

## MIT Open Access Articles

### *Review of The Afterlife of Little Women by Beverly Lyon Clark*

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

**Citation:** Gubar, Marah. "Review of The Afterlife of Little Women by Beverly Lyon Clark." *Children's Literature* 44 (2016): 244-250 © 2017 Project MUSE.

**As Published:** <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/619585>

**Publisher:** John Hopkins University Press

**Persistent URL:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/112617>

**Version:** Author's final manuscript: final author's manuscript post peer review, without publisher's formatting or copy editing

**Terms of use:** Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike



Review by Marah Gubar of *The Afterlife of Little Women*, by Beverly Lyon Clark. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

In 1871, a young girl fleeing the Chicago fire saves a single item from the flames: a copy of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. More than a century later, another young girl pays homage to this beloved text by composing the *Louisa May Alcott Cookbook* (1985), a selection of recipes for foods mentioned in *Little Women*, published in the year its nine-year-old author turns twelve. In between these two events, Alcott's head is featured on a five-cent stamp, a ship is named after her, and a quartet of chimps at the Bronx Zoo is christened Amy, Beth, Jo, and Meg in honor of *Little Women*'s central characters—not once, not twice, but three times between 1952 and 1960. Meanwhile, a couple of over-zealous translators, not content merely to convert Alcott's most famous story into French and Dutch, revise the ending to make it conclude just as many fans (then and now) wish it would: Jo marries Laurie, not that old fuddy-duddy Professor Bhaer (who, by the way, was played by William Shatner in 1978 television version of *Little Women*).

These are just a few of the tantalizing tidbits to be found in Beverly Lyon Clark's compendious account of *The Afterlife of Little Women*. This meticulously researched study provides a panoramic overview of the myriad ways in which Alcott's quasi-autobiographical novel and life story have been embraced, revised, and transformed since *Little Women* first appeared in 1868-69. I open this review with particulars because therein lies the strength of Clark's book: *The Afterlife of Little Women* is comprehensive and contemplative rather than argumentative and evaluative. That Clark has her eye on detail rather than big-picture claims is clear from her introduction. After a brief yet luminous meditation on the mutability of texts and the remoteness of readers, she concludes her introduction with chapter summaries that describe what time periods and types of texts she plans to discuss, never suggesting that a single

overarching argument is being made, either in individual chapters or the book as a whole.

Ambitious in terms of its historical and generic scope, this book is nevertheless not framed as an intervention that will transform Alcott studies, reception studies, adaptation studies, children's literature studies, or any other field of academic inquiry; instead, it surveys the various ways that readers and artists have responded to *Little Women*, leaving others to consider how this treasure trove of information could be put to use.

Such critical diffidence runs counter to prevailing norms of literary and cultural criticism. What does it mean that one of the leading critics in children's literature studies has chosen to adopt such a militantly modest stance? Clark herself remains silent on this question, yet it seems to me worth pondering, so after outlining what she sets out to do in *The Afterlife of Little Women*—and does, with awe-inspiring thoroughness and curatorial care—I will play around with several possible reasons why she commits herself so fully to particularities rather than venturing to make broader analytical or methodological claims. My aim is less critical than appreciative: I think the work that Clark does in *The Afterlife of Little Women* is more generally useful than she herself seems willing to admit.

Clark's avowed goal is to track trends in the popular and critical reception of *Little Women* over time. To that end, her four long chapters are organized chronologically, with each one covering a mix of media since Alcott's story has been recycled and retold in so many different forms over the years. The first chapter, "Becoming Everyone's Aunt, 1868-1900," uses a variety of measures to show how well-received *Little Women* was during this time, including sales figures, publishers' correspondence, library circulation records, fan letters, and autobiographies of readers. Yet even as Alcott's popular appeal soared, an initial burst of critical appreciation slowly began to dissipate as cultural gatekeepers increasingly began to draw more

firm distinctions between high- and low-brow forms of art, with children's literature losing status as the nineteenth-century gave way to the twentieth. Readers of Clark's invaluable study *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America* (2004) will recognize this argument, which Clark buttresses here by citing new evidence for *Little Women's* critical downfall. Besides citing "recommendations, reviews, and essays in literary and other periodicals," she also consults school curricula, textbooks, old scholarly books, obituaries, and biographical reminiscences (28).

In her second chapter, "Waxing Nostalgic, 1900-1930," Clark draws on a similarly varied archive to show that although Alcott was dismissed by arbiters of high culture during this period, she continued to have a strong popular following. In fact, the admiration of her most famous novel might have peaked during the first decade of twentieth century, topped off in 1912 by the debut of the first authorized dramatic version of *Little Women* on Broadway and the opening of Alcott's former home Orchard House to the public. For playwright Jessie Bonstelle, the Orchard House organizers, and many other interested parties, the appeal of *Little Women* seems to have been largely nostalgic: it represented "the joys of domesticity of yesteryear" (43). Partly for this reason, the next few decades witnessed the nadir of Alcott's critical reputation, as Clark recounts in her third chapter, "Outwitting Poverty and War, 1930-1960." Yet while academics continued to dismiss Alcott's work as sentimental pap, "among the general population *Little Women* was still very popular, even if it was declining from its peak at the beginning of the century" (102). Clark shows how several adaptations from this era—including the 1933 Hollywood film starring Katharine Hepburn—emphasize how creatively the March sisters cope with poverty, perhaps because Americans were in the grip of the Great Depression.

In her fourth and final chapter, “Celebrating Sisterhood and Passion since 1960,” Clark traces how Alcott’s critical fortune has risen dramatically since the 1960s, thanks in part to the feminist movement and the publication of Alcott’s previously lost thrillers. Direct popular interest in the original novel has continued to decline, yet Clark notes that adaptations keep proliferating: “In about a third of the time since the novel was first published, more than half of various re-visionings have appeared. . . . The number of illustrated editions and dramatizations in this period is 50 percent greater. The number of spin-offs produced in the past half-century is more than double that of all the previous years, and the number of musical renditions is triple” (198). Beyond pointing out that Alcott’s story clearly “continues to speak to the modern condition,” Clark refrains from speculating about why *Little Women* has engendered so many retellings in recent decades, although she does hazard a guess that the increase in spin-offs “may address some need to translate the novel for a modern audience” (198). Similarly, the explosion of musical versions—“a more consciously artificial mode than most other dramatizations”—“perhaps accommodates a sense of how dated, and hence artificial, the manners of the novel now seem” (198).

As these chapter summaries indicate, Clark is more interested in describing what has happened to *Little Women* than in making arguments about why it happened, or how its afterlife illuminates aspects of American culture or what was going on with different categories of texts (children’s literature, literature by women, family films, etcetera). On the one hand, the particularity and thoroughness of her approach means that *The Afterlife of Little Women* is an incredibly useful resource for Alcott scholars, who can mine it for information on whatever topic interests them, knowing that the catalogue of adaptations described by Clark has not been winnowed down as a result of her determination to make an idiosyncratic argument. On the other

hand, since the moments when Clark pauses to provide more in-depth interpretations of various adaptations were so interesting, I kept imagining how she could have rewritten her chapters to give them a more analytical edge, perhaps by organizing them thematically rather than chronologically.

Take the topic of illustration, for example. Rather than sprinkling brief yet beautifully evocative accounts of how *Little Women* has been illustrated over the years throughout all four chapters, I kept wishing for a single chapter on this subject built around insights that only emerge in the closing pages of Clark's book, when she rightly observes how little attention has been paid to the illustrations of even the most famous nineteenth-century children's fictions and theorizes about how to treat images that don't merely echo or adorn the narration but enter into creative dialogue with it (190). Similarly, I kept wishing that Clark would marshal her knowledge of all the literary spin-offs and mash-ups of *Little Women* into the service of an argument regarding Alcott's role in the history of fan fiction. Was Alcott's text unusual in inspiring so many retellings? Did the translators who hooked up Jo and Laurie help usher in the phenomenon of slash fiction? Clark also uncovers a fascinating link between opera and *Little Women*, noting that several film versions send Jo and Professor Bhaer to the opera even though this kind of activity would have been "unthinkable for them to do, unchaperoned, in the novel or in Victorian society" (166). Had she focused a chapter on making an argument about *Little Women* and opera, Clark could have expanded her sensitive analysis of composer Mark Adamo's *Little Women* (1998), clearly a favorite adaptation of hers.

In all fairness, however, I must admit that the issue is not that Clark wanted to make these sorts of arguments and failed, but rather that she simply did not want to do this kind of criticism. But why not? Since she never articulates the motives underlying her method, we are left to

speculate. One possibility is that *The Afterlife of Little Women* is meant to appeal not merely to academics, but to a more general audience who might care more about information than argument. Yet the level of detail here seems better suited to serious researchers than casual readers, who are in any case unlikely to seek out a book issued by a university press.

A second possibility is that Clark intends to adhere to the norms of traditional reception history by privileging thoroughness and accuracy over interpretive originality. Yet one of the most striking aspects of her study is how alive she is to obscurities and ambiguities in the historical record. Far from adopting a “Just the facts, ma’am” approach, her tone throughout is deliberately tentative and equivocal, as indicated by the frequent recurrence of words such as “perhaps,” “maybe,” “probably,” and “possibly.” Evidence regarding how readers have responded to *Little Women*, Clark stresses, is not only radically incomplete—since most readers leave no record at all—but also “always proximate” (5), meaning that even direct evidence in the form of diaries, letters, and autobiographies does not give us unfiltered access to the absolute truth about what individual readers were thinking and feeling. Children in particular, Clark admits, often tailor their responses to suit the needs and desires of adults around them—but even grown-up readers leave behind at best a rough approximation of what they thought and felt. Numerical data, too, must be treated with caution: sales and circulation figures don’t tell us as much as we might think, Clark notes, since a single book may well have had more than one reader—or none at all, since we “can’t be sure that a purchased or borrowed book will actually be read”: it might have been obtained “just for show,” “to be in on the latest trend,” or “to assure a mentor that one is reading something ‘wholesome’” (6).

Indeed, a large part of Clark’s introduction is devoted to explaining why we should be skeptical of all the various kinds of evidence that she is about to cite in evaluating how *Little*

*Women* has been received. Her underlying point seems to be that even though this evidence is sketchy, it still matters: we should press on with this kind of work while at the same time resisting the impulse to cloak our conclusions in certainty, since even a study as exhaustively researched as *The Afterlife of Little Women* will only yield a hazy picture of how readers react to particular texts. Another overarching point that I took away from Clark's study is that children's literature scholars interested in doing this kind of work can profitably widen our range of resources; she tracks down an astonishing array of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century polls, contests, lists, and reports on children's reading that should prove very helpful to future researchers.

As for general insights about Alcott, I might be barking up the wrong tree here, but it seems to me that Clark's panoramic survey suggests that, sadly, *Little Women* was never more radical than when it first appeared; taken altogether, the adaptations discussed here suggest that the history of *Little Women*'s afterlife in popular culture is primarily one of people misremembering and revising it in ways that make it more sentimental, nostalgic, and conservative than it was. Given the gender-bending aspects of Alcott's novel, for example, I was surprised by how few queer adaptations Clark turned up; over and over again, heteronormative romance and other conservative "family values" seem to have trumped all other themes. Even Katharine Hepburn's Jo, Clark shows, is a far less transgressive figure than we might have expected. Describing this film directed by George Cukor, Clark relays yet another priceless anecdote that encapsulates this tendency to misremember *Little Women* as more saccharine and soppy than it actually was: "When technical difficulties required twenty takes of Katharine Hepburn's Jo weeping at Beth's deathbed, and the actress finally turned aside and vomited out of frustration, Cukor said, 'Well, that's what I think of the scene, too'" (123).



That said, since Clark does introduce some evidence that undermines this argument—and since there may be other radical adaptations out there that she doesn't discuss—perhaps all I am doing here is showing how addicted to argument *I* am, and how critique of this kind generally entails the over-simplification of unruly bodies of evidence. A third possible explanation for Clark's commitment to particularity could be that she is alive to "the limits of critique," to quote the title of Rita Felski's 2015 book on this subject. Clark seems to anticipate Felski's call for literary and cultural critics to recognize that the aggressively analytical, hyper-skeptical approach that dominated our field for the last four decades is not the only acceptable intellectual stance; scholars can and should "embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes" of thought (Felski 3). Departing from the vigilantly suspicious and diagnostic mode that Felski describes so well, Clark's approach is instead appreciative, meditative, and pointedly inconclusive. Consider for example her close reading of a key figure in illustrator Mark English's depiction of a Christmas scene from *Little Women*:

The woman in the center, rising or sitting, is bathed in light—or maybe her chair is—yet her outline blends into her surroundings. One could argue that, in keeping with the strand of feminist theory that celebrates connection and community, she is interdependent with the rest, both pictorially and familiarly. Or maybe she is relatively indistinguishable from her domestic role as she merges with the table. Or maybe the indeterminacy of her form simply reflects English's overall concern with design, with composition and the ambient play of light, as much as with the character her depicts. (196)

No one reading is endorsed, either here or elsewhere in Clark's appreciative account of English's art, which concludes, "In short, Mark English's images are stunning and evocative... They don't so much replicate the text as work in parallel with it, allude to it, raise questions, perhaps

provoke it” (197). A similar point could be made about the work Clark herself does in this book: rather than slavishly adhering to the norms of scholarship, she hews her own idiosyncratic path alongside it, raising more questions than she answers and provoking us to think about what we can and should do with the rich array of information that she has amassed.

*Work Cited*

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Marah Gubar, Associate Professor of Literature at MIT, is the author of *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children’s Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Her second book, tentatively entitled *Age and Agency*, attempts to generate a theoretical account of children’s voice and agency by drawing on a double archive: twentieth-century children’s texts that young people had a hand in creating; and work by childhood studies scholars from the sciences as well as the humanities.