

# Louisa May Alcott and Walt Disney: The American Optimists and Their Opposition

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"America has been something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself." Invoking the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., I concede, always comes off as a little heavy handed, but I can think of no better voice to call upon when the subject is "American optimism." On the subject of a national worldview (if, indeed, one exists), America does seem to be truly divided; our recent election revealed a little of this divide. The president, Barack Obama, campaigned under the banner of "hope." On the side of some of the realists, the pragmatists, the elitists, the intellectuals, the academics, and the pessimists, his rhetoric was summarized by his opponent during the Democratic primaries, Hillary Clinton, as a promise that "the clouds would open up and celestial choirs start singing." However, the message of "hope" – of optimism – won out; many believe that Americans have fallen under some sort of spell and cannot wait until we wake from this foolishness of hope and dreaming. Many would rather Americans simply not be optimists. They are the self-proclaimed gate-keepers of "the real world" and they know it to be a very, very bad place. It is no wonder that these same critics find no use for an author of "children's stories" and a "cartoon maker." Fortunately, as in the election, the critics do not hold the majority and, in spite of their boorish dismissal, Louisa May Alcott and Walt Disney continue to influence the American psyche, and continue to promote an American optimism.

Louisa May Alcott, famed author of *Little Women*, abolitionist, and Transcendentalist, and Walt Disney, the famed creator of Mickey Mouse, Snow White, and the Disney Corporation, both refused to pander to critics; they did not attempt to complicate their art in an effort to be more "artistic" or "academic." In their art and their lives, they did not reach out to the so-called intellectuals – the book reviewers, film columnists, elite academics – any more than they reached out to the wider audience. In spite of the many criticisms from these critics – proclaiming Alcott a "hack" or Disney a "dark prince" – these storytellers remain ever popular and influential. What is most troubling about their popularity, to their critics, is the fact that their visions of America and life in general are often simplistic and always optimistic. This simplicity and optimism obviously leaves a bad taste for those who "know" the plight of the world around them, those who read the fictions where life ends badly or has no meaning, those who refuse, it seems, to allow that any hope or happiness may exist outside of a market to buy it or a people displaced by it; in a word, they are the cynical. Alcott and Disney actively promoted a worldview that is optimistic, in spite of the many reasons and circumstances which might have changed them, including the attacks of their critics. And because they dared to play Pollyanna (or make the movie), they have made it okay for their audience to do the same – okay to have a little bit of good ol' American optimism,

to "hope." Certainly, this call to optimism leaves many a dour critic perfectly pissed off.

In a haughty piece tellingly titled *The Revolt Against Taste*, Harrison Morris warns members of the American Philosophical Society that they can, like Louisa May Alcott, "Throw away tradition; deride taste and beauty, desert domestic life, join the nudists of art and literature, and [they] will be a big bold self-conscious and naughty best-seller" (280). Morris is not alone in his understanding of the work of Louisa May Alcott; she is most often referred to as a popular children's author, nothing more. Alcott's work is often dismissed in the academic realms as juvenile fictions, though her Civil War accounts in *Hospital Sketches* are every bit as entertaining and mature as the work of Hawthorne and Crane — authors read in high school and college courses. Her most famous novel, *Little Women*, is perhaps the most accomplished (certainly the most popular) American novel of nineteenth century sentimental fiction, but almost never joins college reading lists which contain the works of her contemporaries and equals, such as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens (Moriarty 578). Alcott's great transgression, it seems, is that she tells her tales not only with sentimentality (which, in her time, was completely within "good taste") but that she tells her tales with unyielding optimism. Every character carries his or her burden, grows, matures and is redeemed from any faults — there is not a character irredeemable because Alcott believed fervently in this truth. Alcott believed in the good of man and the absolute good of America as a whole.

Walt Disney is similarly dismissed as a man associated with the world of children — though his imagination, storytelling, and entrepreneurship surpass nearly every figure in entertainment and business of the twentieth century. His prescient alignment with cutting edge and "experimental" entertainment continually put him and his company at the forefront of the American consciousness, always suggesting a better, more dynamic tomorrow, while glossing past the trials of contemporary American life. His three little pigs in the 1930s gave Depression Era Americans an anthem against the economy: *Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?* During World War II, like Alcott in the Civil War, he dedicated himself to the American soldiers — she nursed them, he gave them entertainment and insignias for their planes. When Americans were despondent in the 1950s, fearing another war or adjusting to living without a war, he gave them the grand distraction of Disneyland. Of course, Walt Disney made a profit on most of these ventures and it is a mistake to believe his every action was magnanimous, but his legacy, much like Alcott's, springs from some nobility, some high-minded idea that the world could be better and, more, America could show it the way.

## My Own Mythology

Walt Disney's critics are keenly aware of his passion to "show the way" to Americans, so they have been quick to point out his faults — or even make some up. In Marc Eliot's scathing biography *Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince*, Disney is presented as "an alcoholic, either entering or coming out of a nervous breakdown, an anti-Semite who kept Jews out of top Disney positions, a racist who only employed blacks to shine shoes, an undercover FBI informant... and a radical right-wing antiunionist..." (Boje 1006). There is no arguing Disney's desire to offer America a "model" — in his movies where there is always a happy ending, or his theme parks where the world seems perfectly manicured, or in himself, in that he believed he represented the American Dream. Where Alcott meant to share with women her own successes and struggles through the characters of Christie Devon in *Work: A Story of Experience*, Jo March in *Little Women*, and Phebe Moore in *Eight Cousins*, Disney shared with all Americans his own story in the "character" Walt Disney. Walt Disney played up the role of "Uncle Walt" to the American public in his appearances on his television shows and specials. Reporters could not print a picture of him with a drink or a cigarette, and the story of his childhood and early successes became a well-rehearsed script that never delved into dark territories like self-doubt and depression. The Walt Disney America would know, so long as he was alive, would be the same "Uncle Walt" they had grown to love.

The mythologies Alcott and Disney have created out of their own lives have long been decried by critics who find it presumptive of these American optimists to tell Americans how to live their lives — when what they are sharing, whether in a book or in an interview, are only half truths. Their critics are obsessed with pointing out, for example, that Alcott was tired of *Little Women* by the time she had finished it. Or that Walt Disney did not really come up with the idea of Mickey Mouse on a train trip home, as he often told interviewers. Those critics simply cannot accept the easiness of Alcott and Disney's narratives, and it is probably to our benefit that they have not; they have managed to uncover figures of influence in both Alcott and Disney's mythology which have been somewhat misrepresented.

The figures in both storytellers' mythologies who give critics and fans alike a better idea of Alcott and Disney's motivations and goals are their fathers. For Louisa May Alcott, it was Bronson Alcott, who famously established the utopian colony "Fruitlands" with Charles Lane. Bronson Alcott was a Transcendentalist who forced his family to live in poverty so that he may pursue goals of a purer life. Louisa May

Alcott marginalized her father in her tales and resented him for making her mother and sisters live in poverty; however, in nearly all correspondences and in all public places, Louisa May praised her father's idealism. In short, she had what we would call "father issues" and she longed for Bronson Alcott's approval in everything she did. When educators began to ask her if a school like Plumfield, the school in *Little Men*, actually existed – a coeducational school – she gave credit to Bronson: "As many people inquire if there ever was or could be a school like Plumfield, I am glad to reply by giving them a record of the real school which suggested some of the scenes described in *Little Men*... Not only is it a duty and a pleasure, but there is a certain fitness in making the childish fiction of the daughter play the grateful part of herald to the wise and beautiful truths of the father" (Matteson 371). Though there are indications that suggest that Alcott and her father were at odds often, she refused to play him up as a villain; and more importantly, as the American optimist that she was, she did not indulge in complaining about her past, but used it as a means to create her very best works, including the trilogy of *Little Women*, *Little Men*, and *Jo's Boys*.

Walt Disney's "father issues" revolve around Elias Disney. Elias, like Bronson, drove his family to poverty often, but not for idealism; he was simply a bad businessman. From purchasing a paper route to attempting to run a farm (with no experience), Elias continually tried to make his fortune – mostly on the backs of Walt and his three brothers, who were all cheap labor. Walt Disney's brothers left his home as soon as they could and all resented Elias. Like Alcott, though Disney resented his father, he longed for his approval. When Walt decided to become an animator, Elias was more than skeptical (though Walt often pointed out in interviews that his father had bought him his first paint set, which, to Walt, proved Elias was supportive). When Disneyland was built, Walt Disney had a window dedicated to Elias who had "taught him everything he knew about business." The irony, of course, is that where Elias was almost a total failure in every business, his son rarely made a misstep, particularly in his later years (Gabler 21-32).

Walt Disney chalked up his early years to learning experiences and he recorded many interviews where he told reporters that he was basically living proof of the American dream. Walt Disney's mythology was not only about being a great figure, he would be a great American figure. The Imagineers (the engineers and artists who create Disney theme parks) of today recognize Walt's love for America "and her colorful history. He long held the belief that we, as Americans, should recognize the extraordinary influence of historical events on our present day lives. In his strong desire to help Americans become more aware of the significance of their nation and its heritage, he

included many aspects of its history in Disneyland" (Rafferty 62). Imagineers, who owe their profession to Disney and tend to idolize him, do not seem to take offense to his somewhat "white-washed" vision of America, as his critics do. In addition, what the Imagineers and fans often miss is Walt Disney's success in placing himself into the storied history of America. Just as he created a father who "taught him everything" about business, he had created an America – through not only theme parks, but films like *Johnny Tremain*, *Old Yeller*, *So Dear to My Heart*, and *Song of the South* – where the heroes won, the lessons were learned, and everyone became a better person in the end. Any struggle in America, Disney believed, would be well worth it. Just as Alcott had done in *Little Women* and a dozen other books, Disney created dozens of characters who had one message to sell: hope. These characters and their stories – Louisa May and Walt among them – hold little appeal to many critics but continue to fascinate the general, "middle class" public. Critics, of course, point out what little attention Alcott and Disney give to real problems, such as slavery and racism, but the criticism clearly shows that these critics are themselves a bit unrealistic – should Alcott have included a chapter in *Little Women* where the March sisters band together to save a runaway slave? Do they expect Disneyland to open an attraction called "Mine Ride through the Underground Railroad?" Alcott and Disney were very perceptive of how much preaching and proselytizing they could do and their successes depended on their ability to know when not to cross the line; unfortunately their critics would rather they had crossed that line, turned off their audiences, and damn their popularity and success.

## False Starts

Louisa May Alcott and Walt Disney, of course, lived quite different lives outside of their mythologies, and a few false starts in their early careers almost saved critics the ink and hot air they have dedicated to these American optimists. Alcott, though convinced she was meant to write most of her life, was confused about what "type" of writer she would be. In addition to working odd jobs to keep the family afloat, her early stories were "potboilers" – fantastical fictions with blood, gore, sword-fights and damsels in distress. Stories like *A Long, Fatal Love Chase* and Pauline's *Passions and Punishment*, written under the pseudonym "A.M. Barnard," proved to be successful and lucrative, as did her earliest works of collected fairy tales, *Flower Fables*. Of course, the worlds of damsels and fairies would give way to the much more intriguing world of a war-torn America and, later, the world of her own childhood.



Alcott's biographer, Madeleine B. Stern, describes Louisa May's transformation as an artist when Alcott returned from her nursing duties: "War was as much a story of basins and lint, bandages and spoons, as of daggers and shields and gunpowder. All this [Louisa May] had experienced and put on paper [in *Hospital Sketches*]. Romance was evicted and in its stead a crowd of living people thronged the page. Louisa May Alcott had risen from her dreams and gazed on Truth, the never-failing source for storytellers" (*Blood and Thunder* 119). It is interesting that Alcott's critics dismiss her tales as unrealistic and childish when it was her most real experiences – patching up wounded soldiers, watching her sister Elizabeth die young – which inspired *Work*, *Hospital Sketches*, and the *Little Women* trilogy. When she submitted her first essay, a publisher, James T. Fields, rejected it with the curt note, "Stick to your teaching, Miss Alcott. You can't write." It seems she was determined to prove Fields wrong.

And if rejection can be called one of Alcott's motivators, it is perhaps Walt Disney's primary motivator. Walt Disney was not as sure of who he was – he vacillated between dreams of being a cartoonist, a director, a producer, an animator, and even an actor. Where Alcott was certain she would be a writer, Disney was only certain that he would be great... somehow. In the late 1920s, after Disney had decided to move to California and pursue being an animator, along with Ub Iwerks, he created his first mega-hit cartoon character: Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. However, as biographer Bob Thomas plainly states, "Oswald... provided an important lesson for the young filmmaker" (83). Disney's distributor, a shrewd businessman in the growing Hollywood economy, Charlie Mintz, had retained all rights to Oswald and, when it was time to negotiate terms with Disney, Mintz offered Walt less money for more output – and reminded Disney that, if he decided to decline the offer, he would walk away with nothing. As Alcott had reacted to Fields by writing all the more, Disney not only declined the offer, but was determined to make a character that would be more popular and more successful than Oswald. His next creation was Mickey Mouse. Mickey Mouse, the first animated character to be presented with sound, has become the most popular cartoon character ever created, and Walt Disney was always fond of reminding his fans (and Charlie Mintz) that, "it all started with a mouse" (not a rabbit).

## One Big Break

As successful and well-known as Mickey Mouse would become, his creation cannot truly be considered the turning point in Walt Disney's career – when both fans and

critics really took notice. Walt Disney's "cartoons" grabbed few headlines, just as Louisa May Alcott's *Flower Fables* received positive, yet passing reviews. In short, nobody really cared. Walt Disney, the "cartoonist," was nothing in a Hollywood booming with producers, directors and bigger-than-life actors, so he changed his game; Walt Disney became a film maker and, to the absolute awe of fans and critics alike, his first full-length film would be an animated film, presented in color. Many laughed off the notion. Critics warned that the film would be "Walt Disney's folly" – an entirely absurd venture and a ridiculous premise: who, in their right mind, would sit through a two hour cartoon? In addition to the critics' warnings, the movie would carry a hefty price tag – 1.5 million dollars in an economy still reeling from Depression. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* ended up raking in over eight million dollars of revenue and paved the way for an entirely new medium in Hollywood that is still one of the most reliable money-makers in the box office: the full-length animated feature. Walt Disney took the opportunity of his success to relay, once again, his version of the American dream, "All the Hollywood brass came out for my cartoon! That was the thing. And it went way back to when I first got here [to Hollywood] and I went to my first premiere. I saw all of these Hollywood celebrities comin' in and I just had a funny feeling. I just hoped that someday they would be going in to a premiere of a cartoon" (Thomas 141). This version of the story left out his nervous breakdown caused by the stress over making the film – had the film failed, his family and his company would be bankrupt.

The reality of *Snow White's* success is a more mixed-bag than a Disney Company rep is likely to give to an interviewer. Walt Disney had poured everything he had into the film, only to have the public demand another film as soon as possible. He and his artists were exhausted; the animation had taken nearly five years to complete. What was more, the public (and distributors) were very specific about what they expected. Walt said, "Then they wanted more *Snow White*, the same as they wanted more *Three Little Pigs*. I remember the ones that followed were disappointing in a way. And for years afterwards I hated *Snow White*, because every feature I made after they'd compare it to *Snow White*" (Greene 52). He was cursed with phenomenal achievement and, ever after *Snow White*, Walt Disney was pursued and hounded by fans, critics and the media.

The same was true for Louisa May Alcott. She wrote that people traveled to her home in Concord to "gaze on" her home and her family after *Little Women* flew off the bookshelves. She had become a celebrity in a home and a town where pomp and pride were dishonorable. Alcott never saw it coming. Her publisher, Thomas Niles, recognized a need for literature for young women and requested Alcott produce a "girl's

novel." Alcott was unenthusiastic at first, but soon decided upon using her childhood as a blueprint to her story. *Little Women* was a moral and domestic tale, but Alcott allowed herself to be more confessional and experimental than she had been in her fairy tales. Her honesty produced characters who were not always likeable, like the self-centered Amy March or the condescending Aunt Josephine. Ruth MacDonald, who compares *Little Women* to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, suggests that, unlike Bunyan and other moralists, Alcott did something different with *Little Women*: "Perhaps Alcott is not as simplistic as she might otherwise seem... She remained true to life [in *Little Women*] in showing not only the profound love that she had for her family, but also the more unpleasant sides of their characters" (MacDonald 29). But, even in showing this unpleasant side of characters and attempting to be more "realistic," Alcott continued to promote the narrative of the American optimist: Amy would give up painting and Europe to come and help her family in Concord, Mr. Lawrence would soften from being the old curmudgeon next door to being a "second father" to Beth, Aunt Josephine would leave Plumfield to Jo, and Jo would be content to be a wife.

Though *Snow White* and *Little Women* brought Disney and Alcott, respectively, a lack of privacy and a thronging public, these crowning achievements allowed both storytellers something that neither had enjoyed – financial independence and, with it, the opportunity to produce works which they themselves enjoyed. Louisa May Alcott immediately used the popularity of *Little Women* to send some of her earlier works into the wider audience in a collection called *Jo's Scrap Bag*. She followed up by offering a subtle commentary on women's suffrage in *Work: A Story of Experience* and suggested coeducation in *Little Men*. Indeed, Alcott had a world view to promote, but, as a woman, she only had an audience through her books – "[Little Men], along with her other popular novels for children, provided her only available public medium for practical philosophizing about education and childhood" (Laird 276). Walt Disney used the money made off of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to build a state of the art animation "campus" and begin work on three new animated films: *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, and *Bambi*. Walt Disney, in his determination to not make "another *Snow White*" refused to work on a film centered around a princess... and the Disney Studios, in turn, did not produce another box office smash until they released *Cinderella* thirteen years later.

### The Subversive Story

Alcott and Disney's growing popularity was bound to garner the attention of critics. Early critics, of course, found Alcott's treatment of the Civil War to be unserious, her

descriptions of the Irish to be racist, and her attention to domestic life to be – perfect; as long as she portrayed the Jo Marches of her novels as being satisfied, ultimately, with their domestic roles, her other faults were easy to forgive. However, with the creation of Christie Devon in *Work*, she created a character who "complicates the conventional opposition between the masculine public sphere of work and money and the emotional realm of family ties ... by having Christie leave the domestic sphere in search of precisely those values it is supposed to uphold and reproduce" (Hendler 687). Christie becomes a servant, actress and seamstress in an attempt to live an individual life – only to find that her happiness is in advocacy for others, not in a man. Alcott, through Christie and later characters, turned the Victorian convention of male/female roles around by allowing the woman to find happiness without a man. This was suggested in the first part of *Little Women*, when Jo turns down Laurie's proposal – but Alcott ultimately creates Fritz Bhaer as the male role of ultimate woman happiness. Alcott's critics added to her title of "hack" the title of "feminist" writing subversive fictions promoting girls to leave behind their domestic duties to, God help them, find happiness outside of the home.

Disney, too, is accused of being subversive – of promoting everything from racism in *Song of the South* to "Big Brother" style government in his plans for EPCOT. After World War II, the US Government had asked the Disney Studios to consider making educational films for classrooms. Critics were outraged – accusing Disney of having a carte blanche opportunity to "sell Mickey in the classroom." Walt responded by attempting to speak the language of the academy, "The motion picture took a leading role in all phases of wartime education – propaganda and information as well as training. It explained and supported ideas, it showed with impartial fidelity the course of events, it made hidden phenomena visible, and it demonstrated the way to control them. So successful was the motion picture in this task of education for war that close attention was once more given to its capacity as a means of enlightenment and teaching in the "work of peace" (Disney 119). The films were made and still exist in classrooms today – but critics have had a field day with the idea of Disney making a buck off of teaching little girls about their periods and Mexican farm workers about not defecating in the crops. Even when Disney decided to experiment with the film *Fantasia* by utilizing classical music with animation, critics accused him of going high-brow just to please them. This, of course, was not the case as Christopher Finch points out in *The Art of Walt Disney*: "It has sometimes been suggested that in making *Fantasia* Disney was courting the intellectual community, but this does not seem consistent with his character or his goals. There is every reason to believe that he was always careful to keep the mass movie audience in mind. If intellectuals praised his

work, that was an added bonus, nothing more" (Finch 180-181). Walt Disney said that he was a corny guy and he connected with Americans because they like corny guys.

Critics do not dismiss Walt Disney's worldview as simply corny – they suggest that his imagination and creations are, at best, insipid, and, at worst, harmful. In H.E. Wheeler's *The Psychological Case Against the Fairy Tale*, he sums up the basic critique of Disney's movies, cartoons and theme parks in regards to their supposed effects on the mind of Americans: "The mind of the child should be as carefully guarded against the fantasizing which cuts itself loose from the objective realities as an adult should be guarded against the morbid daydreaming that may lead to neurosis and insane delusion" (Wheeler 755). The idea is that Walt Disney and Louisa May Alcott's optimistic "fantasies" distance people from reality – so much so that they may become insane. Disneyland, and other Disney theme parks, are particularly troubling because they not only suggest another reality, they create another reality. One critic suggests that Disneyland represents America itself, which is "an America reduced, frozen, and sanitized – a fortress against dis-ease of...society" (Bukatman 56).

## Unexplained Popularity

In spite of warnings of subversive recruitment to "fantasy" realms of freedom and happiness, the American and worldwide public continue to deem Louisa May Alcott and Walt Disney worthy of their time and money. In 1994, another film version of *Little Women* starring Wynona Ryder, Kirsten Dunst, Christian Bale, and Susan Sarandon fired up the box office and renewed interest in the novel and Louisa May Alcott herself. *A Long Fatal Love Chase* was released by Penguin as a "lost novel of the famous author of *Little Women*." Yet, the Alcott critics were quick to try to smolder the flames – Linda Grasso, in her review, focuses on all of the ways Alcott came up short as a "feminist" and points out that: [The 1994 film version of *Little Women*] "distorts how Alcott came to write *Little Women* and perpetuates the myth that 'writing from the heart' is a sanctified literary practice that exists outside market forces. In actuality, the opposite is true. Alcott wrote *Little Women* because an enterprising publisher wanted to capitalize on the untapped market of young, female readers" (178). What Grasso and other critics seem to forget is that Alcott dedicated so much of herself to the novel that, by the time it was finished, she described herself as "quite spent." Yes, Thomas Niles had suggested the creation of the book, but there is no single document nor is there any other proof that might suggest that Alcott was primarily concerned with making a profit from the book. Of course Alcott hoped it would sell, but Grasso's insinuation

that *Little Women* was somehow born of "market forces" reveals how absolutely out of touch some critics are with the works they critique. The fact that Grasso, in the same breath, seems to recommend that writers not "write from the heart" makes me wonder what kind of writer would meet her approval – certainly not the more "intellectual" Woolf or Auden or Joyce or Eliot who, most certainly, wrote from the heart. *Little Women* is now a Broadway musical; a documentary, *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women* was released this summer at the Museum of Fine arts in Boston; and Alcott's short story *An Old Fashioned Thanksgiving* was released this year as a Hallmark Classic film. Alcott's stories, brimming with simple morals, cozy scenery, and American optimism continue to delight audiences and confound critics.

Walt Disney's popularity not only confounds critics, but also frightens many would-be fans who observe the love and devotion given to the man by fans throughout the world. In some people's eyes, he is nothing short of a god. This, of course, is far from true – and it is absolutely terrifying that people would be quick to deify a man for being a good storyteller. I am not prepared to build my altar to Walt Disney, but I would like to suggest some reasons why, like Alcott, he deserves proper respect, admiration, and attention from both critics and fans. He recognized the potential of animation like nobody before him and spoke of animation in the same terms we speak of novels and epic poems:

The versatility of the animated cartoon in the pictorial sense, is fairly obvious. What is not so apparent is that its very nature demands a delicate adjustment of what are called "story values." The argument must be condensed and synthesized, contrast and continuity so arranged that clarity and interest are never lost, character sharply defined and narration kept balanced at that point, so well known to educators, where intelligibility and completeness meet without injury to each other. (Disney 120)

He created the process of "storyboarding," which is now done before filming anything from commercials to movies. He set the standard for animated feature length films, making the way for studios like Pixar and Dreamworks to exist. This same standard is also something critics "blame" on Disney; Kay Stone, in her anti-Walt bashing *Things Walt Disney Never Told Us*, suggests that "[Walt Disney] must be criticized for his portrayal of a cloying fantasy world filled with cute little beings existing among pretty flowers and singing animals" (44). It is the same fantasy world that has created the

largest and most successful entertainment company in the world and a "Walt Disney" that lives on as more myth than man in both the summations of his fans and his critics.

### American Dreamers

Hope is a hard sell in America. The skeptics and cynics are continually looking for the trick. A smile is never trusted. A gesture of goodwill is received with trepidation. Fortunately, there are those who defy cynicism – those who challenge the skeptical to see the humor in a hospital room on the front line of the Civil War or enjoy a "Christmas without presents" in a tiny house in Concord. There are those who dare you to fly an elephant or believe that it really is "a small world after all." Those who see the very worst of America and continue to believe it is the best place in the world to live. They are the corny, the cheesy, the childlike believers in something better – American Dreamers. One, an author of children's books whose legacy is summed up by her biographer, Madeleine Stern, who says "As long as human beings delight in 'the blessings that alone can make life happy,' as long as they believe, with Jo March, that 'families are the most beautiful things in all the world,' [Alcott's books] will be treasured" (Appraisal 477). Another is a cartoon maker who, when he passed away, was eulogized as "not just an American original, but an original, period." Eric Sevareid, the CBS News Anchor, went on to say, "What Walt Disney seemed to know was that while there is very little grown-up in a child, there is a lot of child in every grown up. To a child, this weary world is brand new, gift wrapped; Disney tried to keep it that way for adults" (Thomas 353). The same could easily be said of Louisa May Alcott whose later novels *Lulu's Library* and *Jo's Boys* continued to preserve the same childlike charm and optimism of their predecessors. Both Alcott and Disney have not only promoted American optimism, but have, in many ways, defined it as a belief in the goodness of present circumstances, no matter how dire, and determination to reach one's goals, no matter how lofty.

But what can we say to the critics who abhor the damage Alcott and Disney have done to the traditional narrative of life – that it is a hard and brutal reality we must endure? Jack Zipes, in his book *Why Fairy Tales Stick* suggests that, "What distinguishes the great writers and storytellers is that they write and tell with a conscious effort to grab hold of tradition as if it were a piece of clay and to mold it and remold it to see what they can make out of it for the present. They don't view tradition as iron-clad, static, or settled, but as supple and changeable. Nothing is inanimate in their hands and mouths. They are animators, breathing life into all things and all beings" (241).

It has always been the "American way" to forge change, even if that means changing the way we dream; even if that means sometimes exchanging dour cynicism for lollipops and chocolate cordials.

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