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Biography

Miss Alcott's E-mail: Yours for Reforms of All Kinds
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“Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.” Ralph Waldo Emerson famously sounded this rallying call to individualism in his essay “Self-Reliance.” Emerson, along with Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne, were friends and sometime neighbors of Louisa May Alcott’s family in Concord, Massachusetts.

So it is no surprise that their own homegrown philosophy—Transcendentalism—echoes throughout this book (the author’s first). Primarily a biography of Alcott, the book is inflected by personal correspondence that the author imagines sharing with her. How do they correspond? Bakke isn’t sure: she sends emails that Alcott “receives” as letters in the post; Alcott’s responses (quotations from her actual writings) somehow come back as email.

Bakke was a member of the Weather Underground, a militant leftist group in the 1960s and ’70s. She left that radicalism behind when she left the group, adopting a thoroughly mainstream life with husband, kids, and a nursing career. Now in her mid-fifties, Bakke is looking to Alcott for direction, as she writes in one letter: “I am sitting in 2005 Seattle, looking back, looking ahead, and wondering if age is weakening my rudder and ripping my sails. I think it’s time for a little course correction. You seem to have kept your rudder and sails in near perfect trim your whole life.”

Alcott wasn't just the author of *Little Women*: she was a suffragette and abolitionist, in general, a *reformer*, signing even her personal letters "yours for reforms of all kinds." Bakke's book surveys important portions of Alcott's life, placing it in the context of her neighborhood, of Concord and Boston, and of emerging political and social struggles that would last through the twentieth century into the twenty-first. At one stage or another, Alcott is participant or witness to heterodox views and lifestyles. For instance, Bakke surprises with this tidbit about Alcott's childhood: "In the spring (rural utopias always start in the springtime) of 1842, when she was ten, Louisa and her family founded a commune called Fruitlands."

To those who are versed in Transcendentalism, abolitionism, and women's studies, the book may be too ambitious, building a context for Alcott's work but ultimately lacking the space or depth to make connections between that context and the work. But for a general audience, *Miss Alcott's E-mail* serves as a well-written introduction to Alcott's life and work. A great starting point for lively discussion at book clubs, it is also fitting for a high school history or literature unit that includes other texts to round out the issues. With illustrative photographs, drawings, and even a "Reader's Guide," Bakke's book reads as an alive and engaged text, giving voice to Alcott in creative ways.

Alcott followed Emerson's advice, seeking peace through "the triumph of principles," and this counsel holds up well for Bakke and her readers.

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