Invincible Louisa Short Guide

Invincible Louisa by Cornelia Lynde Meigs

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Overview

Invincible Louisa is a wonderful book for readers who already are familiar with Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868), and will inspire those not familiar with Alcott's novel to read it. Alcott's characters in Little Women, her most successful work, are based on her own real-life family. Meigs's depiction of the Alcott family will enhance many readers' appreciation of and fondness for the members of the March family.

Meigs's work also is historically enlightening. Alcott's family actively aided fugitive slaves, and Meigs conveys the drama of this endeavor, describing the Alcotts hiding fugitives in brick ovens inside their home and Bronson Alcott protesting the return of a captured slave to his master. Her portrayal of Louisa nursing wounded Civil War soldiers and experiencing the atrocities of life in the hospital heightens the intensity of the story.

Because many aspiring writers believe that successful authors easily dash off stories, Meigs's account of Louisa May Alcott's struggles with her writing is valuable. Alcott reworked her first two novels several times, and her initial draft of Little Women was not well received by her publisher. She struggled with the writing process, sometimes receiving only discouragement for her efforts. Her perseverance led to her success and provided inspiration for future writers.

But most of all, Invincible Louisa should be read because it is an account of people who lived in accordance with their beliefs. The Alcotts did not simply profess to be against slavery, they actively protested against it. They did not simply sympathize with the plight of the hungry or needy, they attempted to remedy the situation. They did not simply complain about the educational system, they set out to test alternative systems. The members of the Alcott family were not afraid of hard work or long struggles. Although unorthodox, they were extremely moral people, cheerfully persevering to accomplish what they believed was right. They demonstrate the value of true charity, and Meigs's book shows how it is possible to meet even the most challenging goals.

About the Author

Although born in Rock Island, Illinois, on December 6, 1884, Cornelia Lynde Meigs lived most of her life in Keokuk, Iowa. The daughter of an accomplished storyteller, Meigs inherited her father's aptitude for making history come alive. His tales of the Civil War, the War of 1812, and the Barbary pirates sparked Meigs's long-lasting interest in history. Many of her early works are about America's infancy: Master Simon's Garden, The Willow Whistle, Wind in the Chimney, and The Covered Bridge.

Meigs earned a bachelor's degree from Bryn Mawr College in 1907 and later taught English at St. Katharine's boarding school in Davenport, Iowa. While at St. Katharine's she completed and published her first book, The Kingdom of the Winding Road, a collection of fantasy stories. After the death of her father, a government engineer, Meigs persuaded the administration of Bryn Mawr to allow her to teach a writing class. She remained at the university for eighteen years, serving as a professor of English and then a professor emeritus until 1950.

For most of her life, Meigs continued to write for young people and for adults, completing over forty major works before her death on September 10, 1973, in Harford County, Maryland. She wrote plays, such as The Steadfast Princess (1915), which won the Drama League Prize; biographies of strong women, such as Invincible Louisa, which won the Newbery Medal in 1934; and critically acclaimed scholarly pieces, such as A Critical History of Children's Literature (1953). She was presented with the Beacon Hill Bookshelf Prize (1927) for The Trade Wind, the Child Life Award (1938) for "Fox and Geese," and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Jane Addams Award (1971).

As a child Meigs read and reread Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters and Journals (edited by Ednah D. Cheney, 1889), admiring Alcott's courageous spirit. When presented with the prestigious Newbery Medal for Invincible Louisa, Meigs accepted the honor not only for herself but also on behalf of her literary mentor, Louisa May Aleott. It is with this same love and respect for Alcott that Meigs re-creates the life and times of the famous writer in Invincible Louisa.

Setting

The biography begins with Louisa's birth in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1832 and ends with her death in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1888. For most of her life Louisa resided in or around Boston and nearby Concord, Massachusetts.

By the time Louisa was twenty-eight years old, the household had been uprooted and moved twenty-nine times, generally for financial reasons. The Alcotts lived for an extended period of time at Hillside, one of their homes in Concord. Louisa had her first writing success here, a play featuring the character Duke Roderigo. The family also lived for quite a while in a dilapidated building in Concord that they purchased and worked diligently to renovate. Although officially christened Orchard House, Louise irreverently called the building Apple Slump.

Louisa spent several months in Europe on two separate occasions, once as companion to an ailing young woman and once with May Alcott and a family friend, Alice Bartlett. During her first trip abroad Louisa became acquainted with Ladislas Wisniewski, a young Polish man upon whom the Little Women character of Laurie is based. Louisa also spent significant time in Washington, D.C., nursing soldiers wounded in the Civil War. In the infectious environment of the military hospital, Louisa contracted typhoid fever, the effects of which remained with her for the rest of her life.

Social Sensitivity

Because Louisa May Alcott and her family were sensitive and socially conscious, there is very little opportunity for Meigs's biography to be anything other than socially sensitive. The Alcotts were active abolitionists who found the concept of slavery absolutely intolerable.

They lived their ideals and exemplified the value of such commitments. Bronson was committed to quality education for children of all races; this unprejudiced attitude led to the closing of his Temple School, for not all of the citizens of Boston shared his views, and indignant parents withdrew their children when they discovered a black child among the students.

Invincible Louisa portrays several adults as sensitive to the rights, needs, and ideas of children. Louisa and her sisters, even when they were very small, always participated in philosophical discussions with their father and his peers.

Bronson respected children and felt they should have a voice in decisions concerning them. His innovative, gentle, yet thorough methods of teaching reflect his regard for young people.

Louisa could easily be labeled an early feminist. Her nontraditional views of marriage, her interest in pursuing her own career, her support of other women struggling on their own, and her assertiveness all present a case for the independent woman. Louisa earns her role as heroine of her family.

Reflecting the values of American society in 1933, Meigs does treat a few parts of Louisa's life gingerly. Avoiding any references to pregnancy or childbirth, Meigs has babies simply "appear," to the astonishment of their siblings.

Treating death with equal timidity, Meigs mentions only that Louisa's baby brother "came and went away again."

Similarly, Elizabeth and Abba both simply "go away," a somewhat ambiguous reference to their deaths. Readers of today expect a clearer explanation of such events and are equipped to handle more forthright statements about life and its inevitabilities.

Literary Qualities

In chronicling Louisa May Alcott's life, Meigs provides a historical account of life in the 1800s. Louisa's personal experiences with distinguished people and important events bring history alive. The Alcott family is close to many literary greats, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. On several occasions Louisa happens to see Abraham Lincoln on the streets of Washington, D.C., and while in England, she sees Charles Dickens and hears him read.

Meigs bases her accurate work on interviews with the few relatives and friends of Louisa who were still alive at the time of the biography's writing, and on firsthand accounts of the Alcotts, such as Ednah D. Cheney's edition of Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters and Journals and Clara Gowing's The Alcotts as I Knew Them. Meigs does not fictionalize events or invent dialogue, and even the reports of the Alcotts' emotions and attitudes are backed up by written or oral accounts from the family and their friends. Despite its reliance on known fact, the biography is a lively work.

Vivid prose and adept descriptive technique make it easy to visualize the lovely Pennsylvania countryside, the landscape of Fruitlands, and the filthy, disease-ridden, unorganized military hospital where Louisa works. Against the backdrop of these strong settings, Louisa's character comes to life as the biography's balanced portrayal reveals her faults, quick temper, and struggle to write along with her kindness, empathy, and eventual success.

Invincible Louisa also includes Meigs's analysis of the characters in some of Alcott's books. While many people know that Little Women is based on Alcott's own family, it is interesting to find out how other characters, such as Professor Bhaer and Laurie, came to life, or how Bronson Alcott's educational ideas are incorporated in his daughter's novel.

Themes and Characters

Invincible Louisa is the story of Louisa May Alcott, her parents, and her three sisters. Her parents' sense of morality strongly affects Louisa. As a child, she gives food away to hungry children, and at one point an adult, not understanding Louisa's upbringing, reprimands her for this.

Louisa's most outstanding character traits are her courage and determination. An indefatigable worker, she takes pride in her accomplishments. This attitude influences many of her decisions: to remain employed as a caretaker for an invalid woman, even though the position has been misrepresented; to continue stoically at the military hospital, where conditions are deplorable and the nurses are overworked; and to persevere with her writing despite early criticism.

Eventually, the success of Little Women allows her to realize her dream of providing financial security for her parents and opportunities for her sisters.

Unlike most women of the 1800s, Louisa values her independence and gives little thought to marriage, declaring that she prefers being "a free spinster." She is an early supporter of women's rights. Later in life, she often meets with other women to discuss problems associated with living on their own.

Louisa's father, Bronson, is a sensitive, caring, and highly intelligent man whose weakness is his idealism. A transcendentalist, he dreams of communal living but fails with an experimental farm, Fruitlands, where he and some friends hope to prove the potential of cooperative living. Many of his ideas about education are also progressive but generally misunderstood. He seeks to abolish long school hours, dark classrooms, and unnecessary pressures on students. A respected member of the philosophical community of the mid1800s, Bronson keeps close company with some of America's most distinguished literary figures: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Although committed to philosophical thinking, Bronson is also devoted to his family. When Louisa falls ill while tending wounded Union soldiers in Washington, D.C., her father comes to take her home but she refuses to leave. He remains several days, at her request, nursing her patiently until she is too weak to resist the move back to Concord.

Louisa's mother, Abigail (Abba), serves as the role model for Louisa's invincibility. Abba has inherited the peppery disposition of the May family but has learned to control her own temper and indignation about the difficulties in her life. She works hard and capably, once saving the communal barley crop by determinedly filling her Russian linen sheets with the cut grain while a storm threatens. Her love for her husband is the focal point in her life, and her quiet, unassuming manner belies the fact that she is frequently worried about the family's poor finances. Both Abba and Bronson feel a sense of responsibility to fight injustice in the world. Sacrificing their own comfort to share meals and firewood with the needy or hiding escaped slaves in the home, they are models of tolerant, nonprejudiced behavior.

Louisa intensely loves her sisters as well as her parents. The eldest of the siblings, Anna, is temperamentally unlike the strong-willed Louisa and finds contentment easily. She has two sons but is widowed when the children are very young. To provide for the financial security of her sister and nephews, Louisa writes and publishes Little Men (1871) for them. Anna has been effectively immortalized in Louisa's Little Women, where she appears as the eldest sister, Meg. Elizabeth, the second youngest sister, shares Anna's sweet, docile temperament. She dies from complications related to scarlet fever when she is twenty-three years old. Her unassuming courage as she approaches death is portrayed by the character Beth in Little Women. Energetic and inquisitive, May, the youngest of the Alcott children, is the most like Louisa in spirit. She travels extensively in Europe because of the generosity of Louisa, who feels that May's artistic nature can be more suitably nourished abroad. May meets and marries Ernest Nieriker on one of her European trips and names her child after Louisa.

Another major character in Invincible Louisa, Ralph Waldo Emerson, is a loyal and devoted friend of the Alcott family.

The Alcotts care deeply about him, and he plays an important role in all of their lives. He provides support and a sympathetic ear at all times, especially when Bronson and Abba suffer financial problems, and is enormously influential with Louisa. Her writing style so resembles Emerson's that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once mistakes a poem of hers for one of Emerson's.

More than just a biographical account of Louisa May Alcott's life, Invincible Louisa is a tale of courage and hope. The values most honored by the Alcott family contribute to the themes in this book.

Meigs develops the idea of love and devotion to family in her descriptions of the unselfishness of the Alcotts. Louisa returns early from Europe, in response to her family's needs. Bronson gives up his life dream, Fruitlands, when it threatens the stability of his family life.

Despite the family's poverty, their lives are so filled with love and familial companionship that the deprivations they endure seem minor.

Meigs broadens this initial theme of love and devotion to include the Alcotts' commitment to all humankind: Louisa's father dreams of a school for neglected boys; the family is adamantly opposed to slavery; and Louisa feels a patriotic call to serve her country by nursing soldiers wounded in the Civil War.

Because they are willing to act on their convictions, the Alcotts share their richness of spirit with the poor, the neglected, and the oppressed. By maintaining a positive attitude and a sense of humor, they make the challenges of life easier to cope with. Together they survive the public criticism of Bronson's ideals, the discouragement of Louisa's editors, the heartbreak of Elizabeth's illness and death, and the hardships of everyday life.

Topics for Discussion

1. Louisa's family moves twenty-nine times in twenty-eight years. Considering that the Alcotts repeatedly return to homes or areas they already have lived in, are these moves prudent?

2. Invincible Louisa focuses on the positive aspects of Louisa's temperamental personality. Why do you think Meigs chose this focus?

3. When Louisa is in Washington, D.C., deathly ill with typhoid fever, her father decides not to bring her home against her will. Why does he allow her to remain in an unclean, infectious atmosphere?

4. Ralph Waldo Emerson tells Louisa that her "father might have talked with Plato." What does he mean by this comment?

5. The members of the Alcott family are abolitionists who choose to conceal runaway slaves, an illegal undertaking. Are they justified in breaking the law?

6. When Louisa takes a job as caretaker for an invalid and then realizes the position has been misrepresented, she remains to finish the terms of the agreement. Why does she do this? Would you have acted the same way? How could she have avoided this situation?

7. Why does Abba Alcott praise Bronson when he returns from a lecture tour with only one dollar?

8. Do you think the title of this book, Invincible Louisa, is an accurate description of its main character? Why or why not?

9. Why does Louisa feel that Theodore Parker's sermon "Laborious Young Women" is a landmark in her life?

10. As a child, Louisa makes a list of faults that includes "love of cats." Why does she consider this a fault?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read Little Women. Compare the main characters in that novel with the main characters in Meigs's biography of Louisa May Alcott.

2. Draw parallels between Pilgrim's Progress and Louisa's way of life. How is Louisa influenced by this work which so greatly influenced her father?

3. Meigs mentions that Louisa admires the German author Goethe. Read some of his work and determine why Louisa may have liked it.

4. Bronson Alcott's farm, Fruitlands, is an experiment in communal living similar to Nathaniel Hawthorne's communal venture at Brook Farm. Compare the two undertakings. Why do you think they failed?

5. Bronson Alcott was a transcendentalist. Define this term. How did the movement begin? What effects, if any, has it had on life in the twentieth century?

6. The conditions in the military hospital where Louisa nurses are atrocious.

The wards are unsanitary, the food is inadequate, and the patients are required to work before they fully recover.

Research the changes that have occurred in nursing facilities since the Civil War and the people responsible for the improvements.

7. Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne are all close friends of the Alcott family.

Find examples in their works that show parallels between their thoughts and those of Bronson Alcott.

8. Describe the ways in which Bronson, Abba, and Louisa Alcott are all invincible.

9. Fugitive slaves escaped with the help of the "Underground Railroad." Research and report on how this organization developed and how it worked.

10. Longfellow once mistook Louisa's poem "Thoreau's Flute" for one of Emerson's works. To understand Longfellow's confusion, analyze Louisa's poem and note similarities to Emerson's style.

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Horn Book (October 1968): 521-526.

An insightful look at why readers of all ages enjoy Little Women.

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Related Titles

A very condensed summary of Invincible Louisa, entitled "The March Family," appears in Cornelia Meigs's A Critical History of Children's Literature. This book received much critical acclaim and long stood as a standard textbook in children's literature. Fifteen years after its publication, Meigs edited Glimpses of Louisa: A Centennial Sampling of the Best Short Stories of Louisa May Alcott.

Meigs also published Louisa M. Alcott and the American Family Story (1971), which examines the family life of seven authors, including Alcott. Meigs's last major work was Jane Addams: Pioneer for Social Justice, another biography of a strong, appealing woman.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996