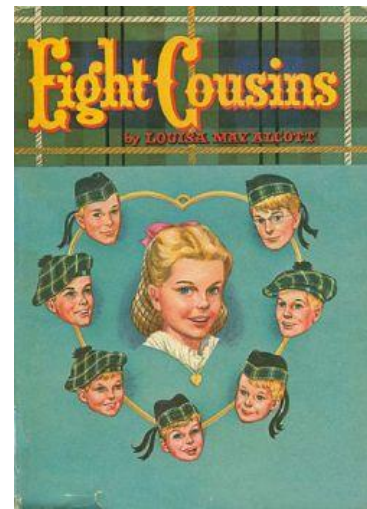


Reading Guide:

Eight Cousins

Louisa May Alcott (1875)



Thought Questions:

1. This book was chosen for its perspective on life in late 19th –century Massachusetts. What historical aspects of the novel did you find most surprising or interesting?
2. Uncle Alec often shocks the aunts as Alcott intended to shock her readers with unconventional beliefs about education for women. Did you see any connections or parallels between the child-rearing debates of the novel and discussions of parenting today? Were there times when you disagreed with Alcott's positions? The aunts' perspectives?
3. Who do you think the audience for this book was, adults or children? Would you recommend it to a child today?
4. When we read fiction that was written in other eras, it can be interesting to notice aspects of the book which seem natural to the author but strange to us. Did you remark on any parts of the book like this?
5. *Eight Cousins* has a sequel, *Rose in Bloom*. Have you read it? If so, what did you think of Alcott's continuation of the story? If not, what would you predict will happen to the family next?
6. Some argue that Louisa May Alcott's importance to children's literature is that she was the first to write children's book characters that were vivid and life-like. However, others find her work unbearably preachy. What's your take?
7. Are there related books, museum exhibitions, websites, or other resources that you would like to share with fellow readers of this book?

Author Biography (adapted from the Orchard House museum website)

Louisa May Alcott was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania on November 29, 1832. She and her three sisters, Anna, Elizabeth, and May, were educated by their father, philosopher/ teacher Bronson Alcott, and raised on the practical Christianity of their mother, Abigail May. Her career as an author began with poetry and short stories that appeared in popular magazines; she felt driven by her family's poverty to earn money, and few respectable employments were available to young women. Alcott's first book, *Flower Fables*, was published in 1854. When Louisa was 35 years old, her publisher asked her to write "a book for girls" which became *Little Women* (1868). In all, Louisa May Alcott published over 30 books and collections of stories. She died on March 6, 1888, only two days after her father. She never married or had children of her own.

If you liked *Eight Cousins*, you may enjoy the sequel (descriptions courtesy of amazon.com and bn.com):

Alcott, Louisa May. *Rose in bloom: A Sequel to Eight Cousins*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1995 (original published in 1876).

In this sequel to *Eight Cousins*, Rose Campbell returns to the "Aunt Hill" after two years of traveling around the world. Suddenly, she is surrounded by male admirers, all expecting her to marry them. But before she marries anyone, Rose is determined to establish herself as an independent young woman.

To read more about the life of Louisa May Alcott:

Matteson, John. *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*. New York: Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc., 2007.

Louisa May Alcott's name is known universally. Yet, during her youth, the famous Alcott was her father, Bronson—an eminent teacher, lecturer, and admired friend of Emerson and Thoreau. Willful and exuberant, Louisa flew in the face of all her father's intricate theories of child rearing. In a family that insisted on self-denial and spiritual striving, Louisa dreamed of wealth and fame. This story of their tense yet loving relationship adds dimensions to Louisa's life, her work, and the relationships of fathers and daughters.

For further reading about the lives of women and children in 19th Century America:

Green, Harvey. *The Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

From the world's greatest collection of American Victoriana comes a wonderful evocation of the lives women lived one hundred years ago. In *The Light of the Home*, Harvey Green culls from letters and diaries, quotes from magazines, and looks at the clothes, samplers, books, appliances, toys, and dolls of the era to provide a rare portrait of daily life in turn-of-the-century America.

Havens, Catherine Elizabeth. *Diary of a Little Girl in Old New York*. New York: Henry Collins Brown, 1919.

Many New Yorkers like to imagine the city as it was in days gone by. This diary describes the memories of the author as a ten year old girl growing up in New York City from August 1849 through June 1850.