

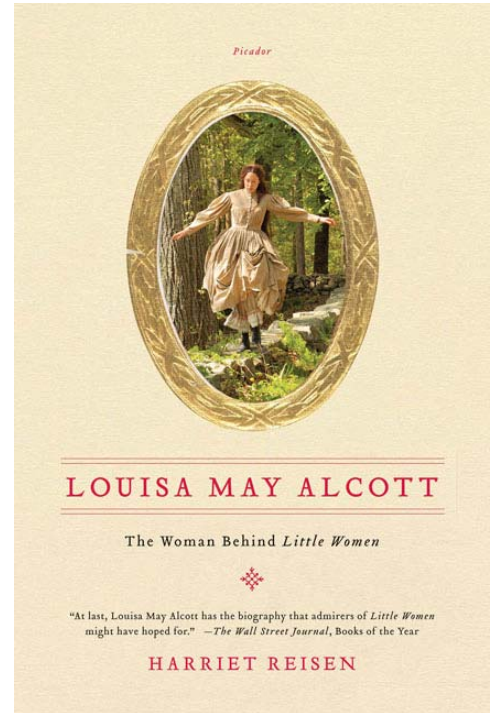
READING GROUP GUIDE

Louisa May Alcott *The Woman Behind Little Women*

by Harriet Reisen

ISBN-10: 0-312-65887-7

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-65887-8



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Louisa May Alcott* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Louisa May Alcott*.

About the Book

In a fresh, modern take on the remarkable Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Reisen's vivid biography explores the author's life in the context of her works, many of which are to some extent autobiographical. Although Alcott secretly wrote pulp fiction, harbored radical abolitionist views, and served as a Civil War nurse, her novels went on to sell more copies than those of Herman Melville and Henry James. Stories and details culled from Alcott's journals, together with revealing letters to family, friends, and publishers, plus recollections of her famous contemporaries provide the basis for this lively account of the author's classic rags-to-riches tale. In *Louisa May Alcott*, the extraordinary woman behind the beloved American classic *Little Women* is revealed as never before.

About the Author

Harriet Reisen has written dramatic and historical scripts for PBS and HBO, including a recent PBS documentary on Louisa May Alcott. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and son.

Discussion Questions

1. What was your first experience with *Little Women*? How old were you? Who introduced you to the story? Which of the sisters did you relate to the most? What scenes do you remember most vividly today?
2. Louisa May Alcott describes the realization of her artistic ambitions as “a long-held dream.” Reisen borrows the phrase to describe her own passion for literary biography. Do you believe that Louisa completely fulfilled her long-held dream, or is her work unfinished? Does Reisen fulfill her dream? Can a biography of someone as complex and influential as Louisa ever be finished?
3. In what ways is Louisa a quintessential American figure?
4. In what ways was Louisa far ahead of her time?
5. What traits did Louisa adopt or inherit from her mother? How do those traits contribute to her survival and success? See her mother's letter to her on page 118. How does her advice become central to Louisa's lifelong “creed” on page 332: “Work is such a beautiful & helpful thing & independence so delightful”?
6. Reisen portrays the relationship between Louisa and Bronson as the most complicated of her life, beginning with their shared birthdays and ending with their near-simultaneous deaths. See Bronson's birthday letters to the child Louisa (52, 79) — how does Reisen characterize Bronson? Does Louisa's desire to remain unattached stem from her view of her parents' marriage? Do Reisen's speculations about Bronson's likely mental illness affect your impression of him? Do your feelings about him change throughout the book?
7. Under the pen name and alter ego A. M. Barnard, Louisa wrote work that is a far cry from the sweet, domestic stories for which she was popularly known. Is it possible to write well about subjects or places one has never experienced, as when Louisa writes about prostitutes, murder, and sexual relationships? Did she in fact have dark knowledge to draw upon as inspiration?
8. Thoreau and Emerson were ever-present forces in Louisa's life. How might she have fared without their help and influence? What are some of the roles they played for her and Bronson?
9. In what ways do the Marches live a rosier life than the Alcotts? Did Louisa create the *Little Women* version of her family in order to explore and work out negative feelings about her childhood? Do you think the book would have been as commercially successful if it were more closely autobiographical?

10. Louisa worked on *Moods* at different times throughout her career, but seems never to have been happy with it (234). Why did she return to it again at the age of 50 rather than starting a new project? Why did she feel the need to write a great “adult” novel, after achieving such honor and success with *Little Women*?
11. Louisa’s poems reveal much about her various emotional and mental states throughout her life. Yet, her response to the publication of the heartfelt “Thoreau’s Flute” (226) was that she was a “mercenary creature” who enjoyed the 10 dollars it brought. Does Louisa seem to take refuge in art perhaps as the only place where she can reveal her vulnerabilities?
12. Would Louisa have been happier had she chosen to be more “selfish” after her success, choosing relaxation and pleasure like May? Why does Louisa believe that May’s near-perfect happiness after her marriage was too good to last? Was May’s untimely death a symbolic blow for Louisa as well in terms of her view of life?
13. Louisa moved countless times in her life, hardly staying in the same place for longer than a year. Why was it so difficult for her to settle in any location? What were the effects of her vagabond lifestyle?
14. Money was Louisa’s greatest motivation for her relentless pace of writing, but fame was an inevitable consequence. Was she ever able to truly enjoy the fruits of her labors? Why did she either dismiss or hide from her fans – with the exception of the Lukens sisters (322)? Why did she wish all her letters to be burned after her death? And why do you think she was so especially careful not to disclose the nature of her relationship with Laddie?
15. Louisa seems to take solace in work and a sense of sacrifice for her family. Was she justified in thinking of herself as a martyr for her family, beginning with Reisen’s oft-mentioned incident with the plumcakes? Does Louisa take up this role independently, or is it forced upon her? Why does it especially bother her not to receive presents for Christmas or birthdays? Consider the tragedy that she died utterly alone on her sickbed.
16. How does this biography affect your previous impressions of Louisa? Of mid-19th century America? Of your own attitudes toward familial responsibility and independence?

For more information on Picador Reading Group Guides:

Call: 646-307-5259

Fax: 212-253-9627

E-mail: readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com

For a complete listing of reading group guides visit: www.picadorusa.com

PICADOR

What to Read Next[®]