was the daughter who acquired a 'trade' and she used it well, to maintain her family and bring comfort to her mother's old age. She was fulfilling the promise she had made as a rebellious teenager in Concord, acting out her role as the 'man of the family'.

Alcott took her characters from real life, and so some of their less attractive characteristics, like her own restless and tempestuous nature or May's (Amy's) thoughtless selfishness, were bound to creep in. On balance, though, she seems rather to have idealized her models, leaving out their weaknesses, so that Meg is a much more robust and efficient young matron than Anna, while Beth faces death with a gentle resignation that lacks any of her *alter ego*'s fractiousness or opium-dulled pain. The real Beth may have been their 'angel in the house', but she was never the shy, retiring little mouse that Alcott made her. Marmee, too, was not the self-disciplined, meek counsellor of *Little Women*. She had been almost 30 when she married Bronson, and she was always ready to speak her mind, as Marmee would never have done, with a forcefulness which caused Bronson to refer to her as a she-wolf in his journals. Alcott was acting out her fantasies through her characters, and this makes Professor Bhaer much more interesting. He seems to have been a compilation of all the influential men in her life: Emerson, the idol of her adolescence; Frank Sanborn, the much-admired schoolmaster; above all, her father, whom she spent her life trying to please. (Martha Saxton, in her biography, posits the theory that Louisa died only days after Bronson because she no longer had any reason to live.)

Judith Fetterley sees Jo's marriage as neutralizing her rebellion and making her into yet another good little woman, subservient to the superior male.[8] Yet Alcott was resistant to the idea of Jo's

[8] '*Little Women*: Alcott's Civil War', in Madeleine B. Stern (ed.), *Critical Essays on Louisa Alcott* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984).

marrying at all, wanting her to remain a literary spinster. It was only at the insistence of the 'clamouring girls' that she compromised, ever ready to placate her public, but she would not go so far as to gratify them by matching Jo and Laurie. Instead she chose Bhaer, the unconventional, older man, whom she herself might have liked as a husband. As to neutralizing her rebellion, Jo never gave up her independence completely, and she continued her literary career despite the demands of married life. In 'Jo's Last Scrape', which appears towards the end of *Jo's Boys*, the last of the *Little Women* sequels, this is made abundantly clear.

Fetterley recognizes the ambivalence of Alcott's attitudes, seeing the Civil War as 'an obvious metaphor for internal conflict' and that conflict as being between the 'overt and covert' messages of the book, which have served to maintain its popularity. This seems to me more relevant to an analysis of Alcott's subconscious than to the story itself. One thing is certain: if Alcott was sincere in her comment that the story was 'simple and true' (and there is no reason to doubt such a statement, for she made it to herself in her journal which she always meant to destroy) then she had no conscious intention to do any more than tell a good tale. The covert messages come out of the reader's own interpretation rather than the writer's intent. Alcott herself comments on this kind of criticism on p. 262 of *Little Women*.

Alcott was an extremely complex character and something of an oddity in her generation. As such, she is worthy of analysis. *Little Women* should be part of that analysis, but there is a danger in allowing the autobiographical elements in it to become too important. *Little Women* succeeded because it happened to meet a need in its readers. It opened the way for a new kind of story which has continued down to the present, in which realistic children, with whom readers could identify, solved problems which those readers knew all too well. It is this realism that has caused *Little Women* to survive generations of girls, while the novels and lurid romances, the little fairy tales, the pioneering articles have almost disappeared from view.

The genre of the domestic story which Alcott initiated with *Little Women* was to have some notable exponents. Having discovered the power of the realistic approach to writing for girls, Alcott herself scarcely digressed from the style, apart from one brief foray back into her 'lurid' mode with *A Modern Mephistopheles*, and an autobio-

graphical novel for adults, *Work*, which she had originally written in 1861 as two novels, *Success* and *Beginning Again*, but which was not published until 1873, when it appeared as a single volume after serialization in *The Christian Union*. In this book she dealt with feminist issues in a way that would have been quite inappropriate to *Little Women*. Elaine Showalter in her Introduction to *Alternative Alcott* regards it as Alcott's 'own rewriting of *Little Women* and her most subversive meditation on nineteenth-century domestic fiction'. It was not unfavourably received by the critics, but, as the reviewer in *Harper's New Monthly* remarked, 'The book would not have made her reputation, but her reputation will make the book.' A very perceptive remark as it turned out, but not even Alcott's reputation has kept it long in the public eye, except as a tool for Alcott researchers. It lacked the directness and simplicity of *Little Women*.

Four years after *Little Women* Niles found a second author to open up the girls' story. Sarah Chauncy Woolsey, who wrote as Susan Coolidge, was encouraged by him to write the first of a series of books about a new family of girls. *What Katy Did* was issued in 1872, to be followed a year later by *What Katy Did at School*, and their author was hailed as another 'Aunt Jo'. The books were immensely popular at the time, for they had many of the domestic qualities which made *Little Women* a success, but Coolidge took the girls' story a step further, to include the girls' school story. The underlying theme, though, of girls learning to be 'good little women' was common to the writing of both authors. Indeed, in her third book about Katy, *What Katy Did Next*, where the heroine travels to Europe and gets engaged, Coolidge's story lies very close to Alcott's account of Amy's European trip in *Little Women*, Part 2.

From these two authors, the way was open for a whole range of new, unpretentious domestic stories for girls. Typical were Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and its sequels, Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna* stories and L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series, which were all following in the same tradition of tomboyish girls striving to overcome their natural indiscipline and become useful members of society. Like Jo, the heroines were independent spirits expecting to make their own way in life. Unlike Jo, they were orphans, but each found herself with loving substitute parents. Like Jo they did not regard marriage as the only route to

success, and although they all made conventional alliances in the end, they managed to do so without sacrificing their own personalities. Of this group of stories, the best surviving title has been *Anne of Green Gables*, which, like *Little Women*, was in part autobiographical, and which also appealed not only to the girls for whom it was written but to a much wider adult audience.

The relaxed, unpretentious style, which began with Alcott, is now accepted in children's books, but in 1868 it was still a novelty to be exploited. It almost coincided with the appearance of the first non-didactic magazines catering for both boys *and* girls which helped to disseminate it. The best of these, *St Nicholas*, began in 1873, under the enlightened editorship of Mary Mapes Dodge, who insisted there would be 'no sermonizing, no wearisome spinning out of facts'. The magazine was to be 'A child's . . . pleasure ground'. Alcott and Coolidge were two of her earliest contributors, and headed a long roll-call of distinguished writers.

Today's girls owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Louisa Alcott for her contribution to their literature. The fact that in 1970, over a century after *Little Women* first appeared, it could still command a top place among the books read by English and American schoolchildren is a measure of their continuing appreciation of the honesty and truth she offered them without any suggestion of manipulation or 'improvement'.

# NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text used for this edition is that of the first printing, which appeared in America on 1 October 1868 in a print run of 2,000. It must have been an instant success, for a further 1,000 copies were printed in November and 1,500 in December of which 250 were sold to the English publisher Sampson Low. The success continued the following year with the publication of *Little Women*, Part 2, and reprints of both parts averaged around 1,000 copies a month until 1872, when they levelled out at between 2,000 and 3,000 a year. In 1880 the text was substantially revised and re-illustrated, and it is this version which came to be standard for subsequent reprints in the States. The following year this was published as a one-volume edition, which is also the usual American practice.

In Britain success was slower to come, probably because of the book's very American character, but it was soon to be as popular as in the USA and, although Low was its 'official' publisher, because there were no copyright agreements between America and Britain, it was soon appearing in Library Series from a wide range of publishing houses: Routledge, Warne, Blackie, Weldon, etc. These editions continued to use the first edition text, though with Anglicized spelling in some cases, long after the second edition had become standard for American printings. Another difference lay in the treatment of Part 2. In America it was always so noted, and frequently after 1880 incorporated with Part 1 in a single volume. In England the two parts were usually separated, Part 1 being issued as *Little Women* and Part 2 variously under separate titles such as *Good Wives*, *Nice Wives*, *Young Wives*, and *Little Women Married*—although eventually *Good Wives* came to be accepted as standard.

The editing of the 1880 edition removed many of the 'slang' expressions and grammatical quirks, and these have been discussed in the Introduction. A quick check for the version used can be found in Chapter 1, where in the second edition Jo no longer puts her hands into her *apron* pockets and Marmee has become 'tall and motherly' instead of 'stout'. One of the effects of these changes was to diminish the spontaneity and vigour of the writing in favour of verbal correctness and good syntax, and one speculates on Alcott's

opinion of them. Unfortunately, no record exists, but she may have agreed them in order to establish some kind of British copyright, for she was much incensed by the 'pirates' and went to considerable lengths to ensure her rights in later publications by having them appear first in either London or Toronto and herself travelling there for the occasion.

For this edition, Parts 1 and 2 have been treated as a single volume and the chapters re-numbered consecutively.

# SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

## EDITIONS OF *LITTLE WOMEN*

Since its first publication in 1868–9, *Little Women* has remained continuously in print in either one- or two-volume editions in both the United States and Britain. The early printings have already been discussed, but a look at the listings in the American *National Union Catalogue* and the *British Library Catalogue* gives a very clear view of the enormous quantity of reprints since 1868. Many of these are interesting for their Introductions, which often offer a new insight into the text or its author's life. They also display a wide range of artistic interpretations, some of which would have deeply distressed Alcott, with their rosy-cheeked, trite, doll-like characters.

The books have appeared in numerous forms of school and abridged editions; there have been a number of dramatizations, two film versions (one starring Katharine Hepburn as Jo, the other Elizabeth Taylor as Amy), and special editions for the blind. As recently as 1992 a new illustrated edition of *Little Women* was issued by Pavilion Books with illustrations by Diana Dryhurst.

## BOOKS BY LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

As has been said in the Introduction, Alcott was a prolific writer. Madeleine Stern's biography of Alcott (see below) contains a substantial bibliography of the works, but it is worth noting here the two volumes which complete the *Little Women* saga: *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886). There are also five other books in the same style which go to make up the 'Little Women Library': *An Old Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Eight Cousins, or The Aunt Hill* (1875), *Rose in Bloom: A Sequel to Eight Cousins* (1876), *Under the Lilacs* (1878), and *Jack and Jill* (1879).

## OTHER WORKS

The best introduction to Alcott is through her own letters and journals. These first appeared in a heavily censored form in 1889, but recently new and greatly expanded editions have been compiled from original material:

Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), with an Introduction by the Associate Editor, Madeleine B. Stern.

## 'Jo's ambition was to do something very splendid'

*Little Women* has remained enduringly popular since its publication in 1868, becoming the inspiration for a whole genre of family stories. Set in a small New England community, it tells of the March family: Marmee, who looks after her four daughters while her husband serves in the Civil War, and the girls Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy who experience domestic trials and triumphs as they attempt to supplement the family's small income. In the second part of the novel (sometimes known as *Good Wives*) the girls grow up and fall in love.

The novel is highly autobiographical, and in Jo's character Alcott portrays a strong-minded and independent woman, determined to control her own destiny. The introduction to this edition provides a fascinating history of the Alcotts, and of Louisa Alcott's own struggles as a writer.

THIS EDITION INCLUDES

**Introduction • Textual note • Bibliography • Chronology**
**Explanatory notes • Includes *Good Wives***

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Valerie Alderson

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