

# MASSACHUSETTS LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE 2023

## HONORS LEVEL III

Dear Louisa May Alcott,

From the time you first published *Little Women* over a century ago to the start of 2023, you have undoubtedly received thousands upon thousands of letters from all types of people: critics, friends, and younger girls like me. While it may end up on your rapidly growing pile of letters, spare me a couple of minutes to help you understand why I desperately needed your novel.

I was first introduced to *Little Women* in sixth grade, when my older sister read it to me and my younger sister every night while staying in Egypt. I like to think that my sibling dynamic is like that of the March's: three sisters instead of four. As we huddled close to my older sister under the incandescent light of the only bedroom in our apartment, she read the first chapter aloud. Back then, I paired each of my sisters with one of the March sisters: my older sister as Meg, and my younger sister as Amy. And Jo as myself, of course. Her outright rejection of societal standards, her ignorance towards formality, and her sore abhorrence for ladylike attire was admirable. She was the true heroine of the story, in my eleven-year-old eyes. If I had read the novel to the end then, this letter would be a rageful one at the understanding of Jo's marriage.

In eighth grade, I decided to reread the book. On this second occasion, Beth spoke to me. It was beyond being shy; I couldn't bear debates, let alone one-on-one conversations. If I over-analyzed a trivial matter, it only amplified the pressure. I had once lost my voice during a class presentation because of my stage fright (drinking water proved useless). I relished isolation, and like Beth, it was difficult to confide in someone. My life was in disarray, a cloud of fog that made the world a muted gray.

I saw myself in Beth, yet Beth hadn't mirrored me. The once meek girl became a shining young lady. Beth decided to let her voice be heard before her last breath was taken. This seemingly small realization was colossal to me. Every March made decisions that ultimately steered their lives in unexpected directions. I wept for Jo's hair and for Beth. I smiled for Amy and Laurie. While I held reservations regarding Jo's marriage, I was relieved that the stubborn tomboy flourished and matured, at last. I've dreamed of sharing pickled limes with Amy while listening to Marmee read aloud.

I know that each of these characters mirrored loved ones in your own life. Just as you had an Amy, Meg, and Beth in your life, so do I. They are the girls that slept on one bed next to me, reading your novel in the flickering light every night in Egypt.

Amidst it all, I have depended on my family to become more outspoken in all aspects—they make me joyful, livid, intelligent, and empathetic. You wrote, "I could never love anyone as I love my sisters." I appreciate that.

Just as each of the March sisters have found their key to their “castle in the air,” my door has been left ajar. The straitjacket was removed, and I suddenly found myself giving presentations, debating in class, and becoming an advocate for the youth. Jo would be happy to know that her love for writing has reached the hearts of her audience, said by an editor of her school newspaper.

While I profess my immense gratitude for helping me resolve my inner struggles, you have instilled in me a hope that grew since I reread *Little Women*. I do not reflect one March sister, but instead try and take their best traits: Jo’s spirit, Beth’s kindness, Amy’s creativity, and Meg’s beauty. I develop these characteristics as a Muslim, and as a woman.

I wish for you to take extra care of this letter, not for my sake, but for yours. I have an unrequited debt, yet I hope you find comfort in knowing that your work has helped many little women. If you were to find my letter among the thousands upon thousands of letters filling your office to the brink, anyhow.

Sincerely,

*Yumna*