

NARRATIVE

Reading Little Women: The History of an American Classic
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I have been deeply invested in scholarly research most of my adult life. I am a scholar at heart. Yet as I prepared to publish my third book (my second monograph), I realized that I didn't want it to share the fate of my first book, which was published by a university press. It had been well received, but reviews had taken a year or more to appear, and it was so expensive (\$85) that only libraries could buy it. That book had accomplished what I wanted it to—advancing knowledge in my field—but I wanted more for my new book, a biography of the writer Constance Fenimore Woolson. I firmly believed that Woolson deserved to be recognized as an important American author, and not only by a handful of literary scholars. I wanted the thousands of people who every year read *The Portrait of a Lady*, by her friend Henry James, to know about Woolson too—and maybe even read her work.

So I spent the summer of 2013 learning how to pitch the project to agents and trade presses. It took a lot of trial and error, but by August I had an agent, and by the end of October I had an offer from W. W. Norton. Then I had to completely rewrite the manuscript, turning what felt like pretty raw material into an engaging narrative, before turning it in to my editor. A year and four months later, I have submitted the revised manuscript (revised once again, based on my editor's comments), and the book, now called *Constance Fenimore Woolson: The Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, is in production. It will be published in February 2016.

When not working on the manuscript, I have begun writing shorter pieces for widely read literary websites, convinced that I must not only engage my academic peers but also the larger sphere of educated readers interested in literature and the issues facing women writers today. Two of the reviews I wrote last year were about books that belong to a new subgenre—the biography of a book—which interests me greatly. They were Rebecca Mead's *My Life in Middlemarch* and Maureen Corrigan's *So We Read On: How The Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why It Endures*. I noted in my Corrigan review that the biography of a book—a variety of literary nonfiction that combines elements of (biblio)memoir, literary criticism, historical context, and literary biography—seemed to be experiencing a bit of a heyday. The first such book I was aware of was Michael Gorra's *The Portrait of a Novel*, published in 2012. It seems to me the most compelling way for literary scholars (both Gorra and Corrigan are professors) to write about literature for a wider audience. Thus I began developing plans to make my own contribution to the subgenre.

I decided on *Little Women* for reasons I discuss in my writing sample. When I realized that in 2018 the classic novel will turn 150 years old, I knew that I couldn't wait to begin. So I broached the idea with my editor at Norton. She was enthusiastic, so I decided to proceed. In order to publish the book during its anniversary year, I will need to devote the calendar year of 2016 to completing the archival research and writing the first draft. My experience with my current book has taught me that a revised manuscript must be ready a year before the date of publication, which would mean December 2017, at the latest. To allow time for my editor to read the manuscript and make comments and for me to revise it, I must have the first draft completed in early 2017.

Little Women deserves such close examination not least because it remains one of the most popular American novels. A 2014 Harris Poll determined that *Little Women* ranks number

eight among Americans' favorite books.¹ To commemorate Louisa May Alcott's enduring portrait of the transition from girlhood to womanhood, I propose to illuminate how *Little Women* was written and how it has been read ever since. Combining the approaches of Gorra's and Mead's books, I will incorporate elements of memoir as I discuss my own experiences reading the book with my daughter and her friends and teaching it to adults, as well as my research journey as I visit various archives in search of its reception history. I will also provide a behind-the-scenes look at Alcott struggling to write the book and then to adapt to the overnight success it became. While other recent works have documented Alcott's life, this book will put *Little Women* at the center and take readers on an exploration of the life, times, and places that produced it, as well as the rich history of how it became an American and feminist classic. There has been much useful scholarship on the novel, but no previous attempt that I am aware of to distill it for a general audience. My book will also rely on primary research to fully explore the creation and lasting influence of the novel.

Like Corrigan's book, I will examine the history of the novel's reception and the multiple films, plays, and other books (for adults and children) it has inspired. However, I don't plan to be the proselytizer that Corrigan unabashedly is. In my review, I noted the way she tries to convince her readers that *The Great Gatsby* is not only "great" but "our Greatest American Novel." I also regretted the sometimes admonishing tone she takes towards general readers for misreading or not appreciating the novel to the extent it deserves. I intend to avoid being either a cheerleader or a scold (which Corrigan veers toward at times), raising serious questions about what *Little Women* means to us today, who should read it and why, and whether it should be considered a candidate for the Great American Novel, as well as what politics are involved in arguing that a book ostensibly written for girls belongs in that category. Although I am clearly a fan of the book, I do not intend to overlook its faults or shortcomings. Rather, I intend to examine the novel in all of its complexity and recognize what Alcott was and was not able to accomplish in it.

I have found that my students—a very diverse group in terms of age, race, and class—are surprised to find how much they relate to the struggles of the March girls. The overriding argument of my book will be that *Little Women* is more than a children's classic—it is an American classic that should be read by girls *and* boys as well as adults of both genders. I will particularly challenge the widespread assumptions (which I intend to document) that boys/men will not read a book about girls/women and should not be made to do so, say in a school or college setting. Now that the novel has been included on the Common Core Standards reading list for grades 6-8, it is important for parents and teachers to understand the value of the book for all genders and all ages. In addition, as *Little Women* turns 150 and we stand on the eve of the first viable woman candidate for president (Hillary Clinton, who has called the book the most influential of her childhood), re-reading the novel can initiate a larger conversation about how far we have and have not come in terms of gender expectations and life choices—for boys and girls. For the novel may begin with the girls in early and mid-teens, but it charts their journey into adulthood, following them into their own parenthoods. In addition we watch the girls' neighbor and friend, Teddy Laurence (or Laurie), grow up and make difficult life choices as well.

Of course, *Little Women* has been particularly significant to young female readers, some of whom have grown up to be leaders and writers themselves. (Ann Petry, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Cynthia Ozick, Hillary Clinton, Ursula K. LeGuin, J. K. Rowling, and many others and have cited Jo as their greatest inspiration.) My book will examine in detail the novel's groundbreaking

¹<http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/mid/1508/ArticleId/1422/Default.aspx>

portrait of Josephine March, the first girl in American fiction who was allowed to be a flawed individual rather than a model for exemplary female behavior, and show how she paved the way for much of American women's writing thereafter. If, as Hemingway famously said, all of American literature came from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a similar claim about American women's literature can certainly be made of *Little Women*.

Reading *Little Women* today, however, is complicated. Readers often feel torn between their intense engagement with the story's realism, which grew out of Alcott's own experiences and thorny feelings about growing up, and their frustration with the novel's idealism, some of which grew out of her father's and Emerson's Transcendentalism, but much of which was imposed on the author, who felt she had to conform to her publisher's and her readers' expectations. Excavating the tensions Alcott felt about writing what she called "moral pap for the young" and the pressure she received to marry off each of the March girls gives readers another way to think about *Little Women*, and teaches us a lot about the friction between an author's ambitions and the pressures of the literary marketplace and societal conventions, especially for women writers. Illuminating how Alcott did not give into demands to marry off Jo and Laurie also gives today's readers a greater appreciation for the ways she was still able to create a space for Jo to assert her independence. By giving Jo the choice—to refuse one suitor and accept spinsterhood until she finds and accepts another with whom she can be a partner in the running of a school—Alcott opened a door she would finally be able walk through in the final book of the *Little Women* trilogy, *Jo's Boys* (1886), where she was finally able to portray a young woman who chooses a career over marriage.

OUTLINE

CHAPTER ONE: "Discovering *Little Women*"—My personal history with the novel, which is not the usual narrative of falling in love with it in childhood. [Shorter, introductory chapter.]

CHAPTER TWO: "Writing *Little Women*"—The history of Alcott's writing of the novel; her earlier career and struggles establishing herself as a serious writer; need to contribute to her family's income; the development of the lucrative children's market; her publisher's request that she write a book for girls and her negative response; her decision to write one based on her and her sisters' lives; the rapid composition of the novel; the model of *Pilgrim's Progress*; the instant popularity of part I; and writing part II, after girls had written making specific requests; she swore she wouldn't marry Jo and Laurie.

CHAPTER THREE: "The Life Behind *Little Women*"—The biographical basis for much, but not all, of the book; the Alcott sisters' greater poverty, for instance; the educations they received; their relationships; the home-made newspapers and plays they created; the men in Alcott's life (including her fraught relationship with her father), who informed her portraits of Laurie and Prof. Bhaer; Alcott's choice not to marry; her mother's influence on her proto-feminist politics. All told in a narrative style.

CHAPTER FOUR: "The Many Facets of Jo"—Examines in depth the significance of the character of Jo March, the first flawed, ordinary, multi-faceted girl in American literature; her impact on children's literature, American literary history, and American culture; the many women in history who have drawn inspiration from her; the female characters based on her.

CHAPTER FIVE: “The Plots of Women’s Lives”—Examines the novel in the context of the history of the largely male tradition of the *Bildungsroman*; argues that the novel is revolutionary for exploring four different paths for women in the nineteenth century: domesticity and motherhood; invalidism; the pursuit of art in Europe; and a literary career. Each will be discussed in detail with reference to the character in the novel, the life of the Alcott sister on whom the character is based, and other women of the era who also followed that path.

CHAPTER SIX: “Reading *Little Women*”—The early reviews (both positive and negative) and readers’ reactions in the twentieth century and beyond. Emphasis on how readers have read it differently over time. [I hope to find some personal accounts in the archives on which to base this chapter, and will certainly augment with the many published accounts.]

CHAPTER SEVEN: “Becoming a Classic”—How the novel became not only a best-seller but a classic; reprints in classic series; included in American literary histories, etc.? [there is much I still must discover in order to understand how the novel is positioned in literary history and the significance it has in children’s literature and in American literature. I plan to foreground my archival researches and discoveries, creating a narrative out of them.]; discussion of how the novel is taught [based on my use of surveys of college and middle- and high school teachers], including its appearance on the Common Core reading list for grades 6-8; raising the question of whether it should be a candidate for “The Great American Novel,” examining historical and recent discussions (some of them very recent—in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and elsewhere).

CHAPTER EIGHT: “*Little Women Lives On*”—A look at how *Little Women* has become a cultural phenomenon, including the five films (and one currently in the works by Sony), television documentaries and adaptations of the novel as well as shows such as “Facts of Life,” the living history activities at Orchard House, mother-daughter book clubs, and the many forms of fandom online, including blogs and fanfiction sites.

CONCLUSION—My argument for reading the novel as an adult, not only as a child, and for men and women to read the book. I will return to my experiences teaching the book.

Work Plan and Research

My research in secondary and primary sources will begin this summer, before the start of the fellowship, and extend into the fellowship year. I have applied for a visiting fellowship at Houghton Library, at Harvard, which would allow me four weeks of on-site research in the Louisa May Alcott and Alcott Family Papers. Family papers are also held at the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Concord Free Public Library, which has portions of the manuscript of *Little Women*. I also plan to visit the Special Collections at the University of Virginia to view copies of the Alcott sisters’ Pickwick Club papers, which inspired a key scene in *Little Women*. I also intend to conduct research at the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C., on the publication history of *Little Women* as well as the many books it has inspired in its 150-year history. I have family whom I visit often in the D.C. area so will not need to apply for funding to visit these last two repositories.

I also plan to make several trips to Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts. The first will be for a ten-year-anniversary celebration of the Louisa May Alcott society this May (in

conjunction with the American Literature Association meeting in Boston). I also plan to return in spring 2016 in order to participate in living history events, attending the annual Plumfield Fun Week with my daughter. I also hope to return in the summer for their Summer Conversational Series and Teacher Institute. A student of mine who was a tour guide for many years at Orchard House has informed me that there are many research materials still on site, so I also plan to use the opportunity of my visit this May to familiarize myself with its (uncatalogued) holdings.

My plan is to take time off from teaching during the calendar year of 2016, with the assistance of the NEH Public Scholars fellowship, to work on this project full time. I would probably still have some short research trips to accomplish, but I would plan to spend the bulk of the year completing the first draft of the manuscript, so that I could turn it in to my editor in early 2017. My experience working on the Woolson biography was that a calendar year plus a semester with a two-course teaching reduction (from the ATLAS grant), leaving me one course to teach, was sufficient time to complete a first draft. A biography is a much larger project, though, so I believe that one calendar year will be adequate time to complete the first draft of this book. I will then be able to spend the summer and fall of 2017 revising the manuscript, allowing for a publication date in 2018, to mark the 150th anniversary of *Little Women*.

My Preparedness and Competency

My dissertation featured Alcott as one of its four main figures and became my first book, *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2004), which was widely and favorably reviewed in academic journals. One strength noted by reviewers was its accessible and jargon-free writing style. The book discusses the first generation of American women writers to adopt identities as artists, among whom Alcott was the most well-known.

My extensive research in nineteenth-century American literary culture and women writers, including editing an anthology titled *Wielding the Pen: Writings on Authorship by American Women in Nineteenth-Century America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), also enables me to examine Alcott's life and her novel in a wider context, as does my extensive work on her contemporary, Constance Fenimore Woolson.

I regularly teach courses in American literature at the graduate and undergraduate level, including the American literature surveys and courses in women's literature, which regularly include Alcott, her predecessors (Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller among them), and her many contemporaries.