



The Bee & The Fly: The Improbable Correspondence of Louisa May Alcott & Emily Dickinson

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The Bee & The Fly is an absorbing epistolary novel in which two of the nineteenth century's most beloved women writers exchange their concerns about writing and contemporaneous issues.

Framed as an attic discovery, these winsome letters begin in 1861, with Emily Dickinson seeking Louisa May Alcott's advice about her poetry. From initial politesse, they warm into keen displays of the women's opposing personalities. They culminate in the 1880s.

From Alcott's confident, voluble descriptions of her household; the ins-and-outs of publishing; Concord's notables, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; views about family; travels; and the writing of *Little Women*, to Dickinson's admiring replies—which adhere to the airy, reclusive impressions that surround her even now—the women's perspectives tease at the gulf between public ideas about women's comportment and private truths. Here, the foibles of men mingle with women's domestic duties; with colorful pith, Alcott notes, "One can discuss Greek poetry and chop meat."

The letters preserve idiosyncracies, such as Dickinson's fragmentation and dashes, yet are also infused with generous creativity about events. They posit, for example, that it was Alcott who introduced Dickinson to her editor. The result is a story of impassioned, gentle solidarity that will reward literary fans while inviting more general appreciation for women's friendships.

Alcott's voice dominates through its sheer volume. Her appealing wit enlivens the historical background, including the Civil War and biographical details. Dickinson's infrequent yet steadfast missives, often penned on scraps, rely on implied meanings, which prompt Alcott's chastisement or renewed wisdom. Their back-and-forth commiseration is heartfelt.

Entertaining in its breadth and intimate about the challenges surrounding writing for publication while longing for greater work, *The Bee & The Fly* is an enchanting flight of fancy centering on two memorable women.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2022)

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