

Little Women: The new film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's famed work

By David Walsh
20 January 2020

Directed by Greta Gerwig; written by Gerwig, based on the novel by Louisa May Alcott

Little Women, directed by Greta Gerwig (*Lady Bird*), is the latest and a generally conscientious film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's novel of the same title about four sisters and their parents during the Civil War era, the first part of which was published in 1868.

There have now been seven films based on the deservedly beloved book (including versions directed by George Cukor, Mervyn LeRoy and Gillian Armstrong, featuring—among others—Katharine Hepburn, Joan Bennett, June Allyson, Elizabeth Taylor, Janet Leigh, Winona Ryder and Kirsten Dunst), and it has been serialized on television at least half a dozen more times. There also have been stage, opera and musical adaptations.

Little Women was immediately popular and has never gone out of print, although Alcott by all accounts rather grudgingly wrote her “book for girls,” a genre she described as “moral pap.” Her work has been translated into more than 50 languages.

The film and novel are principally set in Concord, Massachusetts, now a Boston suburb. In the mid-19th century, Concord, the site of the opening shots of the American Revolutionary War, was home to an illustrious group of writers and thinkers, including, at one point or another, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and Alcott herself. Other nearby residents and contemporaries included Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell and Horace Mann.

Alcott lived in Concord as a child, and later as a young woman. Her father, the transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, a complicated, often frustrated man, was a pioneer in progressive education and a fervent Abolitionist. Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller and Julia Ward Howe were all family friends and occasionally Louisa's instructors. The Alcott family had little money and moved frequently, 22 times in 30 years. Louisa was the second of four daughters. *Little Women* is a fictional, somewhat idealized portrait of her family and life in Concord.

Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, and their mother, Margaret (or “Marmee”) March, are trying to make do while the girls' father, Robert, is off with Union Army as a chaplain. The family is poor, although they have one wealthy relative, the irascible Aunt March.

Jo (short for Josephine) is tomboyish and “wild,” Meg beautiful and primarily interested in domestic bliss, Beth kind and gentle, while Amy aspires to be a painter and tends to act selfishly, impulsively. Their relationships and exchanges make up the bulk of the novel and many of its more realistic, enduring moments.

Gerwig has created a framework for her film version. Her *Little Women* begins in 1868 in New York City, with Jo March (Saoirse Ronan), now a teacher, endeavoring to get a story published by Mr. Dashwood (Tracy Letts), an editor of sensational material.

After a few other sequences set in 1868, including one involving Jo's youngest sister, Amy (Florence Pugh), on a trip to Paris with her

great-aunt where she meets a childhood friend, Laurie (Timothée Chalamet), who is drinking too much and generally misbehaving after being rejected by Jo, the film returns seven years in time, to 1861.

Gerwig includes in her film a number of the novel's well-known episodes. One of the opening sequences takes place on Christmas Day. Mrs. March (Laura Dern) asks her daughters, assembled at the breakfast table anticipating a rare feast, to give up their meal to a poor, German immigrant family that lives nearby. They agree, pay a visit to the family, and are eventually rewarded when a rich neighbor, Mr. Laurence (Chris Cooper), Laurie's grandfather, provides them with an even greater repast.

After Amy is not allowed one evening to attend the theater with Jo and Laurie, she burns her elder sister's writings, an apparently unforgivable act. The following day, Amy, desperate to make amends, falls through the ice on a pond chasing after her sister and Laurie, and they are forced to act quickly to save her life.

Mr. March (Bob Odenkirk) falls ill in Washington, D.C., and to help her mother finance a trip there, Jo cuts off her “abundant hair” (a “chestnut mane” in the novel) and sells it to a barber for \$25. She assumes an “indifferent” air in front of her assembled family, but later, in a sweet and authentic moment, relapses into more reasonable adolescent girl behavior, as the book has it: “My... My hair!” burst out poor Jo, trying vainly to smother her emotion in the pillow.”

Mr. Laurence, having lost a daughter, makes available to Beth, who loves music, the piano in his large house. She has the happiest moments of her life playing the instrument. The goodhearted girl continues to visit the impoverished family on her own, while her sisters only make excuses, and falls ill from scarlet fever as a result (based on the illness and death of Alcott's sister Lizzie, who contracted the disease while visiting a German family). Sadly, the fever eventually kills her.

Laurie asks Jo to marry him, but she refuses him, arguing that their temperaments are too much alike and they'd only fight and make each other miserable. On a trip to Europe with his grandfather, Laurie encounters Amy and eventually falls in love with her. At first reluctant about accepting Jo's castoff (“I've been second to Jo my entire life”) and seemingly determined to marry an even richer man she doesn't love, Amy comes around to recognizing Laurie's qualities.

Jo stands apart from convention about marriage, declaring that “Love is not all a woman's good for,” but also admits to being terribly lonely. In New York, she develops feelings for a German professor, Friedrich Bhaer (Louis Garrel), who returns her affections, but dares to criticize some of the stories she's had published as trivial and unworthy of her. They reconcile at her parents' home in Concord. As her editor Mr. Dashwood insists, the central female character must either die or marry.

This *Little Women* is generally appealing and often moving. It draws most of that strength from the original, but Gerwig has worked conscientiously to bring out the novel's qualities. Saoirse Ronan is fine as Jo, although it seems a little ironic for a director presumably disdainful of “objectifying women” and measuring people in general by their looks to

have chosen such an ultimately glamorous pairing as Ronan and Garrel, the well-known French actor (and director). Jo in Alcott's novel is "very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt," with her "long, thick hair ... her one beauty," while Bhaer is older, and in Jo's own words, "rather stout" and hasn't "a really handsome feature in his face," other than "the kindest eyes I ever saw." Hollywood will unfailingly be Hollywood.

Timothée Chalamet is convincing and appealing as the initially dilettantish Laurie, who threatens to become dissolute but eventually finds his moral and emotional way, while the most remarkable performance is given by Florence Pugh as Amy. Pugh, who was memorable in *Lady Macbeth* (2016), continues to demonstrate a ferocity and intelligence that makes a strong impression.

To her credit, and to one's pleasant surprise, Gerwig does not attempt to inject contemporary identity politics into her film, at least not overly so. The framing device of Jo's dealings with her publisher lends itself a little to some of that, but it is kept to a respectable minimum. In general, Gerwig respects Alcott's tone and intentions.

Little Women occupies an unusual place in literary history. As mentioned above, Alcott thought it a relatively lightweight affair ("I plod away," she confided in her diary, "although I don't enjoy this sort of thing"), as did her real-life publisher. Although it is life idealized, "rounded off," occasionally sentimentalized, the novel appealed to readers, young and not so young, at the time of its publication for its relatively unadorned and natural portrait of everyday existence, in opposition to much of the saccharine contemporary treatment of women's and children's lives in particular. Its moralizing is subordinate, in the final analysis, to its realism.

The book's honesty and unpretentiousness are disarming. This description of Jo at her literary efforts presumably bears some relationship to Alcott's own experience and self-image: "She did not think herself a genius by any means, but when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care, or bad weather, while she sat safe and happy in an imaginary world, full of friends almost as real and dear to her as any in the flesh. Sleep forsook her eyes, meals stood untasted, day and night were all too short to enjoy the happiness which blessed her only at such times, and made these hours worth living, even if they bore no other fruit. The divine afflatus usually lasted a week or two, and then she emerged from her 'vortex,' hungry, sleepy, cross, or despondent."

Alcott had the undoubted advantage of her education and intellectual surroundings. Her dialogue is often witty, engaging and precise, no doubt in part the result of having overheard some extraordinary people in conversation. Literary critic Van Wyck Brooks noted Alcott's "life spanned all the great days of Concord." He pointed out that she "had built her first play-houses with diaries and dictionaries and had learned to use them both at four and five." Later, "she browsed in Emerson's library, where she read Shakespeare, Dante, Carlyle and Goethe. She had roamed the fields with Thoreau, studying the birds and flowers."

When, Brooks observed, "she made a 'battering-ram' of her head, to force her way in the world and earn her living, she ignored the conventional notions that governed her sex." As for *Little Women*, he commented, "it was the author's high spirits that captivated the world in this charming book."

No doubt, but there is more to the novel's continuing impact than that. The intellectual conditions of Alcott's life themselves were bound up with great changes in society in the build-up to the second American revolution, the Civil War. As noted, Alcott and her family were fervent Abolitionists. Bronson Alcott was a friend of William Lloyd Garrison and participated in rallies against the return of slaves to their owners. In one instance, during the trial of one such unfortunate in 1854, Alcott joined the storming of a Boston courthouse. The Alcott family house was a

station on the Underground Railway, sheltering fleeing slaves.

Louisa May Alcott volunteered to be a nurse in the Civil War in 1862 on or near her 30th birthday, when a single woman became eligible for such service. "I want to do something," she wrote, for the Union cause. For six weeks in December 1862 and January 1863, Alcott served at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown in the District of Columbia. On her third day there, the casualties from the disastrous Battle of Fredericksburg began to arrive, as she writes in her remarkable *Hospital Sketches* (1863), on "stretchers, each with its legless, armless, or desperately wounded occupant."

Alcott tended to the sick and wounded, "washing faces, serving rations, giving medicine, and sitting in a very hard chair, with pneumonia on one side, diphtheria on the other, five typhoids on the opposite," until she herself contracted typhoid pneumonia. Her father came and took her back to Concord, by which time she had fallen into delirium. She eventually recovered, but the war experience, along with the relationships she developed with African Americans in Washington (she shocked certain colleagues "by treating the blacks as I did the whites"), had life-altering effects.

In an interesting 2015 article devoted to Alcott's war service, John Matteson of CUNY John Jay College argues that "no life experience transformed her writing more profoundly" than her stint as a Civil War nurse. Matteson comments that Alcott was "no stranger to harrowing experiences," including her family's grinding poverty and her much-loved sister's death. She had even contemplated suicide in her mid-20s. "Nevertheless," Matteson writes, "her experience of war exposed her as nothing had yet done to the farthest limits of human struggle and endurance."

Little Women can be categorized, and criticized, in a number of ways. There seems little question, however, but that when Alcott came to take up her "book for girls," about the apparently most mundane details of life, she brought to it some of the intensity and life-and-death urgency of the epoch, which is one of the reasons it still holds interest.

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