

March by Geraldine Brooks

Booklist Review: Brooks' first novel (*Year of Wonders*, 2001) was a straightforward historical novel of the plague. For her second novel, she has come close to creating a new genre; she imagines the life of Captain March, the father in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. This technique has been done before, most famously in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Brooks, however, has combined this idea with two other genres, historical fiction and fictionalized biography. The results, however, are mixed. March appears, much like Bronson himself, as a man whose convictions tread a thin line between admirable and aggravating. He is pure to the point of being ineffectual, and noble to the point of stupidity. The nineteenth-century writing style is accurate and entertaining, but it may be too ornate for some readers. The best moments in the narrative are the peeks inside the mind of the long-suffering Marmee, and thus we learn where Jo gets her famous spunk. -- *Marta Segal (BookList, 02-01-2005, p938)*

Publishers Weekly Review: /* Starred Review */ Brooks's luminous second novel, after 2001's acclaimed *Year of Wonders*, imagines the Civil War experiences of Mr. March, the absent father in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. An idealistic Concord cleric, March becomes a Union chaplain and later finds himself assigned to be a teacher on a cotton plantation that employs freed slaves, or "contraband." His narrative begins with cheerful letters home, but March gradually reveals to the reader what he does not to his family: the cruelty and racism of Northern and Southern soldiers, the violence and suffering he is powerless to prevent and his reunion with Grace, a beautiful, educated slave whom he met years earlier as a Connecticut peddler to the plantations. In between, we learn of March's earlier life: his whirlwind courtship of quick-tempered Marmee, his friendship with Emerson and Thoreau and the surprising cause of his family's genteel poverty. When a Confederate attack on the contraband farm lands March in a Washington hospital, sick with fever and guilt, the first-person narrative switches to Marmee, who describes a different version of the years past and an agonized reaction to the truth she uncovers about her husband's life. Brooks, who based the character of March on Alcott's transcendentalist father, Bronson, relies heavily on primary sources for both the Concord and wartime scenes; her characters speak with a convincing 19th-century formality, yet the narrative is always accessible. Through the shattered dreamer March, the passion and rage of Marmee and a host of achingly human minor characters, Brooks's affecting, beautifully written novel drives home the intimate horrors and ironies of the Civil War and the difficulty of living honestly with the knowledge of human suffering. *Agent, Kris Dahl. Staff (Reviewed December 20, 2004) (Publishers Weekly, vol 251, issue 51, p34)*

Kirkus Reviews: Brooks combines her penchant for historical fiction (*Year of Wonders*, 2001, etc.) with the literary-reinvention genre as she imagines the Civil War from the viewpoint of *Little Women*'s Mr. March (a stand-in for Bronson Alcott). In 1861, John March, a Union chaplain, writes to his family from Virginia, where he finds himself at an estate he remembers from his much earlier life. He'd come there as a young peddler and become a guest of the master, Mr. Clement, whom he initially admired for his culture and love of books. Then Clement discovered that March, with help from the light-skinned, lovely, and surprisingly educated house slave Grace, was teaching a slave child to read. The seeds of abolitionism were planted as March watched his would-be mentor beat Grace with cold mercilessness. When March's unit makes camp in the now ruined estate, he finds Grace still there, nursing Clement, who is revealed to be, gasp, her father. Although drawn to Grace, March is true to his wife Marmee, and the story flashes back to their life together in Concord. Friends of Emerson and Thoreau, the pair became active in the Underground Railroad and raised their four daughters in wealth until March lost all his money in a scheme of John Brown's. Now in the war-torn South, March finds himself embroiled in another scheme doomed to financial failure when his superiors order him to minister to the "contraband": freed slaves working as employees for a northerner who has leased a liberated cotton plantation. The morally gray complications of this endeavor are the novel's greatest strength. After many setbacks, the crop comes in, but the new plantation-owner is killed by marauders and his "employees" taken back into slavery. March, deathly ill, ends up in a Washington, DC, hospital, where Marmee visits and meets Grace, now a nurse. Readers of *Little Women* know the ending. The battle scenes are riveting, the human drama flat. (*Kirkus Reviews, January 1, 2005*)