



4 Sessions—Tuesdays: February 4th, March 10th, April 7th, May 5th, 6-8pm at the Rosenbach.
Led by Melissa Jensen, Lecturer, Department of English, University of Pennsylvania.

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“Never liked girls, or knew many, except my sisters.”

So begins, in a single line in Louisa May Alcott’s private journal, the enduring paradox that is *Little Women*, perhaps the most beloved book about girls ever written. Undertaken by Alcott at the request of a publisher, motivated by her own financial needs, the story she called “The Pathetic Family” was written in three months (the second part, originally published separately as *Good Wives*, came the following year), some claim because she found it dull and distasteful and simply wanted to be done with it, others that, unwittingly and unwillingly falling into the story of four girls she loved, she was consumed to the point of not being able to set down her pen. The truth? Do we need to know?

What we do know is that *LW* is estimated to still be selling a thousand copies every month; has never been out of print; has spawned eight feature films, at least as many dramatic stage plays and television productions, an opera, a Broadway musical, and two Japanese anime series. Simone de Beauvoir, Ursula Le Guin, Patti Smith, and J.K. Rowling have all been openly inspired by Alcott and the Marches.

Something about this book has made it not just iconic, but canonical: for many, *the* story about growing up, whether from child to adult, or girl to woman. It has been hailed as a deliberate paean of domestic sentimentality, and as a quiet rant against gender inequity. Literary critics often refer to it as seminal protorealism, or profeminist fiction. Which might mean everything to someone reading the book in a scholarly fashion, and perhaps nothing to some reading it in a joyful one. In this course, we meet, literally, somewhere in the middle: at the Rosenbach, where the love of literature meets the importance of

literature, with the goal of finding that point where the meaning we derive from *Little Women* meets the love we feel for it. (Or, perhaps...do *not* find or feel.)

Over our four sessions, we will read *Little Women*, a selection of Alcott's short writings, and some essays about the phenomenon that is her best-known work. We will discuss why *LW* is enduring, why beloved, and why perhaps such devotion is best viewed through a critical lens.

Previous knowledge of *Little Women* is not necessary. It's enough that you've come to it now.

Texts:

Little Women, Louisa May Alcott, 1868-9

Recommended edition: I am resisting requiring a specific edition, as there are so many good ones out there. I will strongly suggest that everyone choose an edition containing the complete, original text as it was published in 1868-9. Illustrations are fine, as are annotations, but neither is necessary nor necessarily recommended.

Selected letters, reviews, and essays on Alcott and her seminal work (pdfs to be provided), for contextual and critical perspective

Schedule: We will be dividing *Little Women* into three parts, not two as Alcott originally did; as we leave Session 2, the Marches are separated not just by marriage and a few streets, but by an ocean.

Session 1: "Lively, simple books" and "moral pap for the young"? History and Didacticism

Introduction to each other, and to Louisa May Alcott

A brief history of children's literature to 1868

Reading: *Little Women*, chapters 1-13

Session 2: "Something splendid". Inspiration and Impact

Reading: *Little Women*, chapters 14-30

Session 3: "Be worthy love". Sense and Sentimentality

Reading: *Little Women*, chapters 31-47

Session 4: "Imaginary heroes". Past, Present, Future

21st Century March: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy at 150

The enduring impact of *Little Women*

Reading: Selected classic and contemporary essays on *LW*
(pdfs to be provided and/or excerpts to be read in session)