

**THE**  
afterlife  
**OF**  
*Little  
Women*



Beverly Lyon Clark

# The Afterlife of *Little Women*

BEVERLY LYON CLARK

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## The Afterlife of *Little Women*

*For Roger, Adam, Wendy, Kristina, and Matthew,  
and in memory of Norma and Maurice Lyon*



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## Introduction

Readings are not controlled by the text or by any one regime of reading. The task of reception history is in the first place to describe those readings in all their wildness.

—John Frow

I hold my childhood copy of *Little Women*. A solid, tangible object. Unchanging, it would seem, except for the yellowing of its pages and the peeling of its laminated cover. Unchanged, I assumed when I first read it, from what Louisa May Alcott had originally written—or at least I had assumed a kind of authenticity. Yet what appears to be solid and unchanged is not.

For what I read was abridged—“A Modern Abridged Edition,” it says on the title page. But back then I didn’t scrutinize title pages. Several chapters that appear in unabridged versions are missing (“Burdens,” “The P.C. and P.O.,” among others), eliminating some of the incorporated stories and some of the moralizing. And parts 1 and 2 of the novel are combined, unremarked, without page break or discontinuity in chapter numbering.

As for what makes the abridgment “modern”: On the cover a young woman reclines on a sofa, in a room whose unfinished wooden walls and sloping ceiling signal that she is in an attic. She is reading, not writing. She may represent the novel’s Jo March; she might represent the reader of the novel. The book she holds appears to be leatherbound, with gilt trim. Thus does the Whitman Publishing Company image the value of an item in its Famous Classics series, even if its own product lacks the leather and gilt. The young woman wears a long green skirt, a white blouse, and black flats. Her look is slightly old fashioned, in this 1955

edition, although maybe only by a decade or so: her blouse resembles one in a Simplicity pattern book of the 1940s. She is not dressed like a young woman of the 1860s.

The title on the cover is in pink, above the young girl, and casts a thin lavender shadow. The font carries Western associations for me; indeed, online I can find similar fonts labeled Saloon Girl, Cowboy Western, and Outlaw. My adult self is tempted to think that if the colors signal the traditionally feminine, the font hints at the passionate, outlawed subtexts of the novel. The author's name does not appear on the cover.

Inside, "Louisa May Alcott" appears on the title page, and the book claims to be newly illustrated. These illustrations, black and white with pale pink or green washes, are less anachronistic than the image on the cover. Or at least the clothing is. The image opposite the first page of text shows the four March sisters as cozily overlapping figures, facing what must be a fireplace in profile on the right, its light casting shadows behind them. Yet for readers unfamiliar with fireplace screens and poker and with an uncertain sense of history, it could be a television set encased in shelving. Jo and Amy gaze at it intently. The words and cameo portraits on the page to the right become the story and images that they gaze at.

*Little Women* is a mutable text. The words aren't always the same. The illustrations and packaging vary widely. The social context in which we encounter the text varies too, and what we already "know" about the book before we read it colors what we read. I don't remember how old I was when I first read *Little Women*, nor do I remember who introduced me to it. But I do know that I read it independently, not as assigned reading for school, nor had I previously seen a film version. I doubt that I'd heard the book dismissed as sentimental subliterate. Nor did I find the title off-putting, demeaning.

The novel speaks differently to different readers, and differently to the same reader at different times. When I read *Little Women* as a child, Jo was the character who most spoke to me. It was her rambunctiousness that attracted me. It was her reading and writing. It was also, I think, her ability to negotiate all this in a close-knit family, although that was not uppermost in my conscious mind. I felt empowered by her, this Jo who could run and talk slang (not that those actions seemed very daring to me), this Jo who liked to read and write. It didn't matter that she eventually married; my enthusiasm didn't have to be controlled by the ending of the book. Or maybe it mattered a little. I'd wanted Jo to marry Laurie, but not passionately so (yet maybe that dispassion is a latter-day projection). Still, it probably seemed appropriate to me that she marry; I hadn't yet encountered many models of unmarried womanhood. (There was my second-grade teacher,



## CHAPTER 1

## Playing Pilgrims

"CHRISTMAS won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

"It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

"I don't think it's fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

"We've got Father and Mother and each other," said Beth contentedly, from her corner.

The four young faces on which the firelight shone brightened at the cheerful words, but darkened again as Jo said sadly, "We haven't got Father, and shall not have him for a long time." She didn't say "perhaps never," but each of the girls silently added it, thinking of Father far away, where the fighting was.

Nobody spoke for a minute; then Meg said in an altered tone, "You know the reason Mother proposed not having any

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Facing the text and basking in its glow

Illustration by Jill Elgin for *Little Women* (Racine, WI: Whitman, 1955).

whom we called Missy. I don't now remember anyone else.) And I didn't really think that work and family were incompatible for a woman; Jo may have given up her public writing, for a while at least, in *Little Men*, but she still had work. *Little Women* and its sequels made it possible for a girl growing up in the 1950s to dream of having it all—family and career—even though I didn't know many actual women who did. It probably isn't accidental that the motto I chose for my high-school yearbook, wanting "to work, to love, to give," sounds as though it comes out of an Alcott novel. I can think of no other author that I'd read who speaks so cogently to all three desires.

And of course I'm working now from my memories of my early engagement with *Little Women*. Critics of literature for the young have long puzzled over the relationship between childhood and memory, given that those who produce such literature and those who publish comments on it are almost always adults, remembering. The influential early theoretical exploration of children's literature, Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984, rev. 1993), examines the adult construction of childhood as "a pure point of origin," a fantasy that grounds and mediates our relationship to language

and to the past. Thanks in part to the realism of *Little Women*, especially its semi-autobiographical nature, its readers have always engaged in such looking backward—to the Civil War period of the book's setting and to the time of publication shortly afterwards, to portrayals of childhood and to an adult's childhood reading. Like *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, it is what Valerie Krips, in *The Presence of the Past* (2000), calls a "nostalgic icon," embodying both a specifically literary and a more diffuse cultural value. It functions as a focus for collective memory but also, as Carolyn Steedman has noted of the child figure more generally, is able to "express the depths of historicity within individuals."<sup>1</sup>

In any case, I had gone on, when young, to read *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*—but it was the lively Jo of *Little Women*, especially the first part of *Little Women*, that mattered most. I identified with Jo, but not with all aspects of her as they played out through the series. Barbara Sicherman has suggested that for young women of an earlier era, at the turn of the previous century, reading was both "an esteemed cultural practice" and "a wellspring of aspiration"; indeed, "at once study and play, a source of knowledge and pleasure, public performance and private dreaming, reading opened up space unlike any other."<sup>2</sup> I can see now that, with the exception of public performance, reading *Little Women* played the same roles for me.

And even the other ways in which the novel gives play to desire, ways that I couldn't have articulated back then, made it seem as if one could have it all. As Kathryn Kent argues, this novel and others by Alcott underscore the instability of gender and desire and of the boundaries between identification and desire. Does one want to be Jo or to have her? Kent states that "Alcott's novels query, 'Are you my teacher or my mother? Are you my sister or my lover? Are you my daughter or my pupil?' (And what it means to be a daughter, because Jo is more of a 'son' than a daughter to Marmee, destabilizes even these categories.)" Kent later cites Jo saying, with respect to lovers, "I'd like to try all kinds," thus signaling "a proliferation of identifications and desires within the family" and beyond.<sup>3</sup> Again, with Alcott, I could dream of having—and being—it all.

Few of my students in the last decade or two had been enthralled by *Little Women* as children—unlike a number of students in the 1980s, as I note in chapter 4. A few recent students recall being urged by their mothers to read the book but not being engaged by it. When they read it now as undergraduates, as an assigned text, some find themselves pleasantly surprised by the novel; some, dismayed by the preachiness. Most seem to identify with Jo: when I ask which character students like best, most say something like wanting to be Jo. A few students prefer Meg or Amy. One student liked Beth best for being like her own

mother. A number of men students who prefer Jo say they would like to have her as a friend. Thus some students don't so much identify directly with a character as want to "be with" one. Theorists posit that identification during reading is shifting and unstable, and indeed "the 'identification' which the reader . . . makes is not necessarily with the hero/heroine . . . but with the story. It is the anticipation of satisfaction from the story/fantasy that holds our attention, not some identification with a particular character."<sup>4</sup> Young readers interviewed by Holly Blackford often seemed to identify more with a storytelling narrator than with characters; they seemed to feel they were "seeing rather than participating (as a human embodied being) in the social relations of the text."<sup>5</sup>

The students in my class were, furthermore, responding to a teacher who had assigned the book as required reading. So their responses would be tempered by their sense of what I might want to hear and of how comfortably they could disagree with me. Some of the men might also feel uncomfortable about admitting, in a class of fifty, to identifying directly with a female character: their claim to wanting to "be with" Jo might be as much a cover as a direct insight into the ways in which readers engage with texts. Records of response are always proximate. Even a student speaking up in class a day after first reading a novel, speaking as honestly as she can, is speaking from memory, tapping only her conscious responses and framing those responses with the vocabulary and within the frameworks that are available to her.

In her lifetime Alcott received hundreds of fan letters, although most have not survived. Like my students' comments, such a letter is complexly engendered. It may aptly reflect the writer's response as well as he or she can record it. But it is also shaped by the writer's sense of self, as well as his or her perception of the author as audience, whether the writer is hoping to receive a response—and perhaps collect an author's autograph?—or to affect the outcome of a projected sequel. (Please make Jo marry Laurie, fans wrote soon after part 1 was published.) A child writer, in particular, would likely have additional audiences to propitiate or defy: a hovering parent, a commanding teacher. (Only the propitiating ones are likely to be forwarded to the author.)

In the chapters that follow, I trace the afterlife of *Little Women* primarily by examining written commentaries, including letters, autobiographies, and occasionally diaries, although, like fan letters, these must be used with caution. Such responses derive from a narrow spectrum of those who could write and had access to the means to do so. And not only are letters shaped to fit the needs of their recipients but published letters have been chosen by editors and sometimes shaped by them too. Even diaries were not strictly private in the nineteenth century.

Alcott wrote her own childhood journal knowing that her parents would read the entries, and often she recorded her attempts to live as they would like. Sometimes, in short, one can look at direct responses to *Little Women*, but even those are shaped by the needs and desires of the writer and of any perceived reader.

Other sources of response must be treated cautiously as well. Sometimes one can get indirect reports, as when Alcott comments on the fans who besiege her. Sales figures from the publisher and circulation figures from libraries are suggestive, although one can't be sure that a purchased or borrowed book will actually be read (perhaps obtained just for show? to be in on the latest trend or to assure a mentor that one is reading something "wholesome"?), or whether it will have a single reader or multiple ones.

Published reviews may reflect a broader pattern of response than that of any given individual, the reviewers acting as "informed agents" of their readers even as they model how to respond.<sup>6</sup> Such a reviewer's stance reflects his or her own response but is also colored by perceptions of audience, including the editors of the periodical as well as its readers. Maybe generating a little controversy with some iconoclasm will be a good thing, or, more likely, the reviewer tries to anticipate the responses of the readership, while guiding its members in their choices and also shaping their responses. But reviewers of works whose audience includes children are almost always at some distance from that part of the audience. They are rarely children themselves, and they may differ with respect to class and race as well. They choose a stance toward their projected audience, maybe one of condescending superiority, maybe one of nostalgia as they remember their own childhood experience of reading, maybe one colored by recent encounters with children, fond or otherwise. And they may be responding to a cultural image of the book or author. (A common refrain, upon a modern adult's reading of *Little Women*, is how much better it was than expected, how unsentimental it was, given how sentimental he or she expected it to be.)

But it says something when the one item a child saves while fleeing the Chicago fire in 1871 is a copy of *Little Women*. Or when a producer labors for eight years to obtain permission to mount a stage production of *Little Women*, a century ago, and then labors to find a theater manager willing to host it—and the result is a hit Broadway show. Or when a producer similarly labors to persuade film executives, two decades ago, until she becomes one herself and produces a successful film version. That says something about the passion of the producer and about her sense of an untapped potential audience. It says something about the audience that made the production a hit, whether it was moved by nostalgia and sentiment or by a sense of being empowered or, ambivalently, both.



Such a production both enacts its creators' response to *Little Women* and mediates the response of others—as do other imitations, adaptations, translations, illustrations. Often readers have tried to enact *Little Women*, whether they try to follow a model of behavior outlined in it, or form a Little Women club whose members write stories—or create a formal adaptation performed on stage or screen, or sketch illustrations, or write a novel that modernizes the book or pursues a tangent unexplored in the original, or write a biography that plays the facts of Alcott's life against those in her autobiographical novel. Sometimes these responses extend the world of the novel, metonymically, perhaps imagining the experiences of Mr. March while he is away from the scene of the novel; sometimes they are metaphoric translations, perhaps imagining what might constitute a modern Jo.

And often these responses engender additional responses. Thus I scrutinize reviews of adaptations, broadly defined, to gauge response not just to the adaptation itself but to Alcott's novel, or to the public image of the novel. Even if adaptation theorists tell us that we should judge a presumed adaptation as a work in its own right, as I note in subsequent chapters, audience members still connect it intertextually, to some degree, with the presumed original.

The chapters that follow track the afterlife of *Little Women* in all these modes, devoting attention both to responses that had a significant impact at the time or are representative and to those that are symptomatically interesting for the ways in which they configure or reconfigure the novel. In chapter 1 I examine the responses of reviewers and other readers from the publication of part 1 in 1868 until the end of the century, a time span when Alcott willingly took on the persona of Aunt Jo, as “the children's friend,” and was also held in some esteem by cultural gatekeepers. During the next three decades, addressed in chapter 2, Alcott was increasingly dismissed by the arbiters of high culture but had a strong popular following; a key year was 1912, when Orchard House was officially opened to the public and the first authorized full-length dramatization was a success on Broadway. Chapter 3 addresses the next three decades: Alcott's critical reputation was still at a low point, but *Little Women* continued to be popular, speaking both to audiences struggling during the Depression and to those experiencing postwar prosperity—especially through the vehicles of the 1933 and 1949 Hollywood films, respectively. The final chapter addresses how Alcott's standing has changed since 1960, in the wake of the feminist movement and of the publication of Alcott's lost thrillers: adaptations—verbal, visual, musical, and material—have proliferated, from picture-book versions to adult retellings, from anime to opera.



## Becoming Everyone's Aunt, 1868–1900

Miss Alcott[']s] name has already become a household word among little people.

—New York Times, 1871

This lady took the public heart by storm six years ago by the publication of *Little Women*, and has since been established as a prime favorite with old and young. . . . Not Miss Burney, not Mrs. Stowe, not Bret Harte, after the appearance of the *Heathen Chinee*, ever received the adulation that has been poured out at Miss Alcott's feet by a host of enthusiastic juveniles. And the seniors are not much more moderate.

—Harper's Monthly, 1875

Grave merchants and lawyers meeting on their way down town in the morning said to each other, "Have you read 'Little Women'"; and laughed as they said it. The clerks in my office read it, so also did the civil engineer, and the boy in the elevator. It was the rage in '69 as "Pinafore" was in '78.

—Frank Preston Stearns, 1895

Louisa May Alcott had been notoriously reluctant to write the novel that became *Little Women*. She'd had some success with *Hospital Sketches* (1863), a fictionalized account of her experiences as a Civil War nurse, and the editor Thomas Niles invited her "to write a girls book." She said she'd try, and she "began at once" in September 1867, although she "didn't like" it.<sup>1</sup> In the press of