LOUISA MAY ALCOTT’S
LITTLE WOMEN
THE BROADWAY MUSICAL
BOOK BY ALLAN KNEE  LYRICS BY MINDI DICKSTEIN  MUSIC BY JASON HOWLAND
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The Alcotts were married for 47 years until Abba's death in 1877. After Anna and Louisa, Abba gave birth to Elizabeth and Abigail May, known as May. The family moved frequently, living off the generosity of relatives, until Louisa's success brought them financial security. A Utopian experiment in the Fruitlands in the early 1840s came to a pathetic end. Bronson [Louisa's father] eked out a living through his public “Conversations.” He then became superintendent of Concord's public schools in 1859, holding that position for six years, and receiving a salary of $100 a year. He was not re-elected to the position.

Years of seeing her family dependent on others persuaded Louisa to start work early: sewing, teaching with Anna, and serving as a companion and housekeeper. None of these suited her well, and she decided to try writing sensational stories for magazines. Just before her 22nd birthday, her story “The Rival Prima Donnas” was published in the Saturday Evening Gazette under the pseudonym Flora Fairfield. Numerous similar tales, under various pseudonyms, brought her a steady income. In 1862, driven by her fervor for abolition, Louisa became a Civil War nurse in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., and suffered permanent damage to her health during her brief service. Her sketches of hospital life became a book and brought her a measure of fame. As she recovered from her illness, she continued her melodramatic stories, and in 1868 at the suggestion of her publisher, she turned her hand to a “girls’ book.” Written under her own name, Little Women became an immediate success. Its warm picture of domestic life remains her best-known achievement and deservedly so.

Louisa's sisters Anna (Meg in Little Women) and May (Amy) both married. May was a talented artist, and Louisa was able to help finance her studies in Europe. Elizabeth (Beth) died of scarlet fever at the age of twenty-three. Louisa herself never wanted to marry, not did she want her heroine, Jo, to marry. “The loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called ‘Mrs.’ instead of ‘Miss,’” she wrote in an article and declared “Liberty is a better husband than love to many of us.” She was uninterested in fame and wanted to be able to support her family and be completely independent. She remained devoted to her family and was particularly attached to her mother. After Abba's death, she said she had no reason to keep on living. She raised Louisa May Nieriker (“Lulu”), the daughter of her sister, after May's death, and was a fond aunt to the two sons of her sister Anna.

From “The Alcotts In Germantown” by Judith Callard

Illustration by Frank T. Merrill “At nine they stopped work and sung as usual”
Like her parents, Louisa was a lifelong abolitionist, knew many of the leaders in the movement, and participated in organizations and meetings opposing slavery. She wrote stories, non-fiction pieces and poems about abolition. In 1868, the year she wrote *Little Women* she wrote in her journal “Glad I have lived in the time of this great movement, and known its heroes so well. War times suit me, as I am fighting *May*.” She wrote in a letter in February 1881: “[I] take more pride in the very small help we Alcotts could give [to the anti-slavery movement] than in all the books I ever wrote or ever shall write.”

Likewise, she was a firm supporter of women’s suffrage, trying to rouse the women in her community of Concord to action but found it “hard work to stir them up; cake and servants are more interesting.” She was the first woman to vote in Concord—in school committee elections in 1880.

After the publication of *Little Women* in 1868, Bronson became famous as the “Grandfather of *Little Women*” and was greeted by curious questions about Louisa wherever he went. He accepted financial comfort as he has accepted poverty—with equanimity. Following Abba’s death, Bronson and Louisa became closer, and they died two days apart, Bronson on March 4, 1988, at the age of 88, and Louisa two days later. She was 55 years old. “She had been suffering from nervous prostration for some time [and] a cold developed into spinal meningitis,” according to the Philadelphia *Public Ledger*.

**Summing Up the Germantown Years**

The Alcotts lived in Germantown and Philadelphia for about 3 and a half years, about 2 and a quarter years of that in Germantown, including periods in three lodgings—Mrs. [Dorothea] Stuckart's boarding house, Pine Place (the house bought for them by Reuben Haines), and “the cottage,” a house some distance from the main street of Germantown. In Philadelphia, they boarded for a couple months when they first arrived and for another year after they left Pine Place, Bronson then remaining in the city while Abba and the girls moved to the cottage. In many ways it was a pleasant time for the young married couple: Pine Place, their first house after rooms in various boarding houses, was large and attractive, with nearly an acre of ground, including a garden, fruit trees, and pines; both parents were deeply interested in their two daughters, Anna and Louisa.
Professionally, though, Bronson's efforts were not very successful. He could not sustain and build up a school which could support him and his family. His ideas were ahead of his time, but he was too impractical to satisfy the parents who were paying him school fees. The loss of his patron, Reuben Haines, was a serious blow, but even if Haines had lived, he might have been unwilling to underwrite Alcott's school permanently. Bronson was thinking ahead from the moment he arrived in Philadelphia. He felt that neither Philadelphia nor Germantown was “advanced” enough to accept his ideas, and he looked forward to a time when he could influence others through public lectures and writing about education.

Many of Abba's journals were destroyed, at her request, so her view of the Germantown years is hard to gauge. The letters of the Haines women and their sympathy for her, as well as Bronson's own journals, give us some idea that she often found life with husband difficult. She was, like him, a reformer and idealist, but she also wanted to build a family life. Throughout her life, she was devoted and loyal to her husband and daughters, drawing the family close when it was attacked by outsiders. (When necessary, she took determined action, arranging their move from Fruitlands when Bronson was too depressed to find a way out). She seems to have been highly regarded in Philadelphia both in the anti-slavery movement and among her personal friends.

[Ralph Waldo] Emerson's daughter, Ellen, on reading Little Women soon after its publication wrote of the Alcotts that “to spend a day at their house was a rapturous event.” Some of the rapture of Little Women came from the ability of Bronson and Abba to make a home where imagination and pleasure were accepted and expected. If times were rough in Germantown and Philadelphia, they remained so throughout the Alcott's lives, and yet family members were able to express themselves in art, writing and drama; they were able to contribute in a meaningful way to the abolitionist and women's rights movements, and they had as valued friends some of the most interesting minds of the day.

Judith Callard lived in Germantown for fifty years. She was a loyal volunteer for a number of organizations including the Germantown Historical Society and started the local history collection for the Northwest Regional [Joseph Coleman] branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia. Ms. Callard was the driving force behind the series of programs devoted to Louisa May Alcott when this article was first published in 1996. Her book Germantown, Mt. Airy, and Chestnut Hill is available at the Big Blue Marble Bookstore.


Reprinted Courtesy of the Germantown Historical Society/ Historic Germantown and the Callard family.
Little Women from its beginning was meant to be a book of realities. Louisa could write it so clearly and vividly because, as she explained later, “We lived it.” When Bronson traveled again to Boston to further solidify his book projects with Thomas Niles, Louisa took the hint and dutifully began writing. In her journal that May of 1868, she wrote, “Mr. N wants a girls story, and I begin 'Little Women.'”

She had no choice but to draw on her own childhood. The only girls she knew about, she insisted, were her sisters and herself. She set the story there on the spot at Orchard House, which was convenient since she could study its nooks and crannies every day. But she drew the events of the plot chiefly from the happy years next door at Hillside, where she and her golden band of sisters had spent their sweetest times. Her memories sat close by: the barn where they’d performed their elaborate theatricals, the fireplace where they’d gathered to chatter and sew. Visits to sick and poverty-stricken neighbors, “sleigh rides and skating frolics, such pleasant evening in the old parlor”; and her father’s favorite book, The Pilgrim’s Progress, would all come into play in her novel.

So, too, would the occasional squabbles between sisters, their struggles with poverty, grueling work, and envy of others. In this she was absolutely radical as an author. No one had ever reported the real lives of teenagers before. Louisa May Alcott set out to do a simple and daring thing: to tell the truth. She asked each member of her family for their permission to write the book drawing from life experiences, hoping, she said, that one of them would turn her down and give her an excuse to stop. None did.

She noted with resignation, “Marmee, Anna, and May all approve my plan. So I plod away, though I don’t enjoy this sort of thing.” She added, “Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it.” Many years later looking back over her journals, the famous author paused here and wryly noted, “[Good joke.—L.M.A].”

Louisa drew not only upon memory but also her powers of embroidery and invention to create the absorbing world of Little Women. G. K. Chesterton wrote, “It anticipated realism by twenty or thirty years; just as Jane Austen anticipated it by at least a hundred years.” He added, perhaps thinking of Bronson, “For women are the only realists; their whole object in life is to pit their realism against the extravagant, excessive, and occasionally drunken idealism of men.”

Louisa began by exiling the father who had been at the center of her family’s life. Writing is a way of revising reality; it is daydreaming out loud. Here, in Louisa’s fictional world, four sisters and their wise Marmee live in their own female sphere, unaided for the most part by men. Each of the four little women works out her own fate, develops her own character, and finds—or loses—her own life. The first rule of order in any book for
young readers is to get the parents out of the way; this may explain the incredibly high number of exiles, orphans, and semiorphans in children's literature.

For Louisa, sending the fictional Mr. March off to war provided freedom of movement for the little women. Even when he finally makes his (late) appearance in the book, he is an invalid who must be cared for—not the centrifugal early force that was her real-life father. Some might argue that it would have been well to exile Marmee, too. Many readers would welcome more of the little women, less of the all-wise, all-knowing grown one.

Of course the fictional March family — note the play the name March presents instead of the family name May — a highly idealized version of the Alcotts. Bronson, her idea-obsessed, complex father, is sent offstage to serve in the Civil War. Marmee is Abby with a golden halo on top. Nearly every bit of wisdom in the book, every aphorism — and all its preaching — comes from Marmee's lips.

At the heart of the book, however, dwells the tightly knit group of four sisters, mirroring their real golden band. Anna Alcott turns into the reliable eldest sister, Meg. Quiet, domestic Lizzie becomes the household angel, Beth, while elegant May transforms into the "snow maiden," Amy. (Swap the letters around and you arrive at the same name: May/Amy.)

Of course Jo is a mirror image of her creator at the center of the action, with her wild "boyish ways," her moods, her scribbling, her theatricals and stubborn independence. Though much altered, she is a barely disguised Louisa. The two are so closely aligned that it's sometimes hard to tell where Louisa leaves off and Jo begins.

No fictional young women like the March girls had ever been seen before. They struggle, squabble, tell lies, preen, and triumph. These were unmistakably real girls, with weakness as well as strength. Meg could be vain, Jo rude, Amy self-centered, and even the saintly Beth too shy for her own good. Their adventures and misadventures are made of the ordinary daily human experiences that any girl might understand — even today. It is one reason Little Women endures 150 years after its creation. The book has no thrilling cliff-hanger adventures, no gothic melodrama. (Unless you count Jo's theatrical productions, for which she borrows her creator's actual russet leather boots.) The sisters are not ravishing beauties; they do not find treasure; they are not courted by nobility.

Even the book's most heart-crushing scenes take place within a domestic circle. The battles fought are largely internally, and the battlefield is daily life. Perhaps because the story was Louisa's own, it flowed easily once she had put pen to paper. As biographer Madeleine Stern rightly notes, "The great facts were the near ones."

Louisa had no lofty aspiration for this book, so this time ambition didn't get in her way. She recorded no writing vortex, no image of herself as the burning literary genius. She simply wrote what was in her to write.

Louisa turned "the brains that earn the money" into a writing machine that spring. In less than six week, she had finished twelve chapters of Little Women, as well as three more tales for two other publications. She sent the first twelve chapters to Thomas Niles and waited. The response was disheartening, especially after his eager courtship of her work. She noted simply, "He thought it dull, so do I." Nevertheless she persisted. Once she had begun a task, she was not one to give up.
She also had her material well in hand. Before she’s ever thought of writing a book called *Little Women*, she had created stories featuring four sisters, and had also at times incorporated other family members into her fiction. She reused elements of those stories now. And she understood her young audience better than ever, thanks partly to her work editing children’s materials for *Merry’s Museum*. The stars aligned for this one inevitable work of genius. She had learned firsthand what worked for a young readership and what didn’t. If ever she understood “their angels,” it was now.

Louisa sat at the epicenter of American thought and ideas—scribbling at her small, wooden half-moon desk, with Emerson about a mile away by the Lexington Road. Her father, the great thinker, sat just downstairs. Any one of them might have been expected to create the great work of 1868, but it was Louisa May Alcott who did it.

As always, she consulted her “home folk” as she wrote. Her family warmly approved the manuscript. Anna praised it because it was so unlike the novels they had disliked as young women where “the heroine cries too much and is too perfect.” Jo March neither wept copiously, nor was she saintly. Her imperfections would endear her to generations of readers.

*From Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, August 14, 1880*

**Scribbles, Sorrows, and Russet Leather Boots: The Life of Louisa May Alcott.**
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Liz Rosenberg is the author of five novels, five books of poems and more than 30 prize-winning books for young readers. Her most recent book is *Scribbles, Sorrows and Russet Leather Boots*, a biography of Louisa May Alcott published last month by Candlewick Press. Her previous biography was the award winning *House of Dreams*, a biography of L. M. Montgomery, author of *Anne of Green Gables*. Her work has been translated into many languages, including Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, German, Czech and Chinese. A documentary about her work and life was produced by Green Light Productions. She teaches literature and creative writing at the State U of NY at Binghamton, where she has won the Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in teaching.

Listen to our Quintessential Conversation with Liz Rosenberg: https://www.quintessencetheatre.org/littlewomen
“Happy Women” by Louisa May Alcott

Five months before Alcott published the first volume of *Little Women*, she published this essay about spinsterhood. Alcott’s “Happy Women” provides a valuable counterbalance to both the resistance against and adherence to conventional gender roles that coexist at the center of *Little Women*.

ONE of the trials of woman-kind is the fear of being an old maid. To escape this dreadful doom, young girls rush into matrimony with a recklessness which astonishes the beholder; never pausing to remember that the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called “Mrs.” instead of “Miss.”

Fortunately, this foolish prejudice is fast disappearing, conquered by the success of a certain class belonging to the sisterhood. This class is composed of superior women who, from various causes, remain single, and devote themselves to some earnest work; espousing philanthropy, art, literature, music, medicine, or whatever task taste, necessity, or chance suggests, and remaining faithful to and as happy in their choice as married women with husbands and homes. It being my good fortune to know several such, I venture to offer a little sketch of them to those of my young countrywomen who, from choice or necessity, stand along, seeking to find the happiness which is the right of all.

Here is L., a rich man’s daughter; pretty, accomplished, sensible, and good. She tried fashionable life and found that it did not satisfy her. No lover was happy enough to make a response in her heart, and at twenty-three she looked about her for something to occupy and interest her. She was attracted towards the study of medicine; became absorbed in it; went alone to Paris and London; studied faithfully; received her diploma, and, having practised successfully for a time, was appointed the resident physician of a city hospital. Here, doing a truly womanly work, she finds no time for ennui, unhappiness, or the vague longing for something to fill heart and life, which leads so many women to take refuge in frivolous or dangerous amusements and pursuits. She never talks of her mission or her rights, but beautifully fulfils the one and quietly assumes the others. Few criticise or condemn her course, and none question her success. Respected and beloved by all who know her, she finds genuine satisfaction in her work, and is the busiest, happiest, most useful woman whom I know.

Next comes M., a brilliant, talented girl, full of energy, ambition, and noble aspirations. Poor, yet attractive, through natural gifts and graces, to her came the great temptation of such a girl’s life—a rich lover; an excellent young man, but her inferior in all respects. She felt this, and so did he, but hoping that love would make them equals, he urged his suit.

“If I loved him,” she said, “my way would be plain, and I should not hesitate a minute. But I do not; I’ve tried, and I am sure I never can feel toward him as I should. It is a great temptation, for I long to cultivate my talent to help my family, to see the world, and enjoy life, and all this may be done if I said ‘Yes.’ People tell me that I am foolish to reject this good fortune; that it is my duty to accept it; that I shall get on very well without love, and talk as if it were a business transaction. It is hard to say ‘No’; but I must, for in marriage I want to look up, not down. I cannot make it seem right to take this
“I never had a lover, and I never can have you know. I’m so plain,” she says, with a smile that is pathetic in its humility, its unconscious wistfulness.

She is mistaken here; for there are many to whom that plain face is beautiful, that helpful hand very dear. Her lovers are not of the romantic sort; but old women, little children, erring men, and forlorn girls give her an affection as endearing and sincere as any husband could have done. Few will know her worth here, but, in the long hereafter, I am sure S. will be blest with eternal beauty, happiness, and love.

A. is a woman of a strongly individual type, who in the course of an unusually varied experience has seen so much of what a wise man has called “the tragedy of modern married life,” that she is afraid to try it. Knowing that for one of a peculiar nature like herself such an experiment would be doubly hazardous, she has obeyed instinct and become a chronic old maid. Filial and fraternal love must satisfy her, and grateful that such ties are possible, she lives for them and is content. Literature is a fond and faithful spouse, and the little family that has sprung up around her, though perhaps unlovely and uninteresting to others, is a profitable source of satisfaction to her maternal heart. After a somewhat tempestuous voyage, she is glad to find herself in a quiet haven whence she can look back upon her vanished youth and feel that though the blossom time of life is past, a little fruit remains to ripen in the offer, and I must let it go, for I dare not sell my liberty.”

She made her choice, turned away from the pleasant future laid before her, and took up her load again. With her one talent in her hand she faced poverty, cheerfully teaching music, year after year; hoping always, complaining never, and finding herself a stronger, happier woman for that act: A richer woman also; for, though the husband was lost a true friend was gained—since the lover, with respect added to his love, said manfully, “She is right; God bless her!”

S. is poor, plain, ungifted, and ordinary in all things but one—a cheerful, helpful spirit, that loves its neighbor better than itself, and cannot rest till it has proved its sincerity. Few, so placed, would have lived forty hard, dull years without becoming either sharp and sour, or bitter and blue. But S. is as sweet and sunny as a child; and, to those who know her, the personification of content. The only talent she possesses is that of loving every helpless, suffering, forlorn and outcast creature whom she meets. Finding her round of home duties too small for her benevolence, she became one of the home missionaries, whose reports are never read, whose salaries are never paid of earth. Poverty-stricken homes, sick-beds, sinful souls, and sorrowing hearts attract her as irresistibly as pleasure attracts other women, and she faithfully ministers to such, unknown and unrewarded.
early autumn coming on. Not lonely, for parents, brothers and sisters, friends and babies keep her heart full and warm; not idle, for necessity, stern, yet kindly teacher, has taught her the worth of work; not unhappy, for love and labor, like good angels, walk at either hand, and the divine Friend fills the world with strength and beauty for the soul and eyes that have learned to see it thankfully.

My sisters, don't be afraid of the words, “old maid,” for it is in your power to make this a term of honor, not reproach. It is not necessary to be a sour, spiteful spinster, with nothing to do but brew tea, talk scandal and tend a pocket-handkerchief. No, the world is full of work, needing all the heads, hearts, and hands we can bring to do it. Never was there so splendid an opportunity for women to enjoy their liberty and prove that they deserve it by using it wisely. If love comes as it should come, accept it in God's name and be worth of His best blessing. If it never comes, then in God's name reject the shadow of it, for that can never satisfy a hungry heart. Do not be ashamed to own the truth—do not be daunted by the fear of ridicule and loneliness, nor saddened by the loss of a woman's tenderest ties. Be true to yourselves; cherish whatever talent you possess, and in using it faithfully for the good of others you will most assuredly find happiness for yourself, and make of life no failure, but a beautiful success.

First published in The New York Ledger 24, no. 7: April 11, 1868.
Additional Resources

Liz Rosenberg, *Scribble, Sorrows, and Russet Leather Boots*

Drawing on the surviving journals and letters of Louisa and her family and friends, author and poet Liz Rosenberg reunites Louisa May Alcott with her most ardent readers. In this warm and sometimes heartbreaking biography, Rosenberg delves deep into the oftentimes secretive life of a woman who was ahead of her time, imbued with social conscience, and always moving toward her future with a determination that would bring her fame, tragedy, and the realization of her biggest dreams.

Judith Callard, “The Alcotts In Germantown”
The Germantown Crier, Volume 70, Number 1, Spring 2020

Callard, a long time member of Historic Germantown, discusses the struggles of Alcott’s father and mother during their time in Germantown, where Louisa was born. Notably, Callard references the specific places where the Alcotts lived and where Bronson Alcott ran an unsuccessful school. The full article includes a thorough examination of this short period of the Alcott’s history; as the family moved to Concord when Louisa was two years old.

https://www.public-domain-poetry.com/stories/louisa-may-alcott

Digital access to the full text of the March family series: *Little Women, Little Men,* and *Jo’s Boys* as well as *Hospital Sketches* (which includes Alcott’s memories of her brief experience as a Civil war nurse), *Work* (a depressing adult novel), and *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (a romantic comedy that was made into a 1949 film starring Gloria Jean).

*The Alcotts: The Real Family Behind Little Women*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJsEvWzu4Iw

Jan Turnquist, executive director of Orchard House, the Alcotts home in Concord, Massachusetts, discusses the daily activities and pursuits of the Alcotts as a trailblazing family of reformers. Building on her performance of a Living History of Louisa May Alcott’s life, Turnquist shares images of the Alcott family and discusses highlights from their family history.

Beverly Lyon Clark, *The Afterlife of Little Women*
https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/title/afterlife-little-women

Describing how *Little Women* was received by Alcott’s fans and critics after its initial publication to audiences of film, television, and stage adaptations, Clark incorporates responses to over sixteen musical versions including the Broadway Howland-Dickstein adaptation. A comprehensive journey through how the meaning of *Little Women* has changed significantly over time.