Study Guide

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TAPROOT THEATRE



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About Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888) and her novel *Little Women* (1868)

Louisa May Alcott was an avid feminist and abolitionist, and a prolific author who published more than 30 books and over 300 individual pieces. Alcott's mother, Abigail May Alcott, was a women's rights activist, and her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was a social reformer, philosopher, teacher, and prominent member of the Transcendentalist Club. The Alcott family was friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and was influenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller.

Alcott was a tomboy who had always been interested in writing. She had three sisters, along with a father who was frequently absent. Her younger sister, Elizabeth, died in 1858 following health complications from a bout of scarlet fever, after which the family moved to the nearly 150-year-old Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts. Her older sister, Anna, married in 1860. All of these details would later find their way, lightly fictionalized, into *Little Women*.

In 1868, Alcott's publisher, seeing a gap in the market for literature about girls, recommended that Alcott write a novel about girls. Alcott resisted, feeling much closer to boys and knowing (and caring!) little about other girls. But she came to realize that her own family would make a good model for a story about girls growing up and, under some pressure from her publisher and her father, began working on *Little Women*, although she never really enjoyed writing it.

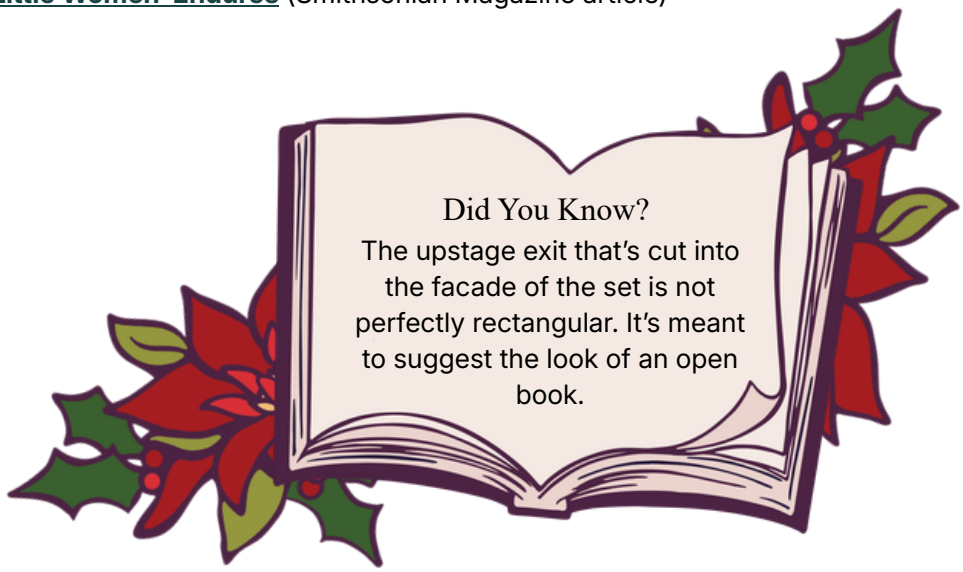
In the book, a tomboy aspiring writer (Jo) is a stand-in for the author who has three sisters, one based on each of Alcott's real-life sisters. Many of the events in the novel follow aspects of real life: the novel is considered autobiographical by some and semi-autobiographical by others. One major difference from real life is that Jo ends up marrying, while Alcott never did.

Little Women was an instant success and has been popular ever since—it has never gone out of print! In some ways, it was a new form of literature, one focusing on everyday domestic life and its trials and tribulations. As such, it was also part of the realism movement in art and literature that began earlier in the 1800s in response to Romanticism. Major American authors in earlier traditions included Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Alcott's books can be seen as part of a move toward realism that was shortly to lead to Mark Twain, Henry James, and other authors who focused on characters speaking in the vernacular and responding to the events of the moment.


Louisa May Alcott (britannica.com)

Alcott was a feminist and made sure that the marriages she wrote about were marriages of equals. However, critics are divided on whether the novel improved or set back women's fiction in general. By providing some non-traditional models of femininity, particularly in adolescence, many critics found the novel to be filling an important need. More recently some critics have argued that, by idealizing women's lives in a domestic children's story, the novel began a downward spiral that reduced the power of women's fiction. Even if true, it wouldn't have been the progressive *Little Women* that slowed the maturity of women's fiction, but the works that followed from it.

Learn more:
Short biography of Louisa May Alcott (video, 7 minutes)
Why Louisa May Alcott's 'Little Women' Endures (Smithsonian Magazine article)



About the play and playwright/adapter Lauren Gunderson


Lauren Gunderson

Lauren Gunderson is America's most produced living playwright. This is the sixth Gunderson play to be seen at Taproot, after *Silent Sky* (2016), the *Christmas at Pemberley* trilogy (*Miss Bennet*, 2018; *The Wickhams*, 2022; and *Georgiana and Kitty*, 2023) and *The Book of Will* (2024).

Four regional theatres joined together to commission Gunderson to write a fresh take on *Little Women*, one that was modern yet still true to the book. She began writing in 2023 and presented the first public reading of the script in 2024 at Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts, the model for the March family home in *Little Women*. Three of the four commissioning theatres have since presented the play in their seasons, with the fourth to follow in early 2027.

In the play, Louisa May Alcott and her real-life sisters appear and comment on the action of the fictional Little Women. In the play's notes, Gunderson writes, "Most of this adaptation is pulled from direct quotations from the novel, or quotes from Alcott's life. **Alcott was a radical creative, this play should feel like it.** Everything is alive and crackling in our story, even the description of a bird, a secret, or a storm."

"I hope the audience sees this as an American classic and a classic that is as universal as American classics written for men and boys," Gunderson says. "*Little Women* is not a polite, tidy, easy and sweet story, but something that's raucous, deeply intellectual and romantic. It's all the things that I want from a great work of literature. And I want audiences to be reminded that women can be brave, brazen, creative, ambitious and, yes, absolutely head over heels in love. And they deserve a big, full-throttled love story." (pcs.org)

Both radical and traditional, both feminist and a gauzy look at a time of female domesticity, this play is both a paradox and a modern paragon of an American literary classic.

Did you know?

Little Women has had a rich afterlife of adaptations and reimaginings, with multiple adaptations for the stage, film, television, and radio, some of them musical. Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) tells the story of a family with four very different daughters that moves to the Belgian Congo in 1959. Other adaptations include *My Little Pony: Classics Reimagined - Little Fillies*, as well as novels introducing werewolves or zombies to the story. Read the first two pages of *Little Vampire Women* by Louisa May Alcott and Lynn Messina" **here**.

Learn more:
Interview with Lauren Gunderson about the play (audio, 1 hour)
Biography (New Georgia Encyclopedia article)
Timeline of the book and the play prepared by Dramaturg Sonja Lowe. *Note: spoilers!*

Did you know?

Some playwrights write extensive stage directions into their plays, while others leave those decisions up to each play's artistic team. Lauren Gunderson, author of **God is in the Stage Directions**, is definitely more prescriptive than most. She attempts to convey both the speed and the intensity with which actors should deliver her lines, and writes lengthy directions such as:

Laurie and Jo smile. Meg clears her throat loudly. And he goes.
Meg looks at Jo like "what's going on with you and that boy?"
Jo scoffs like "nothing is going on! He's friendly."
Meg looks like "there absolutely is something going on. Do you fancy him?"
Jo glares like "of course not are you mad?! Leave me alone."
Meg cackles and Jo growls just as Amy and Beth run on.



Characters in The Play

Here are the novel's descriptions of the story's major characters:



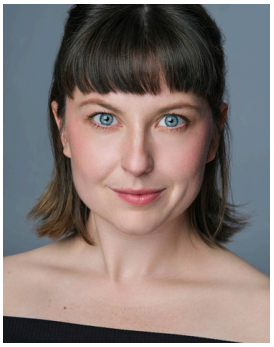
Marmee

"Cheery voice… tall, motherly lady… noble-looking woman… the most splendid mother in the world."
Played by Jesica Avellone



Meg

"Sixteen, and very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft, brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands."
Played by Claire Marx



Jo

"Fifteen… very tall, thin, and brown… a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes… long, thick hair… round shoulders… big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes."
Played by Karin Terry



Beth

"Rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression."
Played by Priya Hendry



Amy

"A regular snow-maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair, curling on her shoulders, pale and slender."
Played by Juliette Jones



Laurie

"Curly black hair; brown skin; big black eyes; handsome nose; fine teeth; small hands and feet; taller than I [Jo] am… fifteen." Frequently described as bashful.
Played by Will Rader



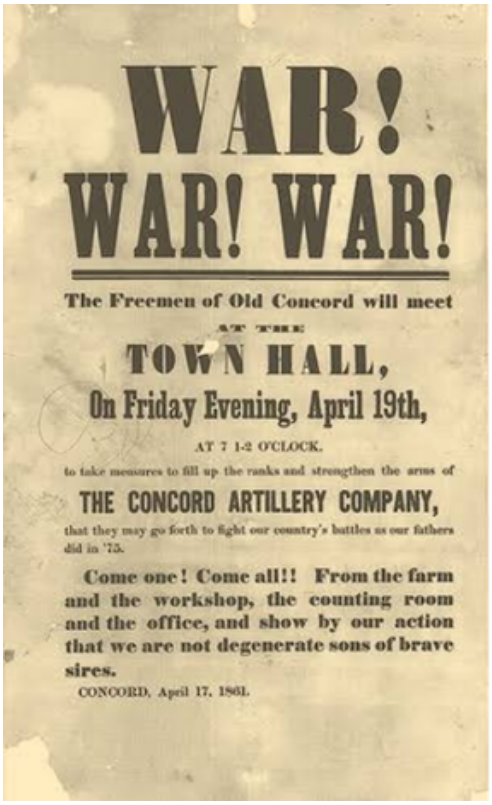
John

"Grave, silent young man, with handsome brown eyes and a pleasant voice." Quiet manners. Walking encyclopedia.
Played by Quinn Armstrong

Friedrich

"A regular German—rather stout, with brown hair tumbled all over his forehead, a bushy beard, good nose, the kindest eyes I ever saw, and a splendid big voice that does one's ears good…"
Played by Quinn Armstrong

The Setting: Civil War, Concord, and the 19th century


WAR!
WAR! WAR!
The Freemen of Old Concord will meet
AT THE
TOWN HALL,
On Friday Evening, April 19th,
AT 7 1-2 O'CLOCK.
to take measures to fill up the ranks and strengthen the arms of
THE CONCORD ARTILLERY COMPANY,
that they may go forth to fight our country's battles as our fathers did in '75.
Come one! Come all!! From the farm and the workshop, the counting room and the office, and show by our action that we are not degenerate sons of brave sires.
CONCORD, April 17, 1861.

The American Civil War began in 1861 and is the backdrop for *Little Women*; the March family father is away serving as a chaplain for the Union army as the story begins. Concord, Massachusetts, location of the March (and Alcott) family home, was a town of just over 2,000 people which ultimately sent 450 off to the war. The Revolutionary War battles of Lexington and Concord had taken place on April 19, 1775, and in a patriotic echo of that event, 82 volunteers from Concord set off for Washington, D.C. on April 19, 1861. Ultimately 49 Concord residents died in the war.

Concord was a major center of American literary history of the day, home to Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne, as well as Alcott. It was also a center of enlightened thinking: a stop on the Underground Railroad, central in the rise of Transcendentalism and birthplace of the Concord School of Philosophy. All of those ideas and thinkers would influence Alcott's beliefs and literary output.

Immigration from Germany to the US jumped sharply in the 19th century, and ultimately five million Germans would set off for the US. Alcott was a fan of German culture—her favorite author was Goethe—and that positive attitude made its way into her writing, particularly *Little Women*. As the US slowly modernized throughout the 19th century and the middle class became larger and more of an American feature, interest in realist literature, with a focus on the lives of women, created the context in which *Little Women* could become a huge success.

Learn more:
Maps and **photos** of Concord
Little Women Podcast: Louisa May Alcott's Love for Germany
School of Philosophy and **Transcendentalism**

Activity

The educators at Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House (a non-profit organization that runs Alcott's former home as a museum) have put together **these activities** in which students act out scenes from the novel and use them to start discussions of the book's topics and themes. These are worth doing either before or after watching the play.

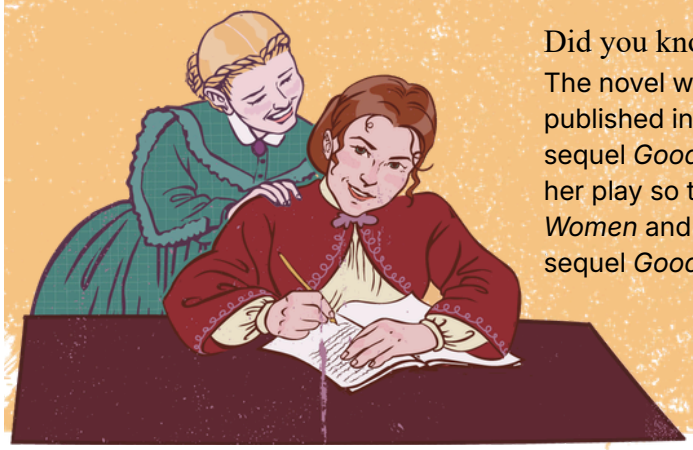
Pre-show Discussion Questions

1. What do you know about the novel, *Little Women*? What are your expectations of a modern play staging that story?
2. What do you know about American life in the 19th century and during the Civil War? How does that influence your expectations for a play set during that time period?
3. How do you interpret the title, *Little Women*? Does it sound respectful, derogatory, ironic, something else?
4. This script moves very quickly from scene to scene and location to location. Think about the production challenges inherent in that: how can a set designer include a piano in a play that might need one for a brief moment, then change location? When you watch the play, keep an eye out for how our designers have solved that problem.
5. If you have read the novel, do you think that today we can consider *Little Women* a feminist work of art? Why or why not?
6. If you have read the novel, many early readers were disappointed that Jo didn't marry Laurie. Were you? And if so, why do you think he would be a better match for her than Professor Bhaer?

To Think About While Watching the Show

In what ways are the real-life characters of Louisa May Alcott and her sisters similar to their fictional characters in the production? In what ways are they different? How does staging those characters together help your understanding of the story as a whole?

Learn more: **Autobiographical roots of Little Women**



Did you know?

The novel we know today as *Little Women* was originally published in two pieces, *Little Women* (1868) and then the sequel *Good Wives* (1869). Lauren Gunderson has written her play so that Act I contains only plot appearing in *Little Women* and Act II contains only plot appearing in the sequel *Good Wives*.

Post-show Discussion Questions and Activity 

1. In what ways did the production meet or not meet your expectations going in?
2. How did the play treat the issue of money and social class? Did that match or counter any expectation you had going in?
3. Who is your favorite character in the play, and why? Is that also the character you most identify with, and if so, why do you think that's the case?
4. Do you believe that this is a feminist script and/or a feminist production? Why or why not? In what ways is your answer to this similar to or different from your answer about the novel?
5. Come back to the question of how you interpret the play's title. Have you changed your mind about this after watching the play?
6. How do you think the play would be different if a sister other than Jo were the main author/character? Pick one of the episodes of the play and one of the other sisters, and try writing out the story (dialogue or regular prose) based on that character's point of view. Do you like this view of the story more or less than Alcott's?

Activity: Seek out one or more film versions of the story. Before watching, select one or more scenes/episodes/moments in the story that particularly interest you or that you feel are a particular challenge to portray. Think about how the film and stage versions contrast in their staging of those moments. Which do you prefer, and why?

Taproot Theatre Company's Education Programs







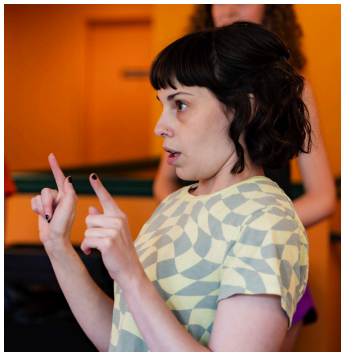
Camps & Classes

Taproot Theatre's Acting Studio offers year-round instructional programs for theatre artists of all ages and experience levels. We are devoted to creating a nurturing environment to help students develop their unique gifts.

In addition to acting classes for adults, we offer improv classes for seniors experiencing early-stage memory loss.

School Touring Productions

Taproot's Road Company uses research-backed strategies from the Committee for Children's Second Step curriculum to help students build empathy, manage emotions, and stand up for themselves and others. Since 1985, the Road Company has brought professional theatre to schools across Washington State, reaching more than 70,000 K–12 students each year with our dynamic bullying-prevention plays that educate and inspire.



In-School Residencies & Workshops

From drama games to acting classes to putting on a production, Taproot Theatre's residencies bring educational theatre directly to schools. Our theatre arts professionals visit classrooms for workshops that excite students. Students develop basic acting skills and explore non-theatre curriculum using theatre as a medium.