

The Devniad, Book 20

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Little Time Travelers.

One sunny Saturday in November 1996, we set our chronocolliding superconducting tempusfugitizers for the year 1869 and dilated into existence in Louisa May Alcott's bedroom.

(Actually, we — my wife Maureen, sister Liz, and aunt Ann — just drove up to the Orchard House historical site in Concord, MA, parked, paid at the door, and walked upstairs. But this is a science fiction newsletter, after all. Must keep up appearances.)

And after all, isn't the aim of every history tour to step backwards in time?

OK, the past-time people aren't around right now. But here's their house. Here's all their stuff. Surely they'll be back any minute.

Anyway, it was a crisp fall day, we all like history and house tours, and I'm very comfortable with my masculinity, thank you, so touring the house where the author of *Little Women* lived the life and wrote the book seemed like a fine idea. And so it was.

Here are some things we learned:

Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888) published *Little Women* in 1869. It's about the youth of the four March girls — Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy — growing up in a small New England town in the mid-1800s. The four Alcott girls — Anna, Louisa, Elizabeth, and May — also grew up in a small New England town in the mid-1800s. The amazing coincidences by no means end there.

Our guide, a vibrant woman named Catherine who's doing scholarly research on the artistic Alcott daughter May (the model for Amy), is also an artist herself. She drew the sketch of the girls' father, Bronson Alcott, that's used on the tee shirt in the gift shop. My aunt Ann discovered this fact by criticizing how stern Bronson looked in that rendering. Oops.

Luckily, little fazes Aunt Ann, who attended Radcliffe with Ursula Le Guin and has a similarly warm yet utterly self-possessed intelligence.

Speaking of intellect, Ralph Waldo Emerson was a long-time friend of Bronson. Both were Transcendentalists, educators, and philosophers, but Ralph made more money at it.

Bronson was also the town crank/radical (presumably serving as co-crank with another friend, Henry David Thoreau). He'd hand out his trademark apples to all passersby with a sunny smile plus liberal helpings of his theories on abolition and school reform.

Although he was a fellow member of Concord's literati, it's said that neighbor Nathaniel Hawthorne sometimes would walk a mile out of his way to avoid Bronson.

Nor would he let his children play with those freethinking Alcott girls.

The house was already a crooked, cracked, clapped-out wreck at least 150 years old when Mr. Alcott in 1857 purchased the 12 acres of land it tottered upon. It was felt he wanted the orchards

(apples, Orchard House, remember?) and would of course tear the house down and build something decent.

Today, it's got even more character.

How talented an artist was May Alcott? When she and her friend Mary Cassatt (now judged a leading Impressionist) both submitted work for acceptance at the Paris Salon, they rejected Mary's and took May's.

May was also probably 19th century America's best copyist of works by the great English painter J.M.W. Turner. Her copies were used in museums and art schools well into this century. You can still admire them in Orchard House; really beautiful things.

Little Women was written on a little circular platform attached to a pillar in Louisa's bedroom, because the family was too poor to afford her a desk.

You can still see it there. It looks homely, practical, and eminently useful. After the astonishing international success of the book, she could afford a desk on which to write the sequels.

Louisa May Alcott didn't really think much of *Little Women*. Her heart was in her more adult works. The main storyline perhaps had sentimental value for her because of its autobiographical elements. (Elements, hell! The thing's a periodic table of autobiography.) But she wrote it mostly for the money, which the family always had desperately needed, and for a juvenile audience on whose behalf she felt she had to tone down or forgo her more radical views. She worked on the book's successors with even less enthusiasm.

However, it's totally untrue that she considered having Moriarty throw Jo over the Reichenbach Fall . . .

Birds in their little nests also agree that Louisa did not find fame to be unalloyed bliss. Once, at a suffragette convention in Syracuse, NY, she was cornered by an overenthusiastic fan.

"If you ever come to Oshkosh," the lady gushed, "your feet will not be allowed to touch the ground. You will be borne in the arms of the people. Will you come?"

"Never," replied Ms. Alcott.

For the Orchard House staff, the worst thing about the recent film of *Little Women* is the crowds it's brought. During the fall foliage season, they have to turn visitors away daily, which distresses their tender hearts. Especially when said visitors have dropped by from, say, Japan or Hungary.

Also, Winona Ryder is way too attractive. Her character is supposedly rather plain, so Ms. Ryder's casting makes nonsense out of moments such as when Jo cuts her hair short and is met with the heartening response, "Oh Jo, how could you? Your one beauty."

I'd have to agree that Winona Ryder has beauties to burn.

The standard French translation of *Little Women* is entitled *Les Quatre Filles du Dr. March*. But Poppa March is barely in the novel at all, being away at war most of the time — while the title doesn't even mention the girls' mother Marmee, an integral character. Ah, *la tyrannie paternalistique*.

Speaking of which, Bronson Alcott early in life changed the family name from Allcock. For which the Orchard House tour guides are hourly grateful.

If you think stickers, video games, and burning popcorn in the microwave are annoying habits of the modern teen,

try this. One popular 19th-century craze for the young and reckless was pyrography — you scorched art images into wood with hot poker.

Over here on the kitchen counter, you can see where May Alcott burned a pretty good Raphael copy into her mother's breadboard.

Bronson had buckets of water stationed throughout his all-too-wooden house that day, in case inspiration waxed too hot.

According to her self-portraits, May looked very much like my wife Maureen's younger sister Karen. Our docent Catherine says May had a marvelous figure; everybody mentions it constantly in letters and memoirs. They go on and on about her figure and her good looks, and never mention a word she uttered.

Whereas no one who met Louisa ever describes what her hair looked like or what she was wearing. They just talk about what she says.

It's kind of a perfect feminist litmus test, isn't it? OK, little women, which would you rather be?

Louisa May Alcott was born in the same year as Lewis Carroll. She died in the same year as her father Bronson.

Finally, there's this about my little riff on time travel: anybody can visit the past, like tourists in an old house.

So we rummage through the Alcotts' place, smile at their crooked lintels and quaint furniture — examine their books and paintings, dresses and desks. Hear colorful anecdotes about their lives. That's a powerful and pleasant way to time travel, and it does bring a transcendence all its own when done with interest and attention.

On the other hand, real time travelers can visit the future.

Louisa May Alcott sat at her little round desk and wrote words so charged with the emotions of girlhood and boyhood, small town and family life that even now they annihilate the barrier of the years and zap into the hearts and minds of today's young readers. And probably tomorrow's.

So who's the real time traveler?

(Orchard House is 1 mile east of the town center, at 399 Lexington Road, Concord, MA 01742. Currently it's open almost year round; guided tours only. Tours are about 45 minutes, although enthusiasm stretched ours to 2 hours. Adults \$5.50, others less. Phone for information: (508) 369-4118. Web site: http://hub.concord.org/town_concord/orchardhouse.html

FlimFam

Noteworthy movies seen since last time include *The Associate*, *That Thing You Do*, *Michael Collins*, *Ransom*, *Big Night*, and *Star Trek: First Contact*.

Maureen and I have decided that a second mortgage just to support my moviegoing habit might be ill-advised. So I'm cutting back until Maureen gets a job and the cash cow flies over our house depositing her gifts again.

But anyone who wants me to give up movies entirely will have to pry my popcorn from my cold dead hand.

Speaking of movies: some of the critics want *Michael Collins* to be *Lawrence of Arabia*, and it isn't that. Neither that ambitious or that masterful.

But it's a substantial, thoughtful, beautifully produced, epic biopic of a

leading Irish revolutionary. No shame in not being *Lawrence*; this is still easily one of the best pictures of the year. Irish director Neil Jordan, who captained *Mona Lisa*, *The Crying Game*, and *Interview with the Vampire*, should have a solid hit on his hands.

Liam Neeson plays Collins, starting as a grimy fighter besieged and ultimately defeated in Dublin's General Post Office during the failed Easter Rising in 1916 . . . then a prisoner in a British jail . . . then an anonymous man in suit and tie, riding a bicycle around the city while masterminding the only successful Irish campaign of force against the British in 700 years . . . then a peace negotiator and parliamentarian . . . meanwhile a long-time suitor of a beautiful and spirited young woman who must choose between Collins and his right-hand man/best friend . . . and last the troubled commander of the army of the Irish Free State in a bitter early-1920s civil war against its former brothers-in-arms.

Neeson is perfect as the tall, broad, handsome man whose nickname in the movement was The Big Fella. When Neeson's Collins swings into some loft packed with IRA gunmen, he takes it over with the force of his personality. His big body broadcasts indomitable energy as he sends the lads into battle with natural command, charisma, a touch of easy humor.

Plus something else.

Speaking with unease about his countrymen from the middle of those turbulent years, Yeats famously wrote "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity."

The movie turns these lines on their head. Neeson's Collins is clearly one of the best men around. And yes, we see Collins' pain and soul-searching in

scenes with his friend Harry Boland (Aidan Quinn) or with the woman he loves, Kitty Keirnan (Julia Roberts.) But we never see a moment's doubt.

When sending men off to kill and often die for the cause, Neeson is all conviction, showing us the purposeful passion and intense intelligence in Collins's level eyes.

Michael Collins seems to have been an irregular military genius on the order of Giap, Begin, or Guevara. Officially, he was just another member of the revolutionary cabinet, chief of the intelligence subsection. But he apparently invented the concept of the "flying squads," groups of young men tasked to fire a police barracks, shoot up a British army truck — or assassinate a police spy — then melt anonymously back into the population.

As noted, these tactics proved fabulously successful. Especially against a British government already staggering from sickening losses in World War I, and finally rather sick of the trouble it took to keep the Irish down.

Collins was a member of the delegation sent to England for peace talks. Despite his bent for fighting, the movie shows him as clear-eyed enough to realize his side could win much by not insisting on all.

They came back with a compromise.

Most of Ireland — the whole country except the far northern section — would become the Irish Free State, with autonomy that the island hadn't known in hundreds of years, and the prospect of complete independence to come. But there was a price. The Free State would still pledge allegiance to the British crown. And the six counties of the North (seeded with English settlers over centuries) would follow the will of their

Protestant majority and remain wholly Britain's.

The south would eventually break entirely from Britain, becoming the independent Republic of Ireland in 1948. But the question of Northern Ireland — what about its almost 40% Catholic minority? — simmers even now. And at the time of the treaty, it provoked a conflagration.

Ardent Republicans like Collins' old IRA chief Eamon De Valera called the compromise traitorous. Civil war broke out.

This may be the most painful section of the film. The war against the ancient enemy is over and won — and the victors fall to quarreling among themselves.

When breakaway IRA fighters seize government buildings in Dublin, it's Michael Collins who must give the command to fire on his former comrades. With borrowed British cannon. . . .

Alan Rickman builds all of De Valera's complicated character out of slitted eyes and sly hesitations in just a few scenes. He's not the villain, exactly. Just the flawed, calculating man who we know won it all eventually, ending as long-time President of the Republic of Ireland. At a far remove from his over-the-top Sheriff in *Robin Hood*, Rickman here plays it cool and careful for a very effective portrait of a man who could — Yeats again — “Cast a cold eye/On life, on death.”

The movie doesn't *have* a villain, really. Aidan Quinn as the romantic rival underplays his disappointment nicely for some real sympathy. Steven Rea — who owns the saddest face in movies — starts as a police spy out of Dublin Castle, but ends up redeemed (while, this being Ireland, martyred). And even

Charles Dance as British master of the Castle is more Rommel than Hitler.

My brother Michael thought Julia Roberts stunk. I thought she just did her best with a rather thankless part. And that my brother is bitter because Julia wouldn't date him.

(Not that he asked, but sometimes you just know.)

The Irish novelist Thomas Flanagan reminds us what Julia brings to the party — and shows why he got to write the review in the *New York Times* and I didn't — when he notes that she still possesses “the most superb smile since the invention of faces.”

Sure and get on wit' ye, Misturr Flanagan!

Roberts features most prominently in one of the film's less successful set-pieces, which intercuts scenes of love and murder in what I'll call an *homage* to *The Godfather* because I know Neil Jordan is too classy to steal.

Neeson goes more for a kind of sad bravery than mad bravura, and Jordan has the movie follow suit. So *Michael Collins* is not the most superb bio since the invention of film. But it doesn't need to be in order to entertain, inform, and enlighten us.

It's not revolutionary, just about one.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #317, October 1996

To Nomi Burstein

Congrats on your promotion. Now you're management, and can't enjoy *Dilbert* anymore.

It IS amazing that Lincoln was a Republican — er, I mean that people can't seem to remember that Lincoln was a Republican.

Because we've met in person since the last APA, we've covered everything else I might want to say.

To Anna Hillier

Thanks for answering all my starry-eyed questions about your favorite science.

This is a big astronomical couple of weeks for me. Before your nice description of the Gegenschein phenomenon, I proofed some John M. Ford pieces for Paul Giguere, including a short story about an astronomer and his work. It's called "Dark Companion." Quite good, and with your interests you might find it even more compelling. It should be in the Boskone book Paul is putting together — Ford is guest of honor in February, you know. (See Paul's story list in the October APA. The collection is called *From the End of the Twentieth Century*.) Are you going to Boskone? We could meet at last.

In fact, we should arrange for all the recent APA regulars to meet at Boskone, have someone bring a digital camera and take a group portrait that could be dumped into the next issue. Mark Hertel, what do you think? Anybody got a Snappy or better?

To Mark Hertel

What do you think of the suggestion to Anna Hillier above re an APA group portrait?

So Deb Geisler is jealous of you in your underwear. Boy, I knew you two couples were close, but I had no idea . . .

Sorry to hear about your car being stolen / glad to hear about your car being recovered so soon. Don't suppose it would work to refuse the return and asseverate YOUR car was a big new BMW, any claim to the contrary being just a mistake in the records?

Good luck with your cyberteaching. Hope you don't have any discipline problems in your class. You know, cyberpunks.

To Paul Giguere

See my free ad for your Ford collection in above comments to Anna Hillier.

So you want to magnify your already obsessively organized books-I-should-read database by putting it on the net, thereby enabling yourself to "further expand the complexity of the present system." Taken by itself, that phrase is a neat description of the goal of all life, isn't it? We constantly test the boundaries of the possible, evolving into higher and higher orders of organic and we hope spiritual richness — sparks flying upward to weave beautifully intricate patterns of fiery life against the black night sky of the universe, striving ever striving to thwart the hateful malignancy of our great enemy, entropy

Applied to your book-reading system, of course, it just means that you're an utter nutter.

To Paul Lieberman

Congratulations on your new job! If congrats are ever appropriate in such circumstances. Still, if we didn't have jobs we'd just be having fun all day, and I'm sure that would begin to pall after awhile. Say sometime in the year 2525.

Well, don't toy with us, woman. Why WAS noted author Mike Resnick seen beating you over the head at Worldcon?

Happy 90th birthday to your father. Has he ever shared with you any special insights all that life experience has given him?

To Jim Mann

Like several other people I've talked to recently (Paul Giguere being the one I remember), Patrick Stewart first came to my attention with his wonderfully memorable performance in the small part of Sejanus, in the (early 1980s?) British TV/Masterpiece Theater production of *I, Claudius*. He was great then, so even his later stint as a Star Trek action figure didn't shake my confidence. Sure, he could play a fine Prospero.

Agree with your analysis of *Emma*, both movie and book. Except that I've rated *Persuasion* as my favorite of the recent Austen films. In fact, eccentrically enough, my favorite film of any kind last year. *Emma* — which I of course still enjoyed immensely — has maybe a little too much Hollywood. Wouldn't you say you feel a modern sensibility lurking everywhere? Not so with *Persuasion*, which is Austen *echt*.

To Ray Bowie

Glad to hear you're getting a new wheelchair. Look out, Esplanade pedestrians . . .

Good insight about resemblances between the work of Alistair MacLean and Dick Francis. For me, it goes beyond man against nature. They're both unbelievable sadists. You just know with both of these guys that if the plot requires the hero to go up and do stunts on the flying trapeze, they'll make sure he's had both shoulder blades splintered by gun butts just prior to agonizedly pulling on his tights.

Agree that the bridge practically emptied out on every episode of *Star Trek* and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*. In a related area, *Star Trek* writer David Gerrold, talking I think at Noreacon 3, spoke of The Yablonsky Principle. Which can be derived as follows: When the shore party that lightheartedly beams off

to confront the dread mysteries of this week's killer planetoid consists of Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Scotty, and Yablonsky — whose locker do you think they'll be clearing out tonight?

Thanks for trying to stifle Michael Burstein's interminable whining about adding my sisters' measly thousand-page word count to my APA score. He's just jealous because Nomi won't let him take credit for her stuff.

To Mark Olson

Never heard of P.C. Doherty, but if as you say he gives you historical mysteries with an authentic feel for period mindsets, not just modern characters in medieval clothes, I'll have to check him out.

Terrific review of the autobiography of Jack Horner the dinosaur digger. Unobtrusive but very artful, the way you hook us with your own interesting narrative of his life, then give a brief overview of the book, an evaluation of its merit, and end with a fascinating fact from the book to stay with us. All in less than half a page. I suspect that, like the process of fossilization you talked about at the end, this level of expository pellucidity is a lot less inevitable than it looks. Bravo.

To Tony Lewis

Thanks for the new-to-me term "Abrahamic," encompassing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There's still a lot of common ground where those circles intersect, isn't there? A unitary god. An (identical?) creation story. A fairly short timespan back to that creation. An afterlife. In-your-face regulations of many facets of everyday life. Calls for kindness, compassion, mercy, charity. The efficacy of and necessity for prayer.

I'm not sure where I'm going with this, except that I've been reading Paul

Park's gritty, serious, excellent historical novel set in the time of Christ, *The Gospel of Corax*. Park's written three SF novels with religious bents. Now he takes us to another fantastic world that this time was once real.

Corax makes you think a lot about what we believe now (if anything) and how we came to believe it. The (thoroughly unreliable) narrator is of Indian descent, raised as a slave in Rome and escaping back through the Middle East to his father's country, which he has never seen. Falls in with a fugitive Jewish bandit/revolutionary named Jeshua, wink wink nod nod.

To Michael Burstein

Congrats on yet another sale! Hhmmm, a horror story called "The Spider in the Hairdo." On your usual form, I predict great things. Do the Horror Writers of America have some equivalent of the Hugo or the Oscar? You know, maybe the Stevie.

I noticed that the blurb under his (color) photo on the inside back cover of all six installments of *The Green Mile* labels Steven King, with breathtaking simplicity, "the world's bestselling novelist." Not bad for a nerdy four-eyed New England science fiction fan.

You say you hope I realize your comments from last issue were meant in a jocular tone. Actually, I don't remember what they were right now. But fear not, Michael. I never take anything you say seriously anyway.

I hope you realize the above comments were meant in a jocular tone.

To Lisa Hertel

Loved your story about your car being stolen. Very well written. Especially the line when you first spot the recovered car in the tow lot. "Mark, are you sure that's ours? It's *clean*."

Rather thought-provoking, too. You mean I shouldn't leave my registration in the glove compartment? But then what do I do when I'm stopped for speeding and the trooper says "License and registration"? I can see the (page 42) headline now: NORTH ATTLEBORO MAN FIRST VICTIM EXECUTED UNDER NEW HIGHWAY SUMMARY JUSTICE ACT.