

46 CRITICS DISCUSS

Little Women I & II (1868,69)



Louisa May Alcott

(1832-1888)

“Simple and true, for we really lived most of it.”

Alcott, quoted in *Louisa May Alcott*
ed. Daniel Aaron (Chelsea 1981) 199

“Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy are friends in every nursery and schoolroom; and even in the parlor and office they are not unknown.”

Editors, *Godey's Ladies Book* (1870)

“A pleasant little story...just such a hearty, unaffected, and ‘genial’ description of family life as will appeal to the majority of average readers.”

The Nation (14 December 1875) 64

“I have read and re-read *Little Women* and it never seems to grow old.”

Jane Addams (1876)

“[Alcott is] generally regarded as the most popular and successful literary woman in America.”

New York Times (1880)

“Moral pap.”

Louisa May Alcott, *Jo's Boys*
(Little Brown 1886) 38

“The writer better loved by the children of America than Shakespeare himself.”

Harriet Prescott Spofford (1888)

“Miss Alcott's claims to popularity as a writer do not rest upon the literary merit of her books.”

Critic obituary (1888)

“Miss Alcott wrote no book equal to her powers, no book of enduring literary worth; and this was because she wrote for bread, and with a rapidity too great for the best work.”

Atlantic Review (1890)

“Her muse was sociable; the instinct of art she never had.”

Thomas Wentworth Higginson
(editor of Emily Dickinson)

Short Studies of American Authors (1906) 66-7

“At the cost of being deemed effeminate, I will add that I greatly liked the girls’s stories...just as I worshiped *Little Men* and *Little Women*.”

Theodore Roosevelt (1913)

“Miss Alcott I was forbidden to read for many years, as she was supposed to use very bad English and to be untrue to life, both of which criticisms I now thoroughly endorse.”

Amy Lowell

Literary Digest 29 (November 1919)

“[A sentimental] girl’s book...empty of emotion.”

Katherine Fullerton Gerould

Modes and Morals (1920) 182-98

“It has long been the custom to refer to Louisa M. Alcott’s masterpiece as the classic expression of a certain kind of American sentimentalism.”

William Troy

Nation (29 November 1933) 630

“[My ears] were exasperated by the laxities of the Great Louisa.”

Edith Wharton

A Backward Glance (1934) 81

“[Alcott] never grew up...living almost always among intellectuals, she preserved to the age of fifty-six that contempt for ideas which is normal among boys and girls of fifteen.... She seems to have felt, moreover, that love, marriage, and child-bearing were interruptions of serious business--although she never quite made out what the serious business of life really is, unless it be earning a livelihood.... [Her] words show the bounce and swagger of a mind that has never really faced life’s darker mysteries.”

Odell Shepard

“The Mother of Little Women” (1938)

“*Little Women* itself accepts the limitations of the domestic sentimentalists and imposes charm and common sense upon them. It is, as has been said, an idyll, a hymn in praise of family life, not a literal transcription of domestic experiences: ‘I do not think that families are the most beautiful things in all the world!’”

Edward Wagenknecht

Cavalcade of the American Novel (Holt 1952) 89

“Any male reader of *Little Women* is ‘really an intruder’.”

G. K. Chesterton

“Louisa Alcott” (1953)

“[*Little Women*], it is fair to say, is beyond the reach of criticism. When a book like this is so loved and cherished--and not merely by the unintelligent--any critic who feels he should discuss Miss Alcott’s sentimentality and priggishness will be shown the door.”

“Sentimental Journal”

Times Literary Supplement (31 May 1957)

“I identified myself passionately with Jo... [She] was much more tomboyish and daring than I was, but I shared her horror of sewing and housekeeping and her love of books.”

Simone de Beauvoir (1958)

“[Alcott] leaves memory-word-pictures of healthy New England childhood days--pictures which are turned to with affection by middle-aged children--pictures that bear a sentiment, a leaven, that middle-aged America needs nowadays more than we care to admit.”

Charles Ives (1961)

“A novel for young readers....a fictionalized account of life in her own family; it made her famous and wealthy. Although intended for girls, it became popular with older readers too, and many of the scenes in the book have entered folklore. The story concerns four sisters of varying dispositions. Jo March, the heroine, is a tomboy and wants to become an author. Her older sister Meg, very pretty, aspires to be a young lady. Beth is shy and loves music. Amy hopes to be a great artist and also to overcome her selfishness. The rich boy next door, Theodore Lawrence or ‘Laurie,’ would like to marry Jo, but marries Amy instead; Jo marries an elderly professor, Mr. Bhaer... Meg marries John Brooke, Laurie’s tutor. The story had a number of sequels.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“Having re-read [*Little Women* and *Good Wives*], dried my eyes and blown my nose...I resolved that the only honorable course was to come out into the open and admit that the dreadful books are masterpieces. I do it, however, with some bad temper and hundreds of reservations.”

Brigid Brophy (1965)

“What an orgy of approved pathos such scenes provided in the hands of a master like Harriet Beecher Stowe, or the later Louisa May Alcott, who in *Little Women* reworked the prototype of Mrs. Stowe into a kind of fiction specifically directed at young girls!”

Leslie Fielder

Love and Death in the American Novel (1966) 267

“The theme of the happy American family had been popularized by several well known writers, among them Louisa May Alcott, in *Little Women* (1868), *Little Men*, and *Jo’s Boys* (1886). In this convention, the family usually is threatened with not only a series of minor disappointments, but also with dissolution. At the end, however, the family is joyfully unified.”

Jay Martin

Harvests of Change: 1865-1914 (1967) 58-9

“Her girls were jealous, mean, silly and lazy; and for 100 years jealous, mean, silly, and lazy girls have been ardently grateful for the chance to read about themselves... Sentimental and preachy, [it] was written by a secret rebel against the order of the world and woman’s place in it, and all the girls who ever read it know it.”

Elizabeth Janeway

New York Times Book Review (29 September 1968) 42

“The book is not one an adult is likely to reread with pleasure.”

Patricia Meyer Sparks (1972)

“Among the earliest of American novelists to champion the ideal of the New Woman was Louisa May Alcott, who is more apt to be identified with sentimentality and domestic virtues than with a crusading feminist spirit.”

Carolyn Forrey

Women’s Studies 2 (1974)

“It was no accident that Louisa May Alcott (1832-88), drawing on the characters of the March girls in *Little Women*, made Jo, the rebellious tomboy who liked to whistle and talk slang, the writer of the family. Women writers in the early and mid-nineteenth century were in a sense tomboys poaching on male preserves.”

Ann Douglas
The Feminization of American Culture
(Avon 1977) 113

“[Its place in American literature is akin to] taffy pulling and Flag Day.”

Martha Saxton
Louisa May
(Boston 1977) 4

“[*Little Women* marked] the decline of women’s fiction...because [it represents] the transformation of women’s fiction into girl’s fiction. The story of feminine heroism now becomes a didactic instrument for little girls; as an adult genre, woman’s fiction becomes the gothic romance.”

Nina Baym
Woman’s Fiction
(Cornell 1978) 296

“Louisa May Alcott’s Jo March learning to write moral homilies for children instead of ambitious gothic thrillers [is lamentable because the latter would have been] assuredly major.”

Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar
The Madwoman in the Attic
(Yale 1979) 64

“I read and reread it--to the point where I read nothing else for about two years and could tell you exactly what context any line quoted from the book came [*sic*].”

Isabelle Holland (1980)

“I read *Little Women* a thousand times. Ten thousand.”

Cynthia Ozick
The New York Times Book Review (31 January 1982) 24

“A fixed point of reference for life.”

Le Anne Schreiber
“Books of the Times”
New York Times (24 May 1982) C15

“It was the first book I read in English and I loved it. I wept like a crocodile.”

Juris Jurjevics (1982)

“...*Little Women*. That’s where I learned that although it’s very nice to have two clean gloves, it’s even more important to have a little ink on your fingers.”

Miss Manners (1986)

“Jo has given generations of readers like...me permission to try to become what we wished. She has helped us to recognize--and to live with, knowing we’re not alone--the conflict between the writer’s need for solitude and self-absorption and the yearning for the warmth of love.”

Gail Mazur (1988)

“Unlike other works by nineteenth-century women, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* has never suffered obscurity; generations of young girls have encountered the tomboy Jo March, and identified with her rebellion. However, since the novel has traditionally been relegated to the ‘minor’ category of children’s

literature, its importance in presenting the conflict many women experience between the desire for individual self-fulfillment and the demands of family life has tended to be overlooked.... Like her heroine Jo March, Alcott during the 1860s wrote gothic thrillers... Although Jo, wearing the 'moral spectacles' of Professor Bhaer, condemns the stories she writes as 'trash' and consigns them to the fire."

The Heath Anthology of American Literature II (1990)

"Where else...could we have read about an all-female group who discussed work, art, and all the Great Questions--or found girls who wanted to be women and not vice versa."

Gloria Steinem (1992)

"The whole thing is like a horror movie to me."

Camille Paglia (1994)

"I understood what it was like being the outsider... I didn't identify with Beth and all the others.... They were too formal, and they were the women you expected them to be, but Jo broke the mold."

Sonia Sanchez (1994)

"I felt as though I was part of Jo and she was part of me."

Ann Petry (1994)

"*Little Women* changed my life."

Anna Quindlen (1994)

"I, personally, am Jo March, and if her author Louisa May Alcott had a whole new life to live for the sole purpose of talking me out of it, she could not."

Barbara Kingsolver (1995)

"It seems to me that the discussion of *Little Women* has been for too long a limited conversation among feminist critics, with the exception of the occasional male who pats himself on the back for simply liking the novel.... *Little Women* perhaps has its strongest appeal and supporters among female readers who, like Jo, are determined to become writers... The other major group of readers who have helped to maintain Alcott's reputation is 'academic women,' who find Alcott fascinating... *Little Women*'s appeal may also be limited by issues of class, race, and ethnicity as Barbara Sicherman has pointed out; she argues that the 'formulation of *Little Women* as the American female myth is a distinctly middle-class reading, one that assumes both a universality of female experience and a single model of reading Alcott's text that transcends class, race, ethnicity, and historical era'... Even contemporary feminist critics disagree as to whether the book is matriarchal and subversive or ultimately endorses patriarchal assumptions that encourage submission, repression, and renunciation for women.

Writing a 'girls' story at the request of her editor, Alcott created a female-centered society that celebrates female bonding and relegates males to the margins.... In redistributing the balance of power, her male characters are often...viewed as the other.... Lack of engaging male characters largely accounts for the novel's limited readership among male readers. Alcott situates the male reader of *Little Women* in the role of Laurie, the fortunate outsider, who is simply allowed to observe the actions of women without speaking. *Little Women* is an anti-male text that approximates an 'Adamless Eden.'

Alcott infantilizes her male characters. Like J. M. Barrie's *Lost Boys* they are all seeking a mother, be it Marmee or her replication in her daughters.... Laurie's chief attraction to Jo is not so much as a romantic suitor but as a boy who needs a mother. The sisters' consistent references to Laurie as 'boy,' 'bad boy,' 'remarkable boy,' 'dear boy,' 'my boy Teddy,' and 'sensible boy' are much more than simply terms of affection. They put him in his place.... While Amy objects to the admission of boys to the Pickwick Club because 'they only joke and bounce about,' most of the bouncing that Laurie does in the novel is as a hapless suitor tossed to the various March sisters, like an unwanted wedding bouquet circulated among reluctant bridesmaids.

Just as there are no real boys in *Little Women*, nor are there real men: the adult males are portrayed as overaged boys.... As for Professor Bhaer, he too is an overgrown boy; one of the first times Jo encounters him, he is on hands and knees pretending to be an elephant playing with children. Bhaer has more conversations with children than he does with other men in the novel.... There is not a single sustained conversation between male characters, since outside their relationship to women, these characters do not exist.... Jo rejects Laurie for the patriarchal Professor Bhaer, who manages to convince Jo of the worthlessness of her writing. Jo...rejects the sympathetic and supportive male reader. Jo would rather be the pupil of Professor Bhaer, than the equal of or superior to Laurie.... Not a single male in *Little Women* can hold a candle to any of the March sisters. Better to be a dying Beth than a pedantic Professor Bhaer. Better to be a little woman than an eternal boy.”

Jan Susina

“Men and *Little Women*: Notes of a Resisting Male Reader”

Little Women and the Feminist Imagination

eds. Janice M. Alberghene & Beverly Lyon Clark
(Garland 1999)

Michael Hollister (2015)