

The Orchard House

Book Club Kit

“Lyric, evocative, and honest, *The Orchard House* is a book meant to be savored.”

Susie Finkbeiner, author of *Stories that Bind Us* and *All Manner of Things*



About Heidi Chiavaroli



Heidi Chiavaroli (pronounced *shev-uh-rol-i* . . . sort of like *Chevrolet* and *ravioli* mashed together) wrote her first story in third grade, titled *I'd Cross the Desert for Milk*. It wasn't until years later that she revisited writing, using her two small boys' nap times to pursue what she thought at the time was a foolish dream. Despite a long road to publication, she hasn't stopped writing since!

Heidi writes women's fiction, combining her love of history and literature to write split-time stories. Her debut novel, *Freedom's Ring*, was a Carol Award winner and a Christy Award finalist, a *Romantic Times* Top Pick and a *Booklist* Top Ten Romance Debut. Heidi loves exploring places that whisper of historical secrets, especially with her family. She loves running, hiking, baking, and dates with her husband. Heidi makes her home in Massachusetts with her husband and two sons.

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Historical Note

It's been more than 150 years since the publication of *Little Women*, and our culture continues to be fascinated by this seemingly simple domestic tale. In many ways, its message is revolutionary. And in many ways, it is as old as time, calling each of us to our own good works and independence, calling each of us to love one another well.

As always, when writing of a true historical figure, I feel both excitement and a burden to portray them as they truly were and honor their memory. To take on Louisa May Alcott, such a fiercely admired lady and author, was a task I did not take lightly.

In preparation for this mission, I read several respected biographies as well as her published letters and journals. Though I had read *Little Women* before, I reread the beloved classic, as well as the books of hers mentioned within—*Hospital Sketches*, *Moods*, and *Fair Rosamond* (published in 1995 as *A Long Fatal Love Chase*). In my research, I gained insight into this woman—so much more than simply fictional Jo March. I gained respect for her and felt her sadness over much of the tragedy that played out in her life. Many times, particularly in dialogue and letters, I have used her own words from her letters and journals to keep a tone of authenticity within them.

Louisa was a champion of the underdog—whether it be the enslaved African, the voteless woman, the widowed beggar, her orphaned nephews and husbandless sister, or hardworking Marmee, I could imagine what this strong-willed woman's response would be to a friend in Johanna's situation.

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Her experience with Johanna's brother John Suhre did happen, though she fictionalized some of it in *Hospital Sketches*. John did leave behind a brother and a sister, whose names I've kept, but the similarities end there and from then on are entirely fictionalized.

I had the pleasure of visiting Orchard House while researching, and I would heartily encourage New England visitors to take a tour if in the area. From the Revolution to the Renaissance, Concord is a town bursting with history and culture.

Though I have not witnessed domestic abuse firsthand, I have known women who have suffered its harmful effects. If you are a woman who finds yourself in a situation like Victoria's or Johanna's, or you know someone in an abusive relationship, I hope you will reach out for help. There are some great resources online at thehotline.org. No one should have to live in fear. Please know I am praying for you and that you are not alone.

I also pray the legacy of women like Louisa Alcott may continue on in our literature, minds, and hearts and that the Lord would use them to inspire hope, freedom, and most of all, love.

“As a longtime fan of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, I was eager to read *The Orchard House*. . . . [It] invited me in, served me tea, and held me enthralled with its compelling tale.”

Lori Benton, Christy Award-winning author of
The King's Mercy and Mountain Laurel

The Orchard House,
Louisa May Alcott's home



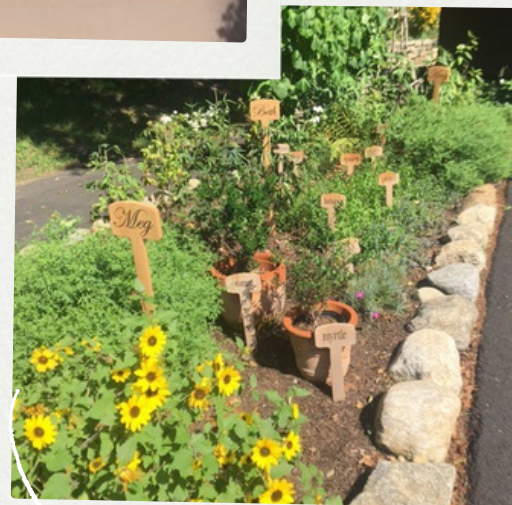
The Orchard House novel
on the steps to Louisa May
Alcott's Orchard House



The Orchard House



Bronson Alcott's School of Philosophy
(where Victoria finds Johanna's book of poems)



The March sisters' gardens

Discussion Questions

- 1 In *The Orchard House*, Taylor and Johanna are both looking for a place to belong. Why do you think they feel as if they don't belong? How do they try to fill the void they feel in their lives? Are there times when searching for love might lead to unhealthy patterns or choices? What are some healthy ways to feel loved?
- 2 Why does Taylor feel that hope isn't always a safe option? Describe a time in your life when being hopeful about something felt like it might be setting you up for disappointment. How did you find balance between holding on to hope and not surrendering to disappointment?
- 3 Louisa tries to warn Johanna about Nathan Bancroft, but in the end Johanna has to make her own decision about whether she will continue to develop her relationship with Nathan. Have you ever had to have a difficult conversation with a friend regarding a concerning relationship or a decision they were making? What would you have said to Johanna about Nathan if you had been Louisa?
- 4 In the midst of her clashes with Louisa about Nathan, Johanna wonders, "Couldn't friends disagree and remain amicable?" How does this play out between Louisa and Johanna? Between Taylor and Victoria? In your relationships?
- 5 How did you feel after you found out Victoria betrayed Taylor by kissing Will? How would you have responded if you'd been Taylor?
- 6 After Victoria betrays their friendship, Taylor goes years without forgiving her. How does this unforgiveness affect Taylor's life and her relationships with others? What might have happened if Taylor was willing to forgive Victoria sooner?
- 7 As Taylor sits with her mom during chemo treatments, she wonders about the worth of bad stuff—"could it possibly produce something good in the end?" What does she conclude? How would you answer this question?

- 8 What consequences does Johanna find in ignoring the advice of her friend and pursuing a relationship with Nathan Bancroft? What are some of the dangers of placing all our hopes and sense of worthiness in our relationships with others?
- 9 How does Johanna's writing of the poems during her tumultuous marriage help her deal with the hard times she faces? Have you ever tried writing or journaling to help you when you're dealing with something difficult in your life?
- 10 Despite knowing that Nathan has a problem with alcohol (what we'd call substance abuse today), Johanna feels that her love might be enough to save him, to rescue him. How have you seen this pattern repeated in the lives of people you know? Why is it such a temptation to believe we can save those we love? What is it that they really need?
- 11 As a writer, Taylor understands the power of story—and the importance of telling both the good ones and the bad ones. What do Taylor and Victoria learn from Johanna's story? How might stories "birth new life" for someone?

- 12 Though living in different centuries, Johanna and Victoria face similar challenges in their relationships with abusive men. What has changed since the 1860s, and what remains the same? In what ways is it easier today for women to get help? In what ways are their struggles similar to what they have been throughout history?

My Book Group Questions

Jot down some questions you want to ask your group:



Q&A WITH HEIDI CHIAVAROLI

Read this Q&A with your book group and discuss how hearing the author talk about the novel deepened your understanding of key themes and characters in the story.

Q. How did you get the idea for the relationship between your two main contemporary characters and your two main historical characters?

I wanted a big part of this novel to be about women's friendships and sisterhood. This was such an integral part of *Little Women* that I didn't feel I could leave it behind. And yet I wanted the freedom of fictionalizing my historical heroine, Johanna. I could give free rein to her character and still allow her to be molded and shaped by her true-to-life friend, Louisa.

I thought it would be interesting to parallel their relationship in a modern-day friendship. I wanted to explore the intricacies and blessings of such a friendship, as well as some of the tangles it potentially creates. Later, when both Victoria and Johanna experience abuse, I wanted to take Louisa's bold stance on domestic violence and bring it around to the present. It was interesting to include Louisa's heart for the downtrodden through both the past and the present stories.

Q. Who did you write this book for?

When I started this novel, I knew I wanted to bring Louisa and Orchard House to life for those who already loved *Little Women*. I also wanted to give a deeper appreciation for the woman behind the inspiration of Jo March.

As the book unfolded, I felt a strong desire to speak into the lives of women tied to unhealthy relationships. This was a cause dear to Louisa's own heart, and yet it didn't stop there because this novel is not just for women who are in such predicaments, it's for women everywhere—women who need help and women who are the ones helping. There's a bond there I wanted to explore. Whether it be one of friendship or one of sisterhood, I wanted this book to feature women helping women. And so, in that regard, I hope women everywhere will be able to appreciate this story.

Q. Your stories often deal with heavy topics, such as domestic violence. Why do you feel called to discuss these subjects through fiction?

My goal as a writer is to shine light and hope into the darkness. I'm a firm believer in not shying away from the hard but facing it head-on, trusting God to be enough to conquer the heavy. I think fiction can be a valuable place to do this. In a story, we can actually experience what it's like to be in the shoes of a character. There's something powerful about that. We can grow, change, become more empathetic. Our world can grow bigger, our eyes wider. And I pray that in that space, we will be able to experience the wonder, majesty, and sufficiency of our victorious God.



Q. Which was your favorite character to write? Do you identify with this character in any way?

Even though I didn't write in her point of view, I loved writing Louisa's character. Maybe that's because it was the one main character I didn't pull out of my own brain—she was real and certainly interesting enough!

Louisa was bold where it counted, so very insightful, and cared about the deep struggles of humanity. I can relate to her desire to do something great, to stand up for what she believes in, but to also struggle with her flaws.

I had done so much research on her that I felt I knew her as an actual person, so in some ways, writing her was almost easier than making a character from scratch. It was fun to insert many of her actual words (found in her journals, letters, and other writings) into the book. I just loved tying it all together like that! My hope is that it adds a layer of authenticity to the entire work.

BOOK CLUB NOTES

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