

Stepping Into

TIME

Louisa May

Alcott's World



Dona Herweck Rice

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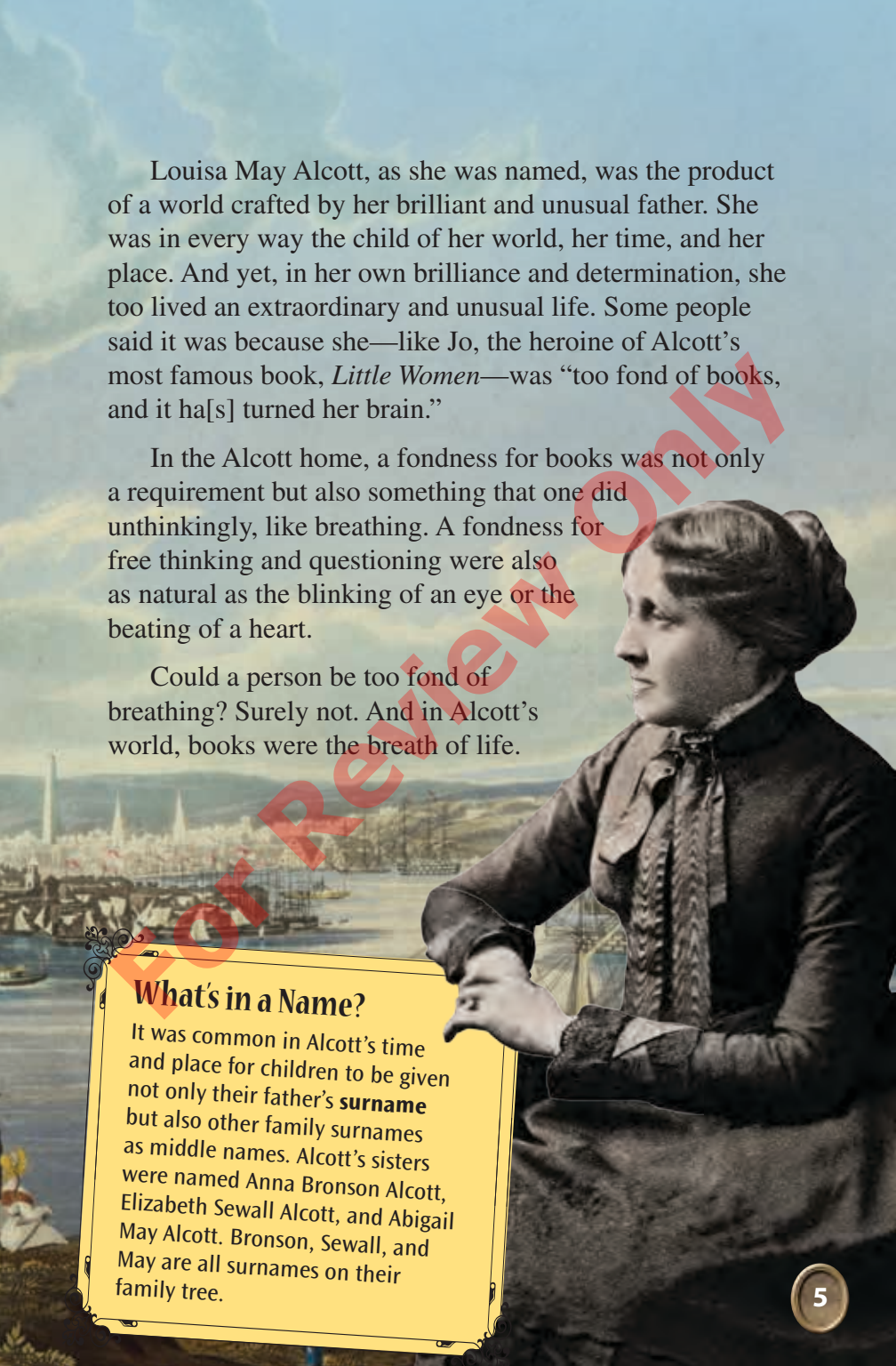
“Too Fond of Books”

In the crisp days of autumn, a baby girl was born to Abigail (Abba) May and Amos Bronson Alcott, the second of their four daughters. The baby had dark hair, inquiring dark eyes, and an intense **kinship** with her father. She was born on his 33rd birthday, November 29, 1832. **Uncannily**, years later, they would die just two days apart.

Germantown Born

Alcott was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in an area that would later become part of Philadelphia. The family didn't live there long, though. In 1834, they moved to Boston, Massachusetts. Alcott would live in and around Boston for the rest of her life.

Boston Harbor, about 1841



Louisa May Alcott, as she was named, was the product of a world crafted by her brilliant and unusual father. She was in every way the child of her world, her time, and her place. And yet, in her own brilliance and determination, she too lived an extraordinary and unusual life. Some people said it was because she—like Jo, the heroine of Alcott’s most famous book, *Little Women*—was “too fond of books, and it ha[s] turned her brain.”

In the Alcott home, a fondness for books was not only a requirement but also something that one did unthinkingly, like breathing. A fondness for free thinking and questioning were also as natural as the blinking of an eye or the beating of a heart.

Could a person be too fond of breathing? Surely not. And in Alcott’s world, books were the breath of life.

What’s in a Name?

It was common in Alcott’s time and place for children to be given not only their father’s **surname** but also other family surnames as middle names. Alcott’s sisters were named Anna Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Sewall Alcott, and Abigail May Alcott. Bronson, Sewall, and May are all surnames on their family tree.

Being an Alcott

Bronson Alcott believed that people should live by their intellect. He was a noted Transcendentalist. Bronson and his wife, Abba, raised their daughters with these beliefs. They also surrounded themselves with other like-minded people, several of whom were quite famous and well respected. Many became Alcott's teachers.

The Alcott family was rich in friends and in the pursuits of new knowledge. But they were deeply poor financially. Bronson believed in living simply. He was a vegan before anyone used that word, and he thought a person should deny himself unneeded material goods. The family scraped by, often with the help of friends and benefactors. The three oldest girls worked to help support the family by cleaning, sewing, teaching, and taking care of other people's children.

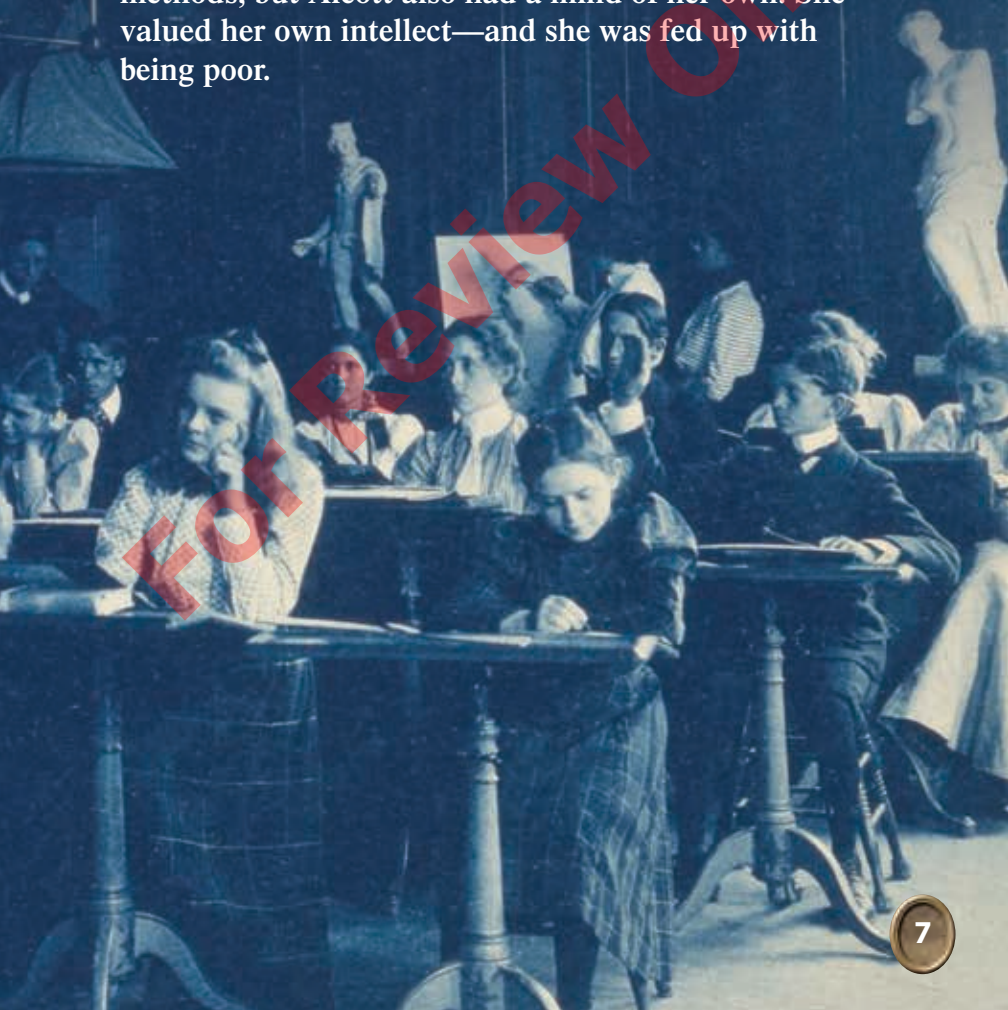
Transcendent!

Transcendentalism was a popular spiritual and intellectual movement in the early 1800s. At its core, it suggests that all people and the natural world are good, and people create "evil" by corrupting nature and the natural state of things. Transcendentalists believe in:

- **self-reliance**
- goodness of humanity
- no religion and limited government
- equality and individual rights for all
- importance of the imagination and creativity

Despite continued poverty, Bronson believed in his ideals and methods for education. He started a school in which he talked with students and let them share their own ideas. This was shocking for the time! Students wrote and discussed their life experiences. They even spoke about their own interpretations of the Bible, an act that many found **blasphemous**.

Alcott and her sisters learned through these methods, but Alcott also had a mind of her own. She valued her own intellect—and she was fed up with being poor.





The Concord Circle

Alcott grew up among a group of intellectuals, philosophers, naturalists, and writers who shared Bronson Alcott's ideas. Some of them became Alcott's teachers, especially Henry David Thoreau. Ralph Waldo Emerson lived nearby and helped Bronson buy a house for his family. As Alcott grew and became a writer, she also became a welcome peer among this group of friends who lived in and around Concord, Massachusetts. Together, they became known as the Concord Circle.



Henry David Thoreau

author, naturalist, philosopher

*"Go confidently in the
direction of your dreams.
Live the life you have
imagined."*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

author, poet, philosopher, leader
of Transcendentalist movement

*"What lies behind us and
what lies before us are tiny
matters compared to what
lies within us."*





Margaret Fuller

author, editor, women's rights leader

"If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it."

Nathaniel Hawthorne

author, surveyor, diplomat

"Every individual has a place to fill in the world, and is important, in some respect, whether he chooses to be so or not."



Louisa May Alcott

author, abolitionist, suffragette

"We all have our own life to pursue, our own kind of dream to be weaving, and we all have the power to make wishes come true, as long as we keep believing."



Resting Place

Alcott is buried in a graveyard in Concord in an area called Author's Ridge. Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne are buried there as well.

Reader's Guide

1. Why has *Little Women* continued to be so popular all these years after its publication?
2. How might Alcott's life as a woman have been different if she were born 100 years later?
3. Alcott had the opportunity to grow up with and learn from some great thinkers and writers. If you could spend one day with a person you consider a mentor, who would it be, and why?
4. How did the place where Alcott was born and where she lived influence who she became?