

Becoming Jo March

Abigail Crane

When I was a girl, I read *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. The beauty of this book is that the reader can see pieces of herself in every March sister, and I was no exception. Mostly, I sought flattering comparisons: Amy's creativity, Beth's selflessness, Meg's nurturing spirit, Jo's ambition. But I carry no shortage of ineptitudes, particularly with Jo's rashness. All too often I found myself biting my tongue, and like Jo, ending up receiving a good scolding from my own Marmee. Despite these imperfections, Jo became a kindred spirit of mine. Her ambition and love of writing awoke something in me. I, too, became a writer after reading this book. I begged my mom to purchase journals for me, and if I was good and did my chores and went to Sunday school, she would laminate and bind the pages together. I developed my own series of stories, each volume detailing coming-of-age experiences, like fighting with siblings, or a good friend moving across the country. The experiences in those stories were my experiences, and through this fictional world I was able to better understand my own; in this way, I sought to become Jo March.

Jo began her writing career exploring the passions, dramas, and mysteries: the little play-acting of her childhood. Two-bit magazines published these topics, and her readers sought superficial distractions from their daily lives. But Jo was better than these little fantasies. She realized that good writing, above money or praise, seeks "truth, beauty, and earnestness" (Alcott, 1868-1869, p. 320). Writing helps us see our world more clearly and inspires readers to pursue our dreams with greater conviction. Although I am not the professional writer I once dreamed, I found a better dream. Like Jo, I became a teacher. My joy springs from teaching others to write for the purposes of better understanding ourselves and our world. If I accomplish nothing else in my short life, I will be satisfied.

My own writing experiences all have one thing in common: the struggle. Writing is never easy and comes only at the expense of great toil and effort, revision, and polishing. I have always appreciated the axiom: "I hate writing, I love having written." The same is true for me. As a teacher, I push my students to become lifelong readers and writers. I firmly believe that I must meet the standards that I demand of my pupils, and because of this, I created a blog. If I ask my students to publish their words in a public forum, I do the same. Is anyone actually reading anything I post? Most likely not. But the vulnerability of putting myself out there for others too—especially my students—is what matters. They see me struggle along with them. This choice to publish my writing stems from a deep belief that in a democracy, citizens cannot allow themselves to become passive consumers of text and media. By telling my stories, I join the conversation. I fear too many of us are guilty of passively consuming text rather than creating and sharing it, and therefore we become vulnerable to the loudest voices in the room. My hope is to model active participation for my students. Even if the conversation they choose to enter does not involve writing specifically, but media production—like podcast development or movie making—they tell their stories, and this is my ultimate end goal as an educator. When I create something—*anything*—I become Jo March: fearlessly telling my own story.

So what is the purpose of writing, professionally, academically, or personally? I want my students to feel like Jo March, too. I want them to find out their truths and tell their stories, especially those students who are too often silenced. The school where I teach serves a significant Latino population. Too few of their stories have been told. My goal is to equip them, and other disenfranchised students like them, to share their truths with the world. Without their voices, our world is a lot less beautiful. Jo March knew that women's voices, like Latino voices, or LGBTQ voices, or voices of color, are often minimized, if heard at all. Representation matters. Writing is a

tool to widen representation. I hope my students one day find themselves sitting at the proverbial table of opportunity, but in reality, gatekeepers guard the entryway. Students must write well so that the gatekeepers let them through. These gatekeepers guard many things: power, influence, careers. Writing is the main faculty to demonstrate some sense of intelligence, self, and education. A great burden is placed upon us educators, especially language arts teachers like ourselves. We must equip students to write well, or else gates become locked and opportunities lost. If our singular role is to prepare students for their futures, writing should be one of our core tenants of instruction.

Writing is a messy process that requires great struggle, revision, and perseverance, but when young people become equipped with the skills to write their own stories, opportunities arise before them. Writing shapes the world around us, voices our opinions, and makes our ideas heard. Together, we—teacher and student—can begin the process in the classroom. We should not passively consume text as readers, but create a seat at the table. Our futures depend on the young people in our classrooms telling their own stories. The burden is heavy, and at times feels overwhelming, but we embrace the challenge with purpose and passion, because there is too much at stake otherwise. Becoming Jo March is something all of us can do—we just have to be brave enough to begin.

Reference

Alcott, L. M. (1868-1869). *Little Women*. Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers.

Author Biography

Abigail Crane is a high school language arts teacher in Olathe, Kansas, where she has been teaching for four years. Abigail earned a B.S. in Secondary English Education from the University of Kansas, and a M.S. in Curriculum Leadership from Emporia State University. She intends to pursue National Board Certification in 2018. Her favorite things are words, her cat, coffee, her husband, and her students. Not in that order. Follow her on Twitter: @abigail_crane, and visit her blog at www.abigailcrane.com. She may also be reached at adcrane@olatheschools.org.