

# FINDING JO MARCH

*Adapted from the novel "Little Women" by  
Louisa May Alcott*

A DRAMEDY IN TWO ACTS BY  
*Laramie Dean*



**CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE**

## Introduction

A very non-traditional version of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. It's about telling someone else's story so you can find your own.

## Playwright Bio

Laramie Dean is a Montana native, born and raised on a ranch in northeastern Montana. His move to the "big city" of Missoula in high school allowed him to take drama classes at Hellgate High School, opening up an entire theatrical world of possibilities. Laramie earned his BFA in acting at the University of Montana before moving across the country to work on his PhD in playwriting at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Since then he has performed, written, and directed numerous plays, including *Othernatural*, a one-man show, which was performed at Stage Left's Left Out Festival in New York City and again at Missoula's own Crystal Theatre. For the past several years he has been commissioned by the Montana Repertory Theatre to compose plays for their Educational Tour: *The Gorgon Sisters* in 2014, *Bronte to the Future* in 2016, and *Morgan and Merlin* in 2018. He was also recently commissioned by Storytree Theatre to write *Ladies Among Lions*, a play about the heroines of Shakespeare. Laramie is currently enjoying his dream job as the Theatre Director right back at Hellgate High School, where he has recently written and directed adaptations of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Little Women*. Please visit him at [bylaramiedean.com](http://bylaramiedean.com).

## Synopsis

Jo is trying to find themselves and deal with great tragedy, but doesn't know how to begin. As a writer, Jo discovers *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, and decides to adapt the novel into a play. But in this adaptation, they become one of the main characters of the novel, Jo March. The 1800s combines with the 21st century as Jo and their friends recreate Alcott's novel for the stage. As they tell someone else's story, Jo begins to identify with Jo March as real life melds with life in the novel.

## Characters

**JO [W/NB]:** A writer trying to turn Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* into a play. Casts themselves as "Jo March."

**AMY [W]:** The youngest March sister. An artist. Says whatever thought comes stomping through her brain.

**MEG [W]:** The eldest of the March sisters from *Little Women*. Concerned with money and appearance, at least at first.

**BETH [W]:** In *Little Women*, the middle sister, sweet and empathetic and incredibly musically inclined. The actor who plays Beth also plays the Writer's sister: determined, headstrong, and occasionally bratty.

**RAE / ANNIE [W/NB]:** "Jo's" ex-girlfriend who has agreed to help them turn *Little Women* into a play. Plays other characters where noted, but particularly Annie Moffat, a wealthy brat of a young woman who, nevertheless, has an eye for Jo.

**JET [A]:** One of "Jo's" friends who has agreed to help them turn *Little Women* into a play. Impatient and possessing little in the way of an attention span, nevertheless very much wants to help their friend. Plays other characters where noted.

**NORA [W/NB]:** One of "Jo's" friends who has agreed to help them turn *Little Women* into a play. Motherly and empathetic. Plays other characters where noted.

**JACKSON / CHRISTOPHER/ FRIEDRICH [M]:** One of "Jo's" friends who has agreed to help them turn *Little Women* into a play. Very much a "dude bro" and super into the writer playing Jo. Plays other characters where noted, but particularly Christopher Straub, a wealthy 21st century socialite and Laurie's boyfriend, and Friedrich Bhaer, a 19th century German man with an oversized mustache who might or might not end up marrying Jo.

**MARMEE [W]:** Margaret March, mother of the March sisters. The actor who plays Marmee also plays the mother of "Jo" and "Beth."

**FATHER [M]:** Mr. March, father to the March sisters, husband to Marmee, away fighting in the Civil War. The actor who plays Father also plays the father to "Jo" and "Beth," an alcoholic gambler who finally leaves his little family forever.

**LAURIE [M]:** “Jo’s” best friend who has agreed to play Laurie, otherwise known as Theodore Laurence, a wealthy boy and next-door neighbor to the March sisters.

**AUNT MARCH [W]:** In Act One, Father’s elderly and mean-spirited aunt, a wealthy woman who hires Jo to organize her library. In Act Two, the not-quite-as-elderly and far more stylish (but still disgustingly wealthy) aunt who insists on controlling the lives of her nephew’s daughters.

**MR. LAURENCE [M]:** Laurie’s grandfather, a beneficent gentleman who appreciates the March family’s kindness and consideration and decides to reward them when he can.

**JOHN BROOKE [M]:** Laurie’s tutor who falls in love with Meg March.

## Themes

Adolescence, death, economic issues, family, friendship, gender issues, happiness, illness/health, individuality, love, obedience, parenting/family, personal responsibility, poverty, relationships, technology, war, women’s issues

## Pre-Read Questions

- ★ Have you ever written a story? What was your writing process like? How did you feel as you wrote it? How did you feel when it was done?
- ★ What do you know about *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott? Who are the characters? What are the main themes?
- ★ Do you have siblings? What is your relationship like? What’s challenging about the relationship?
- ★ How do you honor your loved ones?
- ★ In your opinion, what does it mean to be a woman?
- ★ What do you think about gender stereotypes that have existed in the past? (e.g., women stay at home while men fight in wars; women are weaker than men)? How have gender stereotypes changed? Which ones are still prevalent?

# Pre-Read Activities

## Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a short poem as their source material. The point is for students to work quickly.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
  - » Adaptation definition: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the poem into a scene. They don't have to use the words of the poem, but the scene must be connected to the poem. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the adapted version must have theatrical qualities.
  - » What characters can be derived from the poem?
  - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the poem?
  - » What conflict can be derived from the poem?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute. Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

## Little Women Adaptation Exercise

- ★ As a class, read a small section from the original *Little Women* text.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.

- » Adaptation definition: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will have a copy of the original section. Their first task is to identify characters, locations, and possible lines of dialogue.
- ★ Next, groups are to discuss, decide, rehearse, and come up with a one-minute section of a scene. This is an exploration, rather than an assessed assignment. How do you adapt? What are the challenges?
- ★ After groups present, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

### **Research Project: Author**

- ★ Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research the author of the original text, Louisa May Alcott.
  - » Who is Louisa May Alcott?
  - » What is her background?
  - » When did she write *Little Women*?
  - » Did she write any other novels?
  - » Was she a “successful” writer?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they’ve learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? A quiz? Give students a way to demonstrate what they’ve learned.

### **Family Tree**

- ★ Have students create a family tree.

- ★ Students should not only think about their relationship with their family, but they should also ask how their family has shaped them into who they are today. How has family affected their story? What do their family relations look like?
- ★ As a class, discuss the family trees together.
  - » What did they learn about their family?
  - » How has their family helped shape them?
  - » Is there a family member they particularly look up to?
  - » How did they feel while creating the family tree?
  - » How do they honor their family?

### **Finding Yourself Monologue**

- ★ As a class, discuss if there has ever been a time when each student identified with a character they saw. It can be one they read in a book, saw in a TV show, etc.
  - » How did they feel seen?
  - » What qualities did they identify with?
  - » How did this make them feel?
- ★ Have each student write a monologue as that character. Challenge the students to find bits of themselves within the monologue.
- ★ Pick students who would like to perform their monologue.
- ★ At the end, discuss what the monologue process was like. How does the character reflect who they are? Did they discover anything new?

### **Honoring Powerful Women Monologue**

- ★ Ask students to think of a powerful woman they know who inspires them. It can be anyone from their mother to a celebrity. With this exercise they are going to honor that person.

- ★ Have students research their chosen woman.
  - » What makes her powerful?
  - » What has she contributed to the world?
  - » Why is the student inspired by her?
  - » What was her life like growing up?
  - » How did she face challenges?
- ★ After doing research, have students write a monologue about their chosen woman. It can be written as if they are the woman or it can be them talking about the woman.
- ★ At the end discuss what the process was like.
  - » How did they honor their chosen woman?
  - » How did the student feel while writing the monologue? How do they feel after presenting it?
  - » What was their favorite and least favorite part of the process?
  - » What did they discover about themselves through this process?

### **Breaking Gender Stereotypes**

- ★ As a class, discuss societal standards/stereotypes women have had to follow in the past that no longer exist today. Create a list of them on the board.
- ★ Ask students how they feel about these standards/gender stereotypes.
- ★ Pair up students and assign each one a societal standard/gender stereotype. Have students research the origin of their standard/stereotype and what's changed.
- ★ At the end of a designated time have students present what they discovered. Decide how students will present their information: verbally, with a slide deck, theatrically, etc.



- ★ Once all the pairs have presented, discuss as a class how times have changed. How has the gender stereotype been broken? What gender stereotypes still exist today? What does it mean for a woman to be strong? How can we further the discussion of women's rights in society? How can we strive to create an equitable society?

## Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Finding Jo March*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

### Read One: What is happening?

1. Who is Jo talking to in their opening monologue? What happened to that character?
2. Why is Jo's father away?
3. Identify ways in which Jo defies gender stereotypes throughout the play.
4. What is Jo's relationship with their sister like?
5. What instrument does Beth play? What instrument does Laurie say she played?

6. What do the sisters do on Christmas morning? What are they surprised with in return?
7. What happened to Laurie's parents?
8. What does Mr. Laurence think of Jo March?
9. What happens to Jo halfway through the play? How do their friends help them?
10. What does Amy do to Jo's writing? What happens to Amy after this scene?
11. What is wrong with Beth in Act Two? How does Jo feel about it?
12. How does Jo feel about pronouns?
13. How does Laurie identify?
14. What happens to the March family's father?
15. How does Jo find themselves at the end of the play? How does the play resolve?

### **Read Two: How does it happen?**

1. Why do you think the playwright named the character Jo? How does this name affect how you understand the story when the writer casts themselves as Jo March?
2. Why do you think the playwright starts the play off by not telling us who Jo is talking to?
3. Describe the relationship between Jo and their friends/the chorus. How do the friends/chorus members help move the play forward?
4. How does the playwright use the text to jump between past and present? Cite an example from the text.
5. How does the playwright use music to forward the story? If you were to sound design the show what sound effects/music would you use during the dance scene?

6. How do Aunt March and Jo contrast each other? What literary device is being used?
7. How does the playwright describe Beth? What is significant about the description?
8. How would you stage Amy falling through the ice?
9. How does the opening scene of Act Two set the mood for the rest of the play?
10. When designing the play how would you distinguish the 21st century costumes from the 1800s costume? How would you make them similar?
11. What literary device is the playwright using throughout the play to compare Jo the writer's life to Jo March?

### **Read Three: Why does it happen?**

1. What do you think happens next to Jo the writer?
2. Which line in the play resonated with you the most? Why? What did the author want you to take away from this line?
3. In your opinion, at what point in the text does the play begin to unravel? Support your answer with the text.
4. What is the author saying about identity? Cite the text to support your answer.
5. What is the author saying about gender? Cite the text to support your answer.
6. What does grief mean to you? Compare and contrast your experience with those of characters in the play.
7. In your opinion, what does strength mean in the play? What does it mean to be strong?

## Post-Read Activities

### Modern Story Scenes

- ★ Divide the students into groups of four or five and assign each group a short passage from the original *Little Women*.
- ★ Tell students that like Jo, they are going to work to take this passage from page to stage, but they are going to modernize the story.
  - » How do the characters communicate in the modern version of this story?
  - » What are the characters like?
  - » What do they wear in this modern story?
  - » What is the world around them like?
- ★ Ask students to create a short scene where they use characters, dialogue, and any inspiration they draw from the story.
- ★ Have each group perform their scene.
- ★ Discuss the process of modernizing the story.
  - » What was different? What stayed the same?
  - » Did they find themselves in the story?
  - » What did they learn while adapting this story?

### Casting Exercise

- ★ The playwright writes this note at the beginning of their play: “I’m fortunate to teach in a school with a fairly diverse population, including a great number of LGBTQ+ students. More and more students lately are coming out as genderqueer or non-binary, and they’ve found that they are not as represented in literature — including performing arts — as are their peers. I wrote this play for them. The character of Jo was played in our first reading by a cisgendered actor; for the fully mounted production Jo was played by Elio House, who identifies as non-binary. I encourage you, as always, to cast the actor you think

would make the production the most successful... but I will steer you toward queer-identified or non-binary performers if possible. Representation matters.”

- ★ Have a discussion in class about what representation means to students.
  - » Why is it important to cast diversely?
  - » How can you create more diverse stories for the stage? How can you diversify a traditional story like *Little Women*?
  - » Can you name examples of other shows that have used diverse casting?
- ★ Give students a list of actors (make sure to include LGBTQ+, genderqueer, and non-binary actors). List the pronouns of each actor next to their name.
- ★ Now have students cast *Finding Jo March* with this list of actors. Ask students to think about why they would cast each actor in the role.
  - » What would that do for the story?
  - » Why is this actor right for the role?
- ★ At the end have a discussion about what actor each student cast and why. Debrief what it was like to be a casting director. What questions did the students ask themselves? How did they make their final decisions? Why did this actor fit a specific character? What story are the students telling with their casting decisions?

### **Compare and Contrast Jo**

- ★ Put students into groups of four and have them research Jo March from Alcott’s novel *Little Women*. Who is this character?
- ★ Next, have students compare and contrast Jo from *Finding Jo March* to Jo March from *Little Women*.
  - » How are they similar?
  - » How are they different?

- » How does the adaptation compare the two? How does this comparison help Jo in the play find themselves?
- ★ Have students present what they found. This can be a slide deck, a written presentation, or a scene where the two Jo's meet. Have students get creative with their work!

### Finding Yourself Monologue

- ★ In the pre-read activities students wrote monologues identifying themselves with a character in pop culture.
- ★ Now have students identify themselves with a character in the play *Finding Jo March*.
- ★ Have each student write a monologue as them finding themselves in that character.
- ★ Pick students who would like to perform their monologue.
- ★ At the end, discuss what the monologue process was like. How does the character reflect who they are? Did they discover anything new? How do they think Jo felt in *Finding Jo March* when writing themselves into the play?

### Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their 1800s costume and their 21st century costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colors and textures would they choose?
- ★ What is the difference between the 1800s costume and the 21st century costume? What are the similarities? How do you tie them both together to represent the same character?
- ★ Draw a color costume rendering.

## Character Identities

- ★ Divide the students into groups of four and assign each group a character from the play.
- ★ Have students answer different questions about identity as their character. Examples of questions are provided below:
  - » What is your name?
  - » How old are you?
  - » How do you describe yourself?
  - » How do you express yourself?
  - » What part of your identity do people first notice about you?
  - » What is one thing you love about yourself? What is one thing you would change about yourself?
  - » What is one thing you wish people knew about you?
- ★ After students answer these questions, have them introduce their character to the class.

## Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

## **Playwright Process**

Playwright Laramie Dean talks about his process of writing *Finding Jo March*. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

### **What was the inspiration for writing this play?**

I loved Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* when I was about 9 or 10. I had a clever little copy with illustrations on every other page, which really helped me understand and identify with the characters. When I began considering writing my adaptation, I knew I wanted to do something unusual with time, inspired by Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*, which jumps back and forth through time. A fun dramaturgical conversation with Theatrefolk's own Lindsay Price helped me cement many of the ideas that ended up in the final version of *Finding Jo March*.

### **What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?**

The biggest challenge I faced was weaving together threads of Alcott's original story with the actual main narrative in the play, which focuses on the Writer and their attempts to deal with the death of their sibling.

### **As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play and why?**

I always loved the moment in the book when Amy March falls through the ice after she's just had a big dramatic fight with her sister Jo. When we staged it at my high school, we used our pianist to create a particularly cool mood with music while my husband, the lighting designer, used effective blue and green gels to simulate an underwater feeling for the audience (and the poor actor playing Amy).

### **Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?**

Ugh, first drafts. Rewrites are helpful; by that point the words are all out and the story is there, whether it's clear or not. Then I can begin hacking and slashing and rearranging and adding if need be. That's an entire process in itself, but there's a nice sense of gratification that comes when the first draft is complete.



## **What's your writing process like?**

It varies from project to project and also depends on the genre of writing (play, novel, short story, etc.). But I always make sure to have a routine, carving out time every Sunday morning to work for at least three to four hours.

## **What engages you about playwriting?**

I enjoy the gratification of seeing the play come to life, especially when it's handed over to people who are not me to stage it.