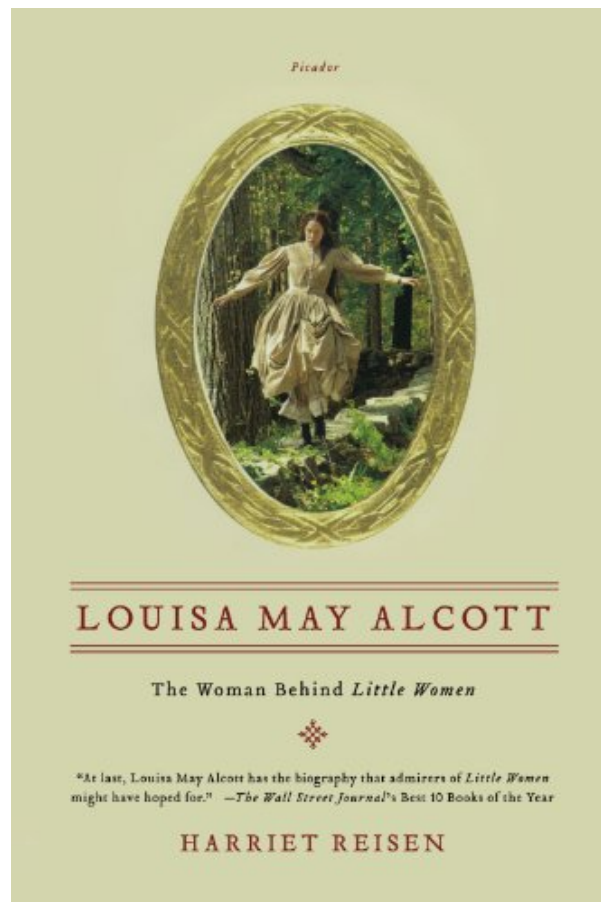


# LOUISA MAY ALCOTT: THE WOMAN BEHIND LITTLE WOMEN BY HARRIET REISEN



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## LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

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The Woman Behind *Little Women*



"At last, Louisa May Alcott has the biography that admirers of *Little Women* might have hoped for." —*The Wall Street Journal's* Best 10 Books of the Year

HARRIET REISEN

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In a fresh, modern take on the remarkable Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Reisen's vivid biography explores the author's life in the context of her works, many of which are to some extent autobiographical. Although Alcott secretly wrote pulp fiction, harbored radical abolitionist views, and served as a Civil War nurse, her novels went on to sell more copies than those of Herman Melville and Henry James. Stories and details culled from Alcott's journals, together with revealing letters to family, friends, and publishers, plus recollections of her famous contemporaries provide the basis for this lively account of the author's classic rags-to-riches tale. In *Louisa May Alcott*, the extraordinary woman behind the beloved American classic *Little Women* is revealed as never before.

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## About the Author

Harriet Reisen has written dramatic and historical scripts for PBS and HBO, including a recent PBS documentary on Louisa May Alcott. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and son.

## Most helpful customer reviews

65 of 66 people found the following review helpful.

The Real Louisa May Alcott

By YA Librarian

Louisa May Alcott has always been a favorite author of mine. I have read a few biographies (years ago with the exception of *Little Women Abroad*, *Alcott in Her Own Time*) about her life and have read all of her

books. So when this new biography came up I was interested but I wondered if anything knew could be written about the author that everyone seems to forget.

I was pleasantly surprised by this book. As others have said it is an easy read, not weighed down with academic writing that makes one want to fall asleep. Yet it is obvious that the author has done her research.

The book starts out with a history of Abigail and Bronson's family history, how they meet and their early marriage. This sets the stage for the childhood that Louisa and her sisters will experience. The interesting thing about this book is that it describes Bronson's life but I found out more about Mrs. Alcott than I ever knew. Everyone neglects her and always focuses on Bronson which is a crime since she was the one who worked the hardest. For instance I was unaware that she had been left for long periods of time with the children while Bronson went off trying to make money. Nor did I know that she had so many miscarriages and nearly died as a result. Another thing that was interesting to me is that Louisa seemed more like her mother yet most biographers continue to say that Louisa was like her father.

The Real Louisa May Alcott is brought out in this book. The author does not sugarcoat things, she does not try to make Louisa into some Victorian model of womanhood(if that was even possible). What the author tries to do is explain who Louisa was faults and all. Those faults do not make Louisa bad, just human, like the rest of us.

Louisa was a rash, naughty child who was spanked for not sitting down properly at the dinner table. She would often hit her older sister and when Elizabeth was born she hated her. Louisa often confused her father with her outbursts and her rage. Abigail felt a kinship with her daughter because she shared the same faults. Yet despite her flaws Louisa was determined to make something of herself. She saw how her mother toiled, how her father lacked common sense, and she wanted to help her family. Louisa longed for nice things as everyone else and she wanted to erase the family debt.

The biography trails Louisa's life, her trials and her victories. While I have read all this before the author gave me new information. I have read about the Fruitlands experience but I cannot recall anyone mentioning Abigail's distrust or Mr. Lane. I remember descriptions of what happened but not the amount of detail that Ms. Reisen provides.

The book covers every aspect of Louisa's life. Her stint as a Civil War nurse, her trip abroad, the success of Little Women and so much more.

Yet even when she gained success she still wasn't happy. Louisa hid from her admirers and didn't seem to like them much. Louisa complained that her family seemed eager to take her money and she wondered when she would enjoy it. There are also some quotes from Lulu, May's daughter, which are insightful. Louisa seems to have showered Lulu with expensive dresses and toys(things she never received).

I enjoyed this book very much and I highly recommend it. I hope that with this book and the new documentary that Louisa May Alcott will be rediscovered for the amazing talent she was. She will no longer be remembered as just a childrens author who is constantly swept under the rug so authors like Dickens and Austen can be praised.

19 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

-----Don't miss reading this wonderful book-----

By Judith Miller

This was a timely read for me. I visited Orchard House, the Alcott family home, a few years ago, and found



the place surreal. It was easy to picture the family living there. I stood next to Louisa's writing table and learned that she had to become ambidextrous because she was sorely misusing the one hand. I admired her sister, May's room where the walls were filled with her drawings. After the tour, I purchased a small print of an owl that had been painted by May Alcott. I also bought a print of Orchard House. I thoroughly enjoyed my visit and the two prints are in the room that I call my library. Finally, in a box of old books, that were recently given to me, I found a book containing five thrillers that had been written by the amazing Louisa May Alcott.

Well, along came *THE WOMAN BEHIND LITTLE WOMEN* by Harriet Reisen, and I was ready. The book is fascinating. I sincerely applaud the author for her excellent research. Although, this book has a lot of very detailed information, it held my interest.

Louisa's father, Bronson Alcott was an intellectual who became involved with the transcendental movement. He was a teacher, and had many different schools over the years, but they usually failed as his methods seemed too unorthodox to most people. His marriage to Abigail May produced 4 daughters. The family were constantly moving and Bronson often left his wife and children for months at a time fulfilling his intellectual pursuits. Mrs. Alcott, was left alone to care for her family. During the years, she experience five miscarriages. Of course, her health suffered, and she almost died during one miscarriage. Bronson was rarely there when she needed him most.

Louisa May Alcott, was the second of the daughters and we're told that she was a difficult and stubborn child. She was often disciplined by her father because she was too willful! Her life was spent in the company of some of the most famous men in New England. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne were all friends of the family. Over the years, those friends provided financial help to the Alcott's, as Bronson could never support his own family. Louisa's family spent most of their lives living on the good will and support of family and friends. Sometimes the family would be split up living in several different places and just waiting for a time that they could be together again. In later years, Louisa's success as a writer brought their dreams to fulfillment.

Writing a short review of this book is almost impossible and my words are only tidbits from the book. I came away with so much respect for Louisa! She worked hard for her entire life and when she finally received fame and fortune, she was surprised at the people who constantly sought her out for autographs and conversation. Her health was not good and it was peace and quiet that she sought and not scores of people wanting to meet and converse with her.

This book is a must read for the details of Louisa May Alcott's life! It also provides some interesting history of the Civil War. Louisa, herself worked in a hospital in Washington, D.C. nursing wounded soldiers. In fact, she contacted typhoid pneumonia and came close to dying from the experience.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Well-written, enjoyable read

By Debbie

This biography of Louisa May Alcott was a well-written, enjoyable read. Harriet Reisen gave a chronological account of the Alcott's lives while relating how the national events of the time effected them and how they influenced history (through their Transcendental movement, abolition movement, etc.). She also worked in many quotes taken from letters and the personal journals kept by each member of the family.

The first 87 pages were mainly about Louisa's parents (Abby and Bronson) and their friends. If you're interested in Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and other famous Transcendentalists, you'll probably

enjoy this section more than I did. I was continually exasperated with her parents and, while I saw the value of showing the influences Louisa grew up with and how they affected her writing, I didn't like her parents and wanted to get on to focusing on Louisa.

From page 88 to 302, Harriet Reisen focused on Louisa and, to a lesser degree, her sisters. This section was lively and very fun to read though Louisa didn't have a very easy life. I liked how Harriet Reisen let us see Louisa's faults as well as her strong points and how she tied Louisa's experiences to her books: Louisa would often take real life events and work them into fictional accounts.

The rest of the book was references and notes about the quotes and information. There were no pictures. I would have at least enjoyed a picture of Louisa.

There was no bad language. Overall, I'd recommend this enjoyable biography to anyone who loves Louisa May Alcott's novels and wants to know more about her.

I received this book as a review copy from the publisher.

Reviewed by Debbie from Different Time, Different Place  
([differenttimedifferentplace.blogspot.com](http://differenttimedifferentplace.blogspot.com))

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