

IN MEMORIAM

Madeleine B. Stern



July 1, 1912 - August 18, 2007

LITERARY SLEUTH ♦ RARE BOOK-DEALER

♦ BELOVED FRIEND ♦

Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts, "The Home of *Little Women*," is deeply saddened to announce the passing of pre-eminent Alcott scholar

Madeleine B. Stern

on Saturday, August 18, 2007 at her home in Manhattan after a brief illness. Miss Stern was 95 years old and surrounded by a caring circle of friends -- Katharine Houghton; Richard, Terry, and Lewis Koch; Loven Lavia; Paulette Rose; Jan Turnquist; Liliane Wilcox -- her cousin, Zelda Mack; and her beloved dog, Laurie. A Memorial Service was held on August 21, 2007 at Frank E. Campbell Memorial Chapel in Manhattan; burial was in Queens, New York.

As Executive Director of Orchard House, Jan Turnquist was privileged to know Madeleine Stern for over fifteen years. Their collegial relationship developed into a mentorship and finally, a very special friendship. She was honored to be with Miss Stern as she left this world with dignity and grace.

Miss Stern's contribution to Alcott scholarship cannot be overstated. She truly had no peer, save her friend of 60 years, Leona Rostenberg. Miss Stern's wish was that memorial gifts be made to Orchard House (P.O. Box 343, Concord, MA 01742-0343, or on-line at www.louisamayalcott.org), a place she and Leona held dear.

As wonderful as her professional contributions were, Miss Stern's generous spirit, devoted friendship, and noble character leave an even greater legacy. There is now a deep void, not only in the world of Alcott scholarship, but also in the hearts of all those who knew, respected, and loved her.

Prefatory Remarks

In the old and rare we have made connections; connections between past and present, between our books and ourselves. When the younger generation tells us we are legendary figures, we sometimes think they really mean has-beens. It is true that they study our catalogues, buy our rare books, consult us from time to time, read and collect our co-authored publications. They search our eyes for a legacy.

Our lives are our legacy. ... [and] we look to the future -- to our next find, to our next book, to our next adventure.

~Madeleine Stern & Leona Rostenberg, 1997

No brief space could ever contain even the bare facts about Miss Stern's life, let alone the impact of her work on the fields of literature and literary criticism, antiquarian book-dealing, and even women's rights. The following information has therefore been adapted to provide a highly abbreviated look at the incredible life of an incredible person. Sources used include an article by Margalit Fox published on August 25, 2007 in *The New York Times*; Miss Stern's death notice, which appeared in *The New York Times* on August 21, 2007; and research and recollections by the Staff of Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, with whom Miss Stern had connections for over fifty years.

Miss Stern was enormously proud of the fact that she and her dear friend, business partner, and companion "literary sleuth," Leona Rostenberg, helped bring to light Louisa May Alcott's unknown tales of intrigue, murder, adultery, suicide -- and as Miss Stern put it, "thuggism, feminism, hashish, and transvestitism" to boot. (Truly "Plots and Counterplots," as Louisa May Alcott entitled one of these stories!)

"One of our greatest thrills," Miss Stern wrote in 1997, "was our discovery of the double literary life of America's best-loved writer of juvenile fiction. The revelation that the author of *Little Women* was also the author of clandestine sensational shockers was our blood-and-thunder story." (from *Old Books, Rare Friends: Two Literary Sleuths and Their Shared Passion, 1997*).

The community-at-large recognized the importance of their discovery as well. Revered Brigham Young University librarian A. Dean Larsen (1930-2002), a dear friend to Miss Stern, wrote to her in the 1980s that, "When you meet Louisa May Alcott in the next life,

she is going to embrace you and say, 'Madeleine, you, more than any other person ever to live, have furthered my literary reputation.'"



Early Life and Achievements

Madeleine Bettina Stern was born to Lillie Mack and Moses R. Stern, "probably on the kitchen table," as she surmised, in her family's Harlem apartment on July 1, 1912 (*photo at left: Madeleine Stern at age 3, 1915*). She graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Barnard College in 1932, and received a Master's from Columbia University in 1934.

Miss Stern's first book was, interestingly enough, quite like *Little Women* -- a largely autobiographical novel entitled *We Are Taken*, published in 1935 by The Galleon Press. Recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1943, Miss Stern authored, co-authored, edited, or co-edited over forty books, among them the seminal biography, *Louisa May Alcott*, published in 1950 by University of Oklahoma Press and re-issued by Northeastern University Press in 1999. Miss Stern's other noted biographies include: *The Life of Margaret Fuller* (E. P. Dutton & Company, 1942); *Purple Passage: The Life of Mrs. Frank Leslie* (University of Oklahoma, 1953), whose husband was publisher of many of Miss Alcott's early provocative works; *So Much in a Lifetime: The Life of Dr. Isabel Barrows* (Messner, 1964); *The Pantarch: A Biography of Stephen Pearl Andrews* (University of Texas, 1968); and *Heads & Headliners: The Phrenological Fowlers* (University of Oklahoma, 1971).

"The Misses Stern and Rostenberg"

Miss Stern and Miss Rostenberg first met in 1929, when both worked as teachers at the Sabbath School of Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan. When the women became re-acquainted as Columbia University graduate students, a warm friendship blossomed from their mutual interests and intense intellectual curiosity. They resided in New York City with their many books and beloved dogs, always eager and ready to assist fledgling Alcott scholars and rare book collectors.

In 1942, doggedly investigating rather unusual and elusive references in Louisa May Alcott's correspondence and journals, Miss Stern and Miss Rostenberg found evidence at Houghton Library in Harvard University that Alcott -- best known for her treasured children's classic, *Little Women* (1868) -- had also written racy potboilers, or "blood-and-thunder tales." Published in popular periodicals anonymously or under the mysterious pseudonym of "A. M. Barnard," these stories dealt with seamier aspects of

life and love that excited the reading public and, more importantly, provided Miss Alcott with badly needed money to help support her family.

Miss Stern oversaw the publication of these risqué stories in several anthologies beginning in the 1970s -- *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (Morrow, 1975); *Plots and Counterplots: More Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (Morrow, 1976); *A Double Life: Newly Discovered Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (Little, Brown & Company, 1988); *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers* (Northeastern University, 1995); and *The Feminist Alcott: Stories of a Woman's Power* (Northeastern University Press, 1996). With Professors Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, Miss Stern co-edited Miss Alcott's journals, letters, and selected fiction in the 1990s.

Old Books and The Magic Touch

Through the years, in tandem with their shared fascination about Alcott went an affinity for rare books. After Columbia University rejected Miss Rostenberg's doctoral dissertation in 1939, effectively, she thought, putting an end to her scholarly pursuits, Miss Rostenberg began to apprentice with a rare book-dealer in New York. By Christmas of 1943, Miss Stern hoped to encourage her friend to set up a business of her own by giving her gifts of stationery she had engraved with "Leona Rostenberg ~ Rare Books." With a \$1,000 loan from Miss Stern, Miss Rostenberg opened her business the next year; Miss Stern joined her in the venture in 1945.

As partners in *Rostenberg & Stern Rare Books* for over fifty years, these two women became legendary in the world of antiquarian book-dealing, and highly respected for their willingness to search the ends of the Earth for treasures. The pair was so gifted in their ability to almost instantly sense the significance of a rare book that the German term *Finger-Spitzengefühl* -- loosely translated as a seemingly electrical energy that emanates from a treasured book, recognizable by only a gifted few -- was often used to describe them.

Miss Stern and Miss Rostenberg were among the only women at the inaugural meeting of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA) in 1949, and were invited to dinner at "The Old Book Table" social group of The Grolier Club, which had a "Men Only" policy for decades. Miss Stern also founded the New York Antiquarian Book Fair, held annually since 1960. In the recent past, Miss Stern and Miss Rostenberg were honored by The Small Press Center in New York City for their groundbreaking Alcott scholarship, and in 2006, Miss Stern was feted by The Grolier Club for her pioneering efforts in gaining acceptance of women in the world of antiquarian books.

Had that dissertation been accepted ... one of us would have been stranded in some small Midwestern college teaching names of kings and dates of battles; the other would have continued unhappily explaining Ivanhoe and Silas Marner to uninterested high school students. There is no doubt that we both owe a debt of gratitude to [Prof. Thorndike] who ... unwittingly -- and magically -- changed our lives forever.

~Madeleine Stern & Leona Rostenberg, 1997

Bookends

With Miss Rostenberg, Miss Stern wrote several memoirs revealing elements of not only their six-decade personal friendship, but also their professional tenacity in the face of widespread prejudice toward single women in business for themselves during the mid-20th Century -- *Old & Rare: Thirty Years in the Book Business* (A. Schram, 1974), *Old Books, Rare Friends: Two Literary Sleuths and Their Shared Passion* (Doubleday, 1997), and *Bookends: Two Women, One Enduring Friendship* (The Free Press, 2001).

Coincidentally, a well-reviewed musical version of *Bookends* -- written by actress Katharine Houghton ("Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" and niece of Katharine Hepburn), directed by her husband, actor Ken Jenkins ("Scrubs"), with music by Dianne Adams and James McDowell -- is playing through Sunday, August 26, 2007 at the New Jersey Repertory Company in Long Branch.

Miss Stern leaves no direct descendants, but was the beloved cousin of Zelda Mack and had an abiding affection for many relations of Miss Rostenberg, who died in 2005 at the age of 96.

If memory of the past enriches us, security in the present strengthens us, and together they prepare us for the future.

~Madeleine Stern & Leona Rostenberg, 2001



From left to right: Leona Rostenberg, "Louisa May Alcott" (portrayed by Orchard House Executive Director Jan Turnquist), and Madeleine Stern in 1999

Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House

This treasured historic site, which long held a warm place in Miss Stern's heart, is a non-profit organization dedicated to public education about the legacies of Louisa May Alcott and her family in the fields of literature, social justice, the arts, and education, and preservation of the significant historic structures on the property -- Orchard House, (*circa* 1690) and The Concord School of Philosophy (1879). Detailed information is available at www.louisamayalcott.org. Gifts in memory of Miss Stern may be sent to Orchard House, P. O. Box 343, Concord, MA, 01742-0343, or made securely on-line at <https://secure.gis.net/hosts/lmama/appealonline.html>.