

The Afterlife of "Little Women"

By Beverly Lyon Clark

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The hit Broadway show of 1912; the lost film of 1919; Katharine Hepburn, as Jo, sliding down a banister in George Cukor’s 1933 movie; Mark English’s shimmering 1967 illustrations; Jo?this time played by Sutton Foster?belting "I'll be / astonishing" in the 2004 Broadway musical flop: these are only some of the markers of the afterlife of *Little Women.*

Then there’s the nineteenth-century child who wrote, "If you do not... make Laurie marry Beth, I will never read another of your books as long as I live." Not to mention Miss Manners, a *Little Women* devotee, who announced that the book taught her an important life lesson: "Although it’s very nice to have two clean gloves, it’s even more important to have a little ink on your fingers." In *The Afterlife of Little Women,* Beverly Lyon Clark, a leading authority on children’s literature, explores these and other after-tremors, both popular and academic, as she maps the reception of Louisa May Alcott’s timeless novel, first published in 1868.

Clark divides her discussion into four historical periods. The first covers the novel’s publication and massive popularity in the late nineteenth century. In the second era?the first three decades of the twentieth century?the novel becomes a nostalgic icon of the domesticity of a previous century, while losing status among the literary and scholarly elite. In its mid-century afterlife (1930–1960), *Little Women* reaches a low in terms of its critical reputation but remains a well-known piece of Americana within popular culture. The book concludes with a long chapter on Little *Women*’s afterlife from the 1960s to the present?a period in which the reading of the book seems to decline, while scholarly attention expands dramatically and popular echoes continue to proliferate.

Drawing on letters and library records as well as reviews, plays, operas, film and television adaptations, spinoff novels, translations, Alcott biographies, and illustrations, Clark demonstrates how the novel resonates with both conservative family values and progressive feminist ones. She grounds her story in criticism of children’s literature, book history, cultural studies, feminist criticism, and adaptation studies. Written in an accessible narrative style, *The Afterlife of Little Women* speaks to scholars, librarians, and devoted Alcott fans.

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Editorial Review

Review

This superb, scrupulously researched book breaks fascinating new ground. Clark provides readers with a comprehensive narrative for understanding the changing reception of *Little Women.* She explores a diverse and substantial number of responses, both in the United States and globally, including personal reactions, popular reviews, scholarly analyses, and adaptations of all kinds. She also raises larger questions about the creation of childhood and the formation of cultural memory. No one has previously researched the critical or popular reception of *Little Women* in such detail or with such nuance. This is an impressive, original, and well-written book.

(Gregory Eiselein, Kansas State University, coeditor of *The Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia*)

Even as new Alcott-oriented scholarship, adaptations, and other artifacts appear, *The Afterlife of 'Little Women'* will continue to be essential to Alcott studies and a model for reception scholars.

(*Reception*)

The research in this book is stunning both in its breadth and depth... This is a book that not only does justice to its subject through a detailed presentation of evidence connected by astute critical judgments, but can also serve as a model for future studies. We are in Clark's debt for this immensely detailed, informative, and--yes--entertaining work.

(*The Lion and the Unicorn*)

[*The Afterlife of* Little Women] is fascinating, cover-to-cover, for the many readers of *Little Women* still out there, whether scholar or generally interested fan, for Clark's prose is clear and lively; her ability to discuss so many diverse materials so cogently is admirable... As the sesquicentennial of Alcott's most famous work approaches (2018), scholars and general readers can only hope that Beverly Lyon Clark will be among those assessing this classic in its 150th year.

(*Studies in the Novel*)

From the child who saves her copy of Little Women as she flees from a Chicago fire, to a schoolgirl who warns Alcott that if she didn't 'make Laurie marry Beth' she would 'never read another of your books as long as I live'... the glimpses we get of child readers in the nineteenth century are compelling.

(*Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*)

About the Author

Beverly Lyon Clark is a professor of English and women’s studies at Wheaton College. She is the author of *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children’s Literature in America,* also published by Johns Hopkins,

the editor of *Louisa May Alcott: The Contemporary Reviews*, and the coeditor of *"Little Women" and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ricky Burnham:

Your reading sixth sense will not betray an individual, why because this The Afterlife of "Little Women" guide written by well-known writer whose to say well how to make book which might be understand by anyone who have read the book. Written in good manner for you, leaking every ideas and producing skill only for eliminate your hunger then you still doubt The Afterlife of "Little Women" as good book not simply by the cover but also by content. This is one book that can break don't determine book by its include, so do you still needing an additional sixth sense to pick this!? Oh come on your studying sixth sense already alerted you so why you have to listening to a different sixth sense.

Alex Jose:

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Tara Payton:

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