
“Fun Forever”?

Toys, Games, and Play in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*



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Nineteenth-century literature offers insights into the history and sociology of play in American life. Louisa May Alcott’s novel *Little Women* contains especially rich period depictions of childhood games and amusements and provides some of the earliest scenes of American girls at play. The author discusses the various depictions of play in the novel, places these in the context of Alcott’s life and work, and contrasts them to other works of the period. She contends that *Little Women*, detailing and celebrating play from start to finish, demonstrates how play was both valued for itself and served a socializing function. She also presents scenes from *Little Women* to illustrate specific aspects of nineteenth-century American play—its use of furniture and the place of dolls, for example. In short, the author treats *Little Women* as a privileged example to discuss play more generally, and she uses the study of play to look more carefully at the novel itself.

In much of the existing analysis of nineteenth-century American children’s toys and play practices, scholars have consulted autobiographies and memoirs for confirmation of their theories.¹ Others have surveyed visual representations of American children of the era to acquire evidence about American childhood.² While scholars acknowledge the existence of literature written about and for children in nineteenth-century America, few of them have assessed literary texts in connection with ongoing theories about childhood and play. Prior to 1860, American children’s literature conveyed little information about toys, games, and play. As Anne Scott MacLeod notes, “Frivolity, imaginative play, and uninstructional entertainment were dismissed, not so much because they were sinful as because they wasted the brief, precious time in which a child must learn so much that was so important.”³ On the whole, nineteenth-century literature for children has received scant attention in the context of historical and sociological studies of American children and their play activities. Neither

have literary scholars attended in any detail to the ways in which nineteenth-century American children's literature depicts and editorializes about child play and amusement. The subject is a rich one, deserving of attention beyond the scope of this article.

Of the literature published for child readers in the nineteenth century, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868/1869) offers a particularly original and fascinating depiction of play in American life. Although there are vestiges of play and amusement in novels for girls prior to the appearance of *Little Women*, Alcott's novel is really the first to show play that is celebrated and valued for its own sake. *Little Women* perfectly embodies what Gary Cross describes as a post-1850 American emphasis on "instinct and spontaneity in play."⁴ It accurately reflects multiple aspects of nineteenth-century American child culture, and it insists that play is not only desirable but a necessary component of a well-rounded life.

Prior to the publication of *Little Women* in 1868, American girls were rarely depicted in literature as being involved with toys, games, and play. It is true that on the whole, few literary texts embodied specific components of play culture. However, even in literary texts published prior to 1860, there are instances in which games and play memorably occur. In novelist Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), for example, Ellen Montgomery experiences little that might be seen as amusement or frivolity. Her dying mother has sent her to live with an unsympathetic relative (significantly named Miss Fortune Emerson), and the primary trajectory of Ellen's story involves her development into a faithful and properly submissive Christian. However, chapter 25 depicts a series of games in which children and adults from the community participate: "Now the fun began in good earnest, and few minutes had passed before Ellen was laughing with all her heart, as if she never had had any thing to cry for in her life. After 'puss, puss in the corner' came 'blind-man's buff'; and this was played with great spirit."⁵ The party culminates with a session of Fox and Geese—here, a variation on tag, rather than the board game.⁶ Warner devotes surprising detail to this community celebration, lavishing attention on Mr. Dennison's strategies for capturing Miss Emerson's geese, and uncharacteristically emphasizing the way Ellen enjoys the party. No clear moral purpose is served by the episode; it is among the earliest in American children's literature to depict fun for its own sake. Published some years before the more formally recognized local-color movement in American literature, Warner's best-selling novel anticipates its celebration of regional activities and characteristics and quite probably draws from personal play and party experiences of her own youth.⁷

Another literary work published the very same year as *Little Women* and written for a comparable audience also includes more references to toys and play than might be expected. *Elsie Dinsmore*, the first in a series of twenty-eight volumes about the title character written by Martha Finley,⁸ depicts a lachrymose protagonist who is in this sense very much an heir of Ellen Montgomery. Given Elsie's single-minded focus on her Christianity, it may seem surprising that there are many references to toys, games, and play in the novel. In the novel's opening chapter, play and fun are forbidden entities when Elsie's vindictive teacher denies her an opportunity to go to the fair with the other members of her family. Although Elsie, a wealthy child, apparently has playthings, Finley commonly refers to them to show the way Elsie's family subjugates her: "She was made to give up her toys and pleasures to Enna, and even sometimes to Arthur and Walter."⁹

Toys also function in *Elsie Dinsmore* as a way for the title character to practice sacrifice and submission, as when Elsie buys the toy boat only so she can make a present of it for the undeserving and sadistic Arthur.¹⁰ Elsewhere in the novel, other children play jacks, although Elsie is explicitly forbidden by her father to play them (in keeping with his attempt to dominate her entirely);¹¹ at a social gathering, there are blocks, dolls, and other toys and games.¹² After having begun to win her father's heart, Elsie receives from him "a number of costly toys."¹³ Finley, significantly, provides no specific detail about them. MacLeod notes of pre-1860 American children's literature, "There were few homely details of food or dress or common activity to anchor the fiction to a particular time and place; most stories were played out against backgrounds almost abstract in their generality."¹⁴

However, other children in Finley's novel receive toys that are more explicitly described. For example, "Mary Leslie and little Flora Arnott were made perfectly happy with wax dolls that could open and shut their eyes; Caroline Howard received a gold chain from her mamma, and a pretty pin from Elsie; Lucy, a set of coral ornaments."¹⁵ It is Elsie for whom there is an overall lack of detail and a pattern of subjugation, particularly in reference to her toys and play; candy also figures into this, as her father denies her the sweets that other children all around her gleefully consume. The other children whose toys and play are described in greater detail often are seen as rather crude (and cruel) in their attitudes and behaviors, while Elsie's only very general association with toys and other possessions suggests her alliance with more spiritual matters. In a scene near the conclusion of Finley's novel, the larger community gathers to

celebrate and play together, adults as well as children. Unlike Warner, Finley provides few details about the games and sports they play.

Elsie Dinsmore suggests that Christianity should be a child's primary consideration, but *Little Women* depicts a very different attitude toward childhood, one which features an astonishing range of toys, games, and play. In part, Alcott's refreshing attitude toward play and activity stems from her own childhood experiences, which she identified as the source for her fiction.¹⁶ In part, however, *Little Women* must also be seen in context. In September 1867, Thomas Niles, of the Boston publishing firm Roberts Brothers, asked Louisa to write a novel for girls.¹⁷ Niles's request was based in part on the success of series books for boys by authors such as William T. Adams, writing as Oliver Optic, and Horatio Alger. Although initially she felt reluctant, Alcott noted in her journal, "lively, simple books are much needed for girls, and perhaps I can supply the need."¹⁸

In her journals and letters, Alcott demonstrates an enthusiasm for play and a familiarity with particular kinds of entertainment similar to those of other well-known nineteenth-century authors such as Edward Everett Hale and William Dean Howells.¹⁹ These authors enjoyed play, and they all three played in similar ways, despite economic, geographical, and gender differences. Each described playing circus or menagerie games; each contributed to theatricals and family newspapers.²⁰ Alcott's journal entries from as early as 1843, when she would have been ten or eleven years old, suggest that, for her, amusement stemmed from making doll clothes or playing outside, among other activities. In one oft-cited entry, Alcott notes, "[I] had a lovely time in the woods with Anna and Lizzie. We were fairies, and made gowns and paper wings. I 'flied' the highest of all."²¹

Modern readers of her journals find even more significant that, despite the family's deprivations (even during their failed commune experience at Fruitlands, which should be seen as the low point of their lives), Alcott regularly notes not only that she has assisted with the work and taken some exercise but also that she makes time for play, and further, that other members of her family regularly participate as well. "We played in the snow before school," she writes. And "we played till supper time[;] in the evening we played cards."²² Other nineteenth-century girls also devoted considerable detail in their diaries and letters (and later, memoirs) to their play.²³ However, for the Alcotts, play seems to have been an essential component of daily life.

Scholars have paid much attention to the way that Bronson Alcott's theories affected his family.²⁴ However, in the context of the role of play in the Alcotts's lives, it is clear that Abigail "Abba" Alcott, Louisa's mother, was the chief proponent of play.²⁵ In reminiscences about the Alcott family and their life in Concord, Anne Brown Adams, a daughter of John Brown who boarded at the Alcotts' while she attended Frank Sanborn's academy in the early 1860s, recalled that while Bronson remained upstairs in his room, "Mrs. Alcott played nine men's Morris, alternate games with my sister and myself, then a game of cribbage with my sister, next a game of chess with me, and then Miss Louisa would come down and we all would play Casino . . . with cards, until tired of it, ending by playing 'Old Maid,' chatting pleasantly and going to bed."²⁶

Adams also detailed Abba's philosophy about play: "Mrs. Alcott was very fond of gathering the young people about her in the evening and playing games with them. She had a theory, and she practiced it too, that it is the duty of every mother in the land to invite a few young men to spend their evenings at their home, and so fill them with quiet rational amusements that it would draw the young men away from bad places."²⁷

Abba's daughters clearly took to heart the principle that a well-rounded life included regular play. In later entries in Louisa's journals, she details such experiences as her sister May's 1863 trip to Clark's Island: "a riotously good time boating, singing, dancing, croqueting & captivating."²⁸ She also wrote of her own experiences, including one in Gloucester in 1864: "Had a jolly time boating, driving, charading, dancing & picnicking."²⁹ Throughout her life, as her health and work obligations permitted, Louisa made play a priority, in part because of the habits her mother instituted throughout her childhood.

Little Women details and celebrates play from beginning to end. The first chapter begins with the girls' rehearsal for their Christmas theatrical, and the final chapter depicts the entire March family celebrating Marmee's birthday and enjoying the apple harvest festivities at Plumfield. In between, the March sisters act, dance, and play Buzz.³⁰ They throw snowballs, skate, go sleighing, play chess, enact characters from Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*, write newspapers, go on picnics, play croquet, go rowing, stage a circus, and play Fox and Geese.³¹ They also fence, concoct mudpies, dress up, slide down the banister, build a snow maiden, and play with kittens—and that's only in the first volume. The March sisters use found objects for play, as in their enactment of scenes from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Marmee notes, "Nothing delighted you

more than to have me tie my piece-bags on your backs for burdens, give you hats and sticks, and rolls of paper, and let you travel through the house from the cellar, which was the City of Destruction, up, up, to the house-top, where you had all the lovely things you could collect to make a Celestial City."³²

In his *Children at Play*, Howard P. Chudacoff has noted, "The most popular playthings have been those informal objects that children fashion or discover themselves."³³ The March sisters are remarkable in this respect. Preparing for their performance of "The Witch's Curse," a play they have written and for which they each act multiple parts, the girls create whatever they need: "Being . . . not rich enough to afford any great outlay for private performances, the girls put their wits to work, and, necessity being the mother of invention, made whatever they needed. Very clever were some of their productions; paste-board guitars, antique lamps made of old-fashioned butter-boats, covered with silver paper, gorgeous robes of old cotton, glittering with tin spangles from a pickle factory, and armor covered with the same useful diamond-shaped bits, left in sheets when the lids of tin preserve-pots were cut out."³⁴

Alcott follows her commentary about the sisters' ingenuity in their preparations for the theatricals with an editorial defense of their activity: "It was excellent drill for their memories, a harmless amusement, and employed many hours which otherwise would have been idle, lonely, or spent in less profitable society."³⁵ Her explanation suggests that she felt the need to defend the March sisters' practices (in this context, against her own family's habits and activities). It could not have surprised her that after the novel's initial publication, her editor was pressured to remove the theatrical sequence. As Niles wrote to Alcott, "Some very good & pious people object to the theatrical part of the Merry Christmas chapter and on that acc[ount] object to its introduction into their Sunday School Libraries. Could you substitute any other matter . . . & if you could, do you wish to do so? For my part I think it is about the best part of the whole book. Why will people be so *very good*."³⁶ The novel's reception indicates that its attitudes toward play and amusement were indeed seen as subversive at the time of its initial publication.

The March family's home is the setting for much of the sisters' play. Chudacoff notes, "The family abode offered an expanded play arena. As new architectural components, such as attics, cellars, and children's own bedrooms, became more common, young people could claim spaces that adults did not always monitor."³⁷ While much of the sisters' play takes place in the parlor on the main floor, they stage their play "upstairs," although it is unclear whether "The Witch's Curse" is performed on the second floor or in the garret.³⁸ Jo generally claims the garret as

her personal retreat and writing space, although the Pickwick Club she and her sisters form also meets there. No adult ever seems to visit these premises, and further, the games that are played there are not particularly domestic. David Watters astutely notes, "The third-floor garret is the repository of New England's past, a place of imagination removed from the public demands of patriarchal authority and performed rituals, an attic for child's play, memory, and the production of new books."³⁹ Readers have long appreciated the privacy and appeal of Jo's garret. As fan Laura Gamache has explained, "I thought that was a tremendously idyllic scene. Jo is way on the top of the house, where nobody knows she is, all by herself in her own world. The basket of apples was the topper. That basket of sustenance meant she could stay up there for hours, and hours, and hours."⁴⁰ The garret ensures Jo's freedom from domestic burdens and serves as an environment in which her creativity flourishes.

Critics also have noted that ordinary furniture played a role in the American children's games of the nineteenth century.⁴¹ *Little Women* demonstrates this tradition as well. The family's sofa became a prop of many playful activities: "A trifle shabby, as well it might be, for the girls had slept and sprawled on it as babies, fished over the back, rode on the arms, and had menageries under it as children."⁴² During the Christmas theatrical, as well, the girls use a clothes-horse and dressers to make a cave for the opening scene, and other materials to construct a tower with a window (one that, alas, crashes down during the scene in which it is featured).⁴³ The girls' use of Ellen Tree, the tree in their garden they have designated as their "horse," is a similar example of the way they turn everyday objects into opportunities for fun.⁴⁴

The March sisters do not have many toys, at least in part because of their economic hardships. Among Jo's prized possessions are her russet boots, which she wears in the theatricals. Beth, however, is the sister most clearly associated with toys. She owns six dolls, and given the family's poverty, this seems a surprisingly large number of toys. Additionally, as historian Miriam Formanek-Brunell notes, "Though the number of toys had increased since the colonial period, there were still few dolls around in the average middle-class household in the 1850s, a fact of doll demography that would change dramatically only after the Civil War."⁴⁵ Beth's collection has swelled as her older sisters outgrew their dolls; youngest sister Amy wants nothing to do with them (and is not interested in toys in general). Beth loves the dolls dearly, even Jo's cast-off toy, significantly named Joanna, who has no arms or legs. Formanek-Brunell addresses Jo's destruction of her doll in the larger context of girls' aggression toward their toys.⁴⁶ However, Alcott stresses Beth's lack of aggression toward her dolls: "No pins were ever

stuck into their cotton vitals; no harsh words or blows were ever given them; no neglect ever saddened the heart of the most repulsive, but all were fed and clothed, nursed and caressed, with an affection which never failed." Alcott adds that Beth "brought it bits of bouquets; she read to it, took it out to breathe the air, hidden under her coat; she sung it lullabys, and never went to sleep without kissing its dirty face, and whispering tenderly, 'I hope you'll have a good night, my poor dear.'"⁴⁷

None of her play is orchestrated or mandated by Marmee; Beth chooses this activity, and her dedication to the dolls is supported by her sisters. Jo, for example, makes sure that the path in the garden is cleared in the winter so that Beth can take Joanna on her daily constitutional. Much of the love Beth demonstrates toward her dolls is representative of the love she feels for her sisters. Interestingly, when Marmee is in Washington, nursing her ailing husband, Beth takes her place in many instances, tending to the impoverished Hummel family and waving goodbye to Meg and Jo as they leave for work. Beth's loving care for her dolls foreshadows her sisters' loving care of her when she falls ill, including Jo's devoting herself to Beth, as Beth has devoted herself to Joanna. It is worth noting that the sister who does not become a wife or mother demonstrates some of the more specific, tender "mothering" in the novel.

Later in the novel, Meg's children Daisy and Demi are depicted as having more plentiful and more diverse kinds of toys. Daisy plays with "a microscopic cooking stove."⁴⁹ Demi is bribed by Laurie with a family of wooden bears from Berne.⁵⁰ Thus the final volume of *Little Women* reflects a shift, identified by historians and sociologists, stemming from the expansion of the toy industry after the Civil War.⁵¹ Daisy and Demi are characters inspired by Alcott's nephews, Frederick Alcott Pratt (born in 1863) and John Sewall Pratt (born in 1865). As her nephews benefited from the burgeoning toy market and the Alcotts' prosperity,⁵² so Daisy and Demi have access to more store-bought toys. However, Alcott also stresses that the next generation of the March-Brooke family also retains its ability to invent fun by using found objects. Demi, for instance, creates a "sewing-sheen,"—a mysterious structure of string, chairs, clothes-pins and spools, for wheels to go 'wound and wound'" as well as a "lellywaiter," consisting of "a basket hung over the back of a big chair."⁵³

The games the March sisters and their friends play are of interest, particularly in the "Camp Laurence" section of the first volume. Here, Laurie invites the March sisters, along with a number of other guests, including visitors from England, to attend a picnic in the meadows located across the river from their

homes. Alcott lavishes detail on what her characters do during the day. They first play croquet. Cross has noted a croquet craze that swept across New England during the 1860s,⁵⁴ and Alcott clearly participated in it. Elizabeth B. Greene, visiting the Alcotts in 1864, writes, “*Lu or Louie*, the Authoress, then appeared, a comic, bright, talented extravaganza of a girl—and we went out on the grass & played Croquet, a nice little game with balls and mallets.”⁵⁵ In this passage, Greene’s sense that she needed to provide an explanation for how the game is played indicates how new the game was to her. The croquet match featured in *Little Women* enables Alcott to comment patriotically on the superiority of the Americans’ play, when Jo, despite having had her ball relegated to the outskirts by Fred Vaughn after he has illegally nudged his ball through the wicket with his foot, manages to win the game with a masterful stroke. But it also makes sense, given the novel’s setting in the early 1860s, that croquet would be so prominently featured at this party thrown by a wealthy and energetic host, not only through description of the matches played at both the beginning and the end of the picnic, but also through numerous references throughout the book to the paraphernalia of the game such as the stake, wickets, and balls.⁵⁶

Jo brings out a new, especially appropriate, game at the Camp Laurence party called Authors. The Camp Laurence episode occurs in the first part of *Little Women*, set during the summer of 1862. Authors was created in 1861, in New England.⁵⁷ The timing of its introduction made it particularly suited to the setting. Further, as an aspiring writer herself, Jo understandably would have an enthusiasm for the game.

Finally, one more memorable sequence in the Camp Laurence chapter highlights the group’s construction of a story during the game called Rigma-role. No evidence confirms the existence of such a game prior to the publication of *Little Women*, although some connection exists to a related game dating back to the thirteenth century that involved drawing fortunes from a paper scroll.⁵⁸ One of the English characters attending the picnic, the older sister Kate Vaughn, proposes the game, explaining that each person in sequence tells a piece of a story that culminates in an especially exciting moment, at which point the teller stops and allows the next person to take up the story and continue it. The Rigmorole narrative that the characters construct certainly proves entertaining, but it is also an admirable strategy for Alcott to have employed, because each storyteller’s contribution reveals a great deal about his or her reading habits, ambitions, desires, and general character. The overall story is, indeed, a fine piece of nonsense.⁵⁹

In keeping with the traditions of antebellum American leisure activity, the March sisters generally play with each other rather than with others outside the family.⁶⁰ Laurie, from next door, however, is included in most activities. Later in the novel, though, Alcott enables her characters to play with acquaintances, and the outsiders' attitudes toward play are often especially revealing of their characters. Significantly, the men who become love interests for the March sisters almost immediately reveal themselves to be appropriate and acceptable because of their affinity for play. John Brooke, Laurie's tutor, first appears in the Camp Laurence episode, where he assists in rowing one of the two boats to the picnic site and leads one of the croquet teams. He serves as commander-in-chief for the picnic, and Laurie notes in response to Jo's appreciation of the fun that "I don't do anything; it's you, and Meg, and Brooke, who make it go."⁶¹ Brooke takes the first turn when the group begins its game of Rigmorole. In contrast, Ned Moffat also rows one of the boats, but he is depicted as an unreliable flirt, while Fred Vaughn, who later becomes a love interest for Amy, cheats at croquet and plagiarizes most of his contribution to Rigmorole. Brooke is thus depicted from his first appearance more admirably—and as more a leader—than the other eligible young men in the novel.

The significance of play also factors into the characterization of Professor Bhaer, whom Alcott has created as a love interest for Jo (in part to annoy the many readers who wrote to her after the appearance in print of the first volume, clamoring for Jo to marry Laurie).⁶² Almost immediately after Jo first observes Professor Bhaer assisting the servant girl with the heavy coal hod, she learns from the children for whom she is serving as a governess that the professor is much loved. Her charges, Kitty and Minnie, "tell all sorts of stories about the plays he invents, the presents he brings, and the splendid tales he tells."⁶³ Professor Bhaer is then seen "down on his hands and knees, with Tina on his back, Kitty leading him with a jump rope, and Minnie feeding two small boys with seed-cakes, as they roared and ramped in cages built of chairs," and Jo summarizes the event, "a more glorious frolic I never witnessed."⁶⁴ It is clear that she and the professor are kindred spirits. It is also clear that, in large part because he is capable of and dedicated to play, he is an appropriate partner for her.

Many readers have expressed dismay that it is Amy who becomes Laurie's wife, rather than Jo, but the intricate patterns of their play indicate Amy's and Laurie's appropriateness for each other. Although Amy determines at one point to marry Fred Vaughn for his money and status, readers who recall his lack of integrity during the play scenes in the Camp Laurence section will know

that he will not become her husband. Of the sisters, Amy is perhaps the most distanced from Laurie for much of the novel, although in the first volume she aspires to go to the theatre with him (along with Meg and Jo) and skate with him (and Jo) and regards him as an attractive role model throughout. Alcott notes in the second volume that “Amy never would pet him like the others.”⁶⁵ When he first arrives in Nice, they do not play well together. He does not express interest in dancing with her, and she punishes him by ignoring him. Later, she tells him she despises him for his laziness, contrasting his indolence in Nice with the way he energetically played at home. She uses two of her sketches to make her point. The first, which she had drawn earlier and retouched in Nice, shows Laurie in the act of taming a horse. Amy notes, “Don’t you remember the day you played ‘Rarey’ with Puck, and we all looked on?”⁶⁶ Amy’s second sketch of Laurie, depicting his indolence in Nice, shames him with its contrast to his earlier, more active play.

When she sends him away, he responds by writing and then destroying several musical compositions. Most significantly, during this interaction, Laurie accepts that Jo will not marry him and begins to consider Amy as a potential mate, and he moves from doing nothing to beginning to play again, both literally and figuratively. Afterward, he goes hiking in Germany before reuniting with Amy in Vevey. She, however, has ceased to play since she told Laurie she despised him. Formerly very active, she becomes “pale and pensive”; although she often goes sketching alone, she “never had much to show when she came home.”⁶⁷

When Laurie returns to her, she is alone in the chateau garden while all the others in her party have gone for a walk. This stillness is uncharacteristic of Amy. One of the first effects Laurie’s return has on her is to make her play again. “At Nice,” we are told, “Laurie had lounged and Amy had scolded; at Vevey, Laurie was never idle, but always walking, riding, boating, or studying, in the most energetic manner; while Amy admired everything he did and followed his example as far and as fast as she could.”⁶⁸

Significantly, Laurie’s proposal of marriage to Amy is subordinated to a conversation about play. When Amy offers to help Laurie row, he allows, “you may take an oar if you like.” Indicating their appropriateness for each other, Alcott writes, “though [Amy] used both hands, and Laurie but one, the oars kept time, and the boat went smoothly through the water.” Laurie proposes: “I wish we might always pull in the same boat. Will you, Amy?”⁶⁹ Announcing their engagement to the family at home, their letter is described as “a written

duet.⁷⁰ Although some readers continue to mourn for the relationship they have envisioned between Jo and Laurie, Alcott embeds within her novel many indications through the language of play that Amy is the more appropriate mate for Laurie.

As these courtship examples indicate, Alcott advocates that adults, as well as children, need to strike a balance between working and playing. At several moments in the novel, characters are not successfully balancing these activities. In fact, the focus on an entire chapter in the first volume, "Experiments," is on the necessity of balance between amusing oneself and contributing something to the community's welfare. After Marmee gives her daughters a week's reprieve from their various chores, prompting Jo to cheer, "Fun forever and no grubbage,"⁷¹ the sisters are pleased to be able to pursue only what amuses them. Jo goes boating with Laurie and reads for hours on end, Amy sketches (and gets caught in the rain), Meg obsesses over her wardrobe, and Beth creates a great mess and then devotes herself to her music. None of the girls is satisfied with her experiences throughout the week, although Beth, in particular, feels quite out of balance. Alcott notes that Beth "was constantly forgetting that it was to be all play, and no work, and fell back into her old ways, now and then; but something in the air affected her, and, more than once, her tranquillity was much disturbed, so much so, that, on one occasion, she actually shook poor dear Joanna, and told her she was 'a fright.'"⁷²

Marmee and Hannah, the household servant, have done all the work while the girls played, but on Saturday, they leave the girls entirely to their own devices. A disastrous breakfast and dinner ensue (including a series of social gaffes that will become fodder for the local gossip, Miss Crocker). Further, Beth's canary is found to have starved to death while the girls abandoned their responsibilities. Freely admitting that they have not enjoyed the week's "vacation," the girls identify specific tasks that they will take up (a range of domestic duties they previously deemed unworthy of their interests). Marmee completes the lesson by stressing the importance of finding a balance between chores and play, cautioning them, "Have regular hours for work and play; make each day both useful and pleasant."⁷³ Throughout the novel, the girls are most vulnerable when they forget this advice.

For both Amy and Jo, the temptation is to pursue their artistic aspirations at the risk of their health: Amy must consequently be dug out of plaster while trying to cast her own foot, getting injured in the process, and Jo regularly becomes obsessed with her writing. The description of Jo's "vortex" conveys her

great joy at being immersed in the world of the imagination (“full of friends almost as real and dear to her as any in the flesh”), but it also suggests the price she pays for her obsession: “She emerged from her ‘vortex’ hungry, sleepy, cross, or despondent.”⁷⁴ Meg finds that after her twins are born, she has so completely dedicated herself to them that she forgets to attend to her husband. Allusions to play figure prominently in the description of this challenge. John Brooke is especially bereft: his “home was merely a nursery,” but no one wants to play with him, even when he suggests amusements such as a concert.⁷⁵ Instead, he finds that he is more welcome at the home of his friend Mr. Scott and his wife, where “The piano was always bright and attractive, the chess-board ready, the piano in tune, plenty of gay gossip, and a nice little supper set forth in tempting style.”⁷⁶ Meg takes Marmee’s advice and makes room for her husband in the nursery; we are told that she “recovered her spirits, and composed her nerves, by plenty of wholesome exercise, a little pleasure, and much confidential conversation with her sensible husband.”⁷⁷ All of the sisters thus are reminded, beyond the experiments in chapter 11, that the most satisfying and happy lives are those that include play as well as work.

The (primarily feminist) critics who have acknowledged and addressed aspects of play in *Little Women* have focused in particular on the girls’ theatrical and its implications for women, although they sometimes also address the sisters’ reenactment of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.⁷⁸ In many of these interpretations, critics see the March sisters’ play as ultimately conservative and restrictive. Alcott scholar Elizabeth Keyser notes that Marmee’s encouragement for the girls to continue seeing themselves as pilgrims implies “not only that life is a spiritual journey but that women’s pilgrimage is merely a game, an imitation of men’s, and that it takes place within the confines of the home for the purpose of winning male approval.”⁷⁹

However, so much of the play in *Little Women* is not accounted for in these interpretations. The wealth of examples throughout Alcott’s novel convey that toys, games, and play provide the sisters with independence, opportunity (both within and beyond the confines of the home), freedom from domestic drudgery, and personal satisfaction. Little of their play prepares Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy for adult domestic obligations. Further, so little of their play is in any way adult directed.⁸⁰ In large part thanks to Marmee’s unconventional parenting, the March sisters enjoy an enormous amount of freedom in the course of the novel.⁸¹

For 140 years, *Little Women* has delighted and surprised readers with its celebration of the March sisters’ energetic activity. Always a great read in itself,

the novel has benefited over time from changing cultural assumptions about the nature and needs of the child. As Chudacoff has noted, “by the late nineteenth century, play had become what one writer has called the ‘stuff of childhood.’ Play served to channel excess energy and provide intervals of relief between more sober tasks of work and learning. And it was considered an enjoyable, rather than a serious, way to rehearse for adulthood and master the emotional challenges of growing up.”⁸² Many authors have acknowledged Alcott’s influence, from L. M. Montgomery in her classic *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) to Jeanne Birdsall in her National Book Award–winning *The Penderwicks: A Summer Tale of Four Sisters, Two Rabbits, and a Very Interesting Boy* (2005), among many other works. Children’s literature today is a very different genre than it was when *Little Women* first appeared in 1868, but we can certainly credit Alcott for the direction it has taken, particularly in reference to its inclusion of toys, games, and play.

NOTES

1. See, among others, Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (2007); Anne Scott MacLeod, *American Childhood: Essays on Children’s Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1994); Bernard Mergen, “Made, Bought, and Stolen: Toys and the Culture of Childhood,” in *Small Worlds: Children & Adolescents in America, 1850–1950*, ed. Elliott West and Paula Petrick (1992), 86–106.

2. See, among others, Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600–1900* (1992).

3. MacLeod, *American Childhood*, 94.

4. Gary Cross, *Kids’ Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (1997), 36.

5. Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (1850; repr. 1987), 259.

6. For a summary of how Fox and Geese is played, see Mergen, “Made, Bought, and Stolen,” 176. Interestingly, the game played in *The Wide, Wide World* is played indoors, not out in the snow.

7. In her afterword to *The Wide, Wide World*, 584–608, Jane Tompkins sketches the details of Susan Warner’s life, including her extensive social and educational opportunities during her teen years.

8. The first volume of Elsie’s saga appeared in 1867, and the final volume, *Elsie and Her Namesakes*, was published in 1905.

9. Martha Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867; repr. 1986), 29.

10. *Ibid.*, 35.

11. *Ibid.*, 290.

12. *Ibid.*, 285–86.

13. *Ibid.*, 256.

14. MacLeod, *American Childhood*, 90–91.

15. Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore*, 296.

16. See, for example, Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, eds., *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* (1987), 118; Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, ed., *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott* (1989), 165–66; Louisa May Alcott, “Recollections of My Childhood” (1888), reprinted in her *Little Women*, ed. Anne K. Phillips and Gregory Eiselein (1868–1869; Norton Critical Edition 2004), 428–33. All citations are to the Norton edition.

17. Myerson and Shealy, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 158. For a more extensive analysis of the editor-author relationship, see Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Twain, Alcott, and the Birth of the Adolescent Reform Novel* (2007).

18. *Ibid.*, 166.

19. While the childhood experiences of Hale and Howells are regularly mentioned by scholars such as Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, and Mergen, “Made, Bought, and Stolen,” Alcott is omitted from these summaries.

20. Inspired by the newspaper in Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers*, Alcott edited a family newspaper when she was a teenager. See Gregory Eiselein and Anne K. Phillips, ed., *The Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia* (2001), 104.

21. Myerson and Shealy, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 45.

22. *Ibid.*, 47, 48.

23. See MacLeod, *American Childhood*, 3–29, for a discussion of the “Caddie Wood-lawn Syndrome” in a variety of nineteenth-century women’s memoirs.

24. See, among others, Madelon Bedell, *The Alcotts: Biography of a Family* (1980); Joel Myerson, “‘Our Children Are Our Best Works’: Bronson and Louisa May Alcott,” in *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (1984), 261–64; Sarah Elbert, *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott’s Place in American Culture* (1987); Carol Gay, “The Philosopher and His Daughter: Amos Bronson Alcott and Louisa,” *Essays in Literature* 2 (1975): 181–91; Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott: A Biography* (1950; rev. ed. 1996; repr. 1999); and Charles Strickland, *Victorian Domesticity: Families in the Life and Art of Louisa May Alcott* (1985).

25. For assessments of Abba’s influence on her family, see Sandford Salyer, *Marmee: The Mother of Little Women* (1949); Strickland, *Victorian Domesticity*; and Cynthia H. Barton, *Transcendental Wife: The Life of Abigail May Alcott* (1996), among other sources.

26. Quoted in Daniel Shealy, ed., *Alcott in Her Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of Her Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Families, Friends, and Associates* (2005), 11.

27. *Ibid.*, 8.

28. Myerson and Shealy, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 119.

29. *Ibid.*, 131.

30. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Buzz was created in the 1860s. In this game, players take turns counting out numbers, substituting Buzz for seven and its multiples. Interestingly, the *OED* gives as an example of the term the quotation from Alcott's 1868 novel.

31. As in Warner's novel, this version of Fox and Geese, like the version of tag played in *The Wide, Wide World*, is not played in the snow. One of the culminating events at Laurie's picnic, it takes place outdoors, during the summer, in the meadow.

32. Alcott, *Little Women*, 17.

33. Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, 8.

34. Alcott, *Little Women*, 22.

35. *Ibid.*, 23.

36. Niles's letter to Alcott, October 26, 1868, reprinted in Alcott, *Little Women*, 419. Alcott's fiction never was accepted by the Sunday School Library authorities. Even in the 1880s, Niles expressed outrage that the Christian Union had deemed her "wholly bad" and that she and other writers published by Roberts Brothers had been deemed "wanting in orthodoxy & . . . tabooo [sic]. . . ." (June 1882; reprinted in Alcott, *Little Women*, 426–27).

37. Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, 49.

38. See David H. Watters, "'A Power in the House': Little Women and the Architecture of Individual Expression," in *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays*, ed. Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (1999), 185–212. Watters notes, "The second floor is a place of intimacy and a place of childhood play, such as the theatricals" (188).

39. *Ibid.*, 188.

40. Quoted by Sue Standing, "In Jo's Garret: *Little Women* and the Space of Imagination," in Alberghene and Clark, *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*, 178.

41. See Mergen, "Made, Bought, and Stolen," 164–65, for a discussion of innovative uses of furniture for entertainment.

42. Alcott, *Little Women*, 256.

43. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

44. *Ibid.*, 112.

45. See Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830–1930* (1993), 14.

46. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

47. Alcott, *Little Women*, 38.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 358.

50. *Ibid.*, 349.

51. See Cross, *Kids' Stuff*, among others.

52. See Myerson and Shealy, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, where Alcott notes in a journal entry that she is dreaming of buying, among other things, "sleds for my boys" (165).

53. Alcott, *Little Women*, 358.

54. Summarizing the career of Charles Crandall of New York, Cross, *Kids' Stuff*, writes, "When a croquet craze swept the Northeast in the late 1860s, tapping the longing for family togetherness and wholesome fun following the bitter divisions of the Civil War, Crandall was quick to turn his wood goods factory to the production of croquet sets" (37).

55. Shealy, *Alcott in Her Own Time*, 13.

56. For another entertaining depiction of croquet in a literary work for children written during the 1860s, see Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), where the Queen of Hearts promenades through a game of croquet in which hedgehogs are substituted for the balls and flamingoes are substituted for mallets.

57. According to "Authors Card Game," <http://www.djmcadam.com/authors-card-game.html>, "The first Game of Authors was published by G. M. Whipple & A. A. Smith of Salem, Massachusetts in 1861." The Pennsylvania Gazette, "The Collector," http://www.upenn.edu/gazette/0397/collector_story.html, notes that the game "became one of the most played and beloved games of childhood, as well as one of the most educational. The game has gone through many editions—and publishers."

58. According to Everything2, "Rigmarole," <http://everything2.com/title/Rigmarole>, the game of Rigmarole, involving the drawing of verses from a scroll of paper, dates to 1450 or earlier.

59. Although there are no pre-1868 origins for Rigmarole as it is played in *Little Women*, a number of twenty-first-century Web sites include Alcott's version of the game among the range of entertainments they suggest for a modern audience. See, for example, Experiential Learning Games, "Word Games with a Difference," <http://www.experiential-learning-games.com/wordgames.html>.

60. Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, writes, "The most accessible partners for group play in the early nineteenth century were siblings and other kin, a pattern that reflected both the enduring importance of family ties and a not-yet-fully developed peer-oriented youth culture" (58).

61. Alcott, *Little Women*, 106.

62. The March sisters' marriages (primarily Jo's, but also Amy's and Meg's) have been the subject of an enormous amount of commentary. See Myerson and Shealy, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, 125; and Myerson and Shealy, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 167, for Alcott's discussion of Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer in her letters and journals. Also see, among others, Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (1978); Anne Dalke, "'The House-Band': The Education of Men in *Little Women*," *College English* 47 (1985): 571–78; Janet S. Zehr, "The Response of Nineteenth-Century Audiences to Louisa May Alcott's Fiction," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 1 (1987): 323–42; Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant, "Dismembering the Text: The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*," *Children's Literature* 17 (1989): 98–123; Ann B. Murphy, "The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*," *Signs* 15 (1990): 562–85; Christine Doyle, "Singing Mignon's Song: German Literature and Culture in the March Trilogy," *Children's Literature* 31 (2003): 50–70.

63. Alcott, *Little Women*, 266.

64. *Ibid.*, 267.

65. *Ibid.*, 313.

66. *Ibid.*, 322. The allusion is to John Solomon Rarey (1827–1866), an American who became famous for his ability to tame wild or savage horses, even being invited to England in 1858 to tame one of the animals in Queen Victoria's stable. See "The Original Horse Whisperer," <http://www.rarey.com/sites/jsrarey/>.

67. Alcott, *Little Women*, 332.

68. *Ibid.*, 335.

69. *Ibid.*, 336.

70. *Ibid.*, 340.

71. *Ibid.*, 93.

72. *Ibid.*, 94.

73. *Ibid.*, 100.

74. *Ibid.*, 211.

75. *Ibid.*, 305.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, 313.

78. Among other sources, see Karen Halttunen, "The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott," *Feminist Studies* 10 (1984): 233–54; Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott* (1993); and Mary Chapman, "'Living Pictures': Women and *Tableaux Vivants* in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Culture," *Wide Angle* 18 (1996): 22–52.

79. Keyser, *Whispers in the Dark*, 63.

80. In "Mysteries of Louisa May Alcott" (1978), reprinted in Stern's *Critical Essays*, Ann Douglas notes that in Alcott's later works for children, child characters "are under the constant and unquestioned guidance and surveillance" of adult mentors (239). In *Little Women*, however, I note that the girls are commonly alone, or, if together in play, without adult supervision.

81. Marmee is a perfect example of what Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, might have in mind when he notes, "Sometimes a child's assertion of freedom and playful spontaneity gained endorsement from adults who had discarded the traditional model of restrictive parenting," 63.

82. *Ibid.*, 68.