

Introduction

*L*ittle Women was written by Louisa May Alcott. She was born in 1832 in Pennsylvania, USA.

Louisa had three sisters: Anna, Elizabeth and May. Anna loved acting in plays. Elizabeth was shy. She liked to stay at home. May was pretty and liked drawing. Louisa was a tomboy. She liked to run races and climb trees. She also liked writing. She wrote plays, poems and short stories.

The Alcott family was poor. The girls wanted to help their parents. They all went to work as soon as they were old enough. Anna worked as a teacher. May became an artist. Louisa had many different jobs. She was a servant, a teacher and a nurse. But she was always writing. In her lifetime, she wrote more than thirty books.

Little Women

Louisa was asked to write 'a girls' story'. So she wrote about herself and her three sisters. Meg March in *Little Women* is Louisa's sister, Anna. Amy March is May. Beth is Elizabeth. Jo is Louisa herself. Many things in the story really happened to them.

Life in nineteenth-century America was hard. Children died of common illnesses. Many young people did not go to school. From 1860 to 1865, there was a war. The northern and southern states of America fought against each other. Hundreds of thousands of young men died in the fighting.

However, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy are like girls today. They like to go ice-skating. They eat ice cream and buy new clothes. They have big problems and small ones. They do selfish things and kind ones. They argue and forgive each other.

Read on to find out more about these four ‘little women’.

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Christmas

Hard times

‘Christmas won’t seem like Christmas this year,’ said Jo. ‘We haven’t any money to buy presents.’

‘It’s terrible to be poor,’ said Meg. She looked down at her old dress. 5

‘Terrible!’ agreed Amy.

‘We’ve got Father and Mother and each other,’ said Beth quietly. All four girls smiled at these words. But they grew sad again as Jo said, ‘Father is away, and won’t be home for a long time.’ She did not add, ‘Perhaps never,’ but they all thought it. They remembered that their father was far away, where the fighting was. Nobody spoke for a minute. 10

Then Meg said, ‘Mother says perhaps we should not have any presents this Christmas. We should remember that our men are having a hard time in the army. We should be happy without presents. But I’m afraid I’m not.’ Meg shook her head sadly. She could remember the time when they were rich. 15

‘We’ve each got a dollar. A dollar wouldn’t help the army much! I don’t think anyone will mind if we spend a dollar on ourselves,’ said Jo. ‘I want to buy a book.’ 20

‘I want some new music,’ said Beth.

‘I really need some new drawing pencils,’ said Amy.

‘Let’s each buy what we want, and have a little fun,’ said Jo. ‘I’m sure we work hard enough!’ 25

‘I know I do. I teach those boring children almost every day. I’d like to enjoy myself a little,’ said Meg.