

Critical Insights: Little Women

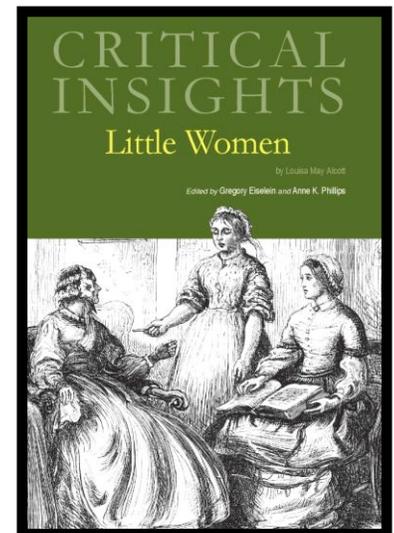
Reviews

“In a canon dominated by bloody battlefield heroics and challenging political maneuvering, it is easy to forget that one of the foremost literary works of the U.S. Civil War period is a domestic drama. Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* has stood the test of time as one of the most popular American novels. Encompassing issues of family, class, productivity, personal development and the transition from childhood into adulthood, the novel is a critic’s delight. *Critical Insights: Little Women* collects a number of essays which work to uncover the roots and effects of the novel’s great appeal.

The volume opens with a **general assessment of the legacy of *Little Women***—a book that has never been out of print—in addition to a biographical essay on Louisa May Alcott. Gregory Eiselein and Anne K. Phillips note the importance of relating Alcott’s particular upbringing (she was a neighbor if not an acolyte of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau) as well as her keen ability to sense the tenor of her time to the establishment of *Little Women*’s “unique place in literary and cultural history.”

The following section then delves into the book’s Cultural Contexts. Daniel Shealy deftly ties the contemporary national milieu, which included issues of immigration, women’s rights, and more, to his extensive research on Alcott’s family. And Beverly Lyon Clark, in her “Critical Reception of *Little Women*,” surveys opinion of the novel from first publication to the present.

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The Critical Readings section of this book includes a good range of essays examining a variety of subjects. Two pieces examine the importance of written communication in the life of Victorian women and the conflicts between professional achievement and personal obligation. R. Eric Tippin explores the influence of organized religion within the novel in his piece titled “Up the Steep Hill by Trying.” And three essays cover the novel’s treatment of courtship and marriage, including Sarah Wadsworth’s “Unsettling Engagements in *Moods* and *Little Women*; or, Learning to Love Louisa May Alcott,” which positions Alcott as progressive in response to nineteenth century romantic conventions and expectations.

Including a chronology of Alcott’s life, a listing of her other works, and notes on this book’s contributors, *Critical Insights: Little Women* **provides thought-provoking analyses of one of the truly great works of American fiction. Recommended for upper-level high school students and undergraduate students.**”

—ARBA