

*Turning toward Truth: Little Women*

Sunday, February 9, 2020

If you do any research into Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* the question which comes up over and over is "Why?" Why has a book about four young white women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Concord, Massachusetts, continued to be read and admired for 150 years? It has been translated into over 50 languages, adapted for plays and movies, including the most recent, directed by Greta Guerwig and up for 6 Oscar nominations tonight, including best adapted screenplay. Writers from Patti Smith to John Green, from Simone de Beauvoir to JK Rowling have credited the novel with inspiring them to write. Even Teddy Roosevelt said he "worshipped" (his word) *Little Women* and its sequel *Little Men*. What is the universal and timeless appeal of this seemingly provincial story?

An opinion piece in today's *New York Times* (published on-line on Friday) gave me an insight. In "I Don't Want to be the Strong Female Lead," the filmmaker and actress Brit Marling writes about the dearth in movies of strong roles for women. Often the roles for women are as victims of male violence who need to be rescued by men. She hated trying out for those roles because they made her feel like a victim. After a while though she began to be offered a different role – the Strong Female Lead. At first she thought that was an improvement. She writes:

*[The Strong Female Lead is] an assassin, a spy, a soldier, a superhero, a C.E.O. ... She's got MacGyver's resourcefulness but looks better in a tank top.*

*Acting the part of the Strong Female Lead changed both who I was and what I thought I was capable of. Training to do my own stunt work made me feel formidable and respected on set. Playing scenes where I was the boss firing men tasted like empowerment. And it will always feel better to be holding the gun in the scene than to be pleading for your life at the other end of the barrel.*

*It would be hard to deny that there is nutrition to be drawn from any narrative that gives women agency and voice in a world where they are most often without both. But the more I acted the Strong Female Lead, the more I became aware of the narrow specificity of the characters' strengths — physical prowess, linear ambition, focused rationality. Masculine modalities of power.*

And she realized that the problem wasn't just with the character, it was with the story arc. The stories were all based in the classic journey of the male hero. In that journey, popularized by Joseph Campbell, the hero must leave his home and

his relationships to find greater life. Guided by a mentor, think Dante's Virgil or Luke Skywalker's Obi Wan Kenobi, the hero goes through ordeals, battles a villain who embodies evil, is wounded but triumphs, and returns home changed, ready to be an adult. But even when women follow this path, it isn't one that invites or is designed for traditional women's roles – and perhaps the story it tells isn't really designed for healthy men's roles either. The hero's journey requires the severing of relationships, seeing the world as divided between good and evil, and going it on your own. And where has that story-line gotten our world? No wonder girls and boys, women and men have been drawn to the journey of the March sisters as an alternate model.

Unlike the male hero's journey, the journey of these female heroes happens in relation; they journey together; they mentor each other, and are guided by the wisdom of their parents. They do not battle evil personified, and the evils they have to deal with are found within themselves and within the systems and structures of their society. And *Little Women* doesn't just offer one model for the journey; there are four models and five if you include the girls' friend Teddy Lawrence. *Little Women* gives us the story of four young women and one young man on the journey to adulthood. Over the course of the book they learn to balance their gifts and dreams along with their duties to others. As John Matteson puts it in his introduction to *The Annotated Little Women*, the March sisters “need to fashion mature lives that will be acceptable to others but will also be satisfying to themselves.” Early on, Alcott lays out their hopes and fears, their strengths and weaknesses. Meg is a talented actress and a loving sister, but desires luxury and approval by people who value the trappings of luxury; Jo is a writer and fiercely loyal, but with a hot temper that often hurts those she loves and prevents her from achieving what she could. Beth is a peacemaker and musician, but so painfully shy that her life is curtailed by it. Amy is an artist but vain and self-centered. Laurie is smart and loving, but lazy and takes for granted the privilege he carries as a wealthy white male. The tension of the story is not in how they will find the magic ring or defeat the dragon but in how they will deal with their own faults and how they will make a place for themselves in the world which allows them to use their gifts in a world which, for the girls and Laurie alike, may not want to allow them the space for their gifts. It is these universal questions which keep us coming back to this book, age after age. For though we don't hitch up the buggy anymore or wear long skirts or waistcoats, we too wonder “how can I be my best self?” and “is there room for me and my gifts in the world?”.

But Alcott doesn't just ask the questions. She shows us how Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Laurie live into their answers. And for a book written for young people, her answers are remarkably adult. For no one gets exactly what they want – or think they want – as the story begins, whether it's Meg's dream of a "lovely house full of all sorts of luxurious things; nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money"; or Jo's dream of "a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled with books and ... a magic inkstand" where she would write books which would make her famous. And she would also be famous for some heroic act. Beth's dream is "to stay at home with [her] father and mother, and help take care of the family." Amy's "to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world." And Laurie's to be "a famous musician... never bothered about money or business" but living for himself." In some ways their dreams come true – but in some ways they don't – and isn't that part of growing up for all of us – making the adjustments and compromises which being in relation with others require. But the compromises and adjustments only pertain to the circumstances; their values remain intact and in fact are strengthened by their compromises, for the highest value Alcott holds up is the value of love – love for those we know and also a self-less love for the world. And the compromises her characters make are always in the service of this love.

*Little Women* is all about choosing love as an ethic. And in that way it is a profoundly religious book, though that isn't always seen. Reviews at the time moaned that a book so un-Christian was so popular and some current reviews rejoice in the way that religion has been left out of the movie. But it's there. On Christmas morning, though their mother has said there will be no presents, she leaves each daughter her own copy of the New Testament, which Alcott describes as "that beautiful old story of the best life ever lived, and Jo felt that it was a true guide-book for any pilgrim going the long journey." There you have the basis for the book's view of religion and what it means to live a good life. As a Unitarian Christian, Alcott understood religion not to be about belief in Jesus but in following Jesus' example. And the girls resolve to read a little of his story every morning, working to model themselves on Jesus' example of self-less love. They also are guided by John Bunyan's inspirational novel *Pilgrim's Progress*, which is an allegory of the journey of the soul. But interestingly, Alcott draws more on the second part of the book, *Christiana's Journey*, which tells the story not of a lone pilgrim but of a mother and her four children. And though the March sisters and their mother don't talk about theological doctrine as in conventional religious novels, when the topic of God comes up in their conversation, they make clear that their understanding of God is as the power of love which holds us all. And Alcott

also makes clear that in her understanding God welcomes all people. As Beth says to Laurie when they are imagining what heaven might be like, “If people really want to go, and really try all their lives, I think they will get in, for I don’t believe there are any locks on that door, or any guards at the gate.” This doesn’t sound radical to our ears but to the readers of Alcott’s time it was. For Alcott is saying that our choices guide our destiny both in this life and beyond and that view directly contradicts the view of the traditional Christians of her time who believed that God predestined or chose who would go to heaven and that there was nothing one could do to affect that decision.

Alcott’s Unitarianism can also be seen in her belief in the goodness of all people and the care with which they are to be treated. In the famous opening of the book, the girls are asked by their mother to give their breakfast to a poor family living nearby in a shed. It’s easy to focus on the girls’ sacrifice and miss what it says about Alcott’s understanding of human nature – that the poor family are as good – as human – as her heroines and as deserving of care. And Beth contracts the illness which weakens her heart and causes her death from caring for this family when they are sick. Not one character ever says that her actions were foolish. No one says the family wasn’t worthy of care. The other sisters berate themselves that they didn’t go in her place. This too is a huge difference from other books for children at the time which had clear good children and bad children. All children, even the girls who tease Amy, are treated as real people.

And women are real people deserving of respect and the freedom to live according to the ethic of love as they choose, not as society chooses for them. This is why Louisa May Alcott bucked the pressure of her publisher and her readers to have Jo marry Laurie in the second part of the book. She had to show Jo as choosing her life, not forced to conform with society’s education, though Alcott did compromise enough to have Jo marry the less glamorous Professor Bhaer. But Mr. Bhaer too lives by the ethic of love and that ethic lived out in their marriage supports Jo in achieving her dreams of a school for boys and space and time to write.

So *Little Women* has endured despite its 19<sup>th</sup> century setting because of the alternative model it offers for how to live a good and full life – one that connects us to others, one that works towards fullness of life for the hero and for the larger community, one that shows us a world with a range of choices, not stark good or bad, and one which finds importance and value in our daily lives. *Little Women* shows us that all of us may make take the heroic journey, that all our lives are pilgrimages to greater life and that we do not have to make this journey alone. It

tells us that this greater life will look different for each of us. And it reminds us that we have power to shape the stories of our lives. Whatever our time, whatever our age, we need this invitation, this validation, this support. Read the book!

- Pamela M. Barz

