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GOLDEN GIRLS: (FROM TOP) LAURA DERN AS MARMEE; AND SAOIRSE RONAN, ELIZA SCANLON,
EMMA WATSON AND FLORENCE PUGH AS THE MARCH SISTERS. PICTURELUX / THE HOLLYWOOD
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Little women writ large

A new film of the American classic asks whether grown women can retain the spirited independence of their girlhood. It's a question that Louisa May Alcott and her pioneering family understood all too well.

BY LINDALL GORDON

Can adult women retain the passionate idealism of girlhood? Greta Gerwig's new film adaptation of *Little Women* (see page 105) moves back and forth between the four March sisters as girls and as grown women, teasing out the issue. This is the eighth film version of *Little Women* since 1933, when Katharine Hepburn, suitably bony and gruff, played the lead as "boyish" Jo March, growing up to be true to her youthful idealism despite the constraints of poverty and the warnings of her mother. It's an appealing idea to look back to the promise of the free-spirited American girl, at this time when women such as Elizabeth Warren are coming forward as candidates for the presidency and Nancy Pelosi campaigns to impeach Donald Trump. The question of whether the independent spirit of girlhood can survive in a grown-up's voice, speaking truth to power, seems particularly urgent.

Jo, the second of the four March sisters and the "unladylike" heroine of the novel, idolised by readers across centuries, exemplifies the conflict of imaginative promise and the

limitations enforced by circumstance. In many classic novels, spirited girls end up miserable, married or dead. Emily Dickinson sums this up in one line, “Born – Bridalled – Shrouded – in a day”. Jo tries to take her father’s place, as best she can at 15, while he is fighting for the abolitionist North against the slave states of the South in the American Civil War. When her father gets wounded, Jo cuts off her abundant chestnut hair – her only feminine beauty – to contribute a few dollars to her mother’s journey from New England in order to nurse her husband in a Washington hospital.

Girls aspiring to womanhood used to curl and frizz their hair, and cutting long hair was not done. But in 1860 wild Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, too brainy not to be a freak among tame little girls, cuts off her hair in a fury of protest against curling, brushing and sitting still in silence. Like Jo, this George Eliot character became an icon for intelligent girls cooped up at home in the 1860s, with no prospect of higher education. Their sole choice was to marry or be an old maid. In 1861, Minny Temple, an untamed girl of 16 from the fashionable resort town of Newport, Rhode Island, cut off her hair with what her cousin, William James, called “a vandal hand”. There is an exquisite photograph of her shorn head and bared neck. Another cousin, Henry James, adored her eager spirit and made her the model for the wilful, idealistic American girl of his novels, who “affronts her destiny” in *The Portrait of a Lady*. I wonder if Jo’s impulse to cut off her hair is not entirely altruistic and is to some extent a protest against the decorative excesses of femininity that tempt her sisters, Meg and Amy.

Jo and her eldest sister Meg, aged 16, have to work instead of going to school. We might contrast the situation of the poet, Emily Dickinson, who attended Amherst’s first-rate co-educational school, where classes in Latin were open to her, followed by a year in a women’s college, Mount Holyoke,

founded as early as 1836, where she studied mostly science. Her father, a lawyer, could afford this. Grim though Mr Dickinson was, he did see fit to excuse this extraordinary daughter from housework so that she could give her mornings over to poetry.

Little Women shows how deadly work could be for young women. In the 1860s there was still no employment for middle-class women apart from being a companion, governess or teacher. Meg, the prettiest of the March girls, is a governess to spoilt children; Jo is a companion to cross, reproving Aunt March, the family's rich relation.

The sisters escape from this reality by imagining "castles in the air". Jo's "favourite dream" is to do "something heroic or wonderful... I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all some day. I think I shall write books." This is the draw of *Little Women* over the century and a half since it came out: collectively, the sisters speak to the aspirations of assorted girls, from the third daughter Beth's love of piano; and the youngest, Amy, who wants to be an artist; to Jo, already publishing her first newspaper piece, who wants to be forever well known – as indeed was the fate of the author, Louisa May Alcott.

Little Women draws on the life of Alcott, who, like Jo, took it upon herself to support a family as altruistic and poor as the Marches. Her father, Bronson Alcott, was a transcendentalist dreamer and educator whose schools all failed, and whose family froze and starved when in 1843-44 they joined "Fruitlands", an experiment in communal living. Bronson did not recognise his wife's sacrifices and, understandably

resentful, Abby May rescued her children with initial help from her brother, and later from her own inheritance, supplemented by a family friend, the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. With his help, the family bought “Hillside” in Concord, Massachusetts, and later in 1857, “Orchard House”, now a museum. Only the family’s youngest daughter, named after her mother and known as May, went to school – just like Amy in the novel. And yet Louisa May Alcott did have the advantage of an extraordinary literary and transcendentalist milieu in Concord. Her family mixed with Emerson, the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne and the feminist Margaret Fuller, the first woman to be a professional journalist. Alcott also had some lessons from the naturalist, Henry David Thoreau. Alcott gave the real-life name of her beloved third sister, Elizabeth Sewall Alcott, to Beth – for like Beth, this sister was frail, and died at 22. Beth’s tender nurture of dolls and kittens, her speechless joy in the piano given to her by a benevolent neighbour, her illness and later her death are infused with the pain of loss Alcott herself had suffered.

The sequel to *Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy*, the novel’s original title, was a separate book called *Good Wives*. It’s now subsumed in *Little Women*. Good wives are what the three remaining sisters become, models of tenderness and care. Jo, married and a mother, does retain elements of her girlhood in running her unconventional school for rough and needy boys. I like the way she dashes about with her baby under her arm, active as ever, with her hat askew – she cares nothing for appearance, only for a community where children thrive. This scene is more idealised than Jo’s girlhood, but it is still admirable. The domestic benevolence practised by little women (by “little”, Alcott suggests not only idealistic girls but also their minimised status in society) has its own power.

It’s tempting to resent “Marmee” for encouraging her

daughters to subdue their natural selves. Jo, for instance, must control her temper, her outspokenness and boyish manners. Jo rejects any hint of romance: “Don’t mean to have any.” Her friend, Laurie, complains of the cold water she throws on his love: “[You] get so thorny no one dares touch or look at you.” Jo retorts that she’s “too busy to be worried with nonsense”. I remember my disappointment as a girl-reader when Jo finally succumbs to stout, kindly Professor Bhaer and becomes “Mother Bhaer” to the boys she takes into the school they found. Fulfilling though it is to nurture lost boys, Jo does not, sadly, go on as a writer. Amy too, as a mother, surrenders her dream to be an artist, though we are told that – as a sideline – she has begun to sculpt a baby in marble, a memorial of sorts to the child she had lost and to Beth.

Meg, who always wanted love and motherhood, is the only sister continuously true to the girl she had been, but her “castle in the air” did not conflict with convention. To readers today, the two other sisters, turned wives, are too perfect, and Marmee too sentimentally unreal. What are we to make of these “good wives”? It would be easy to disparage them, but *Little Women* does bring home the altruistic traits women have kept alive in our species: nurture, listening, compromise (traits the civilised of both sexes share).

The Jo March character of spirited independence and care for others has roots and a legacy in the real-life May family. Louisa May Alcott was the product of a reforming New England family known for its stands against slavery and the oppression of women. Her uncle, the Unitarian Reverend Samuel Joseph May, had invited the controversial feminist and Southern anti-slavery campaigner, Angelina Grimké, to speak in his pulpit, and welcomed freed slaves to sit in the front pew of his church instead of apart at the back; for this, his effigy was

burnt, and, outside his church, mobs rushed at him. He was brother to Mrs Alcott, a source for Marmee – who has her daughters give their Christmas breakfast to a family of hungry immigrants.

The Rev May's daughter, another Abigail, who was a cousin of Louisa May, was a Jo March character who didn't marry. Both May cousins refused the notion of a woman's sphere. They dressed plainly in tailored clothes and tucked their hair behind their ears, determined to live for their work. When Abigail May was elected to the Massachusetts Board of Education, the city solicitor tried in vain to block the appointment of a woman. She became a guiding light for the American Association for the Advancement of Women.

Abigail and Louisa were both major influences on their niece, Mary May. When *Little Women* was published in 1868, Mary May was ten years old and agog over Jo March. Her life, too, turned out to have a Jo character, and in 1888, when both her aunts died, Mary May came into her own, shaping an alternative feminism that did not seek to replicate the behaviour of men but instead built on domestic traditions. At the age of 28 she married a Unitarian minister, the Rev Christopher Eliot, after converting him to the May way of thinking. In a poor parish in West Boston, it was Mary's habit to cook up a storm and dispense home-made meals to the needy, irrespective of their backgrounds and religious affiliations – shades of Marmee, but on a big scale.

As a professional writer, Louisa May Alcott shared a problem with Emily Dickinson, another single woman who remained true to a girlhood gift for writing. They had to deal with the same clueless editor, Thomas Niles, at Roberts Brothers, a prestigious publishing house in Boston. Niles had a mulish face with a protruding lower lip, concealed at the corners with a walrus moustache. He suggested to Alcott that she write a

book for girls, but didn't take to the first dozen chapters of *Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy*. Inexplicably, he thought them dull. Fortunately, he showed the chapters to his niece, Lillie Almy, who laughed and cried. Niles then revised his opinion and Alcott went on with the book. In a similar way Niles did not at first accept some of Emily Dickinson's poems, but after her death was persuaded to publish more of them.

Another Boston reader who didn't appreciate Alcott was Henry James. In a mid-1860s review of her novel *Moods*, he put down its "precocious" girl. But by 1878, James would colonise this woman's territory with his first success, *Daisy Miller*. Daisy, wilfully scooting around Europe, defying convention, is nothing if not precocious. So too is the independent Isabel Archer, who has aspirations beyond marriage, as Alcott did.

Prejudice against the woman writer was one of the trials Louisa May Alcott had to face. To put her down was an action unworthy of James's greatness, as it had been unworthy of Hawthorne to moan that America had been taken over by "a damned mob of scribbling women" who wrote "trash". TS Eliot too, in his capacity as assistant editor of the *Egoist* (a journal owned by a woman and called originally the *New Freewoman*) would assure his father that he was doing his utmost to keep women out: "I struggle to keep the writing as much as possible in Male hands, as I distrust the Feminine in literature." Women lowered the tone, he repeats in a letter to Ezra Pound, when they manage contributions to another journal founded by women, the *Little Review*.

In 1915, Eliot published his poem "Cousin Nancy", a caricature of a fast woman named Miss Nancy Ellicott. She is so alarmingly forceful that when she strode across the New England hills, she "broke them". Cousin Nancy is of course an imagined figure, but it is worth noting that at the time, Eliot's

Boston cousin, Martha May Eliot (the daughter of Mary May and Christopher Eliot, great-niece of Louisa May Alcott) was at the top of her class at the co-educational Johns Hopkins Medical School (as a woman, she had been rejected by Harvard). She was also at the outset of her brilliant career advancing the new field of paediatrics, and bringing well baby clinics to remote, disadvantaged and black communities across the country. Her younger sister Abigail Eliot established advanced nursery education for poor children. These May descendants continued the Jo March strain of committed altruism in the face of formidable disparagement (the American Medical Association argued that, as a spinster, Martha May Eliot could have no knack with infants).

The issue of whether March idealism can be sustained into adulthood opens up further questions. Are some gifted women who keep girlhood going destined to be outsiders? There was the intransigent solitary, Emily Brontë; and Dickinson keeping to her room in Amherst; and George Eliot's calling herself an "outlaw" and "failure of nature" because she could not conform to what was expected. A larger question is what women at full strength might contribute to civilisation.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf is explicit in stating that "the great problem of the true nature of women" is one she cannot solve. The answer, she says, must wait for her sex to be tested in politics and the professions. Another 100 years, she judges. Well, we're almost there: only ten more years to go.

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