

Little Women

This classic American novel has been filmed numerous times, including a very handsome and touching version done in 1994, directed by Gillian Armstrong and starring Winona Ryder and Susan Sarandon. Since it's been **exactly** a quarter century since that film, it's time for a new look. And that is just what the beloved Louisa May Alcott story gets in a dazzling new production adapted for the screen and directed by Greta Gerwig, fast becoming one of our finest filmmakers.

Gerwig's "Little Women" traces the familiar story of the beloved March sisters of Concord, Massachusetts (where the film was shot), but does it with such polish and punch that she makes it new. She also plays with the narrative, beginning her story with the spunky, wannabe writer Jo (Saoirse Ronan), already and adult in New York trying her hand at writing for a living. That big city experience is returned to often in the film, but early on Gerwig flashes back seven years to the March household during the Civil War, with the father gone and Marmee (Laura Dern) trying to keep the home solvent and her brood intact.

The familiar story needs no summary here; suffice it to say Gerwig, as screenwriter, incorporates most of the standard scenes and sequences, at times with text lifted from the book. While Ronan's Jo is the protagonist (more than even in the novel) all the other sisters get their due: modest Meg (Emma Watson), sickly Beth (Eliza Sun), and feisty Amy (Florence Pugh). The latter is a revelation here, Pugh offering a portrait of such spirit and grace that she comes off more impactful than the shallower character of the novel. Offering an appropriately crusty and sour Aunt March is Meryl Streep, a consummate curmudgeon.

The males of the cast perform uniformly well, especially Timothée Chalamet as the moony Laurie, just right in a mix of charm and lassitude. Chris Cooper is sympathetic as the kindly neighbor and Laurie's grandfather Mr. Laurence. Louis Garrel adds a touch of European gravitas and earnestness as Frederich, Jo's ultimate squeeze, and Tracey Letts gives great cameo as Dashwood, Jo's grumpy old editor.

Overall, this "Little Women" is a thoroughly rich conception of the novel, re-imagined, but not too much, and adorned with splendid costuming, outstanding production design, bracing storytelling, and evocative music (think slow movements of Mahler's symphonies) by Alexandre Desplat. And Greta Gerwig has brought this all together in a completely up-to-date and convincing spangle of a holiday treat.

(The film is rated "PG" and runs 134 minutes.)

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