

Grant and Twain: The Story of a Friendship that Changed America

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Review

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O'Brien, Patricia *The Glory Cloak: A Novel of Louisa May Alcott and Clara Barton*. Touchstone Books, \$14.00 ISBN 743257502

Nurses and Little Women

A novel of Barton and Alcott

Patricia O'Brien follows up her study on real women's friendships in *I Know Just What You Mean* with this close examination of a 19th-century fictional friendship in a new novel, **The Glory Cloak**. O'Brien places an imaginary orphaned cousin, Susan Gray, with Louisa May Alcott, author of *Little Women* and other domestic novels that portrayed the trials and tribulations of life with sisters and other friends. Alcott the writer, forced to assume the task of providing for the family when her Transcendentalist father failed to, churned out lurid tales to make enough cash to pay the bills. But when the war broke out, Alcott went to Washington to work at a federal hospital. Gray journeys with her to Civil War Washington, there to encounter the venality of corrupt medical personnel, the horrors of war, and the momentary respite provided by a romance with one John Sulie, with whom both she and Alcott fall in love. After Alcott falls ill (as she did in real life), the two return to Concord, Louisa to write and Susan to earn a living. Gray leaves Louisa eventually to return to the city at the behest of Clara Barton, whom she had met during her hospital encounter. She joins Barton in her quest to identify the missing and the dead from the war. Traveling to Andersonville with former prisoner John Sulie, who has given Barton a list of the dead at the prison and where their graves are located, Gray attempts reconciliation between him and Louisa and, having failed, falls for him herself. After a baby and a suicide, she eventually returns to Concord to operate her own dressmaking shop.

Alcott's experiences as a nurse in wartime Washington were chronicled in her memoir, *Hospital Sketches*, which published her letters about her stay before being infected with typhoid and sent home. Her adventures with her real-life

sisters are chronicled in imaginative form in *Little Women*. Barton's work as a nurse on the battlefield and in hospitals during the war meant she might well have met Alcott. Her work identifying the missing and dead after the war has been well-documented in Stephen Oates' splendid 1994 biography, *A Woman of Valor*. Throwing these women together in the maelstrom of war requires only a small leap of imagination and O'Brien's research is adequate to the cause, both in her biographical research on Alcott, and in her work on Barton's labor for the injured during the war and the missing soldiers afterward.

Novels are ultimately a matter of taste. While O'Brien's scene-setting and historical detail are usually accurate, her novel begins as a flashback at the deathbed of Louisa Alcott. While not an impossible literary device, a flashback can trap an author with the phrase Had I but known once too often, as it does here. O'Brien's dialogue is occasionally stilted if not impossible to imagine, and her use of reminiscence markers is ultimately unnecessary. Still, it's a good read and if it introduces readers to the more scholarly biographies of two of the most important women of the 19th century, Alcott and Barton, its purpose will have been nobly fulfilled.

Dr. Janet L. Coryell is professor of history at Western Michigan University. She has published numerous pieces in Civil War history and women's history and is currently writing a textbook about women in American History for McGraw-Hill.