

from the bookshelf

A REVIEW BY DIANE DINEEN

March (a novel)

Geraldine Brooks, Viking (The Penguin Group), 2005, hardcover, 280 pages

Any list of outstanding and much-loved children's books would certainly include *Little Women*. Written by Louisa May Alcott in 1869 it tells the story of the day to day life of Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, of their mother Marmee and of their absent father, Mr. March. Mr. March is away at war, acting as a chaplain to the Union troops in the American Civil War. The novel presents the day to day lives of those left behind; the worries, the reduced financial circumstances, the small economies practiced so a parcel can be sent to the front.

Louisa May Alcott based her novel on her own family; her sisters, her mother, and her father, Bronson Alcott. Geraldine Brooks has taken the journals and letters of Bronson Alcott and has used these real-life documents as the basis for a novel about the fictional Mr. March, the father in *Little Women*. The novel covers the period of Mr. March's service during the Civil War and Brooks paints Mr. March as a pacifist, an abolitionist and a militant vegetarian, much like the real Mr. Alcott.

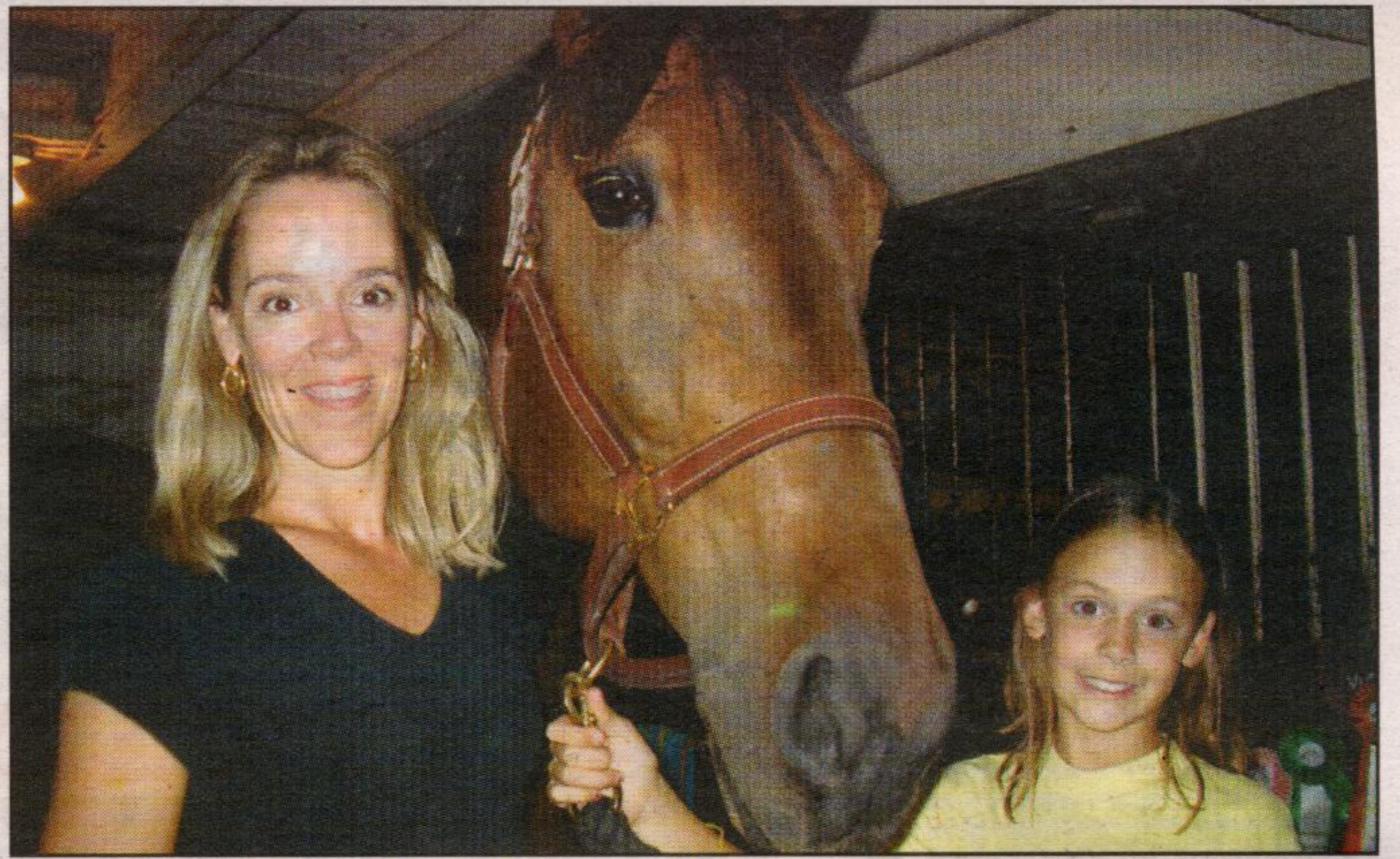
As this novel is intended for adult readers the details of Civil War strife are more graphic than the vague mentions of the war found in Alcott's own book. Battlefield scenes are bloody and painful and many good men are lost. Also vivid are some scenes in which Mr. March encounters slavery; grim and violent

and ugly. Particularly unpleasant are the scenes in the military hospitals of the day; unclean and so full of infection as to be more dangerous to life and limb than was the battlefield.

Hopes and illusions are shattered as Mr. March is informed that he is not a good chaplain and that the men do not appreciate his views and tone. He is sent off to become a teacher of "contraband", former slaves who are now managed by the Union Army and who are in a form of limbo until the war is over.

Late in the book Mr. March is injured and ends up in a military hospital in Washington. His wife Marmee goes there to tend and comfort him. What she learns about the hospital and about Mr. March's past changes her picture of herself both as a civilian and as a wife.

Attempting a sequel to a famous book can be difficult, moving from a children's novel to a book intended for adult eyes can be even more of a challenge. Geraldine Brooks is an accomplished writer, the author of the acclaimed *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*. She is a skilled researcher and a former war correspondent in Bosnia, Somalia and the Middle East. She has capably followed up on Alcott's much-loved book and further developed the characters in an unusual and interesting way.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Love at first ride

Pictured at Oakridge Equestrian Centre in Oakville are Jane Riley, Valid Victory, and Jane's 11 year-old daughter, Averell. Vic (as Valid Victory is called) is a bay gelding at 16.2 hands and was adopted by Jane and Averell from the Ontario Standardbred Adoption Society. The Society is a registered charity that provides lifelong care for horses retired from the track. Those adopting pay a fee of up to \$750 and are then responsible for all day-to-day expenses for the horse. The horse has a guardian appointed by the Society to give lifelong monitoring of the horse's well being. Vic has been with the Rileys for only two weeks and has already bonded with them. A sweet natured docile giant he is a safe and easy ride even for young Averell.

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