



LITTLE WOMEN (ANNOTATED)

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

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- Biography of the author
- Historical context of the book
- Literary critique

Little Women (or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy) is a novel by American author Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888). Written and set in the Alcott family home, Orchard House, in Concord, Massachusetts. It was published in two parts 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 part of the book was an immediate commercial and critical success, prompting the composition of the book's second part titled *Good Wives*, also a huge success. Both parts were first published as a single volume in 1880. Alcott followed *Little Women* with two sequels reprising the March sisters, *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886). *Little Women* has been adapted to play, musical, opera, film, and animated feature.

Alcott's original work explores the overcoming of character flaws. Many of the chapter titles in this first part are allusions to the allegorical concepts and places in *Pilgrim's Progress*. When young, the girls played *Pilgrim's Progress* by taking an imaginary journey through their home. As young women, they agree to continue the figurative journey, using the "guidebooks" — copies of the New Testament, described as "that beautiful old story of the best life ever lived" (chapter 1, see also chapter 19) — they receive on Christmas morning. Each of the March girls must struggle to overcome a major character flaw: Meg, vanity; Jo, a hot temper; Beth, shyness; and Amy, selfishness. The girls must work out these flaws in order to live up to their mother and father's high expectations as mothers, wives, sisters, and citizens.

In the course of the novel, the girls become friends with their next-door neighbor, the teenage boy Laurie (whose given name is "Theodore"), who becomes a particular friend of Jo. In addition to the more serious themes outlined above, the book describes the light hearted, often humorous activities of the sisters and their friend, such as creating a newspaper and picnicking, and the various scrapes that Jo and Laurie get into. The story represents family relationships and explores family life thoroughly. It also reflects issues of feminism, as Jo consistently struggles with the boundaries 19th century society placed on females, including not being able to fight in a war, not being able to attend college, and being pressured by her Aunt March to find a suitable husband to take care of her.

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