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INCLUDES READING GROUP GUIDE

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

With foreword by Newbery author Joan W. Joan W.

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

Little Women

A L A D D I N 6 C L A S S I C S
New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 00-101509 ISBN: 0-689-83531-0 were no exception and their diaries and letters were saved. Although there were some days when Louisa did not write in her journal, her daily notes and monthly summaries form a lively account. This is our good fortune because it means that we can learn about how the book was written from the author herself. The editors who prepared her journals and letters for publication reveal that "[s]he was always careless about spelling, paragraphing and punctuation" and that she destroyed a number of letters and some parts of her journals in her later years. Luckily many entries about *Little Women* remain.

May, 1868. . . . I begin Little Women. Marmee, Anna and May² all approve the plan. So I plod away, tho' I don't enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters, but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it.3 June. Sent twelve chapters of "L.W." to Mr. N. [The editor.] He thought it dull, so do I. But I work away and mean to try the experiment, for lively, simple books are v. much needed for girls, and perhaps I can supply the need. July 15th. Have finished "Little Women" and send it off-402 pages. May is designing pictures for it. Hope it will go . . . Very tired, head full of pain from overwork, and heavy heart about Marmee, who is growing feeble. August 26th: Proof of the whole book came. It reads better than I expected. Not a bit sensational, but simple and true, for we really lived most of it, and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it. Mr. N.

likes it better now, and says some girls who have read the manuscript say it is 'splendid.' As it is for them, they are the best critics, and so I should be satisfied.

The enthusiasm of these first readers was soon matched by others'. The first edition sold out quickly, more copies were printed, and the publisher wanted "a second volume for spring." Louisa was glad to oblige. By this time she was enjoying the project and admitting it.

November 1st. Began the second part of "Little Women." I can do a chapter a day, and in a month I mean to be done. A little success is so inspiring that I now find my "Marches" sober, nice people, and as I can launch into the future, my fancy has more play. Girls write to ask who the Little Women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please any one.

And she didn't. Jo March, the second oldest and best loved of the book's four sisters, shares many qualities with Louisa May Alcott herself. Like Jo, Louisa worked hard to control her temper, wrote gaudy magazine stories for which she was paid, and was the adored confidante of her youngest sister. Beth's death, described in Part Two, was a true and heartbreaking event although the real Beth was not as young when she died as the story suggests. Perhaps it was to bring the story closer to the lives and experience

of her readers that Louisa Alcott changed the sisters' ages and set the story in the 1860s, when the book was written and published, rather than twenty or thirty years earlier when she and her sisters grew up. It is also interesting that the Civil War (1861-1865) does not play a large or necessary part in the story. Was this to avoid giving offense to Southerners who might read the book? Because Louisa Alcott's brief experience as a war nurse had made it impossible for her to take sides or portray the war gloriously? Because the war had very little to do with the story she wished to tell? One of the things that makes Little Women so special is that it is not historical fiction—a book written by a present-day author about life in a bygone era. Louisa May Alcott wrote in a natural way about daily life as she knew it. In Chapter One, for example, the girls' mother comes home to be welcomed by the devoted attention of her daughters. She says:

"Well, dearies, how have you got on today? There was so much to do getting the boxes ready to go tomorrow that I didn't come home to dinner. Has anyone called, Beth?...

Chapter 1, Playing Pilgrims

Only the slightest hints as to what "the boxes" are all about come before this passage. Among themselves the sisters have spoken of "Father far away, where the fighting was;" Meg refers to, "our men . . . suffering so in the army," and when Jo shakes out a "blue army sock" she is

knitting this clarifies their loyalties as being with the North; the Confederate soldiers wore gray. A writer describing the same scene today would almost certainly pause to explain that Mrs. March has been helping to prepare supplies to be sent to Union troops, that where she says "dinner" we would say lunch, and that Beth is being asked if anyone came to visit, not did someone telephone or was there a message on the answering machine. All by itself the next example, underlining added, contains three references to items common in Louisa Alcott's time but no longer in use.

"There never was such a cross family!" cried Jo, losing her temper when she had upset an <u>inkstand</u>, broken both <u>boot lacings</u>, and sat down upon her hat. "You're the crossest person in it!" returned Amy, washing out the sum, that was all wrong with the tears that had fallen on her <u>slate</u>. Chapter 4, Burdens

(If one includes the hat on which Jo sat down, there are four such items! It appears to have been a broad-brimmed hat—not likely to be worn today except, perhaps, by bridesmaids—for the next page reports how close it came to flying off Jo's head when she went outside.) Would these and similar details keep the book alive to this very day, and interesting to more than a handful of readers? Probably not. How about the plot? Not much there, either. The girls come and go, make

friends with their neighbors, take a Christmas meal to the poor. What is it, then, that makes the book so special? What keeps the book widely read, fresh in memory once it has been read, and not infrequently offered in new and attractive editions such as this one? The sisters themselves may account for it. It is not just that a reader can choose to be like Jo and be happy not to be Amy! More likely, it is that parts of them are to be found in every one of usvanity, hot temper, hopefulness, and talent. In each we recognize real and familiar struggles to overcome our less agreeable traits and discover enduring strengths; as each of us has known some painful loss, we cry for Beth when she dies. If Louisa May Alcott was hesitant about starting to write Little Women, by the time she read the page proofs she had begun to recognize its worth. Remember how she put it on August 26th? "Not a bit sensational, but simple and true, for we really lived most of it and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it." It has indeed succeeded and endured-far beyond expectation and other books of its day.4 Never mind that at times the book turns preachy or that its two parts, taken as one, make it awfully long. Those of us who have read the book know that Louisa May Alcott had it absolutely right: we lived most of it too.

Joan Blos October 7, 1999

Footnotes

- 1. This observation from page xliv of *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*; quotations from Louisa May Alcott's journals appear in *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*. Both were edited by Joel Myerson and Daniel Sheahy, with Madeline B. Stern as associate editor. *Letters* was published in 1987, *Journals* in 1989, both by Little, Brown & Company of Boston.
- 2. Anna and May are the true names of the Meg and Amy characters; Lizzie, the real Beth, died in 1858 just a few months before her twenty-third birthday.
- 3. To this bleak entry the wry comment "Good joke.— L.M.A." was added at a later date.
- 4. The Columbia Encyclopedia, Second Edition, calls it "one of the most popular girls' books ever written." According to The Young Readers' Companion to American History, it is "the most loved girls' book in American literature."

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Part 1

CHAPTER ONE

Playing Pilgrims

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

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

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

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

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 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 presents this Christmas was because it is going to be a hard winter for everyone; and she thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly. But I am afraid I don't"; and Meg shook her head, as she thought regretfully of all the pretty things she wanted.

"But I don't think the little we should spend would do any good. We've each got a dollar, and the army wouldn't be much helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect anything from Mother or you, but I do want to buy *Undine and Sintram* for myself; I've wanted it so long," said Jo, who was a bookworm.

"I planned to spend mine on new music," said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard but the hearth brush and kettle holder.

"I shall get a nice box of Faber's drawing pencils; I really need them," said Amy, decidedly.

"Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun; I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it," cried Jo, examining the heels of her shoes in a gentlemanly manner.

"I know I do—teaching those tiresome children nearly all day when I am longing to enjoy myself at home," began Meg, in the complaining tone again.

"You don't have half such a hard time as I do," said Jo.

"How would you like to be shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady, who keeps you trotting, is never satisfied, and worries you till you're ready to fly out of the window or cry?"

"It's naughty to fret; but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross; and my hands get so stiff, I can't practice well at all"; and Beth looked at her rough hands with a sigh that anyone could hear that time.

"I don't believe any of you suffer as I do," cried Amy; "for you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice."

"If you mean *libel*, I'd say so, and not talk about *labels*, as if Papa was a pickle bottle," advised Jo, laughing.

"I know what I mean, and you needn't be *statirical* about it. It's proper to use good words, and improve your *vocabulary*," returned Amy, with dignity.

"Don't peck at one another, children. Don't you wish we had the money Papa lost when we were little, Jo? Dear me! How happy and good we'd be, if we had no worries!" said Meg, who could remember better times.

"You said, the other day, you thought we were a deal happier than the King children, for they were fighting and fretting all the time, in spite of their money."

"So I did, Beth. Well, I think we are; for, though we