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EDITOR'S CHOICE

Louisa May Alcott: A Literary Biography

HARRIET REISEN



Editor's Introduction: *HJM is proud to select as our Editor's Choice Award for this issue Harriet Reisen's superb biography, Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women (2009) published by Picador Press, an imprint of Henry Holt and Company. Brilliantly researched and beautifully written, Reisen brings to life an American icon. A famous writer whose books have never gone out of print, Alcott led a literary double-life. Her children's books remain best-sellers, but under a pseudonym she wrote far more sensational pulp fiction thrillers. Reisen argues, "The real Louisa Alcott was infinitely more interested in the darker side of human nature and experience than in telling polite stories to nice children. She was a protean personality, a turbulent force, a passionate fighter attracted to danger and violence."*¹

In this vivid and absorbing account, Reisen addresses all aspects of Alcott's life: the impact of her father's self-indulgent utopian schemes; her family's chronic and often desperate economic difficulties; her experience as a nurse in the Civil War; her literary successes; and the loss of her health and early death at the age of fifty-five. Based on the astounding sales of her books, which outsold contemporaries such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Henry James, Alcott became the equivalent of a contemporary multimillionaire. By early adulthood she had become the main financial support for her parents, siblings and, later on, numerous other relatives.

Reisen draws from a wealth of revealing primary sources, including Alcott's personal journals (which she began at age eight), along with copious letters to family, friends, and publishers, and the recollections of her contemporaries. She also draws upon Alcott's fiction and numerous published works, all of which are, to some extent, autobiographical. Through a focus on Alcott's life, the reader also gains an understanding of the literary, social and political milieus of Boston and Concord.

Born on November 29, 1832, Louisa May Alcott was the second of four daughters. Her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was the son of an illiterate farmer. He was self-educated but became a leading teacher, writer, philosopher, reformer, and charismatic lecturer. Her mother, Abigail May Alcott, descended from a distinguished Boston family. The Alcotts were an extraordinarily radical family. Affiliated with both the abolitionist and transcendentalist movements, they aided fugitive slaves in the Underground Railroad and maintained close friendships with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Indeed, Alcott grew up under their tutelage; she studied literature with Emerson and was schooled in natural science by Thoreau. She had youthful crushes on both men. Emerson also provided financial support to the family, as he did for many of his closest friends. Alcott absorbed her family's progressive values. She was passionate about abolition and volunteered as a nurse during the Civil War. Her mother had been a champion of woman's rights in marriage, the workplace, and voting booth. Alcott also championed women's suffrage and was proud to be the first woman to vote in a local school board election in Concord in 1880.

Reisen offers a thoroughly unsentimental portrait of Alcott's childhood. Despite this rich intellectual milieu, the family was virtually destitute, and Alcott experienced a childhood of severe material deprivation. In the fictional Little Women, the March sisters live in what might be called "genteel" poverty, with the Civil War as a vague, distant backdrop. The

girl's adored father spends the first part of the book away, nobly caring for wounded soldiers. The family is left less than wealthy, but still comfortable.

*In reality, Bronson Alcott was a dreamer and idealist who rarely earned enough to support his children. The family often subsisted on nothing but bread and water. When Louisa Alcott was ten years old, her father co-founded the utopian community of Fruitlands. After barely six months, the scheme failed, and the family was left destitute with Bronson Alcott on the brink of suicide. Constantly in debt, they moved frequently. By the time they settled at Orchard House in Concord in 1858, they had lived in approximately thirty homes. At an early age, Alcott resolved that one day she would become rich and famous. At first she dreamed of becoming an actress and soon began writing, directing, and acting in plays with her siblings (a pastime portrayed in *Little Women*).*

*Throughout her teenage years Alcott worked to help support her family. She had a series of jobs, including seamstress, teacher, governess, laundress, and servant. In her early twenties, she began writing romances for local papers. She rapidly learned how to tailor her writing for different markets and to experiment with different genres. However, she knew that writing sensational stories would tarnish her reputation, so she published them anonymously. In 1868, at the age of thirty-five she published *Little Women*. This book, and its sequels, proved immensely profitable, and Alcott was soon able to provide for her entire family. Her fate as a writer was essentially sealed; she built her career writing what she once called "moral pap for the young" because that was what was financially lucrative.²*

*As author Harriet Reisen noted in an interview, "Louisa made herself a brand. She suppressed the fact that she had written pulp fiction that included stories about spies and transvestites and drug takers."³ It wasn't until many decades after her death that the full breadth of Alcott's work was revealed. Reisen, a former fellow in screenwriting at the American Film Institute, has written dramatic and historical documentary scripts for PBS and HBO, including a PBS *American Masters* documentary about Louisa May Alcott.⁴ Reisen's exhaustive research and thorough detective work brings to life this remarkable story.*

* * * * *

Author's Preface: For many girls, *Little Women* is a reading experience so stirring and lasting in impact that as adults they name their baby daughters after the characters. When they judge their daughters old enough, they press

the book on their little Megs, Josephines, Beths, and Amys; often it is the same copy they read with their mothers, sometimes the one their mothers read with their grandmothers, occasionally an early or original edition that represents continuity through a hundred or more years. Louisa May Alcott wrote many works in every genre—conservatively, more than two hundred, over a career that spanned almost forty years—but *Little Women* was far and away her most successful. The story of the March sisters, which Alcott thought lifeless and flat as she was writing it, unexpectedly touching and true when she finished, struck a deep chord with readers when it appeared in 1868, just three years after the end of the Civil War. The sequel, *Little Men*, was a bestseller before it was even published. Readers anticipated Alcott's juvenile novels with a fervor not seen again until the *Harry Potter* series of J. K. Rowling.

One hundred forty years after the publication of *Little Women*, none of Louisa May Alcott's eight novels, for what is now called the "young adult" audience, has ever been out of print. Women around the world cite *Little Women* as the most treasured book of their childhoods "magically the book told my story," as a writer for the Philippine Inquirer put it.⁵ Translated into more than fifty languages, *Little Women* crosses every cultural and religious border. It has been adapted for stage, television, opera, ballet, Hollywood, Bollywood, and Japanese anime. Its characters have been drafted for new versions set in California's Beverly Hills, Salvador Allende's Chile, and New York's Upper West Side.⁶

Little Women is a charming, intimate coming-of-age story about family love, loss, and struggle set in a picturesque rendering of mid-nineteenth century New England life. What sets it apart is the young woman at its center. Her name is Jo March, but her character is Louisa Alcott.

Jo March is a dazzling and original invention: bold, outspoken, brave, daring, loyal, cranky, principled, and real. She is a dreamer and a scribbler, happiest at her woodsy hideout by an old cartwheel or holed up in the attic, absorbed in reading or writing, filling page after page with stories or plays. She loves to invent wild escapades, to stage and star in flamboyant dramas. She loves to run. She wishes she were a boy, for all the right reasons: to speak her mind, go where she pleases, learn what she wants to know—in other words, to be free.

At the same time, Jo is devoted to the fictional March family, which was closely modeled on the Alcott family: a wise and good mother, an idealistic father, and four sisters whose personalities are a sampler of female adolescence. But while Jo March marries and is content within the family circle, Louisa Alcott chose an independent path.



Tender Scene

This illustration is from the first edition of *Little Women*. The accompanying caption read: “They all drew to the fire, Mother in the big chair, with Beth at her feet; with Meg and Amy perched on either arm of the chair, and Jo leaning on the back.”

Descriptions of Louisa by her contemporaries matched Alcott’s first description of Jo March in *Little Women*: “Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful.”⁷ Frederick Llewellyn Willis wrote that his cousin Louisa Alcott was “full of spirit and life; impulsive and moody, and at times irritable and nervous. She could run



Louisa May Alcott (1832–88) at age twenty-five

like a gazelle. She was the most beautiful girl runner I ever saw. She could leap a fence or climb a tree as well as any boy and dearly loved a good romp.”⁸

Another Louisa May Alcott lurked behind the spirited hoyden who wrote the March family books (*Little Women*, *Little Men*, and *Jo’s Boys*), five other juvenile novels, and countless stories for children. The real Louisa Alcott was infinitely more interested in the darker side of human nature and experience than in telling polite stories to nice children. She was a protean personality, a turbulent force, a passionate fighter attracted to danger and violence.

The voice of the other Louisa is heard in writings that were unknown or unpublished for almost ninety years after her death. In pulp fiction written anonymously, or under the name “A. M. Barnard,” she is villain, victim, and heroine, sometimes all of them at once.

An actress of professional caliber, Louisa played many roles in life and used them in her work. Much of her fiction is not fictional at all: Louisa Alcott held the jobs heroine Christie Devon holds in the gritty novel *Work*; loved the two men, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who

inspired the characters Sylvia Yule loves in *Moods*; served in the Civil War as a nurse, as Tribulation Periwinkle does in *Hospital Sketches*; and displays her infinite variety in a lifetime of poetry, journals, and letters. She was her own best character.

In everything Louisa Alcott wrote, she made use of the outward details and the hidden emotional currents of her life, and her life was no children's book. She knew not only family affection but also dangerous family disaffection; not just domestic toil but grueling manual labor; she knew gnawing hunger and the bloody aftermath of war. She was familiar with scenes of wealth and fashion from visits to privileged relatives, knew the famed sights of Europe from traveling as paid companion to a wealthy woman, and had vast vicarious experience from a lifetime of reading novels.



Orchard House, Concord, MA

Purchased in 1858, this was the only permanent home the family ever had after two decades of constant moves. The figures in the foreground are Bronson Alcott, Abby Alcott, sister Anna and her son, and Louisa (sitting on ground.)

She wrote almost everything at high speed and for money. Works as different as *Little Women* and “Perilous Play” (a tale about the dangers and blessings of hashish) were written in the same year and brought to life from the same experiences. They are both filled with classical allusions and quotations from Shakespeare, both peppered with metaphysics and moral scrutiny. They provide tantalizing glimpses not of the New England spinster of popular conception, but of the real Louisa Alcott, a person we might recognize, someone so modern that she could pass at a dinner party as a woman born 150 years after her actual birth in 1832.

A Concord contemporary, Clara Gowing, described Louisa as “a strange combination of kindness, shyness, and daring; a creature loving and spiteful, full of energy and perseverance, full of fun, with a keen sense of the ludicrous, apt speech and ready wit; a subject of moods, than whom no one could be jollier and more entertaining when geniality was in ascendancy, but if the opposite, let her best friend beware.”⁹

Jo March resembles her creator most in the fertility of her imagination. Like Jo, the young Louisa May Alcott burned with genius, spinning tales of murder and treachery one minute, fairy tales and sentimental poetry the next. She told herself a dozen stories at a time, working out their plots in her head, sometimes for years. Spinning out her fantasies on paper, Louisa was transported, and liberated. Her imagination freed her to escape the confines of ordinary life to be flirtatious, scheming, materialistic, violent, rich, worldly, or a different gender. In her struggle to fulfill her childhood vow to be “rich, famous, and happy before I die,”¹⁰ her imagination was her greatest comfort, and her refuge even in her last days, when she wrote in her journal, “Lived in my mind where I can generally find amusement. . . . A happy world to go into when the real one is too dull or hard.”¹¹

HEAVEN’S SO FAR AWAY

[Editor’s Note: When this excerpted section begins, Louisa is eighteen-years old. Again her family is in dire financial straits and Louisa is trying to find paid work. The excerpt concludes with Louisa publishing her first book at the age of twenty-one.]

Louisa decided that she disliked teaching. “School is hard work. . . . I get very little time to write or think, for my working days have begun.”¹² Spending those days giving lessons to small children was not the future she had planned.

Life upon the wicked stage was more in her line. She wrote that Anna [her older sister] “wants to be an actress, and so do I. We could make plenty of

money, perhaps, and it is a very gay life. Mother says we are too young, and must wait . . . I like tragic plays, and shall be a Siddons if I can.”¹³ Sarah Siddons was a member of a celebrated British acting family, known for her portrayals of Lady Macbeth and Hamlet. Louisa yearned not only to play Lady Macbeth and Hamlet but to be them. Her taste was for the “lurid,” for everything dangerous, unconventional, and extreme. The thrilling option of taking to the stage, in defiance of respectable opinion, contained the promise of escape and the risk of ruin that she craved. Other than writing, acting was the only career for which Louisa had any enthusiasm.

The year before, she had tried another route to self-support and independence: she took a job in the home of James Richardson. Her relations were horrified—which she quite enjoyed—and though being a servant was lowly, it was work that had served as a launching pad to bigger things for many a young girl in the stories she read.

Richardson had been a classmate of Henry David Thoreau’s at Harvard and was part of her father’s wide circle of young admirers. Louisa was at her mother’s employment office once when he called to hire a companion for his sister. Though at eighteen she was impressed when she met him—he was thirty-five, tall, and well built—her description from a retrospective view is cynical.

He possessed an impressive nose, a nice flow of language, and a pair of large hands, encased in black kid gloves. With much waving of these somber members, Mr. R. set forth the delights awaiting the happy soul who . . . “will be one of the family in all respects, and only required to help about the lighter work.” . . . When my mother turned to me, and asked if I could suggest anyone, I became as red as a poppy and said abruptly: “Only myself.”¹⁴

Mr. Richardson became the Reverend Josephus, the employer in “How I Went Out to Service,” one of Alcott’s most autobiographical and satirical stories. The experience it relates was a demoralizing demonstration of how little power Louisa had as an impoverished female in the wide world. Like Louisa, her nameless heroine thinks she is stepping into the pages of a sentimental romance when she is setting herself up to be humiliated by a creepy psychological predator. The “stately old mansion” that the fictional Reverend Josephus advertises as a paradise of “books, pictures, flowers, a piano and the best of society” turns out to be a dilapidated old pile; the sister in need of a companion is a “timid mouse” of forty wrapped in shawls; an

ancient father is tucked away out of sight. Only one room is luxurious, “full of the warm glow of firelight, the balmy breath of hyacinths and roses, the white glimmer of piano keys and tempting rows of books along the walls”—her employer’s parlor. What the Reverend Josephus seeks, it turns out, is a companion not for his sister but for himself, an attractive maidenly presence to be with him through long fireside evenings (and, it is implied, smoldering bed-chamber nights).¹⁵

The fraternal invitation to both Louisa and her heroine was not to read or rest, but to listen, to be “a passive bucket, into which he was to pour all manner of philosophic, metaphysical and sentimental rubbish.”¹⁶

Louisa could read all manner of philosophic, metaphysical, and sentimental rubbish at home, so she took refuge in household tasks; when asked by her employer (in her fictionalized account) if she actually prefers scrubbing the hearth to sitting in his “charming room” while he reads Hegel to her, she replies, “Infinitely.”¹⁷ Louisa refused to play adoring auditor, and Richardson retaliated by making her a galley slave. “The roughest work was . . . my share. I dug paths in the snow, brought water from the well, split kindlings, made fires, and sifted ashes, like a true Cinderella.”¹⁸ Although much of what Louisa wrote in “How I Went Out to Service” has the charm of self-mockery, her degradation while a prisoner to an ostensibly righteous man was a lasting injury, according to Louisa’s friend Maria Porter. “This experience of going out to service at eighteen made so painful an impression upon her that she rarely referred to it, and when she did so it was with heightened color and tearful eyes.”¹⁹ Apparently Louisa was given easily to tears far into adulthood.

After seven weeks she quit. Like her sister Anna in Lenox, she could not stick it out for a second month. Her employer’s frail sister slipped a cheap purse into Louisa’s pocket, and she set off on foot behind the wheelbarrow that carried her shabby belongings to the Boston stagecoach. In the pocket “I fondly hoped was, if not a liberal, at least an honest return for seven weeks of the hardest work I ever did. Unable to resist . . . I opened the purse and beheld four dollars.”²⁰ As a nursery maid, Anna was underpaid at six dollars a month; Louisa was paid four dollars for nearly two months of very hard labor.

In “How I Went Out to Service,” her heroine’s family indignantly sends the paltry four dollars back; in actuality Louisa could not afford the gesture. Life was still an uphill struggle of governessing, teaching, and sewing, with no relief in sight.

At least she could improve herself, Louisa thought, and resolved to read fewer novels, listing high-minded books by authors she admired and Ralph Waldo Emerson had recommended: Carlyle, Goethe, Plutarch, Schiller,



Louisa May Alcott's Parents

Abigail May Alcott (1800–77) and Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), “Mr. March” of *Little Women*.

Madame de Staël, Charlotte Brontë, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had sold three hundred thousand copies that year.

While Louisa presumably was steeped in the passionate rigor of Madame de Staël, the most exalted literary woman of her time, her own first published story, “The Rival Painters,” came out in the *Olive Branch*. Another auspicious event of 1852 was Nathaniel Hawthorne's unexpected offer to buy Hillside, the family's home, four years after the Alcotts had put it on the market.

For the seven previous years the Hawthorne family of five, like the Alcotts, had scrambled for lodging from Salem to Lynn to the little red cottage on the Tappan estate in Lenox. Finally Hawthorne's literary ship came in with the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, *The House of Seven Gables* in 1851, and *The Blithedale Romance* in 1852. At forty-eight, Hawthorne was not a rich man, but he could make an offer of \$1,500 for Hillside. Her father, Bronson Alcott, quickly accepted.

The Alcotts suddenly had liquid assets and immediately overextended themselves to move up to Beacon Hill, home to several of their May relatives. They rented a four-story brick house on Pinckney Street, a narrow cobblestone lane of shuttered townhouses and quiet respectable neighbors. Her mother, Abby, advertised for boarders to help pay expenses. They were quartered in

a pleasant neighborhood, but at the Christmas of 1852 the Alcotts were still struggling to get by, as Louisa's forthright acknowledgment of the "great bundle of goodies"—hand-me-downs—sent by her cousin Charlotte over the holidays makes plain. "Mother broke down entirely over your letter, and we like dutiful children followed her example for we felt somewhat forlorn and forgotten among the giving and receiving of presents all around us, and it was so cheering to find that . . . someone had remembered the existence of the 'Pathetic Family.'"²¹ To the author of "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," the holiday was a measure of the family's fortunes and her personal happiness.²² A festive Christmas was synonymous with prosperity, affection, and the brilliant, happy side of life. At low points, a lack of Christmas presents was proof of how little she counted in the world.

Louisa's "How It All Happened" is a Christmas story that takes her past and repairs it in a homely, Dickensian way. Two impoverished young sisters, lamenting their miserable Christmas prospects, are overheard by a neighbor in their boardinghouse. "Don't you wish there really was a Santa Claus, who knew what we really wanted, and would come and put silver dollars in our stockings, so we could go and see Puss and Boots at the Museum tomorrow afternoon?" one of them, who can only be Louisa, asks.²³ The other, evidently Lizzie, declares that when she is rich, as she imagines her boardinghouse neighbors to be, she will "go round each Christmas with a big basket of goodies, and give all the poor children some."²⁴ Though her neighbors are in fact modest working people, Miss Kent, a simple milliner, and Mr. Chrome, a self-absorbed artist, rise to the occasion, join forces to produce an unforgettable Christmas for the children, and fall in love along the way.

The joyless holiday over, early in January Anna went to New Hampshire, to help out with her cousin's two children. Probably at her parents' urging, Louisa opened a little school for about a dozen children in the Pinckney Street parlor. Abby noted that Louisa's pupils loved her—like her father, she was gifted with children. Her mother was satisfied for the time being, but Louisa was not. As soon as her school closed for the summer, she embarked on her own plan. She would return to the Leicester country house of Abby's wealthy uncle Samuel May; she had visited the household twice for a few weeks and liked the surroundings very much. Now she would relocate as a "second girl," a low-ranking servant, but she didn't care; all honest work was dignified in her egalitarian view. Plus she would get out from under the family roof, try her wings, and live her own life. She knew the people and the place as she had not in the disastrous debacle at wintry Dedham. "I needed the change, could do the wash, and was glad to earn my \$2 a week"; this was Louisa as pure Jo March, pragmatic, brave, and bold.²⁵ No matter



The Alcott Sisters

Louisa May Alcott's sisters Elizabeth "Lizzie" Alcott (1835–58), left, around age eighteen, and Anna Alcott Pratt (1831–93), around age twenty-seven.

that working as a laundress put her at the very bottom of the servant class. Her indifference could not have extended to the actual performance of the job: carrying large tubs of water, making fire enough to boil it, stirring the heavy, wet load over the scalding steam, scrubbing heavily soiled items on washboards with rough soap that left her hands raw, wringing the laundry, hanging it outdoors to dry, taking it down, folding it up, carrying heavy baskets of it indoors.

While Louisa was working as second girl in Leicester, mother Abby was visiting her brother Sam in Syracuse, Anna was continuing as nursemaid to relatives in Walpole, New Hampshire, May was making long visits to assorted Mays and Willises, and Lizzie kept house for her father at home. There the eighteen-year-old received notes from her mother in Syracuse that almost seem intended to alarm: "My home-child, my patient little housekeeper . . . I wish every day you were here, this sweet place might be enjoyed by us all—but where is our employment or means of livelihood? Our lives seem very stupid and unsatisfactory."²⁶ Abigail May Alcott gave her children unreserved love; she never varnished the truth, either.

Autumn brought another reshuffling of Alcotts. Abby, Louisa, Lizzie, and May came together on Pinckney Street. Bronson set out for the West (now

called the Midwest) on his first speaking tour, and Anna went to Syracuse for a second year of teaching and living with Sam May's family. She wrote home complaining of headaches. "Put on your bonnet and cloak and walk 100 times across the piazza," Abby advised her. "Oh my daughter, get firm health. I see so many sickly mortals to whom life is a burden and a daily sorrow that I dread chronic evils being harnessed upon you."²⁷ In a time before vaccines could prevent debilitating illnesses, or antibiotics could cure them before they did lasting damage, almost everybody had "chronic evils" that no known medicine or painkiller could control or alleviate.

Something was also wrong with Lizzie. "It seems as if there had been some collapse of the brain," Abby wrote to Bronson in Cincinnati in mid-November. "At times she seems immovable—almost senseless. Louisa and I both relieve her of all the work. . . .there is a great struggle going on in her mind about something."²⁸ A brief comment in Louisa's yearly summary suggested the "something" might have been heartbreak: "Betty . . . had a little romance with C."²⁹

The third Alcott daughter is impossible to pin down. She appears never to have asked anything of anybody or of life itself. Her only image, a photograph made in her late teens, does not reward scrutiny. It shows a soft round face set off by dark hair, with delicate features and a hint of a smile unique in Alcott sister portraiture. Abby's characterizations of her third daughter's mental state as a "collapse of the brain" and "a great struggle . . . about something" indicate that Lizzie was as opaque to her insightful, articulate mother as she is to us. "Immovable—almost senseless" sounds like a description of someone in a deep depression bordering on catatonia and requiring hospitalization. "A little romance with C," whoever "C" was, seems insufficient as a cause and was probably a wrong guess. Louisa knew that it was by the time she wrote the incident's fictional counterpart in *Little Women*, when Jo thinks that Beth has fallen for her admirer Laurie and goes to New York to leave Beth a clear field. But Jo is mistaken; Beth suffers no passion for Laurie.

Whether any of the Alcott girls had suitors or marriage proposals is almost as hard to pin down as Lizzie's smile. Birth into a prosperous family and marriage to an income-producing husband were a woman's only routes to economic security. Neither had worked out for their mother, the sisters were well aware. For an independent woman to earn enough for even subsistence-level food, clothing, and shelter was practically impossible. Yet none of the Alcott daughters entered into matrimony at the age their peers did, in their late teens and early twenties. their constant moves, ambiguous social standing, and pitiful wardrobes may have stood in the way. Nonetheless, in *Little Women* and her later domestic novels Louisa conveyed a convincing

familiarity with the parties, outings, and flirtations of girls their age, and in “My Boys” she described a roster of admirers and crushes not mentioned in her journals or letters—probably Louisa expunged them. The answer Anna wrote to the favorite question of *Little Women* fans—was there a real-life Laurie?—implies that Louisa had a lively social life: “there was once a beautiful Polish boy, whom she [Louisa] met abroad . . . whose good looks and ‘wheedlesome’ ways first suggested to her the idea of putting him into a book,” Anna explained. “She has therefore put upon him the lovemaking and behavior of various adorers of her youthful days.”³⁰

Around the time of Lizzie’s puzzling sorrow, Abby alluded to Anna in a letter written to Bronson, suggesting it was her oldest daughter who had suffered an unrequited love. “I think she feels better about the heart pang. . . . It was severe while it lasted—but the inevitable soon quiets inflammation—perhaps it is as well.”³¹

The unhappiness of two of her daughters did not spring solely from the heart, Abby perceived. The empty pocketbook also hurt. “I think Anna and Lizzie are a good deal oppressed with this [economic] uncertainty.” They were not as well equipped to endure or cure it as Louisa was. “Louisa feels stronger and braver—to meet or to bear whatever destiny may have in store for us. . . . The other girls are not so firm in health and there is more dependent feeling on their parents.”³²

While her mother did not recognize how oppressed Louisa felt by poverty—Louisa deliberately hid it from her—she was right. Louisa loved but did not feel dependent on her parents; in fact, she dreamed of earning enough to support them financially while she led her own life. And while Abby’s second daughter was a dreamer, she was also practical and realistic. Not only did she see and accept reality; she also defied it by finding and making fun. She knew how to entertain herself and other people, to create diversions—her plays, her Hillside mailbox, her newspaper—to wrest attention from poverty for days at a time. “Louisa is to give a Masquerade Ball tonight in fancy costume,” Abby wrote Bronson on his forty-fourth birthday, and Louisa’s twenty-first. “You can predict its brilliancy and success.”³³ Louisa was brave, as her mother said, to take a job far from home, and daring, to try to get her writing published. Her material resources were limited, but the intense force of her imagination coupled with the energy of her capabilities were equivalent to possessing an enormous fortune.

Bronson Alcott’s first tour of the West was a tonic for his battered ego. Transcendentalism was now twenty years old, and word of it had reached the provinces, where Bronson was billed as a great thinker from the storied East. The culture-hungry came to see him in the flesh, handsome Bronson Alcott, a man who knew Emerson, whose transparent blue eyes were mesmerizing.

They felt what Emerson said he felt in Bronson's presence: an atmosphere that brought out his best thinking. They came away feeling they had participated in American culture, and that they understood the ideas of the great thinkers of their nation. They might not recall the thoughts or the ideas the next day, but they would remember being lifted off the quotidian plane.

Louisa's journal account of her father's return from his first "Conversations" tour in the winter of 1854 reads like a draft of a story. "Mother flew down, crying 'My husband!' We rushed after, and five white figures embraced the half-frozen wanderer." Bronson "came in hungry, tired, cold, and disappointed, but smiling bravely and as serene as ever," and then, as in a parable, the youngest child, May, asked the question they all want answered: "Well, did people pay you?" . . . With a queer look, he opened his pocketbook and showed one dollar, saying with a smile that made our eyes fill, 'Only that!'" His overcoat had been stolen, his travel expenses had been great, promises of large audiences or generous payment were not kept. "I shall never forget how beautifully Mother answered. . . . With a beaming face she kissed him saying, 'I call that doing very well. Since you are safely home, dear, we don't ask anything more.' It was half tragic and comic, for Father was very dirty and sleepy, and Mother in a big nightcap and funny old jacket."³⁴ Long after, reviewing her journals, Louisa wrote below this entry, "I began to see the strong contrasts and the fun and follies in every-day life about this time."³⁵

Bronson's trip was not as pitiful as Louisa painted it. True, his audiences were small, and he spent many days waiting for more to be arranged, but early on he sent Abby a check for \$150. Later he sent her twenty-five dollars, with small, thoughtful Christmas presents for all of them, and assurances that he would take care of all debts upon his return. But whether he came home with just a dollar or somewhat more, Bronson's tour didn't change the family's fortunes one bit.

Louisa had five dollars for the family coffers when she sold a story to the *Saturday Evening Gazette*. "The Rival Prima Donnas" was as fluent and dramatic as her first published tale, "The Rival Painters," was stiff and forced. Set in Italy, a favorite locale for intrigue and romance, it takes us onstage with Beatrice, a reigning opera star about to relinquish her position to Theresa, a rising young singer, for the love of a painter, Claude. All three characters are ruined, but in the most violent and glamorous way. "The Rival Prima Donnas" was published in the November 11, 1854, *Gazette* under the pseudonym "Flora Fairfield."

That same season Louisa published a short book that she could claim in her own name. *Flower Fables* was a small collection of fairy tales,



Success Story

When Louisa May Alcott published *Little Women* in 1868 at the age of thirty-five, she immediately found the fame and fortune she had sought since childhood. This photograph shows her in elegant attire. Alcott undertook her classic children's novels primarily to support her parents and siblings.

fanciful interpretations of nature patterned on the stories she had heard from Henry Thoreau. Louisa first told her flower fables the summer she was almost sixteen, to the Concord children in Emerson's barn. Afterward she wrote them down for Ellen Emerson, who loved the stories and worshipped Louisa. With Lidian Emerson's encouragement, and a payment of three hundred dollars as a guarantee against losses (by a rich acquaintance of the Emersons aptly named Wealthy Stevens), *Flower Fables* came out in time for the Christmas market of 1854.

Louisa made Abby a gift of the first copy, with a note that mixed pride and gratitude. "Whatever beauty is to be found in my little book is owing to your interest in and encouragement of my efforts from the first to last," she wrote. "I hope to pass in time from fairies and fables to



Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888)

On February 5, 1940, a 5-cent stamp honoring Alcott was issued in the American Authors set of the Famous Americans series. When the 29-cent Classic Books set was issued October 23, 1993, one of the subjects was Alcott's *Little Women*. Alcott was among the very first American women to be honored on a United States postage stamp. Although Queen Isabella of Spain was included in the first commemorative stamps issued in 1893 (celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas), the first stamp to specifically honor a woman was an eight-cent Martha Washington stamp issued in 1902. This was followed by stamps honoring Pocahontas (1907), Martha Washington (1923), Susan B. Anthony (1936), Virginia Dare in 1937 (the first English child born in the British Colonies), Martha Washington in 1938 (for a third time), and then, in 1940, stamps honoring Louisa May Alcott, Frances E. Willard, and Jane Addams.

men and realities.”³⁶ Ellen Emerson was thrilled with Louisa’s dedication to her. *Flower Fables* was well reviewed in the *Transcript* and the *Saturday Evening Gazette*, and the book turned a profit.

“The principal event of the winter is the appearance of my first book *Flower Fables*,” reads Louisa’s first journal entry of 1855. “An edition of sixteen hundred. It has sold very well, and people seem to like it. I feel very proud that the little tales I wrote for Ellen E. when I was sixteen should now bring money and fame. I will put in some of the notices. . . . Mothers are always foolish over their first-born.”³⁷

Louisa had published her first book at the age of twenty-one. Three decades later, she compared the receipts for *Flower Fables* to her earnings in the previous six months, and wrote a note in the margin of her original entry: “I was prouder over the \$32 than the \$8000.”³⁸

This Editor’s Choice was reproduced with permission of Picador Press. This section was excerpted from Harriet Reisen’s *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women* (2009), pages 1–5 and 145–56. The book can be ordered from Picador Press (A John Macrae Book, Henry Holt and Company, New York).

HJM

Notes

1. Harriet Reisen, *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women* (NY: Picador Press, 2009), 3.
2. Louisa May Alcott, in *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, edited by Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine Stern (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 204. (Hereafter abbreviated as *Journals*.)
3. “Alcott: Not The Little Woman You Thought She Was,” Interview with Harriet Reisen, National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, December 28, 2009. www.npr.org
4. PBS *American Masters* documentary, *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*, directed and produced by Nancy Porter and written by Harriet Reisen. The film’s website has an excellent teacher’s guide and lesson plans, see www.alcottfilm.com/
5. Pennie Azarcon de la Cruz, “How Jo Met Jo and Finally Found Her Groove,” *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, 29 March 2008.

6. These “new versions” of *Little Women* are as follows: Judith Rossner, *His Little Women* (New York: Summit Books, 1990). Marcela Serrano, *Hasta Siempre, Mujercitas* (Chile: Planeta, 2004). Katharine Weber, *The Little Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).
7. Louisa May Alcott (hereafter abbreviated as LMA), *Louisa May Alcott: Little Women, Little Men, and Jo's Boys*, edited by Elaine Showalter (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2005), 10
8. Frederick L. H. Willis, “From Alcott Memoirs (1915),” in *Alcott in Her Own Time*, ed. Daniel Shealy (Iowa City: University Press, 2005), 177.
9. John S. P. Alcott, “The ‘Little Women’ of Long Ago (1913),” in Shealy, *Alcott in her Own Time*, 135.
10. LMA, “Recollections of My Childhood,” in *Louisa May Alcott: An Intimate Anthology*, New York Public Library collectors’ edition (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 9.
11. LMA, “2 January 1887,” in *Journals*, 287.
12. LMA, “August 1850,” in *Journals*, 63–64.
13. *Ibid.* Note: The reputation-making role of Hamlet was performed by several ambitious actresses in the nineteenth century.
14. LMA, “How I Went Out to Service,” in *Louisa May Alcott: Selected Fiction*, edited by Daniel Shealy, Madeleine Stern, and Joel Myerson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 461.
15. *Ibid.*, 463–65.
16. *Ibid.*, 468.
17. *Ibid.*, 469.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Maria S. Porter, “Recollections of Louisa May Alcott (1892),” in Shealy, *Alcott in Her Own Time*, 64.
20. LMA, “How I Went Out to Service,” in *Selected Fiction*, 471.
21. LMA, “2 January 1853,” in *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine Stern (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), 7.
22. LMA, *Louisa May Alcott: Little Women, Little Men, and Jo's Boys*, 1.
23. LMA, “How It All Happened,” in *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag*, 6:39.
24. *Ibid.*, 40.
25. LMA, “1853,” in *Journals*, 69.
26. Abigail May Alcott to Elizabeth Alcott, August 8, 1853, Family Letters, 1828–61, located in the Alcott Pratt Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University (hereafter referred to simply as Harvard University).
27. Abigail May Alcott to Anna Alcott, November 18, 1853, Family Letters, 1828–61, Harvard University.
28. Abigail May Alcott to Amos Bronson Alcott, November 19, 1853, Family Letters, 1828–61, Harvard University.

29. LMA, "1853," in *Journals*, 69.
30. Anna Alcott Pratt to "Julia" and "Alice," two Vassar girls, January 20, 1871, "A Letter from Miss Alcott's Sister about 'Little Women' (1871)," in Shealy, *Alcott in Her Own Time*, 18–19.
31. Abigail May Alcott to Amos Bronson Alcott, November 29, 1853, Family Letters, 1828–61, Harvard University.
32. Abigail May Alcott to Amos Bronson Alcott, November 19, 1853, Family Letters, 1828–61, Harvard University.
33. Abigail May Alcott to Amos Bronson Alcott, November 29, 1853, Family Letters, 1828–61, Harvard University.
34. LMA, "1854," in *Journals*, 71.
35. Ibid.
36. LMA, December 25, 1854, Letters, 11.
37. LMA, "January 1, 1855," in *Journals*, 73.
38. LMA, 1866 note added to January 1, 1855 journal entry.