Louisa May Alcott was no little woman, and her life was no children’s book. The world-famous author of *Little Women* grew up in the innermost circle of the Transcendentalist and antislavery movements, served as a Civil War army nurse, and led a secret literary life writing pulp fiction. She was vivacious, passionate, romantic, principled – and nearly six feet tall! Louisa May Alcott was her own best character, and her life was her own best plot.

Louisa May Alcott’s Boston relatives were wealthy, yet she and her three sisters grew up poor. Their father, educator-philosopher Bronson Alcott, was not a lazy man, but his beliefs were never compatible with earning a living. When Bronson’s utopian farm experiment, Fruitlands, left the Alcotts starving and freezing, Louisa, age 11, vowed to rescue the family from poverty.

The Alcotts, leaving debts in their wake, made some 30 moves before they settled at Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts. Louisa wrote and set *Little Women* in Orchard House, and based heroine Jo March upon herself, but the book is about Louisa’s childhood as she wished it to be, not how it was.

The Alcott family was materially impoverished, but led a rich intellectual life. Louisa’s father’s friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, directed her reading; on excursions to Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau taught her about nature. Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller stood as models of female achievement for her to emulate. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s family lived next door.

When slavery threatened to tear the nation apart, the Alcott home was an Underground Railroad stop for fugitives. Louisa was proud that she knew the great antislavery activists, among them William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman. The Alcotts acted upon their principles, more than once risking their lives for their ideals.
Nineteenth-Century Women

A free woman in the nineteenth century could not vote or own property, and any wealth she had was controlled by her husband after she married. If she had no family money and did not marry, she could barely live at a poverty level through the only respectable jobs available to her: sewing, domestic employment, and teaching. With every breath and every step, voluminous and corseted clothing hampered the middle-class woman of the nineteenth century, and reminded her that women were not supposed to move as freely as men did.

An enslaved woman in the nineteenth century did not own even the rags on her back. She was forbidden to learn to read or write, or to marry. Her master could whip her, rape her, and sell her children. Louisa May Alcott was furious about social injustice; as a teenager she taught free black women enough reading and arithmetic to write bills and count their wages. As an adult she taught black soldiers to read as they trained for war. She wrote stories about race relations, risked her life to end slavery, and called herself a “fanatic” believer in absolute racial equality.

Civil War Nurse

Louisa May Alcott wanted to fight in the Civil War, but as a woman she could enlist only as a nurse. She was sent to the Union Hotel Hospital in the nation’s beleaguered capital to care for some of the thousands of wounded soldiers from the Battle of Fredericksburg. Within days, and without training, Louisa was assisting at assembly-line amputations. “Ether was not thought necessary,” she commented in a letter home. She traveled first-class to Europe, sovereign in New York, dressed in silk, and went to the theater as often as she wanted.

In her last 20 years Louisa May Alcott earned $200,000–millions in present-day terms. Her contemporary, Henry James, earned only $25,000 in his lifetime; Walt Whitman earned less than $10,000 in his. Once a domestic servant herself, at the end of her life Louisa employed 10 servants. Once a hungry child, she made donations to groups who fed them.

Louisa May Alcott’s books for young adults have never been out of print and they have been translated into more than 50 languages. For 140 years Alcott has empowered her readers to forge their own lives and to insist upon equality. As one reader said, “You don’t grow up to walk two steps behind your husband if you’ve met Jo March.”

Rags to Riches

At age 35, Louisa May Alcott took 10 weeks to write Little Women. She struck it rich with its publication, and later amassed a fortune with a series of novels for young adult readers. With her money, she ceded her mother, outfitted her father, paid tuition for her nephews, helped buy a house for her older sister, and sent her younger sister to study art in Paris. She traveled first-class to Europe, sovereign in New York, dressed in silk, and went to the theater as often as she wanted.

Louisa May Alcott wrote Little Women, but did you know she also:

- worked as a seamstress, a laundress, a teacher, a governess, and a domestic servant?
- was raised a vegetarian and lived on a commune?
- secretly wrote pulp fiction teeming with transvestites, murderers, spies, and frauds – and these works remained undiscovered until a half-century after her death?
- was an excellent actress – and may have worked as one under a different name?
- wrote and published groundbreaking stories about interracial marriage, slave revolt, and race relations?
- said she didn’t enjoy writing what she called “moral pap for the young” and that she did it for the money?
- supported equal rights for women, organized women to vote 40 years before the nineteenth amendment was passed, and was the first woman to cast her ballot in a Concord election?
- inspired the careers of Gertrude Stein, Gloria Steinem, Simone de Beauvoir, Cynthia Ozick, Ursula LeGuin, Sandra Day O’Connor, Ruth Ginsberg, Hillary Clinton, and J. K. Rowling?

Related Readings


On the Web

www.louisamayalcott.net
Official website for Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women documentary and biography.

www.classicauthors.net/Alcott
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