

# *A Daughter's Place: The Intertextuality of Gene Stratton-Porter's Laddie and Louisa May Alcott's Little Women*

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• Jane Goldstein •

*Résumé* : Cet article offre une lecture intertextuelle de deux romans populaires, *Laddie* de Gene Stratton-Porter et *Les Quatre Filles du docteur March* de Louisa May Alcott, dont les stratégies de narration historique sont semblables.

*Summary*: Gene Stratton-Porter's *Laddie* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* are autobiographical family stories of historical narration. The two authors use many of the same devices, a situation that provides an opportunity to illuminate each text through parallel investigation.

**I**n *A Sense of Wonder: On Reading and Writing Books for Children* (1995), Katherine Paterson expresses her belief that writers depend on their own personal history when telling a story. She claims that writers include in books memories over which they have had no control in their lives:

The way a writer shapes the human experience depends to a great extent on her history — all those forces, most of which she had nothing to do with, that made her what she is. In speaking of those forces, we are speaking of our human heritage, our particular family history, and our individual past experiences, these are the memories that we consciously or unconsciously write. (182-83)

Both Gene Stratton-Porter in *Laddie* (1913) and Louisa May Alcott in *Little Women* (1868-69) write in this vein. The intimacy that we feel in the two books is a result of the personal experiences that the authors include from their respective childhoods. These are autobiographical family stories, which, in falling under the larger category of historical narration, repre-

sent a genre of children's literature that tells us a lot about the culture of the Civil War and the years that immediately followed. At the same time, they both present the traditional qualities of delighting readers with humorous situations while imparting educational and moral concepts.

Consciously or unconsciously, Stratton-Porter wrote a family story that parallels in many ways the episodic format of Alcott's more famous and more positively acclaimed story of the March family. In both *Laddie* and *Little Women*, the two authors struggle to deal with a male system of morality. Father is a central figure in the overall education of female children, and it is his philosophy that shapes the daily pursuits of the women portrayed in both households. Teaching strength and perseverance as ways to overcome life's obstacles is presented to the main character by very masculine devices. In Stratton-Porter's fictionalized account of her own childhood, the family icon of a Crusader's pin is a motif that runs throughout the story. Its image inspires Little Sister to confront the challenges in her life. Likewise, Alcott uses John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as a guide to influence the actions of the girls in *Little Women*. The protagonists in *Laddie* and in *Little Women* learn daily from observing their mothers' role within the family structure. Each author's mother is tenderly remembered as being a constant centre of strength, encouragement, and insight for the daughter. In each case, the young women are coached to achieve some level of independence, education, and self-confidence while staying within the guidelines of society. Other women within the community are compared, using the author's mother as the ideal. Beneath the portrayal of family warmth and love conveyed in the novels, the reader realizes the turmoil in which each central character finds herself. Little Sister, in *Laddie*, and Jo, in *Little Women*, are both caught in the dilemma of showing respect to the father figure and to his standard of living while learning from a wise mother and witnessing the often stressful life of the dependent women in the world outside their immediate home.

*Little Women* was written in 1868 and is set in Massachusetts, Alcott's primary home. She uses the name March for her family of four sisters, and some of the sisters have given names that bear a striking resemblance to those of her own sisters: Meg (Anna), Beth (Elizabeth), and Amy (May). Elizabeth dies young in Alcott's life, as does Beth in the book. The author's actual life never escaped the shadow of her idealistic father, Bronson Alcott, a member of the Transcendentalist community. She was born on his birthday, 29 November 1832, and died 6 March 1888, only two days after his death; as a result, father and daughter shared a funeral service. Mr. Alcott was never inclined to provide for the physical needs of his family and relied on his wife and daughters for support. He did, however, assist his wife with the education of their four children. In the novel, Mr. March is a Civil War chaplain and his wife and daughters work to maintain the family home in his absence. Alcott's father in reality was a philosopher and a spiritual

leader of sorts, holding only unpaid jobs. Thus, the novel can be seen as a loyal daughter's delicate means of dealing with her father's inadequacies.

The author was particularly close to her mother, Abigail May Alcott. In her personal journals and in other fictional writing, the daughter reveals her mother's difficult marital situation and the constant struggle to survive because of the esoteric pursuits of her husband.<sup>1</sup> Jo, the main character in *Little Women*, has a special relationship with Marmee, as she fondly calls her mother. Marmee helps Jo curb her strong personality and shares her own personal struggles with her headstrong daughter. Marmee admits that anger is an emotion that she cannot remove from herself. She cautions Jo to learn to control that which she cannot eliminate in her personality (79-80). As a child, Alcott was chastened by her father to control her independent streak. In her journals and in conversations with her mother, she shared her struggle to overcome anger. For Alcott and her sisters as well as for the fictional March girls, working to support each other was as much part of their youth as was the traditional preparation for becoming wives and mothers. In life and in fiction, these young women are confronted with the fact that many of their extended family and friends have much more disposable income. Their pilgrimage to the Palace Beautiful involves sharing kindness instead of riches that they do not possess. Alcott makes the world more romantic as she tries to diminish the pain of poverty for the Alcotts and for the fictional Marches.

Stratton-Porter is best known for her fictional novels *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909) and *Freckles* (1904), which were already bestsellers when *Laddie* was published in 1913. This book is a very thinly veiled autobiography set in Stratton-Porter's childhood home in Wabash County, Indiana, immediately following the Civil War. The principal characters in the book, the Stanton family, have a name that barely masks the author's own. There are twelve children, two of whom are deceased, as in the author's family. In *Laddie*, the protagonist is the youngest child, Little Sister, who is the voice of Gene Stratton-Porter reliving her own childhood as the last in the family. The world represented is one of a happy home with a strong patriarchal head and brothers with professions or professional aspirations. The men hunt and farm while actively engaging in community affairs and in the spiritual upbringing of the family. In the book, Mrs. Stanton's health is often fragile, and the parents struggle to provide for the education of the older children while raising a much younger child and managing a large farm. Similarly, the author's mother was bedridden for seven years while Stratton-Porter was a child. Her father was ultimately forced to move into town so that his married children could assist him with raising his youngest daughter and caring for his invalid wife. For the most part, the girls in *Laddie* learn from their mother the art of managing a home and contributing to the larger community around them. Some emphasis is also put on education for the girls, however. In the Stanton household, marriage is

In the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, the family provided the central characters of a children's book, with the surrounding community often contributing the tension and conflict. According to Anne Scott MacLeod, children and parents "existed within a system of mutual respect, love, and responsibility, which was bounded . . . by a pervasive . . . code of duty" (105). Also in these stories there is some significant moral concept that, along with family love, is essential to bringing the

her imagination (51).  
 curled leaf, loaded my gun with portulaca powder, rammmed in a tiger lily bullet," and with that, Little Sister is ready for the great African jungle of road" (51). Her ammunition? She tells us she made "a powderhorn of a seed there was. Then I got my biggest alder popgun and started up the each little black ball at the bases of the leaves, and took all the four o'clock touch-me-not pod and all the portulaca." "Then I stripped the tiger lilies of indigenous to Indiana! She goes into the garden and gathers every ripe Little Sister sets out hunting for tigers and lions. (Of course these are not of flowers comes alive in one of my favourite scenes in the novel in which care is used to describe specific trees and plants. Her intimate knowledge woods and pastures of the Stanton farm where Little Sister plays. Great ing of these experiences is reflected in her beautiful descriptions of the area. Stratton-Porter inherited her father's respect for nature and the share covering that time period, the young girl is free to roam the immediate nineteenth century American rural culture and in American children's literature great love of the natural world with his daughter. As was typical in nineteenth century American rural culture and in American children's literature

In both *Laddie* and in Stratton-Porter's own life, the father shares his but she learns that everyone else in the family cares for her, too.  
 is reassured of her place in the family. Laddie remains her hero to the end, in her heart. Throughout the story, Little Sister finds ways to help out and reader knows that of all Little Sister's siblings, Laddie holds a special place Sister and gives her little jobs to help him, making her feel needed. The tell her a story" (22). Likewise in the book, Laddie watches out for Little notice her, to answer her questions; . . . never too tired to carry her . . . and become his little sister's "gallant knight": "he was never too occupied to Leander in glowing terms: he had chosen to remain on the farm and had (1972), Stratton-Porter's daughter, Jeanette Porter Meehan, describes after Stratton-Porter's adored brother Leander: "In *Lady of the Limberlost* mother, Little Sister is closest to Laddie, an older brother who is patterned book. While Alcott's character Jo is closest to her sister Beth and to her member of the family, a feeling that recurs occasionally throughout the

As *Laddie* begins, Little Sister suspects that she is possibly an unwanted offspring" (157).  
 up in a man . . . [I]f the child really had talent, she should be about devel-

encouraged only after thoughtful preparation and some degree of maturity. To quote Mother, "the chief aim and end of a girl's life was not wrapped

narrative together while uniting the action of the plot. As autobiographical family stories, the two books under discussion tell their memories of a girl's childhood as their respective authors experienced it. The culture they explore includes both father and mother in the family. Stratton-Porter and Alcott were products of an environment where both parents were involved in the cultivation of their children. Within this culture, much time and care was spent developing the particular talents of each individual.

Alcott's father, Bronson Alcott, was reportedly a dreamer and a failure, but in partnership with his wife was a strong voice in the overall education of their daughters. While respect was always accorded to her father, Alcott observed her mother as being the more steadfast parent. In *Little Women* she shows this respect by having Mr. March serve his country in the Civil War. His views shape the daily choices of his family's pursuits at home through his letters and the common goals he has discussed previously with his wife. Marmee actively upholds the principles she shares with her absent husband.

While still alive, Mark Stratton was described in a local newspaper as being identified with the "interest" of his community. The same article goes on to say that "each morning . . . he commends all his family to God, and invokes his blessing" (qtd. in Meehan 23). Stratton-Porter wrote about her parents in an article for *McCall's* magazine, printed posthumously in a collection, *Let Us Highly Resolve* (1927). She says that they were "imbued with a religion which they were proud to follow and to practice in business." Continuing on, she credits them with giving her "their breadth of heart, their physical strength, their mental training and . . . religious emanations" (29). Similarly, Mrs. Stanton in *Laddie* is presented as a mother who has not been mentally or spiritually weakened by her infirmities of body. Together, both she and her husband are strong role models in the home and in the community.

As part of the historical novel genre, autobiographical family stories often have moral overtones that are presented as universal truths. In American novels of this type, learning to overcome difficulty is a major theme being impressed into the hearts and souls of the children who are the main characters. The parents teach in the home the ideal of personal strength in the face of adversity, and their children, the authors of these texts, share with their readers the code of duty they were brought up with themselves. Laura Ingalls Wilder writes in much the same style as Alcott and Stratton-Porter<sup>3</sup> and, in an essay reprinted in the posthumous volume *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Family Collection* (1993), sums up the philosophy that is lived out in *Little Women* and *Laddie*: "The overcoming of one difficulty makes easier the conquering of the next until finally we are almost invincible. Success actually becomes a habit thru the determined overcoming of obstacles as we meet them one by one" (145). This ideal suggests a way for a child to approach any obstacle in life. Wilder continues:

There is no elation equal to the rise of the spirit to meet and overcome a difficulty, not with foolish over-confidence but keeping things in their proper relations by praying, now and then, the prayer of a good fighter whom I used to know. "Lord make me sufficient to mine own occasion." (146)

In *Little Women*, the March family approaches each day with the goal to improve their souls while also improving the world around them. Bronson Alcott was known to use stories to give his daughters a strong moral foundation. As Elaine Showalter indicates in *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (1991), Mr. Alcott's favourite moral source, *Pilgrim's Progress*, is central to the structure of *Little Women*, which opens with the chapter entitled "Playing Pilgrims" (46). The parents encourage the constant reading of *Pilgrim's Progress* as a way of measuring purity in their lives. In spite of a lack of cash for Christmas gifts, Marmee manages to buy each daughter a copy of Bunyan's book. She is delighted when they resolve to begin their own personal crusades to the Celestial City by reading and meditating on the book every day.

Showalter points out that each March sister finds that her daily life sends her down a different avenue of experience. The sisters share with each other their ups and downs as they proceed on their paths in pursuit of the Celestial City. Beth "finds the Palace Beautiful" in Mr. Lawrence's mansion; Amy goes through the "Valley of Humiliation" at school; Jo meets the monster Apollyon when she lets her anger at Amy smolder; and Meg is tempted by Vanity Fair in a visit to the wealthy Moffat family (52). In turn, each one is challenged by her shortcomings and approaches life aware of her obstacles to a truly gracious and humble life. The girls are strengthened by the lessons they learn and they evaluate what each experience has taught them.

Stratton-Porter had grown up with stories of her family's noble ancestry in England. Her father had in his possession a box of great historical symbolism to the family, and the author was significantly affected by this sense of connection to the past. For Little Sister, the narrator in *Laddie*, self-discovery and fulfillment often occur as she remembers her family's participation in the Crusades during the twelfth century. Mr. Stanton has inherited a Crusader pin with four shells, each representing a completed trip to the Holy Land centuries before. The pin also has a little bird, which Mr. Stanton tells the protagonist represents her and her place in family history. The more than a dozen references to the Crusader pin throughout the book begin in the opening pages of *Laddie*. When thinking about the pin, Little Sister is reminded that perseverance is a noble quality. The pin gives her a model of how to overcome difficulty and work for inner strength. It also gives Little Sister a reason not to feel too humble. As she says, "When the blood of the Crusaders was in the veins, right must be done even if it took a struggle" (107). As a descendant of a Crusader, she is almost invin-

cible! She is the little bird on the pin. This confidence is reflected throughout the story.

A humorous reference to the Crusades occurs when Little Sister tries to catch a fish for her sick mother. Mrs. Stanton has been unable to keep any food in her stomach and is quite weak as a result. Little Sister is down at the farm pond and has used up all her worms. It is time for dinner, and she is failing at her mission. She decides to go into the deep water and catch a fish by hand rather than return to the house with nothing, but she is fearful of the danger of drowning and of the pain that such an accident would cause her mother:

Instead of helping mother any, a funeral would kill her, so I fell back on the Crusaders, and tried again. Strange how thinking about them helped. I pretended I was fighting my way to the Holy City, and this was the Jordan, just where it met the sea, and I had to catch enough fish to last me during the pilgrimage west or I'd never reach Jerusalem to bring a shell for the Stanton crest. (151)

Of course, Little Sister is successful and catches a huge fish that mother is able to digest with the result that her health is restored.

*Pilgrim's Progress* in *Little Women* and the Crusader pin in *Laddie* present moral values to the reader that are important to the March and the Stanton families. Both sets of values also provide structure to the storylines and link individual episodes together. These vignettes tell the reader much about the characters' personalities and the moral challenges that come into play because of how they perceive and pursue daily events. While a number of minor events are presented in both *Little Women* and *Laddie*, in neither book do these incidents build to a climactic point. The book and the pin are prominent threads in a tapestry of happenings. Additionally, both Jo and Little Sister serve to guide the reader through these series of events. For Jo, there is the continuing struggle as a pilgrim to control her temper. Little Sister is constantly strengthened by the faithfulness of her parents and the power she derives from remembering that her family has possessed great strength in all times.

A final critical element in *Little Women* and *Laddie* is the importance of the family home, a concept discussed by Gillian Avery:

From earliest times [in American fiction] home had been a focus of emotion, representing in settler days a refuge from the harsh outside world, and latterly a temple presided over by mother. . . . For Americans, the household community was a microcosm of the ideal republic they saw themselves to have created; all its members were independent and working towards the same purpose, for the good of the whole. (44)

Even though Jo is clearly central to the events of *Little Women* and Little Sister is the main character in *Laddie*, these two characters function within

the framework of their families. Everything they do and everything that happens to them also relates to at least one other family member.

Both families also have fathers who serve as spiritual leaders for them and for the community, an autobiographical fact noted earlier. Mr. March is a Civil War chaplain and later a local pastor in a congregation as well as the impetus for his daughters' use of *Pilgrim's Progress* as a model in life. Mr. Stanton is a respected speaker in the Sunday School program of the family's church. He also leads the family in prayers at meals and at times when the family is pondering important decisions. Little Sister is touched by the sight of her parents praying together whenever there is a family crisis, such as when Shelly comes home from music school in a weakened state after losing touch with a suitor. Both the Marches and the Stantons have a family faith that connects each member to the larger unit. This faith motivates their sense of hospitality and the generous spirit they display to those in their community.

The Marches are not financially secure, so they are unable to give wonderful parties and frequent dinners for others. Their limited budget does not allow them to attend the many social functions in their community, but they do find ways to live out their personal commitment to others and to help improve their world by sharing what they have in simple possessions. Mrs. March helps the community by working in a hospital.

A typical example of how Marmee and her daughters show hospitality and caring occurs in the opening pages of the second chapter of *Little Women* when the Marches react to "some poor creeter" who comes begging. The girls are preparing themselves for a festive Christmas breakfast and note their mother's absence. Hannah, the housekeeper, tells the girls, "Your ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never was such a woman for givin' away vittles and drink, clothes and firin'" (13). Jo and her sisters decide they must go and offer their breakfast as a Christmas present to the destitute immigrant family. We next see the "kind spirits" at work fixing a fire for the hovel, dressing the sick baby "tenderly," and feeding the children as though they were "so many hungry birds; laughing and talking, and trying to understand the funny broken English" (15). Back home, Meg sums up the morning's events: "That's loving our neighbor better than ourselves" (16). Later in the book, Beth sacrifices her personal health to try to help the same poor family, which is plagued with smallpox. For the lonely neighbour Laurie, the March home provides the open companionship of adopted sisters and an adopted mother. Their warmth and guidance fills the voids in Laurie's own life. The Marches have few material possessions to share, but their community finds them willing to give all that they have to those who have even less, both physically and emotionally.

The Stantons have a farm and plenty of livestock, so their circumstances are more stable than those of the Marches. Early in their years in Indiana, the parents had benefited from the kindness of a neighbour, Sarah Hood.



As the parents tell the children, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (168). This quotation from the Bible is central to the family code of hospitality. So many strangers have been given sanctuary at the farm over the years that the children have come to identify them as the "Even Sos." The children are told that this open door policy will continue because "our share is going to last until God says 'Well done thou good and faithful servant'" (170).

Mrs. Stanton is in her glory on Sunday morning, sharing her home with the community. Little Sister tells us:

I have seen her ask from fifteen to twenty in one trip down the aisle [of church] on Sunday morning. She wanted them to come too; the more who came; the better she liked it. If the hitching rack and barnyard were full on Sunday she just beamed. If the sermon pleased her, she invited more. That morning she was feeling so good she asked seventeen. . . . (49)

Little Sister also tells us later what one of these Sunday dinners was like:

We had been to church and Sunday School in the forenoon, and we had a houseful of company for dinner. All of them remained to spend the afternoon, because in our home it was perfectly lovely. We had a big dinner . . . and then we talked and visited. . . . The women exchanged new recipes. . . . At last, when every thing was talked over . . . father would reach across the table, pick up a paper and read all the interesting things that had happened in the country. . . . Before he finished, he always managed to work in a lot about being honest, kind, and loving God. (192)

Like the March family, the Stantons give us a picture of people who enriched their community in any way that they could.

The Marches served their community by helping the poor, serving in the Civil War, teaching, and making the lives of those around them more comfortable. The Stantons were involved in the educational, political, and spiritual affairs of Wabash, Indiana. Each family's members went about their day using their individual skills to help enrich the world around them. Marmee sums up the philosophy of both families and the ingredients needed to make a home happy. In advising the newly married Meg, she says, "Each of us do our part alone in many things, but at home we work together, always" (392). Guests in both these homes feel that common thread and sense of purpose uniting each family. The members of these households reassure each other daily and gave each other the courage to meet the next challenge in the world. Wilder makes this observation:

We all know there is a spirit in every home, a sort of composite spirit composed of the thoughts and feelings of the members of the family as a composite photograph is formed of the features of the different individuals. This spirit meets us at the door as we enter the home. (89)

Alcott and Stratton-Porter write from the heart, as episode by episode they reveal to us moments from their own childhood in *Little Women* and *Laddie*. As children they felt loved and connected to their families and communities. They retell those memories with respect and an occasional dash of humour. Their stories weave back and forth using the similar motifs of the story of *Pilgrim's Progress* and of the family legend of the Crusaders Pin. The intertextual qualities are abundant and revealing. Both authors open the doors to the childhood homes they knew and share the kindness and hospitality that marked their families. It is hard for the reader to leave the warmth and liveliness to be found there.

### Notes

- 1 Alcott's "Transcendental Wild Oats" and "Work" as well as her letters and journals are found in Keyser's collection of Alcott writings.
- 2 Another brother, Leon, is Little Sister's partner in escapades. Stratton-Porter and her brother Lemon did some of the antics in the book, as Meehan notes (21-22).
- 3 Although Wilder's stories do not neatly parallel those of Alcott and Stratton-Porter, her books are certainly family narratives. Romines deals with autobiography in the *Little House* series.

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