

Social Workers and Classism in Novels for Girls

Louisa May Alcott's mother, Abigail May Alcott, was one of the first paid social workers in the state of Massachusetts, and as a result, it's unsurprising that social work is regularly modeled as a respectable, even aspirational profession within her novels for girls, particularly *Little Women* (1868) and *Rose-in-Bloom* (1876). Within Alcott's novels, social work functions as the ultimate expression of empathy and thus, like many of the helping professions (missionaries, charity work, nursing, etc.) is considered an ideal, even heroic job for women who despite working outside the home, would do so in order to nurture others. Building upon the female social support system modeled by Alcott, early twentieth century novels such as *Daddy Long-Legs* (1912) and *Dear Enemy* (1915) by Jean Webster, directly link the pursuit of women's rights, education, and suffrage to the career of social work, suggesting that greater freedom for women will directly benefit the society for which they will go on to labor.

This sort of professional one-way empathy, however, can be distancing, especially when compared to the empathy displayed by children for one another. As well, these rosy images of social workers, which persist throughout the twentieth century—appearing even in novels as late as Sydney Taylor's *All of a Kind Family Downtown* (1972)—disguise the classism still at work within these texts, which often suggest that there is a radical difference between social workers and the populations they serve, whether related to class, race, ethnicity, or all of these.