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Louisa May Alcott [from *Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*]

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ALCOTT, LOUISA MAY (1832-1888), American fiction writer best known as the author of the girls' novel *Little Women* (1868-1869). Alcott was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, to Abigail May Alcott and the progressive educator Bronson Alcott. The March family of *Little Women* was an idealized version of her own family, which was far less stable and more mobile. Alcott's father's idealistic education, and reform ventures regularly failed, necessitating the family's frequent moves, and she and her mother increasingly provided the family's economic support. Her childhood and adolescence were split primarily between Concord and Boston, Massachusetts, where she was deeply influenced by members of her father's transcendentalist circle, including reform-minded writers and thinkers such as Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau.

Alcott's high rate of productivity and the extraordinary variety of literary forms in which she wrote, as well as the range of audiences she addressed, have challenged and intrigued scholars and leisure readers alike. Her first published story appeared in 1852 in the *Olive Branch*, a Boston story paper (an inexpensive weekly magazine published in newspaper format), and she continued to publish anonymous and pseudonymous tales in story papers intermittently throughout her career. These sensational melodramas featuring subversive heroines—"blood and thunder" tales, as Alcott called them—have kept twentieth-century scholars busy locating and reprinting them. Her first book, published in 1854 under her own name, was *Flower Fables*, a collection of fairy stories. She also published short fiction in elite venues such as the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, plays, autobiographical Civil War sketches based on her wartime nursing experiences, and an adult novel, *Moods* (1864), all before *Little Women*, a novel that has become a worldwide icon of American girlhood. In Japan, *Little Women* was a perennial favorite for teaching good behavior, although occasionally young women admired Jo's individualism and rebelliousness.

Although *Little Women* and the stream of juvenile fiction that followed made Alcott and her family financially secure, she sometimes chafed

at her new public fame as a writer of girls' books. Some critics read her body of work as unified by a feminist analysis of women's place in society; others emphasize the divisions between Alcott's literary personae. Whatever the politics of her fiction, she was active throughout her life in reform movements typically supported by white, middle-class women in the northern states, such as anti-slavery, women's suffrage, and temperance. Her public support of women's rights actually increased after *Little Women*. When Concord allowed women to vote in local school elections, Alcott led an initiative to educate women as voters and was the town's first woman to register to vote, in 1879. She also used her writing to offer explicit support to feminist reform. Between 1874 and 1888 she contributed frequently to the *Woman's Journal*, a women's-rights periodical, and her semiautobiographical adult novel *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873) traces its heroine's attempts to find meaningful work and make a home, ending with the widowed heroine becoming a lecturer on women's rights.

Mercury poisoning from medicine administered to treat the typhoid pneumonia that Alcott had contracted during the Civil War was the likely cause of years of pain and bad health and of her early death.

[See also Literature and Transcendentalism.]

Bibliography

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