



Little Women

By Louisa May Alcott
Adapted by Bryon Cahill

Act I All little girls grow up

Characters

(main parts in boldface)

Louisa May Alcott, author
of the story

Male Narrators 1, 2, 3

Jo (Josephine) March, age 15

Meg March, age 16

Amy March, the youngest sister

Beth March, age 13

Mrs. March (Marmee), mother
of Jo, Meg, Amy, and Beth

Laurie (Theodore Laurence),
age 15, neighbor of the
March family

stories. I wrote what I knew. My life became my words, and now, looking back, I've really filled the pages. Some of it is fiction, some of it is real, and all of it is heartfelt.

I wouldn't have succeeded in this world without my family. We didn't have a lot, but we had each other, and that kept me warm.

Narrator 1: At the March family home in Concord, Mass., four sisters sit in the living room, chatting in front of a fire. The year is 1861, and Mr. March is away, serving as a chaplain to Union soldiers fighting in the Civil War.

Narrator 2: Before leaving, he gave most of his money to an unfortunate friend in need.

Jo March: Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents.

Meg March: It's so dreadful being poor!

Amy March: I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things and other girls nothing at all.

Scene 1

Louisa May Alcott: When I started writing, I was just a little girl, and my whole world was my sisters. I began keeping a journal and then turned to writing short poems and

Clockwise from top left:
Trini Alvarado as Meg,
Susan Sarandon as Marmee,
Claire Danes as Beth,
Kirsten Dunst as Amy, and
Winona Ryder as Jo in the
1995 film *Little Women*

Jo: Someday I will be a famous writer, and we will no longer have these worries.

Meg: That will be fine, but in the meantime, I teach tiresome children nearly all day, when I long to enjoy myself at home.

Jo: You don't have half such a hard time as I do. How would you like to shut yourself up for hours with fussy old aunt March?

Beth March: It's naughty to fret, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy are the worst work in the world.

Narrator 3: The girls' mother enters the room.

Amy: When will Father be coming home from the war, Marmee?

Mrs. March: Not for many months, dear, unless he falls sick. He will stay and do his work as faithfully as he can, and we won't ask him back a minute sooner than he can be spared.

Narr 1: You can see the disappointment on the girls' faces.

Mrs. March: I know what will cheer you girls up.

Narr 2: Mrs. March reveals a letter she has been holding behind her back.

Jo: A letter! A letter! Three cheers for Father!

Narr 3: Mrs. March sits, and the girls all huddle around her. As she reads the letter, their faces begin to brighten.

Mrs. March: (reading) "Tell my girls that I think of them by day, pray for them by night, and find my best

comfort in their affection at all times. Give them all my dear love and a kiss. I know that they will remember what I said to them—that they will be loving children to you and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them, I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women."

Scene 2

Alcott: When I created these characters, I drew them from my life. Meg, Beth, and Amy are very much like my sisters. Meg is the oldest. At 16, she is beautiful and a bit vain. But she is also practical and sweet-tempered. Beth is 13. She is the angel—shy and quiet and always devoting herself to good works. Amy, the youngest, always seems to get what she wants. But she looks up to her sisters and eventually becomes a wonderful little lady. I guess you could say that Jo is most like me. At 15, she is a tomboy who often lets her anger take control of her.

Narr 1: On New Year's Eve, Jo and Meg attend a local party. Jo's dress was blackened when she stood too close to the stove at home, so she has to stand with her back to the wall most of the night to hide the scorched spot.

Narr 2: As Meg leaves to gossip with some friends, Jo stands alone. When a boy approaches her, she ducks behind a curtain and steps into a smaller room, where she finds herself face to face with another boy.

He is her next-door neighbor, Laurie.

Jo: Oh, pardon me. I didn't know anyone was in here.

Laurie: Don't mind me. Stay if you like. I only came in here because I don't know many people and felt a little strange.

Jo: I do believe I've had the pleasure of seeing you somewhere before.

Laurie: I live next door to you with my grandfather. My name is Theodore Laurence, but I like to be called Laurie. Don't you like to dance, Miss March?

Jo: Please call me Jo. I like to dance if there is plenty of room and everyone is lively. In a place like this, I'm sure to upset something,

tread on people's toes, or do something dreadful, so I keep out of mischief and let my sister Meg sail about.

Narr 3: Laurie peeks out at the main room.

Laurie: Which one is Meg?

Narr 1: Jo points out her sister to Laurie.

Laurie: She looks so fresh and quiet. She dances like a lady.

Narr 2: A grand polka begins, and Laurie holds out his hand to invite Jo to dance.

Jo: Oh, I can't. Don't laugh, but I'm afraid that the back of my dress was burned very badly earlier. I can't be seen out there.

Laurie: Then we shall dance in here,



Laurie, played by Christian Bale, and Jo, played by Winona Ryder

Laurie peeks out at the main room.

and I promise I won't laugh.

Narr 3: Laurie and Jo dance energetically in their private room. They laugh and swing each other around and around until the dance is finished. As they are catching their breath, Meg steps into the room.

Meg: Oh, there you are, Jo. I've looked everywhere for you. I've sprained my ankle, so we must leave now.

Laurie: I have a carriage. I can take you girls home myself.

Meg: No. That's quite all right. Thank you anyway.

Jo: (to Meg) Would you rather walk home on your sprained ankle, Meg?

Meg: (after a pause) Very well. Let's go quietly.

Narr 1: Laurie takes the girls home.

Narr 2: In the coming months, Jo and Laurie visit each other often.

Alcott: I was a tomboy, like Jo. No boy could be my friend till I had beaten him in a race. Do you think there is a romance brewing between Jo and Laurie? I beg you, dear reader, to be patient. It takes two flints to make a fire.

Scene 3

Narr 3: One day, Jo and Meg are getting ready to go to the theater, when Amy starts asking them questions.

Amy: Where are you going?

Jo: Never mind. Little girls

shouldn't ask questions.

Amy: You're going to the theater with Laurie, aren't you? Well, I want to go too!

Meg: (to Jo) Oh, I suppose we can take her. What's the harm?

Jo: If she goes, I won't. And if I don't go, Laurie won't like it. It would be very rude, after he invited only us, to drag Amy along. Come on, let's go.

Narr 1: Jo and Meg leave Amy at the door.

Amy: You'll be sorry for this, Jo

'You'll be sorry for this, Jo March!'



Kirsten Dunst
as Amy

Kobal

March!

Narr 2: After a charming afternoon at the theater, the girls return home. Jo finds that the book she has been writing for many years is missing, and she confronts Amy.

Jo: What have you done with my book, Amy?

Amy: You'll never see your silly old

book again. I burned it up!

Narr 3: Jo begins shaking Amy furiously. Crying and screaming, the older girl has to be pulled away from the child by her other sisters.

Jo: You wicked, wicked girl! I'll never forgive you as long as I live!

Narr 1: Jo runs away, crying. Amy calls after her.

Amy: I'm so sorry, Jo. Please forgive me!

Narr 2: The next morning, Jo goes ice-skating with Laurie. Amy follows them onto the pond.

Amy: Jo, I'm sorry. Wait for me, please!

Narr 3: Jo ignores her and forges ahead.

Laurie: What's wrong with Amy?

Jo: Just ignore her. Let's not let her ruin our day.

Narr 1: Suddenly, the ice cracks beneath Amy's feet, and she plunges into the frigid water.

Amy: (crying out) Help!

Narr 2: Jo and Laurie quickly skate back to Amy. Careful not to get too close to the hole, Laurie lies flat on his belly and stretches a branch out to her.

Narr 3: He pulls shivering Amy out of the water, wraps his coat around her, and rushes her home.

Narr 1: In front of a warm fire, Amy recovers.

Jo: Oh, Amy, will you ever forgive me? I'm so sorry. I'll never be cross with you again!

Narr 2: The child falls asleep in the warm embrace of her sister.

Scene 4

Alcott: When I was growing up, my father was a well-known writer who led high-minded discussion groups about American transcendentalism. That movement of thinkers believed in the spiritual communion of man and nature and advocated a simple way of life. My father's work was admirable, but he was often away from home, and my sisters and I worked a great deal around the house. At times, it didn't seem fair, and I guess that came through when I wrote about the Marches.

Amy: I have an excellent idea! Let's not do any lessons for a while or do any work.

Narr 3: The girls think that is a splendid idea and consult their mother.

Meg: May we take a long rest from our daily chores, Marmee?

Mrs. March: You may try your experiment for a week and see how you like it. I think that by Saturday night, you will find that all play and no work is as disagreeable to you as all work and no play is.

Narr 1: The next morning, Jo has not filled the vases, and Beth has not dusted. Amy's books are scattered about, and Meg is yawning and daydreaming in the corner.

Narr 2: A few days go by. Mrs. March and Hannah, the housekeeper, have stopped doing their chores as well. The house is a mess, and no one is cooking meals. Jo is out of sorts and wanders into the

parlor to find Beth crying.

Jo: Beth, what's the matter?

Beth: It's all my fault—I forgot him. There isn't a seed or a drop of water left.

Narr 3: Jo sees that Beth is holding their canary, Pip, in her hands. Pip is dead.

Beth: Oh, Pip! How could I be so cruel to you?

Narr 1: Amy enters.

Amy: Put him in the oven.

Beth: What?
Amy: Maybe

he will get warm and revive.

Beth: (crying) He's been starved, and he shan't be baked now that he's dead. I'll make him a shroud and bury him in the garden.

Jo: Don't cry, Bethy. It's a pity, but it seems as though nothing has gone right this week, and Pip has had the worst of it all.

Narr 2: The girls bury their bird.

Mrs. March: Are you satisfied with your experiment, girls, or do you want another week of it?

Jo: I don't!

Meg, Beth, and Amy: Nor!!

Mrs. March: I wanted you to see how the comfort of all depends on each doing her share faithfully. Don't you feel that it is pleasanter to help one another, to have daily duties that



'I wanted you to see how the comfort of all depends on each doing her share.'

make leisure sweet when it comes, and to bear and forbear, so that home may be comfortable and lovely to us all?
Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy: We do, Marmee, we do!

Scene 5

Alcott: I remember when I first submitted some stories for publication. Waiting to hear whether they would be accepted was sheer torture.

Laurie: Hurrah for

Miss March, the celebrated American author!

Jo: Hush! I told you that I only submitted a few stories. It won't come to anything.

Laurie: I've read your writings, Jo. You won't fail. Your stories are works of Shakespeare compared to half the rubbish that is printed every day.

Now I must tell you, I too have a secret.

Jo: What's your secret, Laurie?

Laurie: I know where Meg's glove is.

Jo: Is that all? Meg lost her glove, and you found it? That's not much of a secret.

Laurie: I saw it in the pocket of my tutor, Mr. Brooke. She must have given it to him as a keepsake. Isn't it

romantic?

Jo: No. It's horrid! It won't be allowed. Oh, it's disgusting! I wish you hadn't told me.

Laurie: I thought you'd be pleased to know.

Jo: At the thought of someone coming to take our Meg away? No, thank you!

Laurie: You'll feel better about it when somebody comes to take you away.

Jo: I'd like to see anyone try it!

Laurie: (laughing) So should I!

Jo: I don't think secrets agree with me. I feel all rumpled up in my mind.

Laurie: Race down this hill with me and you'll be all right.

Narr 3: Jo and Laurie race down the hill. Laurie saunters back to his house as Jo joins her sister Meg in the yard.

Meg: You have been running again, Jo. When will you stop your romping ways?

Jo: Never till I'm old and stiff and have to use a crutch. Don't make me grow up before my time, Meg. It's hard enough to have you change all of a sudden. Let me be a little girl as long as I can.

Narr 1: Over the next two weeks, Jo acts very peculiarly. She rushes to the door whenever the postman rings, is rude to Mr. Brooke whenever they meet, and often sits looking at Meg with a sorrowful face. Occasionally Jo jumps up to kiss Meg for seemingly no reason.

Narr 2: One day, as Meg sits

sewing at the window, she is scandalized by the sight of Laurie and Jo as they race through the garden. They disappear from sight, but Meg can still hear shrieks of laughter and the flapping of what sounds like newspapers.

Meg: (to herself) What shall we do with that girl? She will never behave like a young lady!

Narr 3: In a few minutes, Jo bounces in, stretches out on the sofa, and begins to read a newspaper.

Meg: Have you anything interesting there?

Jo: Nothing but a story. Won't amount to much, I guess.

Amy: Read it aloud.

Jo: Very well. If you insist. It is called

'Hurrah for Miss March, the celebrated American author!'

"The Rival Painters."

Narr 1: Jo reads her story to her sisters. When she comes to the end, she reveals that she is the author. They all cheer her.

Beth: I knew it! I knew it! Oh, my, Jo, I am so proud!

Jo: The man at the newspaper said that he liked my story very much and would like to see more. I shall be paid for the next one! Oh, I am so happy, for in time I may be able to support myself.

Narr 2: Jo is so excited, she feels as

though she can't breathe. She wraps her face in the newspaper. Tears of joy drop onto the pages.

Alcott: That is so like the feeling I had when I was first published that I can't help but look back fondly and smile.

Scene 6

Narr 3: In November, a telegram arrives at the March home. It says that Mr. March is very ill and in a hospital in Washington, D.C.

Narr 1: Mrs. March decides to go to him at once. While she is packing, Jo leaves the house to pick up some items for the trip. When Jo returns, the girls see that she has cut her long hair short.

Amy: Jo! Your hair!

Beth: Oh, Jo, how could you? Your one beauty!

Jo: It doesn't affect the fate of the nation, Beth. It will do my brains good to have that mop taken off.

Meg: You look even more boyish than before!

Narr 2: Jo holds out a fistful of money to her mother.

Jo: Here, Marmee. I was wild to do something for Father. Please, take the money and go. Give Father my love.

Narr 3: Mrs. March takes the money and kisses Jo on the cheek before turning to them all.

Mrs. March: Meg, dear, be prudent and watch over your sisters. Be patient, Jo. Don't be despondent or do rash things; write to me often, and be my brave girl. Beth, comfort your-

self with your music and be faithful to your duties. And Amy, help Hannah all that you can. I want all my girls to obey Hannah and keep happy and safe at home.

Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy: We will, Marmee.

Mrs. March: And visit the poor

'The man at the newspaper said that he liked my story very much and would like to see more. I shall be paid for the next one!'

Hummel family whenever you get a chance. They are not well off and could use some food, supplies, and good company.

Beth: Yes, Mother.

Narr 1: Mrs. March gets in her carriage, says good-bye to all the girls, and leaves to be with her sick husband.

Narr 2: That night, Meg lies awake, thinking the most serious thoughts she has ever known in her short life. She hears sobbing coming from Jo's room and goes to investigate.

Meg: Jo, dear, what is it? Are you crying about Father?

Jo: No, not now.

Meg: What, then?

Jo: My—my hair! I'm not sorry. I'd do it again tomorrow if I could. It's only the vain, selfish part of me that goes and cries in this silly way. Don't

tell anyone, please, Meg. I'm sorry if I woke you.

Meg: You didn't. I can't sleep. I'm anxious.

Jo: Think about something pleasant and you'll soon drop off to sleep.

Meg: I tried that. I was thinking about handsome faces ... eyes particularly.

Jo: (amusedly) What color do you like best?

Meg: Brown. Sometimes blue.

Narr 3: Jo laughs. Meg lies down next to Jo on her bed and pats Jo's new hairdo with affection.

Meg: Now let's both go to sleep and dream of castles in the air. Be comforted, dear soul. There is always light behind the clouds.

Alcott: My older sister, Anna, was very much like Meg. She was always the one to weather life's emotional storms. As the oldest, she often played the part of a second parent to us when Father was gone.

Scene 7

Alcott: In retrospect, living in poverty wasn't so bad. There are worse things to endure. And when they come knocking, you feel ashamed for not fully appreciating the times when you had it so good.

Narr 1: It is a week later. Beth is overly tired and rests on the couch.

Beth: Meg, I wish you'd go see the Hummels. You know that Mother told us not to forget them.

Meg: I'm too tired to go this afternoon.

Beth: What about you, Jo?

Jo: I have a bit of a cold, and it's too stormy out.

Narr 2: Beth coughs weakly and gives Jo a disapproving look.

Meg: Why don't you go yourself, if you're so concerned about them, Beth?

Beth: I have been going! Every day! But the baby is sick, and I don't know what to do for it. My head aches, and I'm so tired. Maybe I'll just take a little nap.

Narr 3: An hour goes by, and Beth cannot rest. She puts on her jacket and heads out to the Hummel home.

Narr 1: It is late in the evening when Beth returns home. She creeps upstairs and shuts herself in her mother's room. Soon after, Jo opens the bedroom door to find Beth looking grave. The girl has red eyes and holds a medicine bottle in her hand.

Jo: Christopher Columbus! What's the matter?

Beth: You've had the scarlet fever, haven't you?

Jo: Yes, years ago. Why?

Narr 2: Beth coughs and then cries out.

Beth: Oh, Jo! The baby's dead!

Jo: What? What baby?

Beth: Mrs. Hummel's. It died in my lap before she came home.

Jo: Oh, my poor dear, how dreadful for you! I ought to have gone.

Beth: It wasn't dreadful, Jo, only so sad. I saw in the first minute that it was sicker than anyone thought. Mrs. Hummel had gone for

the doctor, and when she and the doctor arrived ...

Narr 3: Beth's voice trails off, and she begins to cry.

Jo: What did you do?

Beth: I just sat and held it softly. It gave a little cry at one point, and then it lay still. I tried to warm its feet and give it some milk, but it didn't stir, and I knew it was dead.

Jo: Oh, Beth.

Beth: Both Mr. and Mrs. Hummel have sore throats. The doctor sent me home right away and told me to take this medicine or I would catch the fever.

Jo: No, you won't! Oh, Beth, if you should be sick I shall never forgive myself! What shall we do?

Beth: Don't be frightened. It begins with a headache, a sore throat, and queer feelings like mine. But I took the medicine, and I do feel a little better.

Jo: You've been over that house for a week now. I'm afraid you're going to have it, Beth. Don't worry. Meg and I will nurse you back to health. We'll send Amy to aunt March's to keep her out of harm's way.

Beth: (crying) Jo, I'm frightened. I wish Marmee were here.

Jo: It's going to be all right, Beth. Everything is going to be fine.

Narr 1: Jo pulls Beth close to her and holds her while she cries.

Narr 2: Over the next few days, Beth's condition worsens. The doctor does his best.

Narr 3: Hannah refuses to send word to Mrs. March, so as not to worry her.



Claire Danes as Beth

Kobal

'It wasn't dreadful, Jo, only so sad.'

Narr 1: Jo devotes herself to Beth day and night—not a hard task, because Beth is very patient and bears her pain without complaint. But Beth's condition grows dire.

Narr 2: The days grow dark. Heavy are the hearts of the sisters as they wait and pray. The shadow of death hovers over the once-happy home. Alcott: Forgive me, but I must rest and think a while. As I conjure these characters, I grow weak with nostalgia. Poor, dear Beth. I could write her any ending I want, but how true would that be? How do little women grow up except through loss and gain?

Author-ity

Little Women still has fans because it was ahead of its time. Though written to be popular with 19th-century readers and to appeal to their sense of morality, there is something about the March girls, particularly Jo, that is timeless and wonderful.

Through their lives, author Louisa May Alcott dramatizes the struggles between duty and growth. Each character wrestles with personal flaws, trying to be her best and yet learning to accept herself. Alcott's message resonates with modern readers: Be true to yourself.



AP/Wide World Photos

In the book, Jo famously tells her sisters, "I'm the man of the family now that Papa is away." To understand Jo, look to Alcott herself. She was born November 29, 1832, the second of four daughters. Much of her childhood was spent in Concord, Mass.,

and was defined by the plays she put on with her sisters and the walks she took with Henry David Thoreau, who would become a famous writer in his own right. (See READ, issue 16, "Walden.")

Her father founded several schools, but all failed, and the impoverished family was forced to move many times in the Boston area. As a teen, Louisa took on as many jobs as she could find. She taught children, mended clothes, and washed laundry. After selling a poem, she realized that writing might provide the income she and her family needed.

Little Women, based on life with her sisters, was published in 1868 to instant success. It was followed by several more novels, including *Little Men: Life at Plumfield With Jo's Boys* (1871).