Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888)

"'Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents,' grumbled Jo, lying on the rug. 'It's so dreadful to be poor!' sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress. 'I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,' added little Amy, with an injured sniff. 'We've got Father and Mother, and each other,' said Beth contentedly from her corner."

With these words, Louisa May Alcott launched one of the most popular novels ever written, *Little Women,* a fictionalized version of her own life story. Born in Germantown, Pennsylvania on November 29, 1832 to Bronson and Abigail Alcott, Louisa was the second of four daughters, each one born with a different artistic bent. Anna, the oldest, was considered the actress of the family; Elizabeth, the third in line, was the musician; May, the youngest, was the artist; and Louisa was the writer. All four were accurately, if gently, characterized in the novel's four March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy.

Shortly after her birth, Louisa moved with her family to Boston, Massachusetts where her father started the Temple School. Bronson believed that children should be actively involved in their education and that they should enjoy the learning experience. He spent hours studying his own children, keeping copious notes about their development and the results of different stimuli and treatment for various behaviors. The girls' upbringing was anything but traditional. Their father—an innovative educator, a transcendental philosopher, and a social reformer—designed and supervised their education, having them read widely and deeply, keep journals (which he and his wife read and commented on), and take time to play (recess). They were also encouraged to develop an open mind and a social conscience. Louisa filled the pages of her journal with observations about her moods, her feelings, and the trouble she had controlling her temper. This was good practice for when she started writing the stories that young people everywhere related to. Louisa described her education this way: "I never went to school except to my father or such governesses as from time to time came into the family. . . . so we had lessons each morning in the study. And very happy hours they were to us, for my father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child's nature as a flower blooms, rather than crammed it, like a Strasburg goose, with more than it could digest. I never liked arithmetic nor grammar . . .

but reading, writing, composition, history, and geography I enjoyed, as well as the stories read to us with a skill peculiarly his own."

Bronson's teaching methods were controversial. He had partnered with Elizabeth Peabody, whose methods were equally as radical. Parents were initially excited about this new school, but they soon became uncomfortable over just how different the process was and began withdrawing their children. As a result the Temple School soon went under.

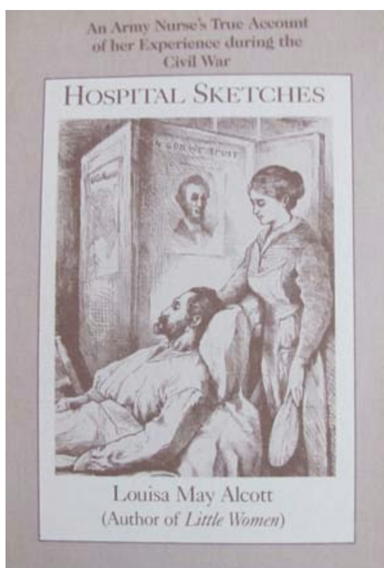
Bronson moved his family back to Concord where the philosophical climate was a little more open. He was still without steady work, though, so when Louisa was ten, her father moved the family to a small communal farm in Harvard, Massachusetts named Fruitlands. There the community refused to use animal products (including wool) or labor ("except for that of women," according to Abigail Alcott) and wouldn't eat any vegetables that grew down into the earth (such as carrots or potatoes) because they grew in the opposite direction from uplifting thoughts and ideas. Alcott and his associates were hoping to live an ideal life, but it turned out to be harder than they expected. The experiment lasted six months and was a disaster for the family, who left the farm in dire straits, both personally and financially. Louisa documented the experience in her journal, vowing to find a way to keep the family out of poverty. She later turned her observations into a small, somewhat satirical and slightly fictionalized memoir called *Transcendental Wild Oats.*

From Fruitlands, the family went to Concord and settled in a house they called "Hillside" to live near Bronson's Transcendental friends Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Margaret Fuller and Nathaniel Hawthorne and his family were also part of the Alcott family's circle of friends who challenged and developed their social and intellectual thinking. Louisa spent time reading in Emerson's extensive library and went on many a walk with Thoreau, developing a crush on him at one point. Under the influence of these friends, though, as well as her father, Louisa fell in love with nature and found in it her religion. Often she would go out into the Concord woods to catch her breath, gather her thoughts. Once, while stopping to watch the sun shining on the meadows, "a very strange and solemn feeling came over me," she wrote in her journal. There was "no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of

nearness all my life." As she got older, this became a stronger desire. "When feeling most alone, I find refuge in the Almighty Friend," she wrote. "If this is experiencing religion, I have done it; but I think it is only the lesson one must learn as it comes, and I am glad to know it."

A few years later, the family moved back to Boston where Louisa tried to help the family out by taking on odd jobs. She read to the elderly and invalids, taught young children, mended, and washed laundry, among other things. But she kept reading: Plutarch, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Goethe, Schiller, Bettine Brentano, Mme. De Stael, Emerson, Charlotte Bronte, Carlyle, Margaret Fuller, George Sand, and more. It was during this time, too, that she experienced her first success in publishing. Her poem "Sunlight" was published in 1852 under the pseudonym of Flora Fairfield, and her first book, *Flower Fables,* was published in 1855. This was written for Ellen Emerson, daughter of Ralph. The teaching didn't go as happily for Louisa. She spent a miserable few weeks living with a family in Dedham and wrote about it in an essay, "How I Went Out to Service." James T. Fields refused to publish it, telling Louisa "Stick to your teaching, Miss Alcott. You can't write." Little did he know!

Again, the family moved, this time to Walpole, New Hampshire. Louisa was able to live on her own by now, though, so she stayed in Boston working on her writing, which she now saw as a potential career. She wrote poems—some of which were published anonymously or under the pseudonym of A.N. Barnard—sketches and plays which she and her sisters acted out for family and friends. She also wrote "blood and guts" thrillers that she hoped would help "the pathetic family" out financially. Her first such story, "The Rival Painters: A Tale of Rome," was published in 1852 in *Olive Branch*. These, in fact, did bring in a fair income.



In 1856, Elizabeth caught scarlet fever, forcing the family to leave Walpole and move back to Concord where "Lizzy" recovered, at least temporarily. Louisa continued writing, but it wasn't until seven years later that she had her first bestseller, *Hospital Sketches*, an account of her experience as a nurse at a Civil War hospital in Washington. By this time, Elizabeth had died, Anna had married, Louisa was being published in the *Atlantic Monthly* fairly regularly, and the family was living in the Orchard House where they stayed for 20 years (after having moved 22 times in the previous 30 years).

When the war broke out, Louisa enlisted and went as a nurse to the Union Hospital in the nation's capital. While her time there provided her with material for *Hospital Sketches (1863),* it also destroyed her once robust health. She contracted not only pneumonia but also typhoid fever that was treated with calomel which contained mercury and which poisoned her nervous system. As a result, she was a victim of chronic pain and illness for the rest of her life. *Sketches*, though, was a real "hit," paving the way for her next book, *Moods* (1864).

Receiving an offer to travel as a companion to an invalid fulfilled a life-long dream to see Europe. While in Switzerland, she met a young Polish freedom fighter, Ladislas Wisniewski, who later served as the model for "Laurie" in *Little Women*. She apparently spent quite a bit of time with him, but ultimately, a relationship with him "couldn't be," she said. Why, we can only surmise. In the long run, Louisa said she preferred to "paddle my own canoe" than settle down with a husband and family. Her own family, it would turn out, would give her all she could handle.

When she returned from Europe, Louisa found her family deeply in debt (again), but now she knew she could do something about it, that she could "earn more from my pen than from my needle." She became editor of a children's magazine, *Merry's Museum,* and wrote for it as well. After a conversation with Thomas Niles, her publisher, she took him up on his suggestion to write something for the young people and sat down at the half-moon desk that her father built for her between the two front windows of her bedroom and wrote what would become an instant best-seller, one that has never been out of print and has been translated into more than 50 languages. *Little Women* (1868) took her eight weeks to write, but it carried her family out of debt and provided financial security for the family for the rest of their lives. It was an instant success, selling 2,000 copies immediately. The publisher begged Louisa for a sequel, and seven months later *Good Wives* was published. (The two books were later combined under the original title, which is how we read it today.) Louisa wasn't overly thrilled about writing what she called "moral pap for the young," but she realized that she would have to sacrifice her artistic desires to secure the family's well-being, and so she continued to write wholesome stories about young people. *An Old Fashioned Girl* followed in 1870, *Little Men* in 1871, *Work* in 1873, *Eight Cousins* in 1874, and *Rose in Bloom* in 1876. Writing in her journal in 1872,

"CHRISTMAS WON'T BE CHRISTMAS WITHOUT ANY PRESENTS"
From the Players' Edition of *"Little Women"*

she said, "Twenty years ago I resolved to make the family independent if I could. At forty that is done. Debts all paid, even the outlawed ones, and we have enough to be comfortable. It has cost me my health, perhaps; but as I still live, there is more for me to do, I suppose."

All this work made Louisa famous, with sometimes more than a hundred visitors coming by the family home over the course of a month. Louisa's father enjoyed being known as "the Father of the Little Women," but she herself preferred her privacy. When fans knocked at her door, this most famous woman in American sometimes disguised herself as a servant, thus escaping attention.

Louisa gave liberally of her time and money to others besides her family. She supported a home for orphaned newsboys and told stories to prisoners, poor city children, and patients. She felt the need to heal more than the physical wounds she had taken care of as a nurse and often signed letters "Yours for Reform of all Kinds." To that end, Louisa involved herself in the social concerns of the day, campaigning against slavery and for women's suffrage, helping to start a temperance society in Concord, petitioning for and receiving the right to vote in the Concord school committee election in 1879—becoming the first woman in Concord to do so—and other such causes. Not coincidentally, perhaps, these were the same reform interests her mother actively pursued. Sadly though, Abba, as the girls called her, never saw her dream of the right to vote come to fruition, as she passed away in 1877. That same year, Louisa published an adult novel, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, anonymously

Louisa's literary efforts provided a comfortable living for her immediate and extended family. When Anna's husband died, Louisa was on her first trip to Europe. She immediately sat down and wrote *Little Men* to provide for Anna and her two children. After her mother died, Louisa built the Concord School of Philosophy for her father to give him something to do. He had long dreamed of a school for adults, hoping to give them opportunities to stretch their minds. And so here he held a series of "conversations" on Transcendentalism with his more famous counterparts—including Emerson. [Even though these conversations necessarily stopped after Bronson died, the

Orchard House, under the direction of Jan Turnquist, has been holding Summer Conversations in the School building every summer since 1999. Transcendental Scholars from all over the country come to share their expertise and hold forth on religion, philosophy, woman's sphere, politics and sundry other topics suitable for conversation.] Louisa sent her sister May to study art in Europe. There in 1878, she married and had a daughter in 1879, but died shortly after "Lulu" was born. The baby was sent to her aunt, for whom she was named, in 1880, where she lived until Louisa died ten years later. Louisa legally adopted Anna's son John as well and willed her copyrights to him, making sure that the income would be shared by Anna, her sons, and Lulu. She bought her father a house in Boston's fashionable Louisburg Square in 1885, where he lived out the remainder of his life after suffering from a stroke.

During the last years of her life, Louisa searched for relief from the pains she suffered from. She tried conventional cures as well as non-traditional forms. In 1888 she entered a convalescent home in Roxbury whose rest and treatments she was hopeful would provided her with another 20 years. She went to visit her father on March 1, knowing that he was nearing the end of his life. In talking with him, she asked him what he was thinking about. Pointing to heaven, he said, "I am going up. Come with me." She replied that she wished she could. He died a few days later, and two days after that, on March 6, Louisa died as well. He was 88 and she was 55. They both were buried in Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, along side Abba and Elizabeth. Her simple grave is decorated only by a Civil War veteran's marker and a flag.

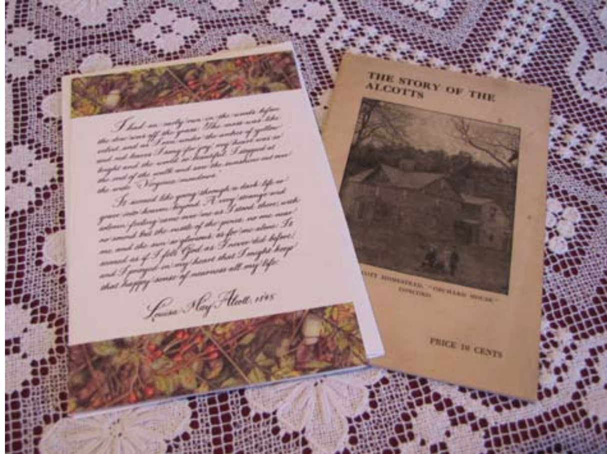
To the end, Louisa was still writing. *Jo's Boys* was published in 1886. She died with an unfinished story at her bedside. All told, she wrote more than 30 books and scores of short stories. She provided hundreds of hours of enjoyment for children and grownups alike to treasure for years to come.

Louisa didn't only have entertainment on her mind when she wrote, though. She also had something important to say to young women. She wanted to show them that their sphere of influence could be greater than what society was telling them (namely that their place was to be daughters, sisters, wives or mothers with few other choices). She wanted them to know that one person could change the world, that all it took was for each of them to change one thing for one person, who in turn could change one thing, and so on and on. Her stories and novels for young people are full of examples of girls being kind to those less fortunate than they are, of one person gently influencing another, of what girls and young women can do—for others and themselves. She shows them doing

something about social inequities—sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly—letting them see a whole host of things that young women can do to make a difference.

Louisa's young women also demonstrate that a strong woman can accomplish whatever she sets out to accomplish. Her characters have courage; they do what they know is right. They stand up for what they believe in. They are loud and clear about their expectations. They reach out with kindness. They don't give in to peer pressure. They are brave enough to think and act for themselves.

And yet, these are not perfect girls. They are very real. They make mistakes. Things don't always work out the way they want them too. Girls and young women across the country fell in love with them because for the first time they saw themselves reflected in stories about real life situations. Louisa encourages them to step out of the sphere society put them in, but she also shows them how to do things well in that sphere.



To the moms of these young women, Louisa encourages teaching their girls to be strong and their boys to be loving and respectful. And she doesn't neglect the boys, either. She tells *them* to step out of their box as well and help their mothers, be kind to their sisters, and be partners—equal partners—with their wives when they grow up.

Louisa's stories work because she likes and understands her audience. She writes from experience—either about things she experienced or wished she had experienced. Her ideas were as revolutionary as her father's, but they were far better received. And yet they had their roots in what she learned in his classroom and by her mother's side. The truth is, because those roots were grounded in the Biblical principles of love for God and others, they resonate in the hearts of all who read her—then and now.

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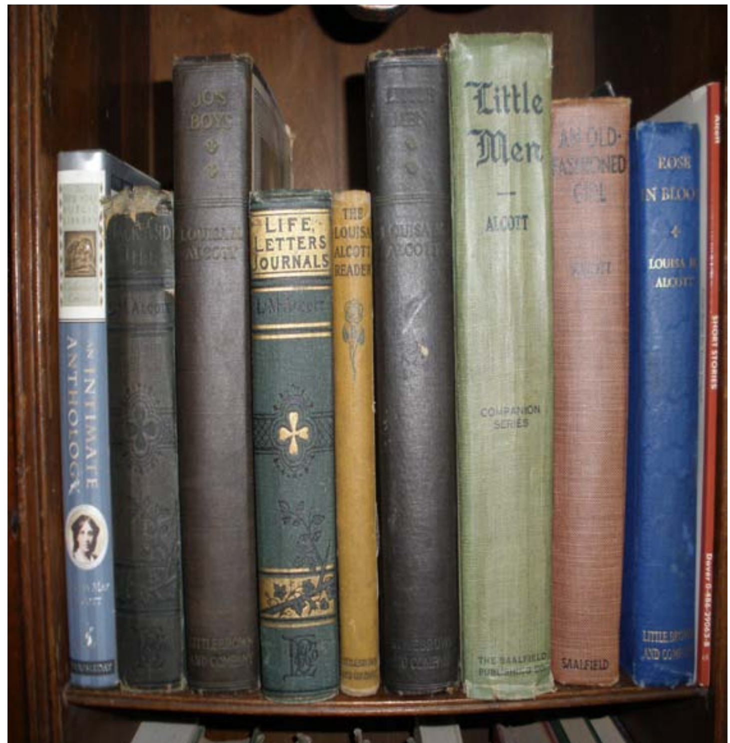

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