

Little Women

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Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)

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Little Women



Two-volume Roberts Brothers printing, from the early 1870s

Author(s)	Louisa May Alcott
Country	United States
Language	English
Genre(s)	Coming of Age
Publisher	Roberts Brothers
Publication date	1868 (1st volume) 1869 (2nd volume)
Media type	Print
Followed by	Little Men

Little Women is a [novel](#) by American author [Louisa May Alcott](#) (1832–1888). The book was written and set in the Alcott family home, [Orchard House](#), in [Concord, Massachusetts](#). It was published in two volumes in [1868](#) and [1869](#). The novel follows the lives of four sisters – Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March – and is loosely based on the author's childhood experiences with her three sisters. The first volume *Little Women* was an immediate commercial and critical success, prompting the composition of the book's second volume titled *Good Wives*, which was successful as well. The publication of the book as a single volume first occurred in 1880 and was titled *Little Women*. Alcott followed *Little Women* with two sequels, also featuring the March sisters, [Little Men](#) (1871) and [Jo's Boys](#) (1886).

Contents

[\[hide\]](#)

- [1 Background](#)
- [2 Characters](#)

- [2.1 Margaret "Meg" March Brooke](#)
- [2.2 Josephine "Jo" March](#)
- [2.3 Elizabeth "Beth" March](#)
- [2.4 Amy March Laurence](#)
- [2.5 Additional characters](#)
- [3 Publication history](#)
- [4 Response](#)
- [5 See also](#)
- [6 References](#)
- [7 External links](#)

[\[edit\]](#) Background

Louisa May Alcott's father [Bronson Alcott](#) approached publisher Thomas Niles about a book he wanted to publish. Their talk soon turned to Louisa. Niles, an admirer of her book *Hospital Sketches*, suggested she write a book about girls which would have widespread appeal. She was not interested at first and instead asked to have her short stories collected. He pressed her to do the girls' book first. In May 1868, she wrote in her journal: "Niles, partner of Roberts, asked me to write a girl's book. I said I'd try."^[1]

She later recalled she did not think she could write a successful book for girls and did not enjoy writing one.^[2] "I plod away", she wrote in her diary, "although I don't enjoy this sort of things."^[3] By June, she sent the first dozen chapters to Niles and both thought they were dull. Niles's niece Lillie Almy, however, reported that she enjoyed them.^[4] The completed manuscript was shown to several girls, who agreed it was "splendid". Alcott wrote, "they are the best critics, so I should definitely be satisfied."^[3]

[\[edit\]](#) Characters



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[\[edit\]](#) Margaret "Meg" March Brooke

At sixteen, she is the oldest sister. She is considered the beauty of the March household and she is well-mannered. Meg runs the household when her mother is absent. Meg also guards Amy from Jo when the two quarrel, just as Jo protects Beth. Meg is employed as a governess for the Kings, a wealthy local family. Meg is allowed into society through her family's genteel background; their poverty would otherwise bar them from this. However, after a few disappointing experiences (first, the Kings' eldest son is disinherited for bad behavior, and later she discovers that the family of her friend Annie Moffatt believes Mrs. March is plotting to match Meg with Theodore "Laurie" Lawrence only for his fortune) she desists in her tryings to be part of "good society". She falls in love with Mr. John Brooke, Laurie's tutor, whom she marries. Meg bears twin children, Margaret "Daisy" and John Brooke "Demi" (short for Demi-John), and "Demi" and "Daisy" live a happy life.

[\[edit\]](#) Josephine "Jo" March

The second-oldest of four sisters, Josephine March is a tomboy; Mr. March has referred to her as his "son Jo" in the past, and her best friend Laurie sometimes calls her "my dear fellow.". When her father went to volunteer in the Civil War, she wanted to fight alongside him. She's clumsy, blunt, opinionated, and jolly.

Jo has a hot temper which often leads her into trouble in spite of her good intentions, but with the help of her own sense of humor, her sister Beth, and her mother she eventually learns to control it.

Jo also loves literature, both reading and writing it. She composes plays for her sisters to perform and writes short stories. Jo initially rejects the idea of marriage and romance, as she felt that it would break up her family and separate her from the sisters she adores. While pursuing a literary career in New York City, she meets and falls in love with Friederich Bhear, a German professor, who introduces her to the world of opera, philosophy, as well as encouraging her to improve her writing. As a result, Jo finally begins to discover her feminine side and becomes more thoughtful.

[\[edit\]](#) Elizabeth "Beth" March

Beth, thirteen when the story starts, is described as shy, even-tempered and musical, and has always been very close to her sister, Josephine. As her sisters begin to leave the nest, Beth wonders what will become of her, as all she wants is to remain at home with her parents. When Beth suffers from scarlet fever, the entire family nurses her, especially Jo, who rarely leaves her side. Eventually, she gets better, but her health is weakened and she never returns to be the rosy plump child she once was.

As she grows, Beth begins to realize that her time with her loved ones is coming to an end, although she is still trying to make it better for those who will be left behind. Finally, the family begins to realize that Beth will not live much longer. They separate a room for her, filled with all the things she loves best: her kittens, piano, father's books, Amy's sketches, and her beloved dolls. She is never idle, except in sleep; she even knits and sews things for the kids that pass under her window on the way to school or returning home. But soon, Beth puts down her sewing needle, saying that it grew "so heavy", never to pick it up again. In the end, she gives her dying attention to Josephine and claims she was happy to go home, only sad that she would miss them all very dearly.

[\[edit\]](#) Amy March Laurence

The youngest sister—age twelve when the story begins—Amy is interested in art. She is described by the author as a 'regular snow-maiden' with curly golden hair and blue eyes, 'pale and slender' and 'always carrying herself' like a very proper young lady.^[5] She is dissatisfied with the shape of her nose which she attempts to fix with a [clothespin](#). She is "cool, reserved and worldly" which sometimes causes her trouble. Often "petted" because she is the youngest, she can behave in a vain and spoiled way, and throws tantrums when she is unhappy. Her relationship with Jo is sometimes strained; the literary Jo particularly dislikes when Amy uses big words, mispronouncing them or using them incorrectly. Their most significant argument occurs when Jo will not allow Amy to accompany Jo, Meg and Laurie to the theater. In revenge, Amy finds Jo's unfinished [novel](#) and throws it all in the fireplace

grate, burning years of work. When Jo discovers this, she boxes Amy's ears and tells her, "I'll never forgive you! Never!" Amy's attempts to apologize to Jo are unsuccessful. When Laurie and Jo go skating, Amy tags along after them, but she arrives at the [lake](#) too late to hear Laurie's warning about thinning ice. Under Josephine's horrified stare, Amy falls through the ice, and is rescued by Laurie's prompt intervention. Realizing she might have lost her sister, Jo's anger dissolves and the two become more close. When Beth is ill with scarlet fever, Amy is sent to stay with Aunt March as a safety precaution. Aunt March grows fond of her, as Amy's natural grace and docility are more to her taste. Amy is invited to accompany Uncle and Aunt Carrol and cousin Flo on a European trip. Although she enjoys travelling, after seeing the works of artists such as [Michelangelo](#) and [Raphael](#), Amy gives up her art, because she believes herself to be lacking in talent. In Europe, Amy meets up with Laurie, and shortly after Beth dies, they marry. Later, Amy gives birth to daughter Elizabeth (Beth or Bess).

[\[edit\]](#) Additional characters

Margaret "Marmee" March: The girls' mother and head of household while her husband is away at war. She engages in charitable works and attempts to guide her girls' morals and to shape their characters, usually through experiments. She confesses to Jo (after the argument with Amy) that her temper is as volatile as Jo's own, but that she has learned to control it.

Robert "Father" March: Formerly wealthy, it is implied that he helped friends who could not repay a debt, resulting in the family's poverty. A [scholar](#) and a [minister](#), he serves as a colonel in the [Union Army](#) and is wounded in December 1862.

Hannah Mullet: The March family maid and cook, their only servant. She is of Irish descent and very dear to the family. She is treated more like a member of the family than a servant.

Aunt Josephine March: Mr. March's aunt, a rich widow. Somewhat temperamental and prone to being judgmental, she disapproves of the family's poverty, their charitable work, and their general disregard for the more superficial aspects of society's ways. Her vociferous disapproval of Meg's impending engagement to the impoverished Mr. Brooke becomes the proverbial 'last straw', convincing her great-niece Meg to affiance herself with the young man.

Uncle and Aunt Carrol: Sister and brother-in-law of Mr. March.

Theodore "Laurie" Laurence: A rich young man, older than Jo but younger than Meg, who is a next-door neighbor to the March family. Laurie lives with his overprotective grandfather, Mr. Laurence. Laurie's father had eloped with an Italian [pianist](#) and was disowned. Both died young, and as an [orphan](#), Laurie was sent to live with his grandfather. Laurie is preparing to enter at [Harvard](#) and is being tutored by Mr. John Brooke. He is described as attractive and charming, with black eyes, brown skin, curly black hair, and small hands and feet. In the second book, Laurie falls in love with Jo and after her return from [New York City](#), he offers to marry her. She refuses, and out of pity, Mr. Laurence persuades Laurie to go abroad with him to Europe. There he meets up with Amy March and the two eventually fall for each other. They later marry while still in Europe, shortly before their return home to America.

Mr. James Laurence: A wealthy neighbor to the Marches and Laurie's grandfather. Lonely in his mansion, and often at odds with his high-spirited grandson, he finds comfort in becoming a benefactor to the Marches. He protects the March sisters while their parents are

away. He was a friend to Mrs March's father, and admires their charitable works. He develops a special, tender friendship with Beth, who reminds him of his deceased granddaughter, and he gives Beth his daughter's [piano](#).

John Brooke: During his employment with the Laurences as a tutor to Laurie, he falls in love with Meg. When Laurie leaves for college, Brooke continues his employment with Mr. Laurence as an assistant. He accompanies Mrs. March to [Washington D.C.](#) when her husband is ill with pneumonia. When Aunt March overhears Meg rejecting John's declaration of love, she threatens Meg with disinheritance because she suspects that Brooke is only interested in Meg's future prospects. Eventually Meg admits her feelings to Brooke, they defy Aunt March (who ends up accepting the marriage), and they are engaged. (This part of the plot is similar to, and perhaps inspired by, one of the later chapters in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*.) Brooke serves in the Union Army for a year and is invalided home after being wounded. Brooke marries Meg a few years later when the war has ended and she has turned twenty.

Fred Vaughan: A Harvard friend of Laurie's who, in Europe, courts Amy. Rivalry with the much richer Fred for Amy's love inspires the dissipated Laurie to pull himself together so as to be worthy of her.

The Hummels: A poor German family consisting of a widowed mother and seven children. Marmee and the girls help them by bringing food, firewood, blankets and other comforts. Three of the children die of scarlet fever and Beth contracts it while caring for them.

The Kings: A wealthy family who employs Meg as a governess. They are not described any further in the book.

The Gardiners: Wealthy friends of Meg's. The Gardiners are portrayed as goodhearted but vapid.

Mrs. Kirke: A friend of Mrs March's who runs a boarding house in New York. She employs Jo as governess to her two girls.

Professor Friedrich "Fritz" Bhaer: A poor German immigrant who was a famous professor in Berlin but now lives in Mrs. Kirke's boarding house and works as a language master, seeing some of his students in Mrs. Kirke's parlor. He and Jo become friendly and he subtly critiques Jo's writing, encouraging her to become a serious writer instead of writing "sensation" stories for weekly [tabloids](#). The two eventually marry, raise Fritz's two orphaned nephews, Franz and Emil, and their own sons, Rob and Teddy.

Franz and Emil Hoffmann: Mr. Bhaer's two nephews whom he looks after following the death of his sister. Franz is two years older than Emil.

Tina: The small daughter of Mrs. Kirke's French washerwoman: she is a favorite of Professor Bhaer's.

Miss Norton: A worldly tenant living in Mrs. Kirke's boarding house. She occasionally takes Jo under her wing and entertains her.

[\[edit\]](#) Publication history

The first volume of *Little Women* was published by Roberts Brothers in 1868.^{[[citation needed](#)]} The first printing of 2,000 copies sold out quickly and more printings were soon ordered but the company had trouble keeping up with demand. They announced: "The great literary hit of the season is undoubtedly Miss Alcott's *Little Women*, the orders for which continue to flow in upon us to such an extent as to make it impossible to answer them with promptness."^{[[3](#)]} Alcott delivered the manuscript for the second part on New Year's Day 1869, only three months after publication of part one.^{[[6](#)]}

[\[edit\]](#) Response

[G. K. Chesterton](#) noted that in *Little Women*, Alcott "anticipated [realism](#) by twenty or thirty years," and that Fritz's proposal to Jo, and her acceptance, "is one of the really human things in human literature."^{[[7](#)]} Gregory S. Jackson recently argued that Alcott's use of realism belongs to the American Protestant pedagogical tradition that includes a range of religious literary traditions with which Alcott was familiar. The nineteenth-century images he produces of devotional guides for children provides an interesting background for the game of "playing pilgrim" that, in part, comprises Book I's plot structure.^{[[8](#)]}

[\[edit\]](#) See also



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- [Gypsy Breynton](#), a contemporary tale of a tomboy at the time of the Civil War
- [Orchard House](#), where Alcott lived while writing *Little Women*
- [The Wayside](#), where Alcott and her sisters lived many of the scenes that later appeared in *Little Women*

[\[edit\]](#) References

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- ↑ Matteson, John. *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007: 335–. [ISBN 978-0-393-33359-6](#).
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- ↑ [G. K. Chesterton](#), "Louisa Alcott," in *A Handful of Authors*.
- ↑ Gregory S. Jackson, "The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism." Chicago: Chicago The University of the Frankfort Christian Academy, 2009: 125-156. ISBN 13: 978-0-226-39004-8.

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