

## **Bread and Water: The Life and Times of Louisa May Alcott**

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The last movie that I saw before the Covid-19 pandemic hit and closed movie theatres was *Little Women*, written and directed by Greta Gerwig. It was released on December 25, 2019. The movie had an all-star cast consisting of Saoirse Ronan, Emma Watson, Florence Pugh, Eliza Scanlen, Laura Dern, Timothée Chalamet, Meryl Streep, Tracy Letts, Bob Odenkirk, James Norton, Louis Garrel, and Chris Cooper. *Little Women* had six Academy Award nominations and won for best costumes. *Little Women* inspired at least five movie versions, the first in 1933, and several television versions.

Some reviewers of the book and movie have suggested that Louisa May Alcott was lesbian or transsexual. My first thought was, "How juicy," but let's examine Alcott's life in more detail.

Louisa May Alcott was born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania. She was the daughter of Amos Bronson Alcott, an educator, transcendentalist, and abolitionist. Her mother was Abby May, a social worker and women's suffragist. Louisa was the second born of four daughters. The other daughters included Anna, Elizabeth, and Abigail. There had also been a stillborn brother. *Little Women*, Alcott's most famous work, was a fictionalized story about Louisa's childhood and adolescence.

Louisa's father Amos (1799-1888) was an eccentric to the nth degree. As a transcendentalist he insisted that the family start the day with cold showers and a breakfast of bread and water. Meat and dairy products were forbidden. Although the family lived on a farm, the use of axes and plows was forbidden. Instead spades were used to turn the soil. As a schoolteacher Amos used the Socratic method and forbade the use of corporal punishment. He founded a number of schools which never had a large following and unfortunately never provided an adequate family income. For much of his life the family lived off of gifts and loans from various relatives. To his credit Amos was a gifted carpenter and gardener.

Amos was one of the founders of Fruitlands, a utopian community in Harvard, Massachusetts. It was a short-lived (1843-1844) agrarian community based on transcendentalist principles. Louisa later described it in a newspaper article entitled, "Transcendental Wild Oats." Residents were expected to take cold showers in the morning, have bread and water for breakfast, and eat no animal products including cheese and milk (No bacon!). Their diet consisted of fruits and vegetables produced without the aid of an aforementioned plow.

Later in life Amos Alcott did achieve a modicum of success by traveling on a lecture circuit touting his educational principles and publishing his papers. He died of a stroke only three days before Louisa died.

Louisa's mother Abby May (1800-1877) was a social worker, abolitionist, and temperance activist. Her death was devastating to her daughter, Louisa May who had cared for her mother during her terminal illness, congestive heart failure.

Because the Alcott family was poor, Louisa and her sisters worked as seamstresses and their mother worked as a poorly paid social worker among Irish immigrants.

Both Louisa and her mother Abigail kept extensive journals encouraged by Amos. Unfortunately, later in life Louisa burned both her and her mother's journals so much of the description of the Alcott family life and personal feelings and attitudes was lost to posterity. The same fate also befell most of Louisa's extensive letter collection. What little remains of Louisa's journal and letters is collected from other sources.

As a child Louisa was a tomboy. She later wrote that she could not get over her disappointment in being a woman. Despite this later attitude Louisa loved to make and wear frilly dresses. She also wrote that she wanted to be a man so that she could enlist in the Civil War. Although she was a spinster, she received at least one proposal from a male suitor, Ladislav "Laddie" Wisniewski, a Polish soldier whom she met while living and touring Europe with a friend. In an 1883 interview Alcott said, "I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman's body...because I have fallen in love in my life with so many pretty girls and never once the least bit with any man." As far as is known Louisa never had a romantic female attachment which were part of the so-called "Boston marriages" of the time. In writing *Little Women*, Alcott didn't want her main character, Jo, to marry, but popular opinion overcame her reluctance and *Little Men*, and *Jo's Boys* were born.

Louisa's family was intimately associated with a number of famous authors and philosophers who lived close by. In fact, Louisa received schooling from Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Julia Ward Howe. All were family friends of her parents.

For me one of the most interesting aspects of Louisa's life was her time serving as a nurse for Union soldiers at Union Hospital in Georgetown, Washington, DC. She wrote about her experience in a thinly fictionalized serialized account of letters home published in the newspaper *Commonwealth* in 1863. These letters were later collected in *Hospital Sketches* published in 1869. In her account she named herself Tribulation Periwinkle who had been goaded into volunteering for duty by her brother Tom. She chronicled her journey to DC from Massachusetts by train, boat, and carriage.

Her descriptions of wartime Washington were fascinating. As a new resident she got her exercise by jogging through neighborhoods. Her first hospital job was to scrub Union soldiers who were labeled "scrubees." She was the scrubber, and they were the scrubees. She even held her nose and ministered to Rebel soldiers. She assisted in dressing wounds, fed soldiers their meals, and aided them in writing home.

Eventually Louisa was promoted to night nurse. Her duty room where she rested between shifts was labeled her pathetic "pleasure room." It was sparsely furnished with a cot, books, flowers, and a teapot. A male hospital attendant often brought her "coffee," a brew so vile that she always relegated it to the proverbial slop jar.

Once when off duty she rambled over to the Senate chamber, only to be disappointed that the Senate was not in session. She did find a 10-year-old black boy occupying the Speaker's chair and a couple of other boys, who were supposed to be tidying up, engaged in a lively debate. On other occasions she visited the hospital kitchen and was entranced by small Black children crawling about while their mothers cooked. She offered hugs to these children and was admonished by the white women in charge of the kitchen, but bravely ignored their advice.

Permit me to read poignant excerpts from "Death of a Soldier," as it has come to be called.

"The next night, as I went my rounds with Dr. P., I happened to ask which man in the room probably suffered most; and, to my great surprise, he glanced at John:

"Every breath he draws is like a stab; for the ball pierced the left lung, broke a rib, and did no end of damage here and there; so the poor lad can find neither forgetfulness nor ease, because he must lie on his wounded back or suffocate. It will be a hard struggle, and a long one, for he possesses great vitality; but even his temperate life can't save him; I wish it could."

"You don't mean he must die, Doctor?"

"Bless you. There's not the slightest hope for him; and you'd better tell him so before long; women have a way of doing such things comfortably, so I leave it to you. He won't last more than a day or two, at furthest."

I could have sat down on the spot and cried heartily...if I had not learned the wisdom of bottling up one's tears for leisure moments.... I had not the heart to do it then, and privately indulged the hope that some change for the better might take place, in spite of gloomy prophesies; so, rendering my task unnecessary... John looked lonely and forsaken just then, as he sat with bent head, hands folded on his knee, and no outward sign of suffering, till, looking nearer, I saw great tears roll down and drop upon the floor. .... I said, "Let me help you bear it, John."

Never, on any human countenance, have I seen so swift and beautiful a look of gratitude, surprise, and comfort, as that which answered me more eloquently than the whispered--

"Thank you, ma'am, this is right good! This is what I wanted!"

"Then why not ask for it before?"

"I didn't like to be a trouble; you seemed so busy, and I could manage to get on alone."

"You shall not want it anymore, John."

After that night, an hour of each evening that remained to him was devoted to his ease or pleasure. He could not talk much, for breath was precious, and he spoke in whispers; but from occasional conversations, I gleaned scraps of private history which only added to the affection and respect I felt for him. Once he asked me to write a letter, and as I settled pen and paper...

... for he suddenly added:

"This is my first battle; do they think it's going to be my last?"

"I'm afraid they do, John."

So I wrote the letter which he dictated...

These things had happened two days before; now John was dying...

"I know you'd come! I guess I'm moving on, ma'am."

He was, and so rapidly that, even while he spoke, over his face I saw the grey veil falling that no human hand can lift. I sat down by him, wiped the drops from his forehead, stirred the air about him with the slow wave of a fan, and waited to help him die. He stood in sore need of help--and I could do so little; for, as the doctor had foretold, the strong body rebelled against death, and fought every inch of the way, forcing him to draw each breath with a spasm, and clench his hands with an imploring look, as if he asked, "How long must I endure this, and be still!" For hours he suffered dumbly, without a moment's respite, or a moment's murmuring; his limbs grew cold, his face damp, his lips white, and, again and again, he tore the covering off his breast, as if the lightest weight added to his agony; yet through it all, his eyes never lost their perfect serenity, and the man's soul seemed to sit therein, undaunted by the ills that vexed his flesh."

Although Louisa was scheduled to spend three months nursing soldiers, she only lasted six weeks. Unfortunately, she caught typhoid pneumonia, got deathly sick, lost her hair, and was finally sent home where she recuperated.

Louisa was a prolific writer, and in addition to *Little Women*, *Little Men*, and *Jo's Boys*, authored another twelve novels, as well as numerous short stories. *Little Women* is well known to be semi-autobiographical. In 1975 it was discovered that Alcott had

authored a number of racy gothic novels under the nom de plume, A.M. Bernard. Thus, it appears that Alcott was not disinterested in sex. She dared not to use her real name as the author, however, because for much of her life she was the sole support of her family and revealing her true identity would have in all likelihood caused a huge scandal and would have eaten into her income.

Despite never marrying and in addition to a prolific writing career and responsibilities of caring for family members, Louisa engaged in many activities and social obligations. She took several trips to Europe, the first being to accompany her sister and a friend. After her sister May died in 1879, she took in her daughter Louisa, or Lulu, and cared for her until Louisa died eight years later.

Regarding Louisa's religious interests, she found God in nature as she was not brought up in a churchgoing home. She was, however, quite familiar with Christianity. She also had an interest in Buddhism and past lives and believed in an afterlife.

Louisa died of a stroke in Boston, Massachusetts on March 6, 1888. She is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts.

Much has been written on Louisa's ailments and final illness. Kay Redfield Jamison, a prominent psychologist who had bipolar disorder felt that Louisa's prolonged fits of writing (For example in writing *Little Women*, Louisa wrote 402 pages in 10 weeks.) and several depressions also fit the criteria for bipolar disorder. However Louisa's numerous depressions may have been overwhelming grief caused by losing so many close family members. In addition to losing her mother in 1877, she lost her sister Abigail May in 1879 from postpartum fever, her sister Elizabeth or Lizzie in 1858 due to the effects of scarlet fever, Others have felt that Louisa suffered from mercury poisoning after her treatment for typhoid during the Civil War. Norbert Hirschorn and Ian Greaves have written that Louisa's final illness was lupus erythematosus based on a butterfly rash that she had in her photographs. For me this is an attractive diagnosis because she had multi-organ dysfunction which is so common in lupus. For example she had a lame arm, pain in her arms, dizziness, trouble with her gait, gastrointestinal troubles, weight loss, and exhaustion.

So what can we make of Louisa May Alcott's sexuality? Due to the paucity of information about Louisa's life, I cannot confirm or deny that she was either a transsexual or a lesbian. There may be a simpler explanation for her life of spinsterhood. Her frequent depressions and manic writing periods, along with her need to support and care her family may have kept her from entering romantic relationships.

#### Selected Bibliography

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