

# Louisa May Alcott

By Anne Stuart

**"I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace."**

—*Little Women*

**"MY BOOK CAME OUT,"** Louisa May Alcott noted in an 1855 journal entry. "People began to think that topsey-turvey [*sic*] Louisa would amount to something after all." The ambitious 22-year-old author had probably guessed that her 1854 *Flower Fables*, a collection of fairy tales, would be just the first in a long string of books bearing her name. But she couldn't possibly have imagined that one in particular—her self-reflective *Little Women* (1868), the story of four sisters growing up in 19th-century New England—would rank among the best-loved children's literature of all time. In that sentimental yet realistic look at domestic life, second eldest sister Jo March—whom generations of girls recognize as a thinly veiled version of Alcott herself—declares: "I want to do something splendid . . . something heroic or wonderful that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous." Alcott achieved all her alter ego's goals with more than 30 novels and collections of stories best known for their insightful characters, colorful family scenes, and charming, deceptively simple style. *Little Women* and the books that followed sold so briskly that Alcott comfortably supported herself and her impoverished family for the rest of their lives. She became so celebrated

that signing autographs—not to mention churning out new novels—became a chore. And she achieved a writer's immortality: much of her work remains in print 117 years after her death.

Despite the timelessness of many of her characters and themes, Alcott's reputation has had its ups and downs. Contemporaries praised Alcott's wholesome stories and characters; Henry James, for example, called her "the Thackeray, the Trollope, of the nursery and the schoolroom." Yet many early 20th-century critics faulted Alcott's novels for their overmoralizing, sentimental, and dated depictions of love, sibling friendships and rivalries, and family life. Over recent decades, Alcott's feminist themes, as well as her realistic depictions of maturing adolescents, deflected such

criticism and attracted new interpretations by feminist writers, including Gertrude Stein and Joyce Carol Oates. Today, many view Alcott's classics as a reflection of the author's unconventional life and cultural milieu. Fearing the loss of her independence, she chose not to marry. She earned her own way instead, a theme that surfaces repeatedly in her work. Fiercely independent and progressive, she also embraced diverse reform

## Where to Start

Begin with **LITTLE WOMEN** (1868). If you enjoy the triumphs and travails of the March family, move on to the sequels, **LITTLE MEN** (1871) and **JO'S BOYS** (1886). To sample Alcott's adult fiction, try **WORK: A STORY OF EXPERIENCE** (1873) or **MOODS** (1864), both stories of Victorian domestic realism. For an entirely different Alcott experience, look to one of her gothic thrillers, such as **A MODERN MEPHISTOPHELES** (1877) or those included in the 1995 anthology **LOUISE MAY ALCOTT UNMASKED: COLLECTED THRILLERS**. Finally, read a few of Alcott's letters and journal entries—collected in several anthologies—for a peek into the author's daily life.



movements, from abolition and education to temperance and women's suffrage.

**A**lcott's life was extraordinary from the start. She was the second of four daughters born to (Amos) Bronson Alcott, a philosopher, teacher, and writer, and Abigail ("Abba") May Alcott, a member of Boston's prominent May family. At the time of Louisa's birth—November 29, 1832—Bronson Alcott was already a well-known, innovative teacher. He had joined the Transcendentalists, a group of philosophers and writers that rebelled against much of conventional New England culture; members included Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and others, all great influences on the young Louisa. Although their individual beliefs varied, many advocated new approaches to diet, education, and living arrangements. The last idea particularly appealed to Bronson, and in 1843 he launched an experiment in communal living. He moved his family, which included four young daughters, from the village of Concord, Massachusetts, about 20 miles northwest of Boston, to an isolated 90-acre farm, Fruitlands, 15 miles farther west. There, the Alcotts shared a single large farmhouse and utopian ideals with a rotating group of Transcendentalists. Unfortunately, when starvation threatened their community, the Alcotts returned to Concord.

While at Fruitlands, Louisa had begun a journal. Back in Concord, she turned out poems, stories, and plays. At 16, she wrote the tales that would later be published as *Flower Fables*; before turning 20, she had started publishing poems and stories in newspapers. However, writing could not yet become her full-time vocation. Throughout Louisa's youth, the Alcotts remained impoverished, often sustained by help from friends. Louisa and her sisters taught school, took in sewing, and held other jobs to make ends meet. Louisa also sold what she called "blood and thunder stories"—gothic thrillers and racy romances—to newspapers and magazines. She published all of them anonymously or under pen names; many wouldn't be attributed to her until decades after her death.

Louisa's first successful book, *Hospital Sketches* (1863), a collection of pieces presented as letters to her family, described her experience volunteering as a Union Army nurse in Washington, D.C., in 1862. After this milestone book came *Little Women*. Published in 1868 after an editor asked her to write a "girls' story," the book was an instant success. Girls everywhere adored lovely Meg, impulsive Jo, frail Beth, and artistic Amy, their wise mother Marmee, and their jolly neighbor Laurie. The book's first printing sold out in a month, and fans demanded more of the Marches. Louisa plunged into writing the sequel, *Good Wives*, in 1869 (today, the two books appear as a single volume), then turned out more novels while still contributing to newspapers and magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly*. As her fame grew, Louisa found herself dining with the likes of Henry James and turning away young fans—sometimes a dozen a day—who made their way to her doorstep. But she also admitted in 1871: "Over a hundred letters from boys & girls, & many from teachers & parents assure me that my little books are read & valued in a way I never dreamed of seeing them. This success is more agreeable to me than money or reputation."

**D**espite that success, Louisa pushed herself to exhaustion, and her output dwindled in her later years. By early 1888, Louisa's health had declined dramatically. On March 4, Bronson Alcott died at age 89; two days later, Louisa slipped away as well. She was 55. Both are buried in the family plot on Authors' Ridge in Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

But her work survives. *Little Women* has been translated into more than 50 languages, studied in dissertations, and adapted for movies, audio books, and plays (a musical version opened on Broadway in 2005). And Alcott continues to surprise her readers: In 1980, a researcher discovered an unknown manuscript among the author's papers; Dutton published the novel, *The Inheritance*, which Louisa wrote at age 17, in 1998, 110 years after the author's death. Nobody is likely to forget Louisa May Alcott or her endearing characters anytime soon.

## Selected Other Works

### FLOWER FABLES (1854)

Alcott's first book, published when she was 22, is a collection of fairy tales originally written for one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's daughters.

### HOSPITAL SKETCHES (1863)

This collection of letters describes Alcott's experiences as a Civil War nurse in Washington, D.C. The experience was short-lived; she contracted typhoid within

a month and suffered mercury poisoning from her medication.

### MOODS (1864; 1882)

This novel tells the story of Sylvia Yule, a talented, ambitious woman forced by society to live for others rather than for herself. Alcott modeled the male protagonists on Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

### AN OLD-FASHIONED GIRL (1870)

This young-adult novel features a country girl who, when transplanted to a big city, faces moral questions and peer pressure.

### EIGHT COUSINS (1875) and ROSE IN BLOOM (1876)

These juvenile novels star Rose Campbell, a frail young orphan sent to live with her six aunts and seven boisterous boy cousins.

### UNDER THE LILACS (1878)

This novel recounts the adventures of a boy and his performing poodle, both of whom run away from the circus.

### JACK AND JILL: A VILLAGE STORY (1880)

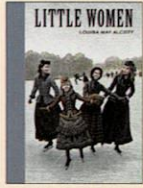
A sledding accident changes the lives of two young friends.



## MAJOR WORKS

### Little Women (1868)

- ♦ RANKED #4, CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ASSOCIATION'S 1976 LIST OF THE BEST AMERICAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS OF THE PREVIOUS 200 YEARS
- ♦ INCLUDED IN *GOOD READING: A GUIDE TO THE WORLD'S BEST BOOKS*, ISSUED BY THE COMMITTEE ON COLLEGE READING, 1947



This beloved juvenile novel propelled Alcott to literary and commercial success, and it remains her best-known work today. Each chapter in the Civil War-era adventures of the four March sisters offers convincing subplots with moral commentary. *Little Women* is, of course, largely autobiographical: Alcott herself was the model for the ambitious, tomboyish Jo, and Meg, Beth, and Amy were the fictional parallels of Alcott's siblings Anna, Elizabeth, and May. Many characters—Marmee, Laurie Laurence, John Brooke, and Professor Bhaer, among others—are based on composites of people Alcott knew.

**THE STORY:** Four sisters, ranging in age from 12 to 16 as the book opens, struggle both to make ends meet and achieve their dreams in 1860s New England. Their experiences, from befriendng a boy named Laurie to experiencing a first love and a life-threatening illness, range from comic to poignant, providing a glimpse not only of a time long ago but of timeless teenage joys and sorrows.

**"Miss Alcott's new juvenile is an agreeable little story, which is not only very well adapted to the readers for whom it is especially intended, but may also be read with pleasure by older people."** THE NATION, 10/22/1868.

**"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, that it has never grown old, never appeared antiquated to the youngsters of today. . . . Librarians and booksellers alike will tell the inquirer that Miss Alcott's masterpiece is still among the books most in demand."** NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 8/8/1908.

**"[T]his Victorian moral tract, sentimental and preachy, 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 knew it."** ELIZABETH JANEWAY, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 9/29/1968.

**"[T]he writing is at an enviably high level throughout—direct, slightly tart, always controlled. . . . Sentimental? Yes, but not sick-making. Preachy? Alcott has enough bred-in-the-bone astringency to keep that sort of thing in check. And, truly, the four March sisters are still irresistible."** DAVID DELMAN, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** *Little Women* was, and remains, Alcott's best-loved work and a true children's classic.

**SELECTED MOVIES:** 1933, directed by George Cukor and starring Katharine Hepburn; 1949, directed by Mervyn LeRoy and starring June Allyson, Elizabeth Taylor, Marga-

### The March Family Series

**LITTLE WOMEN** (1868; the modern version contains the sequel, *Good Wives*): see description.

**LITTLE MEN: LIFE AT PLUMFIELD WITH JO'S BOYS** (1871): see description.

**AUNT JO'S SCRAP BAG** (1882): Jo March narrates the short stories in this six-volume collection.

**JO'S BOYS AND HOW THEY TURNED OUT** (1886): Alcott, describing herself as "a weary historian," brought her beloved series to a close by noting in her final sentence: "Let the music stop, the lights die out and the curtain fall forever on the March family."

ret O'Brien, Janet Leigh, Mary Astor, and Peter Lawford; 1994, directed by Gillian Armstrong and starring Winona Ryder, Gabriel Byrne, Trini Alvarado, Kirsten Dunst, Claire Danes, Christian Bale, and Eric Stoltz

### Little Men (1871)



The subtitle says it all: "Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys." Driven by widespread public demand for more about the Marches, Alcott extended the story to sequels, all less autobiographical than *Little Women*.

**THE STORY:** Jo has grown up, married Professor Bhaer, and given birth to two sons of her own. On an inherited estate called Plumfield, she has opened an experimental boarding school for boys. Jo's life is as "topsy-turvy" as ever as she and her Fritz provide a loving environment for a dozen rambunctious boys—many orphaned or neglected. Jo also teaches and mentors two girls, including Meg's daughter Daisy. While the book describes mostly jolly times, there are, as in *Little Women*, sad and poignant moments as well.

**"[The] whole March family chronicle through *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* charts Jo's transformation into a virtuous matriarch. It's a little disappointing to those of us who prefer the young Jo March, but by the time her *Little Men* are growing up, 'Mrs. Jo' has indeed become another Marmee, a motherly soul ready to care for all the waifs who drift her way. . . . [I]t's a wonderful gift from Louisa that her March family will always be there for us to visit, year after year, without change."** BETTY SMARTT CARTER, THE WEEKLY STANDARD, 2/28/2005.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Like most sequels, *Little Men* doesn't approach its predecessor's power or popularity, but it's a natural next step for readers seeking another fix of the March family—especially Jo.

**THE MOVIES:** 1934, directed by Phil Rosen and starring Ralph Morgan and Erin O'Brien-Moore; 1940, directed by Norman Z. McLeod and starring Kay Francis and Jack Oakie; 1997, directed by Rodney Gibbons and starring



## Recollections of My Childhood

The following excerpt is from "Recollections of My Childhood," an essay written shortly before Alcott's death in 1888 and published posthumously in magazines and as the preface to a later children's book. The period described begins in 1848, when Louisa was not quite 16:

So one gloomy November day, we decided to move [from then-rural Concord, Mass.] to Boston and try our fate again after years in the wilderness.

My father's prospect was as promising as a philosopher's ever is in a money-making world, my mother's friends offered her a good salary as their missionary to the poor, and my sister [Anna, the model for Meg in *Little Women*] hoped to teach. It was an anxious council, and always preferring action to discussion, I took a brisk run over the hill and then settled down for "a good think" in my favorite retreat.

It was an old cart-wheel, half hidden in grass under the locusts where I used to sit to wrestle with my sums, and usually forget them scribbling verses or fairy tales on my slate instead. Perched on the hub I surveyed the prospect and found it rather gloomy, with leafless trees, sere grass, leaden sky and frosty air, but the hopeful heart of fifteen beat warmly under the old red shawl, visions of success gave the gray clouds a silver lining, and I said defiantly, as I shook my fist at fate embodied in a crow cawing dismally on the fence nearby,

"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!" Startled by this audacious outburst the crow flew away, but the old wheel creaked as if it began to turn at that moment, stirred by the intense desire of an ambitious girl to work for those she loved and find some reward when the duty was done.

I did not mind the omen then, and turned to the house cold but resolute. I think I began to shoulder my burden then and there, for when the free country life ended the wild colt soon learned to tug in harness, only breaking loose now and then for a taste of beloved liberty. . . .

At sixteen, I began to teach twenty pupils and for ten years learned to know and love children. The story writing went on all the while with the usual trials of beginners. . . . Every experience went into the chaldron [sic] to come forth as froth, or evaporate in smoke, till time and suffering strengthened and clarified the mixture of truth and fancy, and a wholesome draught for children began to flow pleasantly and profitably.

So the omen proved a true one, and the wheel of fortune turned slowly, till the girl of fifteen found herself a woman of fifty with her prophetic dream beautifully realized, her duty done, her reward far greater than she deserved. ■

Maril Hemingway and Michael Caloz; 1998 TV series, directed by Michael Kennedy and starring Michelle Burke and Spencer Rochfort.

## Work A Story of Experience (1873)



Like Alcott's other major adult novel, *Moods* (initially published in 1864; revised and republished in 1882), *Work* deals with Victorian domestic realism. Like *Little Women*, it is largely autobiographical; its ambitious heroine struggles through a series of unrewarding jobs, just as Alcott did. And, like Alcott, the protagonist comes to embrace social reform and women's rights. Yet unlike the author, who remained single all her life, the character marries for love. Initially published in serial form in 1872, the revised novel, published the following year, delves deeply into issues of independence, women's rights, and the meaning of work.

**THE STORY:** "I am discontented because I help can't feeling there is a better source of life than this dull one made up of everlasting work with no object but money," orphan Christie Devon tells dumbfounded relatives as she prepares to leave their farm town to look for more fulfilling work in the city. "I only ask for a chance to be a useful, happy woman, and I don't think that is a bad ambition." But Christie finds only menial, demeaning, or unreliable jobs as a household servant, actress, governess, companion, and seamstress. Exhausted, impoverished, and depressed, Christie considers suicide but instead turns to a group of Christian reformers with whom she finds her true calling.

**"Experienced in most of the work she described, Alcott was at her best recording injustice to woman in vivid detail. . . . It would be easy to criticize Alcott for the incompleteness of her feminism, for being a woman of her time, and for imaging an ideal society so stuffily masculine and Christian, if we could not see ourselves so clearly in *Work*, without even removing the trappings of another age."** SUSAN P. CONRAD, WASHINGTON POST,

9/18/1977.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Alcott fans will enjoy this glimpse into a little-known period of the author's life. All readers will learn a great deal about the limited choices available for single women in the mid-19th century.

## A Modern Mephistopheles (1877)



Biographers consider this full-length novel noteworthy because it was the only one of Alcott's gothic thrillers to be published *after* she had achieved fame and fortune with her juvenile titles. Like Alcott's shorter "blood and thunder stories," *A Modern Mephistopheles* was published without author credit, in this case as part of the publisher's No Name Series, which featured anonymous works by well-known authors. Biographer Elizabeth Lennox Keyser suggests that Alcott enjoyed the public mystery surrounding the psychologically complex novel because

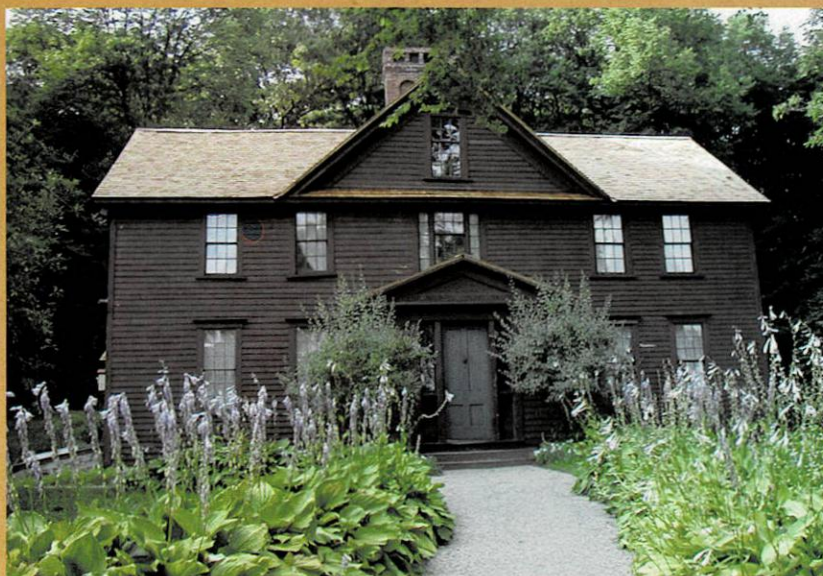


## Alcott Abodes

Few American communities have as rich a literary history as Concord, Massachusetts, a pretty New England town about 20 miles northwest of Boston. Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau all lived and wrote in Concord in the mid- to late-19th century; Thoreau called it “the most estimable town in all the world.”

One Concord home in particular has an unparalleled heritage. Initially called Hillside and now known as The Wayside, the Colonial-era structure housed the Alcott family during Louisa’s childhood. Later, after the Alcotts moved to Boston, Hawthorne purchased, renovated, and lived in the house; later still, it sheltered Margaret Sidney, author of *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew* and other children’s books.

The Alcotts also lived at nearby Orchard House, a rambling and nook-filled 12-room home. Louisa wrote *Little Women*—and many of her following works—in longhand at a half-moon desk between two windows in her second-floor bedroom. She also set *Little Women* at Orchard House; she admitted many times that since the family moved so much in her youth, it would be simpler—especially if the book caught on and fans wanted to see where things took place—to have Orchard House be the backdrop rather than describe the 22 differing locales.



**Orchard House, where Alcott wrote *Little Women***

Today, Orchard House is decorated with family portraits, Victorian-era furniture—80 percent of which was owned by the Alcotts during their residence here (1857–1877)—and watercolors and drawings by Louisa’s youngest sister May, the model for the artistic Amy of *Little Women*. (Because Bronson and Abba Alcott encouraged creative expression, May did some of her work on the home’s walls, where they remain today.) Like other historic Concord homes, both Orchard House and The Wayside are open to the public.

(For details on Orchard House, visit [www.louisamayalcott.org](http://www.louisamayalcott.org). For details on the other Concord homes, visit [www.concordma.com/visiting.html](http://www.concordma.com/visiting.html)).

Concord wasn’t the Alcotts’ only home base; Louisa was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, now part of Philadelphia, where

her idealistic father briefly ran a progressive school. The family also lived in Boston and several other communities, most notably in the rural central Massachusetts town of Harvard. It was there, on a 90-acre farm, that Bronson Alcott and a few other Transcendentalists founded a communal living experiment in the 1840s, Fruitlands. The red farmhouse remains open to the public as a museum. (For details, visit [www.fruitlands.org](http://www.fruitlands.org).)

The Alcotts, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau all reside eternally in Concord’s Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in graves on a hill known as Authors’ Ridge. Louisa’s grave marker in the Alcott family plot is almost painfully stark for someone who generated so many words in life: The half-moon headstone contains only the initials “L.M.A.” and the dates of her birth and death. ■

it meant that she “differed from the woman whom her readers thought they knew.” The novel also demonstrates the author’s uncanny ability to keep surprising readers long after her death.

**THE STORY:** Lust. Lies. Evil. Greed. They’re all here in *A Modern Mephistopheles*, written late in Alcott’s career. The novel reworks the themes of *Faust*, by the German writer Johann von Goethe, whom Alcott called her “favorite author.” A mysterious stranger, Jasper Helwyze (get it?), saves a despondent writer named Felix Canaris and becomes his patron. The relationship turns tragic as Helwyze—essential-

ly the devil from Faust’s tale—uses his power over Canaris to manipulate the poet and his wife, to no good ends.

**“Alcott’s only work of sensation fiction known to have been written after the publication of *Little Women*, and it is one of her best.”** ELIZABETH LENNOX KEYSER, THE PORTABLE LOUISA MAY ALCOTT.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** It’s certainly not *Little Women*. But it’s for precisely that reason that this late gothic deserves attention from serious students of Alcott’s work. It’s worth reading simply as an illustration of the author’s remarkable breadth of style. ■