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Kit Bakke Answers “Miss Alcott’s E-Mail”

Hugo House member Kit Bakke has just published a “bio-memoir” with David R. Godine Publishers. The book, entitled “Miss Alcott’s E-Mail,” recounts Bakke’s journey as she tries to find answers to some of life’s large questions. Bakke sent an e-mail to Louisa May Alcott, one of her childhood heroines and, to the great surprise of both, Miss Alcott sent her an answer. Rewrite caught up with Bakke recently to talk about this extraordinary correspondence.

How did Ms. Alcott first contact you?

I actually contacted her, and I was very surprised when she responded. In the past I’d tried to contact living writers and was not having much luck. The one writer who was kind enough to write back told me I should not bother writers because they were very busy people.

So you thought that maybe Ms. Alcott was not as busy as some of the living writers?

Yes. I figured maybe dead people would have more time on their hands.

Why did you choose Louisa May Alcott?

I was looking for good, strong, American female roots. It was right after 9/11 and I realized that most of my reading had been of British authors—Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, etc. And after 9-11 I was overcome with an unexpected wave of patriotism. So I thought that there must be some good, strong American people. Louisa May Alcott came to my mind.

What did you ask her when you wrote to her?

I wasn’t very coherent at first because I was still surprised that she had written back. But what I was looking for from her was advice—how should women of the 20th and 21st centuries, those of us in our 50s now, live the rest of our lives, because we’re going to live another 20 or maybe even 30 years and we’re going to be relatively healthy, unlike most of humanity. We need to make sure that we spend the rest of our lives doing the right things.

Did you want to talk to her about literary matters, or just about how to live?

It was not specifically literary at all. She was a very strong and interesting woman far beyond anything she ever wrote, and that’s what I wanted to delve into—the other parts of her life, her non-writing life.

Can you tell us a little bit about what she was, beyond being the author of “Little Women”?

Beyond “Little Women,” she was very active in the abolition movement in the 1850s, in the run up to the Civil War. Her family took part in street demonstrations in Boston, especially after the Missouri Compromise when it suddenly became open season on slaves who were free in the North. That inflamed the Northern abolitionists and there was an uptick in demonstrations in the Boston area; Louisa was part of that. She was also a nurse at an army hospital in Washington, D.C. during the Civil War. She really wanted to go to the front and be on a MASH surgical unit. After the Civil War, her big campaign became woman suffrage, and she was, again, very active in the Massachusetts area. She was the first woman to register to vote in Concord.

What did Louisa May Alcott want you to know?

She was very flattered that I had contacted her. She thought it was quite unusual. She was flattered to be able to give advice to the future, but the best thing was that she got to hear what I then told her about what happened after the Civil War.

What did you tell her?

I told her about my parallel experiences in the 1960s and 1970s. We had both lived on communes. She lived at Fruitlands, a very bizarre and eccentric place. I lived on a commune in the 1960s. I told her about the Civil Rights movement and about the antiwar movement. She was quite appalled at all the terrible wars that have happened since the Civil War.

How else did your life parallel hers?

I was involved with the Weather Underground in the 1960s and '70s, so I told her about that. But mostly I wanted to leave Louisa room to inspire us with her steadiness. She was steady and thoughtful and principled, but she also had a sense of humor and an evenness about her that would hold us in good stead today.

How did you go about researching Louisa?

Everybody back then kept a diary. Both her letters and her journals have been published. I started with that and that branched off into many other things. Louisa wrote well over 200 short stories that were published in the ephemera of the day: magazines, children's newspapers. She wrote under her name and under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard. She used the pseudonym for her "blood and thunder" stories. They're the stories that she has Jo March writing in "Little Women." They're stories of incest and drugs and murder and betrayal. All the things that she loved to write about but she didn't think the Concord intellectuals, particularly, Emerson, would have approved of.

What is your process as a writer?

First I got the idea of bringing Louisa's good sense and wisdom into the 21st century. Then I started talking to my colleagues at work about my idea. They discovered that I had lived through the 1960s and '70s and had a lot of stories to tell and they said, "You have to write about that." So I started niggling around with the idea of Louisa and me talking to each other and I would get up early in the morning and write. I did this for six or seven months. Then I took a year off from work to write. It took me 8 months of truly full-time work

Do you research and write at the same time or do all the research first and then sit down to write?

It was in sections. There was the abolition section, and the nursing section. I was a nurse for 13 years at Children's Hospital, and when I found out that Louisa had also been a nurse, I thought, we have to talk about nursing, we have to talk about health care.

Do you wish you could just call her up and have tea with her?

Hey, who says I don't?

What will people learn from reading your book?

Louisa is totally relevant today. The lessons I learned from her are to be persistent in the face of everything. She faced all sorts of difficulties and just kept going. The other lesson is that ideas really do matter, and that what you put into your brain and how you spend your time, the kind of ideas you think about, really matter. If you let your brain be filled with trash, you're wasting the best part of yourself. You need to respect your own brain and use it for important things. Ideas matter. And that leads to being courageous with our ideas and being willing to think independently and not just follow the crowd. Those are not new ideas. But Louisa said them very clearly and in a way that resonated with me.

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