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Emma Watson, Saoirse Ronan, Eliza Scanlen and Florence Pugh star in a scene from the movie "Little Women." (CNS/Sony)

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Over the holidays I had the pleasure of taking my niece and two grandnieces to see the movie "Little Women." Directed by Greta Gerwig, the superb casting of the four March sisters includes Saoirse Ronan (Jo), whose breakout performance in "Lady Bird" (also directed by Gerwig) won critical acclaim. This time, Ronan was nominated for a Golden Globe for her fresh and energetic portrayal of the madcap heroine so beloved by generations of uppity girls. Emma Watson (Meg), Eliza Scanlen (Beth) and Florence Pugh (Amy) deliver thoughtful, well developed performances worthy of their fictional counterparts.

Those who assume "Little Women" is for women only could benefit from listening to the men who enjoyed it on National Public Radio's The 1A Movie Club Sees "Little Women" that aired on Jan. 7.

When I was growing up, Louisa May Alcott's classic novel was (and probably still is) my all-time favorite book. In the sixth grade, I received an award from the local public library for an essay I wrote, having read the novel at least five times by then. Blessed with three sisters of my own, I reflected on characteristics each of us did or did not share with the March sisters. As the oldest, I acknowledged similarities to Meg's responsible nature, but secretly resonated more with Jo, who abhorred 19th century expectations for girls. I was already struggling with similar expectations in the mid-20th century.

A great deal of the appeal of *Little Women* rests on its feminist proclivities, even though in 1869, feminism had yet to be named as such. In the film, Amy's powerful dialogue with Laurie (Timothée Chalamet), a stalwart friend and brother to all of the March sisters — who also happens to be wealthy — neatly summarizes the absolute financial necessity for a woman to marry:

> ***Amy: "I've always known I would marry rich. Why should I be ashamed of that?"***
>
> *Laurie: "Nothing to be ashamed of as long as you love him."*

> "***Well, I believe we have some power over who we love and it isn't something that just happens to a person.***"
>
> "*I think the poets might disagree.*"
>
> "***Well, I'm not a poet. I'm just a woman. And as a woman, there's no way for me to make my own money, not enough to earn a living or to support my family. And if I had my own money, which I don't, that money would belong to my husband the moment we got married. … So don't sit there and tell me that marriage isn't an economic proposition because it is. It may not be for you, but it most certainly is for me.***"

Amy would eventually marry Laurie not for his money but because she truly loved him.

At one point in the film, Jo vehemently decries conventions that circumscribe women's gifts to matters of the heart: "Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for. I'm so sick of it!"

Despite Jo's passionate proclamation, love is central to Alcott's masterful work.

She shows us sisterly love in the midst of violent arguments; familial love in the midst of severe struggles with poverty, war, illness and death; and self-sacrificing love for others, especially the poor, sick and suffering. For Alcott, romantic love arises in the midst of all of the above, being based at least as much on shared values as on shared chemistry.

The key to Alcott's appeal lies in her uncommon ability to unwrap the foibles of the human heart. Loving *Little Women* as I did, I had to read the sequels: *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*. In all of her books, Alcott shows us fictional characters striving each day to overcome their faults and destructive behaviors in practical and sometimes humorous ways.

While some may consider them morality tales, Alcott's narratives are actually stories about the power of love.

Little Women mirrors events in Alcott's own life. She was the second of four sisters and grew up in even greater poverty than her fictional characters. The runaway success of *Little Women* paid off family debts and Alcott's successful literary career subsequently supported her nearest and dearest. Unlike Jo, she never married.

Like the fictional Beth, Alcott's younger sister Lizzie died at the age of 22 of scarlet fever. In many ways the dramatic depth of both the book and the film revolve around Beth, who is as shy and unassuming as Jo is boisterous and outgoing.

Readers are always anxious about Beth who, after bringing food to a destitute family, almost dies of scarlet fever. She contracted the dread disease after the family's youngest child dies of the malady in her arms. While Beth herself narrowly survives, the ravages of the fever leave her with debilitating heart disease. Even though Jo desperately tries to stave off the inevitable with a visit to the seashore, Beth's health gradually fails. It soon becomes apparent that she is dying. One of the most moving scenes of the movie shows Beth helping Jo accept her coming transition: An excerpt from the book sheds light:

> *Beth could not reason upon or explain the faith that gave her courage and patience to give up life, and cheerfully wait for death. Like a confiding child, she asked no questions, but left everything to God and nature, Father and Mother of us all, feeling sure that they, and they only, could teach and strengthen heart and spirit for this life and the life to come. ... Seeing this did more for Jo than the wisest sermons, the saintliest hymns, the most fervent prayers that any voice could utter. For with eyes made clear by many tears, and a heart softened by the tenderest sorrow, she recognized the beauty of her sister's life — uneventful, unambitious, yet full of the genuine virtues ... the self-forgetfulness that makes the humblest on earth remembered soonest in heaven, the true success which is possible to all.*

Alcott's narrative power originates in her own experiences of family love, sorrow, struggle and pain — all of which are sustained by faith in the power of a love that sustains us all.

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk, an NCR board member, served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. Her recent book, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*, was awarded first place in the history category by the Catholic Press Association. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

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