

### Speaker Information

- P — Peyton
- V — Vicki

### Other

- LW – Little Women
- LMA – Louisa May Alcott

00:00:03 [INTRO MUSIC]

00:00:12 **P** Hello, and welcome to Jo's Boys. This is a podcast for little women, little men, and everyone in between. I'm your host, Peyton Thomas. I'm the author of the novel *Both Sides Now*. I'm also a writer for publications like *Pitchfork*, *Billboard*, and *Vanity Fair*. And I'm here today with my very special guest Vicki Johnson. Vicki is a former White House staffer and a future author of the picture book *Molly's Tuxedo* due out in June 2023 from Little Bee Books. She's a Lambda literary fellow, just like me—shout out! A graduate of Smith College and an MFA candidate at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Vicki, welcome to the show!

00:00:48 **V** Yay. Thanks for having me.

00:00:52 **P** I am so delighted to have you here. Did I miss anything?

00:00:54 **V** No, you did it. The MFA is in writing for children and young adults at VCFA. I just wanted to point that out. It's a really special program. I'm so happy to be here. I mentioned before we started recording you brought me back into the March family fold. It's been, dare I say—decades. I dare say it. I read it.

00:01:11 **P** What is your relationship to *Little Women*, then? If it's been decades?

00:01:16 **V** Yeah, let's talk about it. I'm here to bring the Gen X lesbian flavor to this conversation. I was a child of the seventies. I'm sure I read it at 10 years old or younger. I don't know. I loved it and because I know you talk about the cinematic versions—I grew up watching it because my mom loved watching all the old, black and white movies. I definitely remember seeing the 1933 version at some point. I did a re-watch because I'm a huge fan of Katherine Hepburn. And there was that. Then, of course, I kept up with all the movies that came out. I loved Greta Gerwig's version in 2019. I reread some of it to bring myself back up to speed.

00:02:00 **P** Well, I am absolutely thrilled. I am also a huge fan of the 1933 Katherine Hepburn version. There's a real, just absolute Butch chaotic energy that she brings to the role that gets. And I love it. I love it so much.

00:02:15 **V** She's for sure my favorite Jo.

00:02:16 **P** Yeah. I think I would agree. I have a customized American girl doll that like is the Saoirse Ronan Jo, but Katherine Hepburn is really something. Let me grab Jo for a second, actually. [laughs] This was a gift, but she's like,

00:02:31 **V** That's perfect!

00:02:35 **P** I know, I love her so much. So again, I have an inkling, but which March sister are you? And again, for the purposes of this podcast, Laurie is a March sister.

00:02:52 **V** Okay. So I am going to say I have two answers. One, as a child, for sure—Jo because at that point, I'm gonna use the word tomboy. It's not my favorite word because it decenters girls. And it makes it in relation to boys, but I always call it 'tomboy'. Growing up, Jo was definitely the one.' As an adult, though, I have to say Laurie because I really relate to Laurie's outsider-ness, especially at the beginning. Being the person who's alone and lonely, but watching other people have fun and wanting to dip into that. So that's my answer.

00:03:23 **P** That is a fabulous answer. We love to have Lauries' on this podcast. And Laurie has some very heroic moments in this chapter. We're reading chapter 15 today: A Telegram. It begins quietly and ends with a bang. Do you want to give us the rundown of what happens in this chapter?

00:03:47 **V** Yes, please. Let's jump into this. So we're coming off of chapter 14, which is a real high for Jo. She has sold her two stories. She gets to read one to her family. She's saying, "My dearest wishes in the world are to be independent and to earn the praise of my loved ones." So that's the end of 14. Then we turn the page to an ominous title: A Telegram. We all know what a telegram means in wartime, right? And then, of course, there's the first line. "November is the most disagreeable month in the whole year," says Meg, who's always complaining, let's be real. And she's looking out over the frost-bitten garden. It starts off on a real downer note. The sisters are sitting around complaining and moaning and groaning about their lot in life. Jo, as always, is wanting to fulfill her desire to provide for the family. She wishes she could change things and fix things. And Amy chimes in, and then Marmee comes in and says, "Any letter from father, girls?" It's building this dramatic moment when dear Hannah shows up with the awful telegraph, and Marmee grabs it, snatches it out of her hands, and reads, "Mrs. March, your husband is very ill. Come at once to Blank Hospital, Washington, DC." Everything went completely silent in the room. There was nothing but the sound of sobbing; a tragedy has struck the family, and everyone is upset. They don't know what to do. Of course, Hannah is the one who is the first to recover. She says, right away, "We've got to get organized. We've gotta get Marmee down there."

00:05:27 **V** Everyone takes a role. Everyone's given something to do. And then Laurie runs off to go get the horses ready and to buy a train ticket to send a telegram saying that Marmee is on her way. And Jo laments that she wishes there was something that she could do—a little foreshadowing there. Marmee tells Jo to go get some items that she'll have to be a nurse when she arrives right at the hospital where her husband is. She tells Beth to go ask Mr. Lawrence for wine. She asks Amy to track down a black trunk and Meg to help her get her clothes together because she's so confused and upset. So everybody does their thing. Mr. Lawrence comes back with Beth and says, look, "I'm sending Mr. Brooke to accompany you." And Meg has a little moment with Mr. Brooke. That's a central piece in their relationship as it's blowing. And then everyone wants to know where Jo is. Everyone does their thing. They come back together, and like, has anyone seen Jo? This is where it gets really juicy. "They begin to get anxious, and Laurie went off to find her, for no one ever knew what freak Jo might take into her head." That's a funny turn of phrase. "He missed her, however, and she came walking in with a very queer expression of countenance, for there was a mixture of fun and fear, satisfaction and regret in it, which puzzled the family." She threw down \$25, which was a huge sum at the time. I'm sure. And they all said, "Where on earth did you get this money?" And she said, don't worry. "I didn't beg, borrow, or

steal." And she pulls off her bonnet, and she's cut her hair! Possibly one of the most famous scenes of this novel, right? Woo. It's a big one.

00:07:00 **V** The sisters are in disbelief. They say, "Your one beauty, Jo!" And she says, look, "It doesn't affect the faith of the nation," Calm down. She says, "My head feels deliciously light and cool, and the barber said, I could soon have a curly crop, which will be boyish, becoming and easy to keep in order." So they get over it for a minute, and they move on. Let's see what happens next. That night, they finally go to bed, and they're all going to sleep. Jo's blown the whole thing off. Like it's not a big deal, but then as they fall asleep, Meg hears her crying, and she says, "Jo, are you worried about father?" And she says, "No, it's my hair." So the fact that she played it off and says, "I guess I'm just being vain." She says that a couple of times. But at the end of the night, they all fall asleep, and Mom walks around and kisses them all goodnight. And that's the end of that chapter. One thing I left out was both Marmee, and Jo really didn't want to go to Aunt March. I'm obsessed with Aunt March. I think it's because I watched the 1933 version again last night and the actress, what's her name? May Oliver really brought that character home for me. She was a scary character [laughs], but they were both, of course. When Aunt March did give them some money, she also sent a note that said, "I told you—Why did he go to the war? Why don't you listen to me? And Marmee reacts to that. Jo, that's why she reacted to it. That's basically chapter 15. There's a lot to unpack around the haircut that I want to talk with you about.

00:08:37 **P** Yeah, that was my thinking. There's an awful lot happening here related to the Civil War, the dynamics of the family, the suffering, the agony. I have a feeling we're going to zoom right past that to the haircut. [laughs]

00:08:51 **V** Well, it's all actually a little bit related because, yes, because of you and your research, it got me really fascinated. I'm really fascinated digging into our ancestry and these people in the 1800s—we don't really know what their true stories are. I wanted to look a little bit more into Lou Alcott. Their story and Jo's story interact so much. And the haircut itself. Lou Alcott had a haircut when Louisa May Alcott was a nurse in the war, she contracted Typhoid Pneumonia. Apparently, the doctors, without her permission or knowledge, cut all of her hair. Like three and a half feet of her hair off, it's a lot of hair. I don't know how that impacted her as a person. I don't know what happened beyond that. But then similarly, here's Jo who cuts her hair on a whim, like at the last minute. Haircuts are a very queer moment, but in this case, she walked past a barber and saw hair in the window and went for it. She does use the term— that she had that look of 'fun in her eye' when she walked in, mixed with other feelings. I don't know, what do you think?

00:09:59 **P** Yeah, the exact phrasing there, it's something like 'fun and fear, something and regret.' So clearly mixed emotions coming from that. I think one important thing because you mentioned, obviously, this has its roots in, first of all, Bronson Alcott, Lou's father, never went to war. He was too old at that point to go to war. The only Alcott family member who served in the Civil War was Lou, who was desperate to be a soldier. Some of the most explicit "I long to be a man" statements come from that period where she's talking about wanting to be a soldier and go down south and fight. She writes, "I long to have a dab at the Saucey southerners." Like, she really was jonesing to go and fight but was not able to. We know that there are some people who were born women and assumed the identities of men to go and fight in the Civil War. Alcott didn't go quite that far. But she did enlist as a nurse to go and serve in a hospital where she contracted Typhoid fever, as you said. And the haircut there was done to cool her, to reduce her body temperature from the hair. And it was done when she was delirious, it was not like

anyone asked her. So she woke up from this fever, traumatized and missing her hair. So that would've been the context of the haircut in her real life, which maybe is why Jo is so conflicted about it. She's rewritten it as Jo doing this of her own volition, but almost as if like the spirit is moving her, like she's not able to fully think through the consequences of the action. Although I will say, I pulled up the inflation calculator while you were speaking to see exactly how much \$25 in 1868 money would have been. Do you want to have a guess? Do you want to play the Price is Right? How much do you think? \$25 of Jo March's money is worth today?

00:11:52 **V** 300.

00:11:55 **P** Higher.

00:11:56 **V** A thousand.

00:11:57 **P** Lower. This is how much Jo sold her hair for: five hundred and eight dollars and ninety-nine cents.

00:12:02 **V** Wow. That would've been a big help.

00:12:05 **P** I would cut my hair off too. Yeah, quite frankly.

00:12:12 **V** Yeah, to me, it's just interesting because now we all know the history of her writing this book. And perhaps, how much pressure the publisher put on any changes. So I was also wondering about that. On the one hand, it was fun, and it was going to cool her head and give her this boyish, fun, comfortable haircut for herself that maybe made her feel better. But on the other hand, there's this morality that went throughout this book and everything. There was a lesson in every chapter, basically. And she said a few times, "Oh, this solves my vanity problem. I was getting vain of my wig." And so, I don't know. Is that really her feeling about that? Or was this something about the pressures of the moment to write this moral lesson around this? I don't know.

00:12:59 **P** Yeah. I was thinking that too. Because this is one of those scenes in the book that troubles me. I was just chronologically editing and releasing Jaya Saxena's episode about chapter 9. Meg goes to Vanity Fair, which is one of the most conservative chapters in the whole book, right? Meg gets a thumping for daring to be feminine. And it winds up with this very regressive lecture from Marmee about how being loved and chosen by a man is the sweetest thing that can happen to a woman. We know damn well that that is not something that Lou Alcott believed, right? It is not Lou's sentiment being relayed there. So we know that sometimes Lou pulled her punches or felt compelled to include more

00:13:43 **V** Palatable!

00:13:44 **P** —to teach people a lesson about vanity.

00:13:48 **V** Yeah, and to be palatable to the times and to sell books. She knew what was expected in that way.

00:13:52 P Absolutely, and it's worth noting. We've talked about this in other chapters, so I maybe won't go into like super detail, but we know that upon the release of *Little Women*, the Christian union banned the book from Sunday school libraries. They cited the play in chapter 2 as the problem, which is the Christmas play where there's a witch and there are curses. There are spells, and there's talk of one character stabbing himself. Notably, that's also the chapter where Jo crossdresses to play these male roles and plays a very swoon-worthy male love interest to these female characters. So we know that the play was a problem. And we know that an element of the play was this implied crossdressing quote-unquote female character playing 'attracted to females.' So, right, it's quite possible that this boyish crop, like if Jo came home really feeling herself and saying, "I love this, I look like a boy. Isn't it fabulous." That could be a problem.

00:14:56 V That would've been a bigger problem. To back up for a second, you and I met on Twitter because I had seen your post about Lou Alcott and the transness of that person. And I was like, what? And then I opened it up, and I was like, what? I love people who spend the time, because I've done this, working on a picture book—a non-fiction biography. We all do this, right? If you're queer, you have to read between the lines. You have to look at things closely. I've been doing this for years and years. As a person, you want to understand who and what our history is. Looking at it from today's perspective, this haircut piece is a huge flag for the queer community and for self-expression, self-empowerment, and self-knowledge. So then to read it and say, "Oh, I was hoping it was going to be a little different from that." I was hoping that she did it because she wanted to, but then you read it, and you're like, "Oh, okay." It wasn't exactly how I remembered it as a child. But anyways, it's still there and it has meaning. I think that's important.

00:16:10 P Yeah. It's still there. It has meaning. We've already talked about a few factors. I feel we're going to get into a few more. It's a very complex thing. It occurred to me as you were talking that if Jo had come in guns blazing saying, "I love it. I look fabulous. Time for my photo shoot." That would have been tonally at odds with what's happening here, which is that her father is on his deathbed.

00:16:35 V Yeah. It wouldn't be a great moment. It wouldn't be perfect for that to occur. It's funny, as I was talking about this, I was remembering reading it originally when I was a kid and remembered him being so disappointed that she got married at the end. And it's so funny because of how old I was, Like 10? I don't know. I wasn't out yet or anything, but why was I so disappointed? Kids pick up on so much though. But I remember the haircut, I didn't remember the context of it from when I was a kid either.

[00:17:06 P We're hopping ahead a little bit here, but Lou Alcott did not want to marry Jo off. She was very adamant that if it was going to happen, it was not going to be to Laurie. That was a very specific thing that she wanted. There was some editorial pressure, but I think the pressure that she dwells on is the fanmail from young girls who were begging her to marry Jo to Laurie. [laughs] That really bothered her. She was determined not to do that. And in part, devised the character of Professor Bhaer and that whole marriage almost as a middle finger to those young readers.

00:17:42 V Right! For me, as an adult watching Greta Gerwig's version, where she showed that at the end and incorporated it into the end of the movie—conflated her life and the book, it was so good. For me, I was like, "Yes, see, she's explaining to the viewing audience, this is why it ended this way it because it happened in real life to her or whatever." I thought that was pretty genius.

00:18:08 **P** Yeah, likewise, I read somewhere in an interview where Greta said, "if I couldn't make this movie with an ending that Lou would've liked, then there was no reason to make the movie."

00:18:18 **V** Ah, that's so good. There are so many great characters in there. Aunt March, just as an aside in the Aunt March sweepstakes competition—I love Meryl Streep's version as well. Yeah. She's just incredible. But in terms of meanness, it definitely goes to the 1933 version of Aunt March. She almost lost me when she tossed her poodle off of her lap. She was nonetheless very effective as a mean old woman.

00:18:47 **P** Yeah. I've watched that movie a couple of times. I watched it first with my dear friend, James Frankie, who I hosted this podcast's first episode with. Then I watched it again with my parents, and in every case, every person I watched with was just shocked at the way Aunt March yeeted that poodle.

00:19:05 **V** I was upset by that. I marched on because I wanted to see the rest of it, but she reminded me of the witch character in, what movie was that? I don't remember, but apparently, that actress is a direct descendant of the second U.S. president John Adams—just as a crazy aside, I happened to have looked her up. These things may be important. But I'm fascinated with some of these side characters that we don't get to talk about very much too, which is Hannah, the live-in help. She played a part in this chapter where she was the one that pulled herself up and said, "We have to keep going, and we have to get these things organized to get Marmee's to father." And she's always there in the background. I'm fascinated with any of the class-based characters you see in these older stories. And I want to say, Hey, I would love to see a story about Hannah and her life and her experience and what it was like for her, and what's her view of the March sisters?

[00:20:03 **P** Well, I would love to read that, and maybe you could be the person to write it. I know I would be first in line. There's a great episode I did with Daniel Okrent, who wrote a book about Irish and Italian immigration around this period, and we talked a little bit about the character of Hannah, and it tracked with portrayals of Irish people from that era that Hannah would be domestic. But Hannah is incredibly sympathetic in this scene. She is pulling the family together. She is a woman of action. She's maybe even, like a wish-fulfillment role for the Alcott family, who certainly never had hired help. They were way too poor. Maybe it was this fantasy of like an interloper who can be there in that difficult moment to help out. Notably, we also see Laurie, who's an Italian character. Again, being portrayed in an incredibly sympathetic light for the era, racing away on his horse to get this telegram to the station, doing whatever he can to take care of the Marches. So that comes into play here.

00:21:04 **V** I will say I was struck that Hannah was, throughout the novel and in depictions of cinematic depictions, she does seem sympathetic. Oftentimes they'll have these grumpy household 'help' in the background. But she was a positive character for the sisters, which I liked.

00:21:22 **P** What we're almost getting is a vision of the March household as a two-mom household.

00:21:28 **V** Yeah, why not! And also again, I have you to thank that I know much more about Lou Alcott than I ever knew before. I read all about their circumstances with Bronson Alcott not providing for them, having some very bizarre strict thoughts about how his children should be raised. So the adult

women were depicted very positively. Although the Lawrence men are quite positive as well. It's not like she's lopsided in her view. But having Father off at war the whole time, it makes sense now. He wasn't present in their lives. In Lou Alcott's life—I don't know what he was doing exactly.

00:22:22 **P** He was very present. He was certainly an overbearing figure in the household. We know that he struggled with periods of suicidality. John Madison has an excellent biography of Bronson called *Eden's Outcasts*, which goes into Bronson's mental state. I think we can't diagnose people in history, but we know that he was suicidal at points. We know that he had difficulty holding down a job and providing an income. Often Aba Alcott, who was Lou's mother, had to be the one to pick up the slack, work the job, and put food on the table. It was not the traditional father-breadwinner mother-homemaker situation by any means at the Alcotts household. When she had the chance to reimagine this family structure, the father is just out of the picture. Even when he comes back from war, he is not a prominent figure in the household. Certainly, in this scene, the dynamic in the household is between these two adult women caring for one another. So they create this environment where these two women are the heads of the household, and there are these sisters, and Jo is 'the man of the house', and Laurie comes in from this very solitary, lonely all-male environment and delights in getting to be part of this world of women. We see here, I wanted to note really quickly. He says, "'Can I do anything for you, Madam Mother?' asked Laurie, leaning over Mrs. March's chair with the affectionate look and tone he always gave her," which is just so lovely because we know that Laurie's mother passed away. The fact that he's now comfortable enough to call her mother is really lovely to me.

00:24:02 **V** Yeah, it really is. And the other piece of bringing in the real life of Lou Alcott, I think, directly relates to how Jo is always depicted as wanting to provide for the family. I'm assuming that when she was growing up, Lou Alcott felt the need to provide for the family because a lot of the writing was done to make money, right? It's fascinating when you get to know these pieces, you peek behind the curtain at the author and see how it relates directly to their most famous novel.

00:24:34 **P** Yeah, absolutely. It's a biographical collapse because Lou is at once present in the character of Jo and in the character of the ill father. So in a way, Jo cutting off her hair is a sacrifice she makes to save her own life, which might be a reason for some of the regret she's feeling here. Some of the bittersweetness, if that makes sense at all.

00:25:00 **V** Yeah, I was just thinking about it. There's also that line where she says something about how it's like an arm or a leg was cut off when her hair was cut off. That's relating back to the experience of the war. Is it like having an arm or a leg cut off? I'm not sure.

00:25:15 **P** We certainly know that this was a time, [laughs] this was indeed a time when people were having their arms and leg legs cut off. That was very much happening.

00:25:24 **V** Yeah, exactly. So maybe it wasn't quite like that,

00:25:26 **P** Not to get too heavy. I know we've talked about our personal histories and queerness in relation to this chapter. You especially mentioned the experience of a haircut being something that can be so special. Was there a first haircut that you can recall?



00:25:41 **V** I can't. I'm not sure there was a 'first haircut,' but if you look back through the years, it progressively got shorter and shorter and shorter, and then it just stayed that way. There's not a better feeling—it's one of those things. Queer kids, how they first express themselves, maybe, through their clothes because that's something they have control over in their room? Then 'the haircut.' is a really big deal. You've probably got to get your parents to agree to let you get your hair cut a certain way. I think that's what adds a lot of significance to this chapter for a lot of people reading it. I think Lou Alcott gives us clues here to demonstrate that she thought it was a great thing, the whole boyish mop, and the smile and things like that, despite all the crying and the vanity and everything—any self-expression. My picture book is about that a little bit with clothes. It is a real thing. It's not like a superficial thing. It's really how you feel inside, being expressed to everyone in the world. There couldn't be anything bigger than that to make you feel good about yourself.

00:26:56 **P** Yeah. Jo loves that this is boyish. She expresses she's like, "I might never have long hair again. I just love this so much." And we can argue about how sincere she's being, but certainly, it's a sentiment that she's having. The reason I wanted to bring up haircuts and maybe talk about our own experiences is that Jo says, "the haircut is boyish," but there's a difference. This is something that I experienced between having a 'boyish' haircut and really being a boy or looking like a boy convincingly. I remember when I was a little kid, you can see it here—I have puffy, curly—like unruly hair. When I was a little kid, my mom liked to manage that. She always made sure that my hair was very short. So in a lot of childhood photos, I look like a little boy. It's really giving that. And then, as I grew up, what I preferred was the chin-length, 'Donna Tart' bob, the Kit Ridge bob, right? And then, in college, I finally got a pixie cut, and it was like the Jennifer Lawrence, Emma Watson—the 'feminine' pixie cut. But my dad took me out to lunch, looked at me, and said, "Are you comfortable in your gender identity as a girl?" [laughs]

00:28:19 **P** And what I remember about that, it just immediately conveyed something, having this short hair. I knew, and I certainly was not mistaken for a boy, right? There was still a wide Gulf between me with a short haircut and my being able to present to others as a boy. Because gender, to an extent, is something that other people have to give, I think maybe part of Jo's grief here is the Gulf between having a 'boyish' haircut and actually getting to be a boy. Sometimes you think that I don't know—this is an experience I've talked about with other trans people, but you think maybe your first time getting a short haircut or your first time putting on a dress will be this amazing, validating moment. But sometimes, it can just bring into stark relief, the sheer distance between where you are and where you want to be. And I'm wondering if some of that is maybe at play here with Jo?

00:29:19 **V** Yeah, then there are different ways of having short hair. I was confused for a boy, and asked, "what are you" a lot growing up. But I had longer hair. Even when it got shorter and shorter, it was never really meaningful to me until I got to pick out the exact way I wanted it to look. I wanted it to look like a butch haircut. I wanted to go to a barber, not to have a lady-short cut. That looked just hideous to me. I think this is a question of having some control over how you feel about it and how you create it. Maybe at this moment, it was thrust upon her, regardless of whether she liked it. It was not something that she had time to get to the point of figuring out for herself. So, yeah, it's huge. It's big. You can't deny it. It's something that many of us go through, I guess I would say, to express ourselves.

00:30:20 **V** I don't think you can say it enough. Especially how the world is right now for queer and trans people, expressing yourself in any way, whether it's a haircut or your clothes, or anything like that, it is very powerful and important. It's been that way for generations. We're reading this book that was

written when it was written. And it's meant so much to many, I think, queer and trans people throughout the years for moments like this. And just in general, Jo is gender non-compliant and doing what she wants to do, and Laurie also, being a very different male character that we've seen—especially in these classics. You can't say that enough. I also want to say to you personally that for you to honor Lou Alcott in this way and do this scholarly research you've done. This research is just really amazing and important. We all need ancestors, and we don't have enough knowledge out there for us to partake in and understand. So thank you for doing that. And I'm so happy to be on the podcast because I think it's super important what you're doing.

00:31:28 **P** Thank you! Thank you so much for being here. I was so thrilled when I looked through people who'd responded to the thread on Twitter. I was so excited when I saw your bio, I was so interested in the work you were doing. I'm delighted that you're here and that we're talking about this. We talk about Lou Alcott being an ancestor for a reason, like as much as this gender nonconforming impulse, this proto-Queer, trans impulse comes through in Jo. It comes across even louder in the letters, the journals, and the archival material that Lou left behind. So I wanted to read a couple—because we were talking about this haircut and looking 'boyish;' being like a 'fraud' experience for Jo. I wanted to read you a couple of excerpts from Lou's letters, specifically about experiences where she got to present in a more boyish way, even, in one case, pass as a man, and how exciting that was for her. So let me read these to you, and you can tell me what you think.

00:32:31 **V** Okay. Yeah.

00:32:32 **P** This is where she's traveling in the mountains, writing letters to her good friend, Alfie, Whitman, who inspired Laurie. This is a camping trip that she's on. So she writes, "Ladies and old hats, men's coats and no hoops on their backs, for the fashions are of no account up there. And everyone tumbles about in a full and easy style that's just suited me." So that's one thing. She's just really cherishing this opportunity to wear men's coats and no hoops. And while on this camping trip, some of the horse and buggy equipment breaks down, or I don't know. So she writes, "When the trace broke, so demented was my state that I offered a stout green garter to mend the fracture, and immortalized that humble article of dress by assisting in the perilous descent of Mount Washington."

00:33:22 **V** You can see her just so happy to be free in doing what she's doing, something that was not expected, I guess. Or just in general, having the ability to do it without being harassed by people for doing it.

00:33:33 **P** Exactly, just being able to wear a men's coat and dress in a 'full and easy style' that suits you. You know, "I don't need this garter, so let me use it to repair this." [laughs]

00:33:47] **V** I think part of, as a child, my reading it, I would always get put off by the dresses. I'd read this and I would want to be really excited, but then they'd be talking about dresses, and I was like, "No, no, I don't get it. I don't understand that part." [laughs] But anyway, that's just an aside. I'm amazed at how much there is out there about Lou Alcott's life that most people don't know about. Is the end result, are you going to write something about this that we can all read? Are you putting all of this together?

00:34:17 P [laughs] Yeah, it hasn't been announced yet, but the reason I undertook this research in the first place is I'm working on a modern adaptation of *Little Women* where Jo and Laurie are queer kids who meet online.

00:34:22 V Yes! That sounds awesome.

00:34:25 P So when I set out to do this research, it was because I didn't want to make any decisions about this project until I felt that I could really honor Lou's spirit. And it just went so much deeper than I even realized. There's one more letter that I wanted to read. This is another letter to Alfie Whitman. She's been to a costume party, and she's writing to Alfie. She says, "I was a monk, and no one knew me, even after we unmasked, for a Blackbeard and Cow changed me into a Jolly Friar and made great fun. The boys called me sir, pushed me around in the dressing room, and asked me to tie and pin them up, supposing I was a man. And the girls flirted in earnest until I took my beard off when they shouted."

00:35:05 V Oh my God. I love it. It was her dream come true. That's awesome.

00:35:12 P She gets so much joy from just passing as a man.

00:35:17 V Yeah. And it really informs, what was it chapter 2, with the play and her getting to crossdress as a boy or man in the play? I love it.

00:35:26 P Even the delight in the girls flirting is very exciting, I'm sure. When Lou Alcott was asked to write a girl's story, she said, "I don't enjoy this sort of thing," and never liked girls or knew many, except for her sisters—and likewise, she said toward the end of her life, "I have been in love in my life with ever so many pretty girls and never once, the least little bit with any man." But as with other queer women of the period, like Virginia Woolf, there's no romantic correspondence with women in Lou's archives. Anne of *Anne of Green Gables* has Diana. There's no real bosom-buddy for Jo. Sometimes her comments toward Meg can get a little bit romantic. Even in this chapter, Meg is grumbling about how bored she is, and Jo says, "Oh, I don't much wonder, poor dear, for you see other girls having splendid times, while you grind, grind year in and year out. Oh, don't I wish I could fix things for you as I do for my heroines! You're pretty enough and good enough already, so I'd have some rich relation leave you a fortune unexpectedly. Then you'd dash out as an heiress, scorn everyone who has slighted you, go abroad, and come home, my Lady Something in a blaze of splendor and elegance."

00:36:41 V That's awesome.

00:36:44 P Like, "Meg, you're so pretty. I love you." [laughs]

00:36:49 V Yeah, and Jo's also close to her mom, Marmee. There are a couple of scenes in chapter 15 where she and Marmee are opposed to Aunt March in the same way. There's a closeness there. It goes back to what I was saying about the research, the history. It's something we all try to figure out collectively as a community. Well, even currently, whether or not they're gay or queer or trans or whatever. But especially historical figures. One that I've researched before that shall not be named because I'm maybe working on something... But there are some letters. But they wrote so lonely of each other back in the day, it's hard to tell in this case. In fact, it is well known that she was in a relationship

with another woman. So it's too bad, there's not any for Lou Alcott in that way. That gives us sliver of their reality. But it's frustrating, you have to read between the lines and see what you can get.

00:37:56 P Yeah, I think that impulse is very much present here. Just the way Jo talks about Meg, and I know it's a little bit awkward because that's her sister, but there are moments in the book where Jo says, "I wish I could just marry Meg." Just like, okay! We talked a little bit about how this relationship between Hannah and Marmee turns into a household where, essentially this is a two-mom household, which is fun. We have a few minutes left. One parting note, I wanted to quote from, My friend Daniel Lavery, who wrote this piece called The Chaste 'n' Plucky Heroine, Thwarted Again. This is an excerpt from that. This is such a trope and I think it applies so well to Jo. Jo is probably one of the originators, if not the originator of this trope.

00:38:51 P Danny is talking about this trope in children's literature of the 'chaste' and 'plucky' tomboy heroine, "Father is ill: 1. I shall bind my breasts and disguise myself as a Boy Doctor. I will prescribe powerful medicines and prove once and for all that girls with sunburnt legs can be trusted with prescription pads. 2. I shall bind my breasts and disguise myself as a Boy pedlar, smuggling myself Offworld on a caravan of thieves, in order to maintain the family fortune. 3. I shall bind my breasts and disguise myself as a Boy so that, 4. I should really just bind my breasts over this, see if that helps bring Father's fever down. 5. I mean, it can't hurt. 6. Don't you want Father to get better? 7. Look, just as a general policy, you can assume that if anyone in the family gets sick, just to be on the safe side, I'm going to bind my breasts. 8. And get one of those great kind of flow-y tunic-y shirts that sometimes men wear, that are loose-ish but also practical and really highlight the manifold charms of the masculine torso. 9. And I'll have a sick-as-fuck scar under my right eye and call myself Ranulph 10. I mean...if it'll help Father. 11. Did you know sometimes guys kiss other guys? 12. Listen, before you say anything, hear me out: First I bind my breasts so everyone thinks I'm a boy." And that's right.

00:40:14 V That's awesome.

00:40:17 P [laughs] Jo's having a real moment of that.

00:40:20 V What's the name of that essay you just read?

00:40:24 P I'll link to it in the show notes. It's called The Chaste 'n' Plucky Heroine, Thwarted Again.

00:40:28 V That's so funny that they use the word plucky because that's, like such a thing. I'm like, why is it a plucky thing? I don't get that. It's always used to describe these girls. At the end of the day, they're left to take care of everyone else, but they never get the love. That's just what Jo wanted, right? She wanted to be loved for herself

00:40:51 P I love that moment. I feel like the most common phrase uttered, if there was a word cloud of this podcast, the biggest ones would be in the Greta Gerwig movie.

00:41:09 V The Greta Garg film fixed a lot of things for a lot of us, like about feelings for a lot of things.

00:41:16 P Yeah, she gives that beautiful speech when she says, "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, but I'm so lonely." Right? Just really balancing those two impulses. One thing I also love about that speech throughout the movie, Greta really intentionally makes space for reading Jo as trans or non-binary. You'll notice that there's a very careful, sleight of hand in that speech. It's almost like she's not necessarily including herself in the category of women. Women, women, women but \*I\* am so lonely. Which is something that I've noted and I think comes through here because. In *Little Women*, there's a very clear delineation between Jo and the way that all of the other female characters enact their gender. Jo states quite often that she wants to be a boy and that she is a boy. She's called like a man of the house, a fellow, so she's juggling a lot. Poor Jo. She's going through it.

00:42:43 V Yeah, she really is. And again, they always get it at the end of the story. Like the lesbians always die at the end in historical stories or whatever. It's the 'plucky' girl, always at the end, the one that has to provide and has to show up and do things for everyone else. And that's what Jo's going through.

00:43:03 P In your picture book, in *Molly's Tuxedo*, does she also have to sacrifice everything and get a miserable ending? I'm sure that's where that's going.

00:43:14 V She definitely does not. She proves that the best way to feel good is to be yourself and that's what we all want to be. We want Jo to be herself. We wished Lou could be herself, we don't know exactly who that is, but we know that maybe she struggled with that a little bit. It would be fascinating to hear more from her. I wish there was more that we could read about that.

00:43:35 P Yeah, for any reader who is interested, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* edited by Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeline B. Stern, is available. All of her letters are published. The same group edited her journal, so that's available. Not as widely available as maybe it should be, but you can go out and get those books if you're interested. And obviously, come back every week to this podcast, we'll be talking about this a lot. Vicki, it has been such a pleasure chatting with you. I am really excited to read *Molly's Tuxedo*. That's out next year. In the meantime, where can people find your work? Where can they get in touch with you?

00:44:09 V Yeah, when you write a picture book, you have to shout out the illustrator because they really bring it to life. The amazing Julian Reed illustrates *Molly's Tuxedo*. She also illustrated Queer Eye's Jonathan Van Ness's picture book about a non-binary guinea pig called *Peanut Goes for the Gold*. It's amazing. I'm super excited. I just saw the first sketches so I had to have to call out Jillian on that. You can find me on my website: [vickijohnsonwrites.com](http://vickijohnsonwrites.com). I'm also at @vickiJohnsonwrites on Instagram and Vicki Johnson on Twitter. Please, come say hi.

00:44:44 P Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much again for being here, Vicki. My name is Peyton Thomas. You can find me online at [peytonthomas.ca](http://peytonthomas.ca), and I will see you all next week. We have the amazing Kathleen Gros coming to talk about her graphic novel adaptation of *Little Women: Jo*. Which is lovely and spoiler alert: does not give her the traditional plucky tomboy ending. Let's just say.

00:45:00 V Can't wait!

00:45:00 P All right. Thank you again, Vicki. This has been so amazing.