

### March: A Novel

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## Review

Pulliam, June

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**Brooks, Geraldine** *March: A Novel*. Viking, \$24.95, hardcover ISBN 67033359

A prequel to Alcott's *Little Women* Victorian ideals and the coming of war

**March** is the story of Father March (he's never given a first name) from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, a character who in that novel is more of a ghostly patriarch, urging his daughters to spiritual greatness from afar, than he is a fully-fleshed individual on par with his wife and four daughters. Brooks's novel explores the life of the March sisters' father, and in the process, helps the reader better understand how *Little Women* is not only a novel of manners, but a Civil War novel as well.

**March** is a Bildungsroman of sorts, chronicling the life of the title character, from late adolescence/early manhood to his return home after his service in the Union Army. March begins life not as a man from a background of wealth and ease, but as the ambitious son of poor Connecticut farmers. Determined to not only make his fortune but also to obtain an education, young March heads south as a traveling peddler of household goods, gee-gaws, and costume jewelry. In his trunk he also stores books, which are never for sale; they are to be traded for more books that he might read while on the road, thus continuing his education. It is during one of these trips that he meets the Clements, a wealthy southern planter family in possession of a good many slaves. August Clement is intrigued with young March and invites him to stay indefinitely. March takes his meals with the family in the evenings and makes use of the extensive library during the day. During March's sojourn, he also develops a deep friendship with Grace, a young, attractive and intelligent house slave. While Grace herself was taught to read by her invalid mistress who required someone to read poetry to her during the tedious hours spent bed ridden, other slaves on the Clement plantation are illiterate, and are in fact, forbidden by law to learn. Because Grace values literacy, she convinces March to teach some of the younger slave children to read in secret. March's illegal school is eventually discovered, and Clement

evicts him from the plantation, but not before he forces him to witness Grace's brutal whipping for her part in this transgression. March leaves with his abolitionist sentiments solidified.

Soon after, March's years as a traveling salesman garner enough capital for him to invest his earnings. He relocates to Massachusetts and begins to live as a gentleman. March has also gained enough education to serve as an occasional lay preacher to a local Unitarian congregation. It is through this congregation that he meets not only Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, but also Marmee, his future wife. It is at this point that **March** begins to do some serious rehabilitation of Alcott's original story.

*Little Women* hints that the young Marmee once had a terrible temper. One of the most important passages in *Little Women* (and most disturbing to modern feminist readers) comes when Jo tells Marmee that she wishes she could control her own anger, which frightens her since she believes that she gets so savage, [she] could hurt anyone and enjoy it. To this Marmee confesses that she too has a terrible temper that she has been trying to quell for 40 years, and that she is angry nearly every day of her life, but has learned not to show it. Here, alas, Marmee is indeed teaching the most boyish of her daughters to become a little woman, which according to the prevailing ideals of the time, is someone who strangles her own natural feelings in the name of embracing a superior and adult feminine identity. It is this passage that has most dampened my enjoyment of Alcott's novel and made me wish I could devise another fate for Jo, one where she would not renounce her independence and strength in favor of marrying Professor Baher, but would instead stay in the city she loved and write the adventure stories her future husband demands she quit producing, as he believes they corrupt the morals of youth.

Brooks's Marmee has also learned to control her temper, but we don't much see her as the mute Victorian angel in the house. Instead, we actually see her angry outbursts that are never a part of her *Little Women* identity. And most importantly, these outbursts lead to necessary and direct action, rather than the bloody and savage, and ultimately counterproductive venting of spleen that Jo so fears in *Little Women*. One notable example of how Marmee's temper is able to affect positive change comes when she arrives in Washington to nurse her gravely ill husband. March languishes in an army hospital where the head nurse's love of bureaucracy deprives him of critical care and nearly costs him his life. It is only when Marmee's corset can no longer contain her anger that she gives the

head nurse the tongue lashing she so richly deserves so that March gets the care he needs. This passionate nature also exhibits itself earlier, most notably when Marmee and March are alone together for the first time, giving lie to the Victorian idea that proper women lack sexual desire, or that either of these characters as represented in Alcott's story are dead from the neck down.

It is Brooks's representation of March's early life with Marmee that allows the reader to also see *Little Women* as a Civil War novel. In Alcott's story, we only really know Mr. March from afar, since he is absent during the first half of the novel, serving as a Union Army chaplain. Upon his return home, he retreats to his study to let Marmee continue to do the parenting and running of the household. The war is a presence only to the degree that it takes either of the girls' parents away from home and requires them to hone Christian virtues in their absence. **March** explains what laid the foundation for this moral fortitude. Marmee and March live their values and pass them on to their children. Staunch abolitionists, they risk their middle class comfort to support John Brown (before the massacre at Harper's Ferry) and the Underground Railroad, and these feelings are what lead a 40 year old March to join the Union Army as a chaplain.

March himself doesn't fit easily into this role either. As a Unitarian, rather than a Christian minister, he is disliked by troops and officers alike for what they perceive as his inability to comfort the afflicted and his very annoying, from their point of view, desire to make miserable the unjust. It's bad enough that when an ailing soldier confesses his sins to March that he is not told to change his ways or fear hellfire; rather March advises the soldier to merely try to do better in future. But when March attempts to have punished several soldiers who loot a southern home and terrorize the mother and daughter residing within, he is swiftly transferred down South to help a businessman with a new, and eventually dangerous, experiment. March and northern businessman Ethan Canning are to run a plantation with contraband who will work for wages rather than have their labor violently coerced from them, hopefully giving lie to a prevailing notion of the time that blacks were incapable of existing outside of the institution of slavery. It is Canning's job to oversee the running of the plantation, including matters of dealing with personnel, while it is March's duty to educate them. This situation, a re-creation of sorts of his earlier life on the Clement plantation, goes horribly wrong when neighboring rebels feel threatened by the entire experiment and violently attack the plantation, leaving March to address a serious crisis regarding his own idealism when he cannot protect those he cares for.

**March** puts the life back into a classic of 19th century fiction that is tangentially about the Civil War. Brooks transforms Alcott's too-good-to-be-true adult characters into flawed individuals very much like ourselves, and the characters try, through their own small means, to transform an even more flawed universe around them. After completing **March**, readers might find themselves wanting to pick up Alcott's novel, either for the first time or once again, to indulge in the pleasure of reacquainting themselves with the originals and comparing them to the new version.

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