

Little Woman in Blue: A Novel of May Alcott

Jeannine Atkins

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Little Woman in Blue is a *lyrically told and compelling story of Louisa May Alcott's often dismissed, vivacious youngest sister.*

Jeannine Atkins's new historical novel, *Little Woman in Blue: A Novel of May Alcott*, skilfully weaves the story of May, Louisa's youngest sister, setting her coming of age against the dramatic backdrop of the Civil War.

Louisa May Alcott's youngest sister, May, was creative as well—a painter, she practiced her craft fervently, going to any lengths to support her art. "By the following week, May was letting out waistbands for young women expecting babies or hemming linens for beds she wouldn't sleep in." Unlike Louisa, May is slow to accept limitations. She dreams of moving upward, becoming a successful artist, and traveling—alone or with a wealthy husband. "One had to make choices between being loved and making art, telling the truth or turning from it." May's choice becomes clearer as she navigates the tricky territory of both society and her own talent.

Louisa and May are excellent foils to one another. Their interplay drives the plot. "Since painting the owl, flowers, and moth in Louisa's room [during her sister's illness], May hadn't opened her paint box. Maybe she was being faithful, casting aside her old ambitions in trade for Louisa's good health." May becomes increasingly aware of her sister's bitterness towards her, and when she finds that she's been dismissed in *Little Women* as pampered, pretty character Amy, she knows she has to break free.

Atkins's writing is easygoing and lyrical—many passages beg to be read again. "She forced open a window, its panes crackled with frost, and sprinkled sunflower seeds on the snow-covered sills. She loved the round bodies of the chickadees, the swift hammering motion of their striped heads." Although the plot is firmly rooted in the Civil War period, Atkins describes the landscape and characters in a way that makes them fresh and new.

May is vivacious, and Atkins shows her complexity in a way that is refreshing, especially in historical fiction. Drawing on May Alcott's letters and diaries, as well as memoirs written by her neighbors, May is a worthy main character. *Little Woman in Blue* is a fast-paced, compelling story of two sisters, and their unquenchable drive for success.

Claire Foster (Winter 2016)

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