

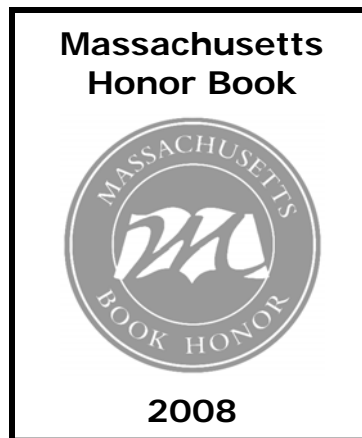
A Reading and Discussion Guide

Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Family

by John Matteson

W.W. Norton

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SUMMARY



Louisa May Alcott's name is known universally. Yet, during her youth, the famous Alcott was her father, Bronson—an eminent teacher, lecturer, and admired friend of Emerson and Thoreau. Willful and exuberant, Louisa flew in the face of all her father's intricate theories of child rearing. She, in turn, could not understand the frugal life Bronson preached, one that reached its epitome in the failed utopian community of Fruitlands. In a family that insisted on self-denial and spiritual striving, Louisa dreamed of wealth and fame. At the same time, like most daughters, she wanted her father's approval. As her father struggled to recover from a breakdown and slowly resurrect his career, Louisa learned to support her family, teaching if she must, but finally finding her vocation in writing. This story of their tense yet loving relationship adds dimensions to Louisa's life, her work, and the

relationships of fathers and daughters.

[Excerpted from the Publisher's catalog]

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What role, if any, does Christian religion play in Bronson's philosophy?
2. What are the most important influences on Bronson's philosophy?
3. Is Bronson's theory of education relevant to today's youth? Should his ideas be taught?
4. Why did Bronson's schools and Fruitlands fail? Was Alcott simply ahead of his time? Were his ideas just too radical for any generation? Was his management style to blame?
5. Was the vision of utopia expounded by Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane realistic? Would it have worked with different people running it? Would the idea work today?
6. What is Bronson's relationship with his daughters?

7. Louisa spends most of her life trying to be a "good daughter" to both parents. How do the views of Bronson, Abba, and Louisa differ on this subject? Does Louisa ever get to be a "good daughter" by her standards or by those of her parents?
8. *Little Women* is Louisa's most famous work, yet she hated writing it. How much does Bronson influence the story and her writing?
9. How is Louisa's time as a Civil War nurse a turning point in her life?
10. Discuss how Bronson and Louisa's motivations for writing were different.
11. Was Louisa a feminist?
12. How much concern does Louisa have for mental instability? Is it a problem she fears? What was the role of mental illness in the family?
13. How is Bronson portrayed in Louisa's works?
14. What was Bronson's greatest success? What was his greatest flaw?
15. Is Bronson a sympathetic figure? Which of the Alcotts do you identify with?
16. What was Bronson's role in the Transcendentalist movement? How is he remembered? Why were Emerson and Thoreau more successful in their philosophies than Bronson?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

John Matteson has a history degree from Princeton University, a Ph.D. in English from Columbia, and a law degree from Harvard. He teaches literature and legal writing at John Jay College in New York, where he has been a professor since 1997. He is currently working on a book about Margaret Fuller. *Eden's Outcasts* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Biography for 2007.

A more in-depth biography can be found here:

<http://web.cuny.edu/academics/oaa/profiles/john-matteson.html>

HELPFUL LINKS

www.transcendentalists.com A guide to the movement, giving a basic understanding of important literary works, and biographies.

www.fruitlands.org Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, MA. A museum and education center teaching the ideas of the Alcotts and other groups like the Shakers and Native peoples on the grounds of the Alcotts' failed utopia

www.louisamayalcott.org Website of Orchard House in Concord, MA., the Alcott home for many years and the setting for *Little Women*. Today it is an historic house museum.

