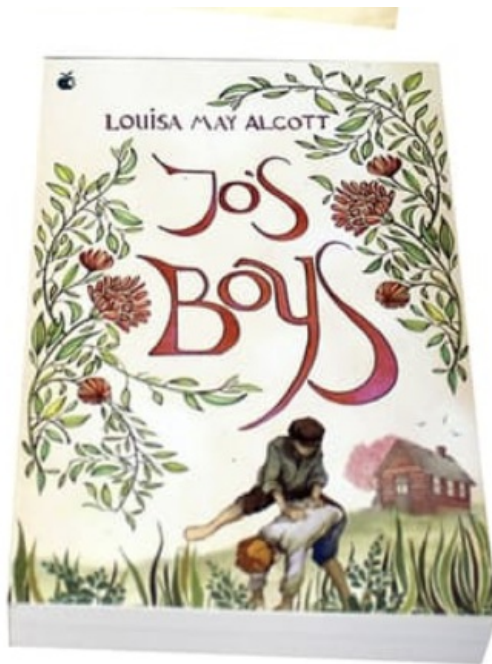
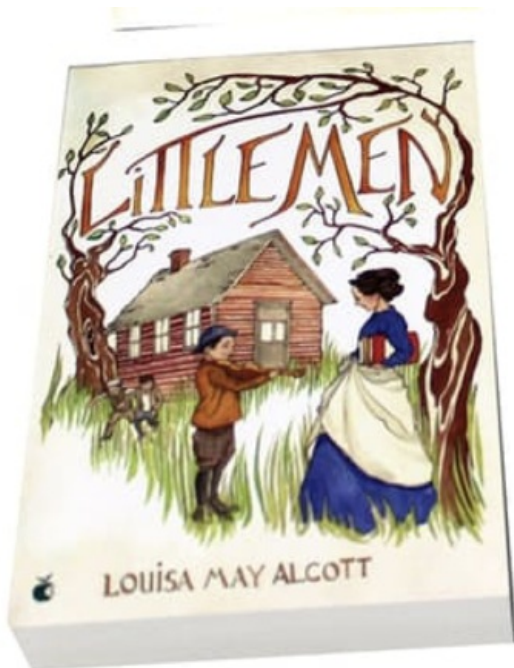


Friday, February 21, 2020

# Book & Film GLOBE



FICTION

FILM

## Into the Little Women-verse

*Redo the Ending All You Want, but the Horrible Sequels Still Exist*

📅 January 3, 2020 👤 Michael Giltz

Writer-director Greta Gerwig's new film adaptation of *Little Women* is a hit in theaters and an Oscar hopeful. So you might ask yourself a question. Are the books still any good? Well, one of them is good. The rest show an author capitalizing on her success but wary of it, growing bored with the March girls and then burning the whole damn thing to the ground.

Louisa May Alcott's life is impeccably progressive, from studying with Henry David Thoreau to rejecting marriage to her family housing a fugitive slave as proof of their passionate abolitionist stance. Her books are another matter and fans wrestle with them constantly. Is Alcott cannily showing the constraints placed on women, even her beloved heroines? Or is she celebrating submissive acceptance of their lot in life?

One thing is clear. Alcott creates four fiercely independent girls with strong minds and big aspirations...and then crushes their dreams. Or at least crushes the dreams readers have for them. Amy won't become a painter. Meg won't become an actor. Jo won't become a lesbian. And Alcott kills off Beth for being too nice. Heck, Jo doesn't even marry the wealthy and lonely and faun-like Laurie when *obviously* they are meant for each other! And that's just the first book. (Sort of.)

First things first. Alcott wrote four novels about the lives of the March family during and after the Civil War. *Little Women* came out in 1868, stunning Alcott and her publishers when it became a runaway bestseller. (Alcott wasn't sure she could write about girls at all.) She dashed off *Good Wives* in 1869. Two years later came the inevitable *Little Men*. And 15 years after that, she (begrudgingly?) offered up one more story: *Jo's Boys*.

All four books are roughly the same length. But the first two are shorter and in 1880 Alcott repackaged them together as one novel. That's what people have been reading ever since as *Little Women*. Part One is the actual original novel and part two is its sequel. Everything you love about *Little Women* is in the first part. Everything that causes dismay and concern is in part two and the sequels. So half of *Little Women* is great because that's the half that people loved in the first place. It's no more surprising than re-watching *Star Wars* and realizing it's a heck of a lot better than *The Phantom Menace*.

It took me weeks to read all four books. The holidays didn't help, but neither did the books themselves. They become increasingly dull and sermonizing, roaming far, far afield from the original's strengths. So let me save you the bother.

## Little Women

The original and best is still worth reading. Alcott's revolutionary idea was to take seriously the domestic lives of women and girls, not to mention their hopes for something more than dull domesticity. A mother and four daughters struggle to get by while Daddy is away fighting to end slavery and preserve the United States. Alcott creates four vivid sisters, each with a strong personality, and lets them fight, argue, make amends and live.

Oh they learn lessons, of course. The March girls are thrilled to receive Bibles as their only Christmas gift and nobly offer their holiday breakfast to a starving family. Rascallions, they're not. But when they're not doing good deeds, the March sisters bicker with the best of them, butting heads with one another, their beloved mother Marmee, a wealthy aunt, teachers, and more. Many chapters contain a neat little homily. But what makes it worthwhile is that in the next chapter the girls commit the same sins, fight just as much as ever and bemoan the noble promises they haven't kept. Jo and Amy and Meg and Beth are real and flawed and pushy and eager to grow up too fast. Alcott captures all of it.

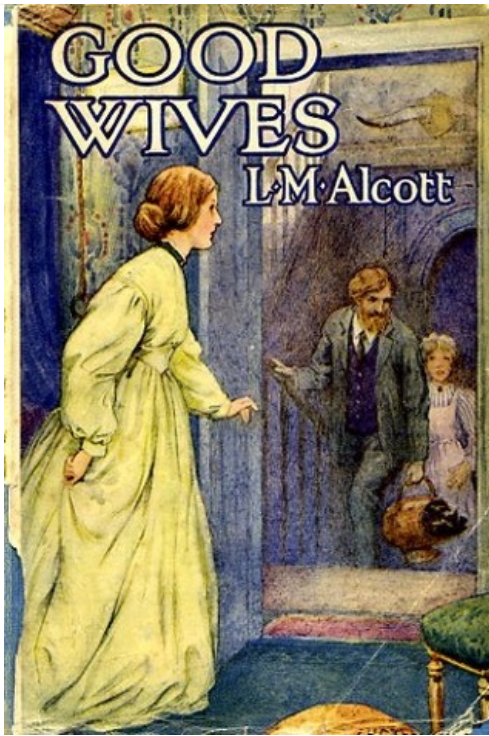
Jo, of course, is Alcott's stand-in and longs to be a writer. Amy has real talent as a painter, perhaps. Meg is quite the actress but clearly longs for domesticity. (Long before the feminist movement caught up, Alcott made clear this was a worthy choice...if not the only one that should be open to women.) And Beth, well Beth is a little angel and kind-hearted and good and dull as soap. It happens.

Jo is the fun one, the girl who rebels against what the world expects of her. Next door is Laurie, a lonely little rich boy who needs a friend so Jo boldly invites herself over. Naturally, Laurie is beautiful and kind and the perfect "brother" for these girls. His grandfather is a gruff old bastard won over immediately by Jo's spunk.

Soon, they're all fast friends, with the old man sending gentle Beth a piano while the kids hold picnics, win over snobbish Brits with their wholesome American ways, head to dances where they act a little fast, go ice skating and nearly drown. At the finale (hey, you've had 150 years to read it), Meg gives up a promised inheritance from her rich aunt to marry the kind and sweet man she loves. So even the marriage involves a bit of rebellion. Jo and Laurie are fast chums and destined to be together. Stop right there and you'll be happy.

*Little Women* is more wholesome and platitudinous than you might expect. But Alcott wrote it in 1868 and even that was an act of daring for women at the time. It's a vivid accomplishment and has more than a few sparks of progressive fire to seem quite modern indeed. If you want to check out the competition, read the first book in the *Elsie Dinsmore* series, which launched one year earlier and produced 28 titles, each one more ludicrous and stiff than the one before. The March family fights to free the slaves and give women more freedom. *Little Elsie Dinsmore* is a frightful eight year old child who can quote the Bible back to front and never lets anyone forget it. It's funny in its absurdity but tiresome beyond belief.

## Good Wives



Alcott wrote *Little Women* in record time for her and its success was a thunderbolt. She dashed off a sequel within the year, continuing the story of the March sisters. Packaged together, they are the source material for all the movie versions, stage plays, musicals, cartoons, TV shows and the like.

Alcott soon grew tired of the *Little Women* phenomenon. The first book interpolated fun material like a newsletter the girls (and eventually Laurie) printed and their amateur theatricals, all evidence of Jo's dreams for something more. *Good Wives* quietly dismantles their every wish.

Is Alcott rebelling against her audience, the way Sir Arthur Conan Doyle frustrated his fans by killing off Sherlock Holmes? How else to explain the cruel machinations of the plot? Some insist she's merely reflecting reality. Independent smart women may yearn for more but they rarely get it. Still, it seems rather beastly of her to dash all of their hopes except for Meg, whose only dream is a happy marriage with John. She gets it and then some. "When John spoke in that masterful tone," writes Alcott, "Meg always obeyed and never regretted her docility."

In contrast, Jo angrily rejects Laurie every time he makes his love clear. Since they're joined at the hip in book one and seem absolutely perfect for each other, one can only imagine Alcott perversely rejected the pleas from fans to hitch them already. This would be fine if Jo turned her back on Laurie for a writing career. Instead, she moves to New York City to tutor some kids, realizes her "sensations", cheap thrillers written for money, are not just trash but *evil* and may doom her soul.

Indeed, Jo's mother prays her daughter won't marry the beautiful, kind and wealthy Laurie because they sometimes quarrel and Jo would never be the submissive wife of her dreams. Apparently, Marmee never saw a Tracy-Hepburn film, my ideal of the perfect relationship. Sickly but saintly Beth begs Jo to come home and take care of their parents and give up writing those dumb old books— the dumb old books that have kept a roof over their heads, mind you. And to top it off Jo falls for a doughy, unprepossessing German man more than twice her age.

Meanwhile, Amy abandons painting because she'll never be a master and proudly tells the family she's turning mercenary and will marry a man she doesn't love to ensure their finances. No one says a peep about this, even though they loudly discuss everything else. Jo marries the German, Laurie despairs but gets Amy as a consolation prize, and Beth dies.

Alcott wrote *Good Wives* nimbly, with a little less sermonizing than the original. It disappoints but only in its plot. The characters are real enough to care about what happens to them so she earns the frustration of her readers. It's like the later seasons of *Downton Abbey*, where the plot becomes ever-more absurd and you kick yourself for watching. Yet Julian Fellowes never burnt down the stately home or turned Lord Grantham into a merchant. Alcott spoils her greatest creation and mocks the thrilling novels that launched her career. Is she taking the piss?

## Little Men

If Jo disappoints in *Good Wives*, she is unrecognizable in *Little Men*. Jo and her husband Papa Bhaer open a boarding school in the home of Jo's late, eccentric aunt. And yes, he's called Papa Bhaer at times, which is unforgivable in itself. The boys in the school range from the lads of wealthy folk to waifs pulled in off the street. Girls are soon thrown into the mix on the advice of Jo, for a little seasoning.

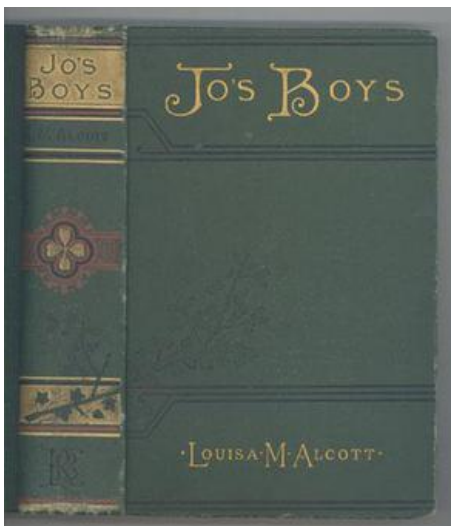
If you've ever read Tom Brown's *Schooldays* or a thousand lesser entries, you'll know what to expect. One boy is a prankster, another a gentle soul, a third will be wrongly accused of some minor theft but bear up under the strain, and so on. Alcott tosses in a mentally challenged child and another who is disabled, which is progressive but highly improbable. So points for that. Papa Bhaer (ugh) insists all the boys and his wife list the faults they most want to improve. He of course, says nothing about his own faults, being practically perfect. Bhaer dispenses sage advice while Jo does practically nothing. The school is her idea, her home provides the setting, she's been a tutor to children...and yet she disappears for chapters at a time, as distant and dull a presence as can be imagined.

When Jo does speak up, it's to mock the spirited child she once was. A girl named Daisy wants to play football? Well, Jo played football, so why shouldn't...no, wait. Jo says on second thought sweet little girls *shouldn't* play football and buys Daisy her own little working stove so the child can play homemaker.

Laurie's blonde-haired little daughter with a childish lisp is a sickening image of the ideal woman: pretty, idiotic, and meant to be worshipped. All the boys and girls adore her when she graces the school with her regal, dainty presence and speaks in her cutesy voice. Jo approves heartily, determined to make us forget she was ever fun at all. Three books in and the message is clear: little girls can have dreams when they're young, but such nonsense must be put away when life really begins. And no writing for money, heaven forbid!

At the last minute, we get a glimpse of bolder stuff. Little Daisy wants to be a doctor rather than the more acceptable role of nurse. And the servant Silas tells a memorable, sad story from his time fighting in the Civil War. It's almost enough to make you want to read one of Alcott's more thrilling tales. Nonetheless, *Little Men* is a long, slow slog with tiresome sermons from Papa Bhaer that never, ever stop. And Jo isn't even a shadow of her former self; it's more like Jo has been taken over by aliens or is the mirror opposite of who she used to be. Why, Alcott, why?

## Jo's Boys



Then there's *Jo's Boys*, which makes a bizarre hash of everything that's gone before. Instead of charming tales that bring dignity, humor and intelligence to the domestic lives of women and girls, here Alcott goes for Thrilling Adventures! Her boys travel the globe, while her girls stay home and worry. Ships are lost at sea! One lad is wrongly jailed for defending himself in a brawl and accidentally killing a vicious fraudster. Naturally, he is wracked with guilt over the shame of it all. Jo tells him to manfully bear up to the weight of his sin, rather than saying, "Snap out of it! You've done nothing wrong!" Another innocent lad becomes a society fop in Germany, runs up debt...and then reforms and puts his nose to the grindstone and triumphs as a musician, all in one year.

Lest you think any of this exciting, Alcott delivers most of these stories in a bland, after-the-fact style that robs them of drama. She describes mining disasters and daring rescues via dull newspaper articles and with the barest hint of danger. On the other hand, the next generation of girls actually fulfill some of the dreams of those who came before. One becomes a doctor and another an actress, though only the sort that performs uplifting material of the purest sort.

Jo is more of a pill than ever, haranguing the boys at every opportunity to turn away from sin and avoid the temptations of painted ladies, wine, and French theater. Worse, she hates the fame her success has brought her, hides from annoying fans, mocks their rudeness, complains about lax copyright laws (!), politely dings the work of George Eliot, and insists that women write too much. Young Jo would have hated her.





Even when Alcott tries to champion the old causes, she falters. Jo raises her boys to see the ideal woman as pretty, submissive, refined and glorying in domestic arts, even if they do get some learning before settling down. And yet the boys all support suffrage. Plus, Alcott works in praise for various feminist tracts like “No Sex In Education” by Eliza Bisbee Duffey. Good for her, but her causes would benefit more from practicing what they preach. Alcott bristles over the constraints women face but perhaps can’t fully imagine what women might do with the freedom for which they yearn.

Jo co-founds a school for boys and girls. But she rarely takes center stage, only popping in with motherly advice. She’s a smart, successful writer who made her living as a tutor. Jo has *literally* been a teacher. And yet it never occurs to anyone that she might actually teach the boys oh, I don’t know...writing? English literature? If she did, we can only hope the Alcott of Little Women would be the instructor and the tired, bored, disinterested Alcott of Jo’s Boys would listen and learn.

Tags: Jo's Boys, Little Men, Little Women, Louisa May Alcott

[← No Safe Spaces for Old Men](#)

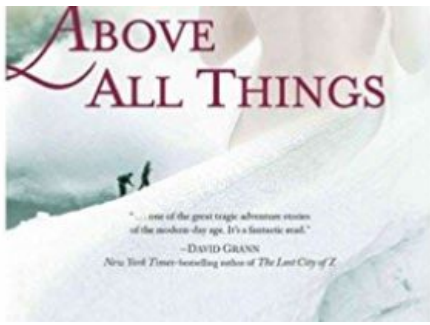
[Toss a Coin to Your Witcher →](#)



### Michael Giltz

Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast *Showbiz Sandbox*.

 You May Also Like



## High In the Air (An Everest Novel)

📅 February 13, 2013



## A Good Book by a Good Guy

📅 January 6, 2015



## Martin Landau Indicts Hollywood for Crimes and Misdemeanors

📅 February 16, 2016

## Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked \*

Comment

Name \*

Email \*

Website

Post Comment

## Featured Stories



Featured  
Stories

FILM

Politics

### 'Gone With the Wind' and 'Parasite' are Both Good Movies

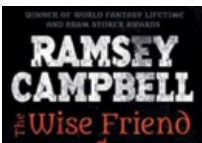
📅 February 21, 2020 👤 Neal Pollack

It's OK to love the classics despite their flaws



### The Golden Age of Asian-American Comedy

📅 February 19, 2020



### The Most Anticipated Horror Novels of 2020

📅 February 19, 2020



### And The Oscar for 2019's Best Telenovela Goes To...Parasite!

📅 February 10, 2020

Subscribe to our mailing list

Subscribe

## Social

 Twitter

 Facebook

## Recent Posts

[‘Emma’ is Likable as Always](#)

[Brown at Last: ‘Gentefied’ and the History of Latino Families on TV](#)

[‘Gone With the Wind’ and ‘Parasite’ are Both Good Movies](#)

[All the Disney Snow Dogs](#)

[Charles Portis Has Passed Away](#)

## Recent Comments

[The Librarian](#) on [The Most Anticipated Horror Novels of 2020](#)

[The Most Anticipated Horror Novels of 2020 – Book and Film Globe – Next Big Baddie](#) on [‘Bird Box’ is Bird-Brained](#)

[Donna](#) on [Your Instagram Stories Suck](#)

[Kim Newton](#) on [Run Away](#)

[Neal Pollack](#) on [‘Schitt’s Creek’ and the Appeal of Vanilla Gay Romance](#)





Editor: Neal Pollack General Manager, Advertising: Kevin Sanders - 201-724-0340

**Sea of Reeds**  
MEDIA

- Book and Film Globe
- California Globe
- Fine Art Globe
- Modern Consensus  
New Jersey
- Globe
- Rock and Roll Globe

© 2020 Book and Film Globe

[About Us](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Advertise with us](#)