



The Reluctant Historian

A NOVELIST FINDS HERSELF FALLING IN LOVE WITH THE PAST AS SHE DIGS INTO THE LIFE OF *LITTLE WOMEN* AUTHOR LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

by Lara Zielin

IT WAS NOVEMBER of 2007 and Kelly O'Connor McNeese ('02) had just moved to Canada. It was cold. And dark most of the time. Having recently quit her job as a seventh-grade English teacher to follow her husband's job prospects to Ontario, McNeese found herself largely alone, watching the snow fall.

This is the perfect time to write a book, she thought.

McNeese put pen to paper, envisioning a novel about long-lost letters that would reveal a romantic relationship between *Little Women* author Louisa May Alcott and a fictional character named Joseph Singer. "Originally it was going to be a contemporary novel about an ancestor of Joseph who finds the letters, with only short flashbacks [in the text] to 1855," McNeese says.

But the more McNeese dug into the past, the more she found she enjoyed it. "As I researched this book, I fell in love with history. I loved the research about the way the characters would have lived, how they would have cooked, what they would have worn."

McNeese scrapped the contemporary narrative to pen historical fiction focusing on the summer of 1855 when a young, plucky Alcott moves to Walpole, New Hampshire, with her parents and sisters. Fans of *Little Women* know that Alcott drew heavily from her personal life to write her breakout novel—many aspects of Alcott herself are reflected in the character of Jo—but the character of Laurie remains a mystery. Was he, too, sketched from a real-life person and, if so, whom?

McNeese refocused her book on exactly that question. "I based it in the summer of 1855 because not much is known about that time in Alcott's life," McNeese says.

McNeese's novel, *The Lost Summer of Louisa May Alcott* (Amy Einhorn Books/Putnam, 2010), imagines romance between Alcott and the character Joseph Singer, on whom Alcott bases Laurie in *Little Women*.

But going back in time and piecing together a romance—even an imagined one—was no small task. McNeese had to sift through overwhelming amounts of information on Alcott's life and historical New England to understand both day-to-day activities in the Alcott household and Alcott herself.

"There is so much information out there," McNeese says, "but I found I enjoyed the hunt. I'd be writing along and would find myself wondering, 'if [Alcott] is staying up late reading, was she reading

by oil lamp or candlelight?'"

McNeese read biographies of Alcott, which draw on her journals and letters, to piece together her facts. In the case of the reading light, McNeese learned that the family couldn't afford whale oil for their lamps, which means they would have made their own candles. McNeese then headed off to the library to learn exactly how, and the result makes its way seamlessly into her novel:

Anna heated a kettle of sheep tallow on the stove until the acrid smell of burning fat engulfed the kitchen.

"Did you know," Anna began, stirring the burping sludge with a flat piece of wood reserved for the task, "that the brick house at the corner of River Road and Westminster Street belongs to the Sutton family? The one with two chimneys?"

Louisa worked a dull knife through the cotton cord, cutting equal lengths for the wicks. "Oh, that house is lovely."

McNeese, who wrote for the *Michigan Daily*, graduated from U-M in 2002. She went on to DePaul University for a master's in education and says being challenged academically at U-M helped her gain the confidence to write her novel. "My professors at U-M pushed me to do what I was capable of doing. I was intimidated, but in a good way."

McNeese worked in and around books for years, first as an editorial assistant in a New York publishing house and then as an English teacher. She knew she wanted to write a novel someday, but it wasn't until the perfect storm of being jobless in Canada and reading a fascinating Alcott biography "created a space where I could try it."

McNeese says that while her history might not be pitch-perfect all the way through the book—"there are points where you can't pin down the details, you have to use your common sense"—she loves the voice she's given to Louisa May Alcott.

"There were so many things about her that were surprising," McNeese says. "She was my inspiration." ■

📖 **LSA WIRE** ▶ To read an excerpt of *The Lost Summer* and to watch the book trailer, visit the LSA Wire at www.lsa.umich.edu/alumni/wire



EARLY REVIEWS

LSA alumna and author of *The Wednesday Sisters*, Meg Waite Clayton ('81, J.D. '84), was one of the first to read and review *The Lost Summer of Louisa May Alcott*. Her full review text appears on Amazon.com, and includes the following: "Mixing fact drawn from *Little Women* author Louisa May Alcott's letters and journals with a longing to understand how Alcott—who is thought never to have been in love—could have written so movingly about it, Kelly O'Connor McNeese delivers a wonderfully imagined, lively novel of first love."