



## LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S BIRTH ANNIVERSARY: RUN LITTLE WOMEN RUN!

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Louisa May Alcott was born on November 29th, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania. She spent some of her early years in Boston before her family finally settled in Concord, Massachusetts, the town where *Little Women* (1968) primarily takes place. Despite having been published a little over a century and a half ago, the novel still strongly resonates with contemporary audiences, and it has been hugely influential in popular culture with numerous TV and film adaptations, as well as a ballet, opera and musical adaptations.

In the cinematic production of the last decades, we can observe that the interest and emotional attachment coming from stories focusing on coming of age is quite notable. These productions appeal to the same interests and anxieties we are still facing today, and are particularly prevalent when centered on young girls—given that the innocence of girlhood and its loss are very powerful symbolic themes in fiction. Alcott's famous work is also engaging due to the prominence of romance in the story. Janice Radway has famously researched the reading practices of women concerning romance novels in *Reading the Romance* (1984), an ethnographic study that highlights the role of audiences in the production and success of romance novels. *Little Women* appeals to a combination of coming of age and an exploration of female identity, becoming a woman and romance.

Notwithstanding the apparent interest in stable heteronormative relationships and the traditional female role that we perceive from the “everyone marries” ending of Alcott's novel, she was not born to a traditional family. Alcott was raised by transcendentalist parents and grew up in Massachusetts, a hot spot for writers and intellectuals of the time, such as Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne



and, most importantly, other feminists and suffragettes like Margaret Fuller and Julia Ward Howe. Her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was an educator, writer and philosopher. He was also a supporter of female suffrage and a vegetarian, a fact that appears now very attuned to Jacques Derrida's reading of meat consumption as a reinforcement of patriarchal values. The Alcott family, however, suffered greatly from poverty and Louisa May Alcott had a difficult childhood. Her hopes to become the breadwinner of the family were strongly motivated by necessity rather than a feminist desire to take on the said traditionally male position. Similarly, staying unmarried was partially due to Louisa taking on the role of the woman in the family, who remains unmarried to take care of her elderly parents after her younger sister's passing.

Yet, in such dire circumstances, we can see how her feminist spirit came out stronger, as she was able to make her own decisions and attain economic freedom. Alcott was a woman who had always wanted to be free to run outside. According to her biographers, running was an activity she was known to love and to be particularly good at. While being a young girl and considered a "tomboy", she is said to have befriended boys in her town by beating them on races (Ruth 1999, 22). Frederick Llewellyn Willis wrote that his cousin Louisa Alcott "could run like a gazelle. She was the most beautiful girl runner I ever saw" (Reisen 2009, 3). Alcott famously projected her desire to break established gender norms in Jo March (presumably *Little Women's* heroine), including her desire of running free. In the fourth chapter of *Little Women*, we learn that Jo longs to be allowed to run and able to achieve great things:

"Jo's ambition was to do something very splendid. What it was, she had no idea as yet, but left it for time to tell her, and meanwhile, found her greatest affliction in the fact that she couldn't read, run, and ride as much as she liked."

*Little Women* seemed to be a text that somehow contradicts its very premise: a coming of age novel that focuses on becoming a proper lady, a proper wife, and whose heroine appears to constantly push back gender convention. The feminist criticism that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century helped put the novel into perspective. Radway, in her work on the romance novel, addresses precisely this seeming paradox with endings such as that of *Little Women*. The scholar argues that "[b]y picturing the heroine in relative positions of weakness, romances are not



necessarily endorsing her situation, but examining an all-too-common state of affairs in order to display possible strategies for coping with it” (Radway 1984, 75).

Greta Gerwig’s adaptation (2019), despite turning Jo into Alcott very explicitly, decides to keep the “happily-ever-after” ending in which she marries. In Gerwig’s *Little Women*, there is a scene towards the end in which Jo (as Alcott) argues with her editor about her wishes not to see her heroine marry. Does she have to? The answer is, of course she does, because that is what the audience expects and finds satisfying. This contemporary adaptation gives Jo the freedom to run and publish her novel, but still, fails to break away from the constraints that Alcott’s publisher (and the audience) seemed to impose. A worthwhile inclusion in this new adaptation is that Gerwig recovers the image of Jo (Alcott) running, using it for the movie poster. So while enjoying the apparent contradiction that we might perceive from the “everyone has to marry” ending—although Radway would not see it as such—, we can now enjoy the movie scenes in which Jo March is running, imagining Louisa Alcott running, and maybe going out for a run ourselves.

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SUGGESTED CITATION: Álvarez Trigo, Laura. 2020. “Louisa May Alcott’s Birth Anniversary: Run Little Women Run.” *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published November 29.