

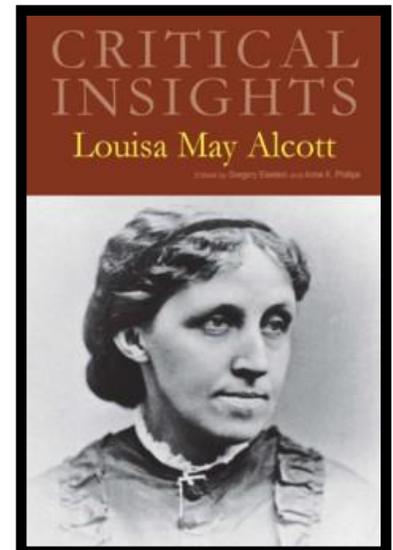
Critical Insights: Louisa May Alcott

Reviews

“Beloved by millions for her novel *Little Women*, with its detailed examination of how the March family makes its way through the Civil War era, Louisa May Alcott is truly one of the keystone writers in American literature. Her views on domestic life and personal development, as well as her candid prose style, have provoked thought among casual readers and critics alike. In fact, readers may be familiar with another volume in the Critical Insights series which gathers criticism exclusively on *Little Women*. This book deals more intimately with the author and is able to shine a spotlight on her other, less-renowned works for a more complete portrait of her life and times.

The volume is separated into four sections: Career, Life and Influence, Critical Contexts, and Critical Readings and Resources. The first section shares two essays providing biographical context for Alcott’s writing as they discuss her brief time as a Civil War nurse, her interest in Transcendentalism, and more. Critical Contexts then shares four essays providing a foundational understanding of the times in which Alcott wrote, including contemporary reaction to her work. John Matteson, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Alcott, contributes “When Rude Hands Shake the Hive: Louisa May Alcott and the Transformation of America,” which posits the notion that Alcott’s life moved parallel to America’s coming of age.

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Critical Readings carry the bulk of this volume, with 10 essays delving into an array of topics seeking to explore beneath Alcott's surface. Several essays place Alcott in juxtaposition to other examples of nineteenth-century literature. Christine Doyle, in her piece titled "American Girls and American Literature: Louisa May Alcott 'Talks Back' to Henry James," points out the similarities between Alcott and the younger James even as they promoted vastly different views of writing and womanhood. Other pieces highlight the progressive nature of Alcott's work. In "Polly, Pygmalion and the (Im)practicalities of an Independent Womanhood," Marilyn Bloss Koester introduces readers to the character of Polly Milton from Alcott's book *An Old-Fashioned Girl*. Polly has artistic friends and Koester establishes that Alcott foresees a future where women can explore artistic, alternative paths in accordance with their own ambition. Other Alcott works discussed include *Little Men*, *Eight Cousins*, and *Work*.

Each essay includes notes and a list of works cited. Critical Insights closes with a chronology of Alcott's life, a listing of all her works, notes on the book's contributors, and an index."

—ARBA Staff Reviewer