Game Changer
How One Book Changed My Perspective on History,
based on a reading of *The Glory Cloak* by Patricia O'Brien

An essay by Susan Bailey
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Game Changer:
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Every once in a while, a book comes along that qualifies as a game changer. It alters the reader’s perspective, perhaps on an issue, perhaps on the act of reading itself. It churns the emotions and excites the mind, broadening it into one eager to probe, explore and perhaps read between the lines for the very first time.

Game changer books are very specific to the reader. I find a certain book to be transformative while you may be merely entertained by it.

For me, *The Glory Cloak* by Patricia O’Brien was such a game changer, not only transforming the way I read historical fiction, but the way I read, period. It also opened up the possibility that historical fact itself may not be so black and white since it is filtered through the individual who reports it.

Set during the Civil War, *The Glory Cloak* probes into the hearts and minds of two significant 19th-century women, Louisa May Alcott and Clara Barton, through a fictitious Alcott cousin, Susan Gray. O’Brien’s portrayal of Louisa was especially provocative and is the subject of this piece.

**Facts leading to questions**

Louisa May Alcott’s life has impacted me in a profound way as it has countless other women. Since the publication of *Little Women* over one hundred and fifty years ago, women have been inspired to become writers, reformers, feminists and political leaders. Pilgrims flock to Orchard House by the tens of thousands every year where they can “hear” Louisa’s voice through the family home and artifacts.

While much is known about Louisa and her family through extensive primary, secondary and anecdotal sources, there is also much about her life that is not known. Fully aware of the prying eyes of both current and future fans, Louisa chose to carefully construct her legacy, burning volumes of journals and letters in order to protect personal and family secrets. Her life was colorful, bold and exciting and those who have caught that bug of passion can’t help digging for more.
Enter historical fiction

Historical fiction, while being an entertaining read, can play an important role in fleshing out historical figures. Because it grants the writer permission to speculate by means of a compelling story, it provides the reader with the opportunity to question and probe. The author is requiring the reader to be flexible and therefore is responsible for providing a plausible story filled with dynamic characters that will carry the reader along, even if some of the historical facts are altered for the sake of the story. The author has to earn the trust of the reader.

Patricia O’Brien earned my trust and by exciting my imagination and stirring my emotions, *The Glory Cloak* opened my mind to this deeper level of reading and study.

**Synopsis of The Glory Cloak**

The heart of the story focuses on friendships between three extraordinary women, centering on Susan. In one friendship, she works side by side with Clara Barton, taking on the impossible task of locating and identifying missing and dead soldiers. They end up setting up the Arlington National Cemetery. Clara walks with Susan through trying times as she deals with losing herself in the heat of passion, losing a friendship through betrayal, and losing her prematurely born son.

The other friendship begins with cousins. Susan is a third cousin to Louisa and each year she and her family come to visit. Ten years her senior, Louisa adopts Susan and draws her close as friend, confidant and writer’s critic. Susan recognizes a kindred spirit and seeks to emulate her older, spirited cousin and her outspoken, brazen ways. Susan eventually comes to live with the Alcotts when she is orphaned through a typhoid outbreak. Their friendship will be severely tested by one John Sulie, a soldier they minister to as nurses in the Civil War. Handsome, charismatic and yet shrouded in mystery, John will touch both hearts deeply. One, with the courage to act, will end up betraying the other who is too afraid to act.

Through this story O’Brien suggests a trajectory that Louisa May Alcott’s life might have taken, using Susan as the guide. In response to a question* regarding the pressure she might have felt to accurately represent Louisa, O’Brien sheds light on why she chose to take her story in this direction:

“Louisa is an icon I’ve spent my life revering, and I wanted to be able to break through her carefully constructed persona ... while preserving the true spirit of a remarkable woman. I allowed myself to

*This question is part of an interview with the author that appears at the end of *The Glory Cloak.*
imagine her in love, and tried to show how difficult it would be for her to embrace any risk-taking that broke the Concord mold.”

When asked how the main character of Susan Gray helped present Louisa in a fresh way, O’Brien responds:

“Unlike her real-life contemporaries, Susan was free to ask questions. I also needed her to cast light on life with the Alcotts before Louisa’s success and to be an intimate counterpoint of Louisa in Washington.”

In the beginning, Louisa is young, vigorous, outspoken, brash and moody – she is Jo March. Her spirit is large, loving and full of creative energy. Susan shares some of these traits and the two form a close bond despite the ten-year age difference. As the story progresses, the disapproval of her father, the constant poverty of her family and her Civil War experience (resulting in the loss of her health) will prove to be too much for Louisa, suppressing that free, creative spirit. The large-heartedness that poured forth from that spirit will become walled off. The success she worked so hard for, embodied in Little Women, will lock her into a trap from which she cannot (or will not) escape. It will permanently stunt her artistic growth.

Susan notices the first hint of change when she moves in with the Alcott family shortly after Lizzie’s death. Grief over the loss of her gentle younger sister along with duty has bowed Louisa; Susan laments the loss of a sense of play in the household, missing Louisa’s scary ghost stories and rollicking plays that so typified her youth.

An obsessive need to be the breadwinner and free the family once and for all from poverty drives Louisa relentlessly in her quest to make a living from writing. The spirit of Jo March is turning inward, fueling a mission to rescue the “pathetic family.” Louisa believes only she can save them; Susan wonders where the Louisa of her youth has gone.

Louisa begins churning out “rubbish” potboilers to make money. Using Susan as a critic, Louisa is shown to be a writer obsessed with the bottom line while feeling disgust and shame for her work. Usually portrayed as a tower of strength, focused and tenacious about her work, O’Brien shows a weaker, more vulnerable side of Louisa.

In the midst of this “rubbish” Louisa writes her first novel, Moods, and invites Susan to read it. It is the work of her heart and Susan is enthralled with it, appreciating the open and honest sharing of her cousin’s soul. It doesn’t take much for her to recognize the object of Louisa’s infatuation, Henry David Thoreau, in the character of Adam Warwick.
The old spirit of adventure is not dead either. When the boys of Concord march off to the Civil War, Louisa and Susan become restless sitting at home sewing. Eager to make a real contribution, they volunteer to become nurses, traveling to Washington City (now known as Washington, DC) to work at the Union Hotel Hospital.

Despite the chaos and horror of war that swirls about her, Louisa’s heart remains open, touched by the handsome and charismatic John Sulie*, a patient in her care. Beginning with a love of literature and meaningful conversation, the two forge a strong bond. Susan also is attracted to the Virginia blacksmith but suppresses her feelings out of loyalty to Louisa.

John’s mysterious background fuels suspicion that he is a Rebel spy and a thief. The unscrupulous assistant head nurse, Belle Poole, falsely accuses him and sees to it that he is incarcerated in the hospital’s basement jail. Stricken with typhoid pneumonia, Louisa scribbles a note declaring her love for John which she hands off to Susan. In a moment of weakness, John and Susan exchange a kiss and the note is never delivered. He escapes from the jail while Louisa and Susan are sent home.

In her real life, Louisa’s losses from her Civil War nursing experience were deep and permanent, beginning with her health. Mentally and emotionally, she was wounded by the brutality and tragedy she witnessed at the hospital. O’Brien’s insertion of a romantic entanglement gone wrong adds the personal heartache that ultimately breaks Louisa’s spirit.

Susan notices that her cousin begins to shut down emotionally, devoting herself even more fervently to work and duty while suppressing her inner life. Asked by the *Boston Commonwealth* to share the letters she wrote home about her hospital experience, Louisa falls into the familiar vortex, crafting *Hospital Sketches*. John Sulie is included but is reduced to a noble spirit who is courageous and valiant through a painful death. The scene is powerful but not real. Unable to deal with her pain, she kills him but not before romanticizing him, changing him from flesh-and-blood man to saint.

*Hospital Sketches* is an unexpected success with publishers clamoring for her work, including *Moods*. Louisa agrees to significantly edit her “first-born” in preparation for publication and it would prove to be the last artistic risk she would take. The mixed response to *Moods* (including a savage review by Henry James Jr.) dashes her hopes and causes her public humiliation. Susan, being one of the few who truly understands the essence of the story, senses that this pain is as

*Some Alcott biographers refer to him as “John Suhre.”*
hurtful as that endured in Washington. Writing could no longer be a vehicle for self-expression. It could no longer provide escape or release – all this was too risky. Louisa obsessively embraces the support of her family as the excuse for forever suppressing her artistic life. The trap is set, and eventually sealed by the success of *Little Women*.

On top of all this is the total breakdown of Louisa’s friendship with Susan over John Sulie. Susan eventually confesses her love for John, the nature of their relationship and its consequences (a child, born dead), and the fact that she never delivered Louisa’s note to him. Louisa’s response is to banish Susan from her life as shown by her total absence from Louisa’s book about her family, *Little Women*.

Throughout the rest of the book, O’Brien shows the results of Louisa’s emotional shutdown and physical decline. In a particularly poignant scene, Louisa, returning from Boston, is met at the train station by Susan. The two have not yet resolved their conflict. Susan describes what she sees:

“She trudged slowly in my direction, a tall, oddly hulking figure, for all her thinness. Her face had a pallor of illness, and her clothes covered her like dark, drifting smoke: heavy, formless, engulfing … I thought fleetingly, achingly, of the Louisa who used to twirl around the room wearing the magic glory cloak in all its bright splendor. It was hard to imagine her now in that jaunty swirl of green and red silk. Her face seemed lengthened, thinner. Her eyes appeared dulled …”

Susan goes on to describe Louisa’s unpleasant interactions with an aggressive newspaper reporter and a group of children who want her autograph. Clearly the burdens of her work and success, coupled with poor health, are weighing heavily upon her; Susan is shaken by what she witnesses.

Louisa is not only broken, but bitter and unforgiving as well. Given her loyal nature and the depth of Susan’s betrayal it is understandable. But that bitterness and resentment also shows in her relationship with youngest sister May.

May is painted as Amy: somewhat shallow and blithe, happy to allow Louisa to carry the total burden of the family cares. She has no problem receiving all the help Louisa gives her in order to realize her dream of becoming a professional artist. Susan often is annoyed with May and yet respects her decision to break away from the family:

“Do you think I’m terrible?” [May] asked, She was no longer a saucy child; there was a gravity in her eyes. “I know I am spoiled, and I owe so much to my family. But I also know that if I don’t get out of
here, if I don’t break free, I’ll end up like Lou. Oh, she’s rich and famous now. But …” She looked at me helplessly. “Do you understand? I don’t want to be trapped.”

“I do understand,” I said. “You should go.”

“Thank you Susan,” she said squeezing my hand. “You know, don’t you, that I love Lou dearly? It is she who has made my career possible. Without her help, how could I go to Europe to study?” She sighed. “I’m not an introspective person, I fear. But I do wonder at times, why is it that Lou has always been best at giving, and I am so good at receiving?”

Lou has always been best at giving, and I am so good at receiving. Through that one line of dialogue, O’Brien sums up the reason for Louisa’s unhappy life: one has to know how to receive as well as to give. Louisa is unable to give good things to herself because of a deep feeling of unworthiness brought on by years of relentless criticism from her father. She instead lavishes these things on May, convincing herself that this is the key to her happiness. Her need to constantly provide for her family is the means by which to justify herself and yet the formula doesn’t always work as shown by her seething resentment to May. Even in her fiction she could not be good to herself as demonstrated in Little Women when Amy is asked to accompany Aunt March to Europe instead of Jo. Jo is able to vent her feelings, decrying it unfair and one can acutely feel the pain. Louisa long ago stopped giving herself permission to vent such feelings in her own life.

During Abba’s final illness, May is in Europe and does not come home. O’Brien’s novel frames it as a cold, calculated decision. An actual letter from Louisa urges May to stay in Europe but O’Brien suggests that Louisa writes that letter so as not to burden her sister’s conscience. Yet Louisa herself is burdened with resentment all the same.

In an interesting twist, O’Brien uses May’s absence as the means to reconcile Susan and Louisa. Acting the part of May to a delirious Abba, Susan demonstrates her love and loyalty. Louisa is touched by that act of kindness and returns it with a warm hug.

Meanwhile, the enthusiastic letters from May describing her success as an artist, and her romance and engagement to Ernest Nieriker rub salt in the wound of bitterness for Louisa. Susan recognizes that Louisa is unable to comprehend May’s zest for life and feels great compassion for her cousin while wondering if May has any idea as to her insensitivity.
Dealt with the blow of May’s untimely death after the birth of her daughter Lulu, Louisa is consumed with grief and guilt, lamenting the fact that she never went to Europe to visit her. Still, a final opportunity is given for reconciliation when May bequeaths her daughter to Louisa. An opportunity is seen for redemption:

“I must do this right, for it is my last chance,” [Louisa] said.

“You shall.”

“I don’t want to retreat. I don’t want to hesitate.” Her breathing was fast and painful.

Lulu brings Louisa renewed happiness. The little girl is the spitting image of her mother, but she reflects the personality of Jo March. She gives new meaning to the “moral pap for the young” Louisa is locked into writing. The task becomes personal with a specific child to write for.

Susan is not just the light that reveals Louisa’s mind and heart, she is also the “angel on the shoulder,” gently urging Louisa out of her fear and complacency. In many of the critical decisions of Louisa’s life, Susan is there. She had longed to emulate Louisa’s feisty spirit; when that spirit was diminished, Susan became that spirit for Louisa.

In a sense, Susan’s presence shows a Louisa of lesser strength, needing to lean on her confidant; this reveals a deeper vulnerability. In her real life there is no evidence of a “Susan” which suggests that Louisa relied on her own strength. She was her own “angel on the shoulder.”

O’Brien’s portrait of Louisa is that of a bitter, broken woman, nearly crushed by the circumstances of life and the ghost of her father’s constant disapproval. She is resentful of the good fortunes of others while failing to acknowledge her own. Retreating to the safety of her mind, she shelters herself from real life through her writing. *The Glory Cloak* paints a depressing picture of Louisa that is hard to shake. Some of the circumstances are fictional of course, but the image remains.

This interpretation is not new: it was presented before in Martha Saxton’s controversial biography, *Louisa May A Modern Biography*. O’Brien listed Saxton’s book as one of her primary sources.

**The need for flexibility**

If there is one thing *The Glory Cloak* has taught me, it’s that one cannot take historical fiction literally. O’Brien suggests a portrait of Louisa by putting forth a “what if” scenario that takes
Louisa’s life on a specific course, allowing writer and reader to probe, question and think. The value of such literature is lost if the reader is too much of a purist regarding historical accuracy.

To serve the needs of the story, O’Brien was selective in the facts she chose to use regarding Louisa. Had she included these facts the story would have been undermined. I admit that I struggled with what she left out despite the success of the story.

First, she makes no mention of Louisa’s relationship with Ladislas Wisniewski, a possible love interest that Louisa met during her first trip to Europe. The trip is mentioned in the story but “Laddie” is not included. While scholars may not agree regarding the nature of the relationship, Laurie, a crucial character in Louisa’s most successful book, *Little Women*, is based in part on Laddie.

O’Brien navigates around this issue. She never gets into the autobiographical aspects *Little Women* but rather, uses it for a two-fold purpose: to illustrate Louisa’s falling out with Susan by not mentioning her in the story, and to show how the enormous popularity of the book trapped Louisa in her own success.

Including Laddie in the mix would have undermined the premise that Louisa was afraid to take emotional risks. In reality, regardless of whether or not it was a true romance, Louisa invested much into the relationship with the result being the immortal character of Laurie (who is a combination of Laddie and Alfred Whitman).

**Differing conclusions from the same facts**

Another fact that O’Brien chose to leave out was Louisa’s second trip to Europe with May. The first trip had been a duty but the second trip was a grand tour. Despite Louisa’s complex feelings for May, the two sisters were inseparable companions.

O’Brien explores these complexities as shown by Louisa’s ambivalence towards May. She struggles greatly over May’s failure to come home to her dying mother. Suppressing her bitterness she writes:

“*I know how hard it will be to bear alone this sorrow – but don’t think of it much ’til time makes it easier & never mourn that you didn’t come. All is well, & your work was a joy to Momma.*”
Other evidence of Louisa’s ambivalence is seen in her reaction to May’s letters regarding her professional success, her romance with Ernest Nieriker and their surprise marriage. Susan notes Louisa’s animosity as she reads May’s letters brimming with happiness, realizing that Louisa will never understand May’s enjoyment of life. Yet she faults May too for being insensitive to her sister’s burdens of poor health, hard work and spinsterhood. Yes, Louisa chose to be a spinster but as Susan points out, “… how much it hurt to be left behind!”

I traced back the correspondences that took place surrounding Abba’s death, specifically in The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott edited by Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy and Madeleine B. Stern, and May Alcott A Memoir by Carolyn Ticknor. In both sources there is only the one short letter that Louisa wrote to May about their mother’s illness and death (as cited on the previous page). There is also a letter from Bronson to May written just two weeks before Abba’s death describing her rapid decline and making it clear May could not get home in time. Ticknor recounts a brief farewell note to May that Abba wrote near the end but May, although deeply distressed, failed to recognize just how close to death her mother was.

The facts therefore support O’Brien’s interpretation. She read between the lines to enhance the story, and it leaves the reader wondering if, in fact, this interpretation could have been true.

Other facts about Louisa’s life were necessarily glossed over for the sake of the story. The Glory Cloak paints Louisa as a woman trapped creatively by her success, plagued by poor health, and never enjoying her money or fame. Here again, O’Brien is selective on the facts to enhance the poignancy of the story as evidenced by Susan’s observation of Louisa’s decline. Louisa is greatly diminished in all ways, becoming a shadow of her former self while Susan thrives. The contrast between the two portrays a real life person as greatly weakened so that the counterpoint can appear strong. This contrast heightens the tragic aspect of Louisa’s life.

Some scholars portray Louisa differently. Madeleine Stern’s book, Louisa May Alcott A Biography shows Louisa enjoying the perks of fame because of the access it afforded her to many of the finest minds available. Being the “toast of the town,” she was able to mingle with prominent authors, thinkers, reformers and feminists. She was able to exert influence, something she could not have done without her fame, and this satisfied her reformer’s heart.
It is true that Louisa allowed herself to be boxed in creatively after the success of Little Women (and the allure of wealth which guaranteed her success as breadwinner) but there was still a creative spark inside. Madeleine Stern writes of Louisa stealing away to Boston to indulge in writing a final sophisticated potboiler, A Modern Mephistopheles:

_The author of “V. V” and “A Marble Woman” longed to indulge again in “lurid” styles and gorgeous fancies, throwing off the chain armor of propriety that had at once enslaved and liberated her … The No Names Series that Thomas Niles was sponsoring would give her an opportunity to write incognito a story dreamed by “A. M. Barnard’s” ghost._ (p. 257, Louisa May Alcott A Biography)

Stern writes that Louisa had, in fact, found escape and release in writing potboilers while in The Glory Cloak, no such pleasure is found.

**What historical fiction can teach**

As a result of reading The Glory Cloak, I will never again take Louisa’s writing at face value. I will always wonder whether John Sulie was actually as saint-like as he was portrayed in Hospital Sketches. I think of Beth’s death in Little Women and how romanticized, and sanitized, it was. The real-life Lizzie died a very painful and gruesome death and Louisa sought to glorify her. Could she have done the same with John? Or perhaps, was John a vehicle by which Louisa could work through her grief over her sister? She writes in Hospital Sketches:

_“I had been summoned to many death beds in my life, but to none that made my heart ache as it did then, since my mother called me to watch the departure of a spirit akin to this in its gentleness and patient strength.”_

The parting of Laddie and Louisa in “My Boys” can’t stand as historical fact as it is in the context of a fictional story. Given Louisa’s propensity to romanticize, and with no hard facts to back it up, it cannot be taken at face value and it’s not meant to be. If one knows the backstory, however, one can’t help but wonder about the depth of feeling she had towards him.

The Glory Cloak has opened my eyes, teaching me to read between the lines, questioning what I read. Two of Louisa’s finest works, acclaimed for their realism, ultimately wove fact with fiction in order to create a compelling story. O’Brien herself acknowledged the difficulty of writing such fiction:
“It was a challenge to remember that the fictional part of the story comes first. I loved immersing myself in the historical material, but needed to balance accuracy with the demands of the plot. Historical detail must bring a tale alive, not engulf it …”

The lines blur and blend, making it difficult sometimes to extract the truth but in the end, it’s the questioning that makes the read and the study more satisfying. History, even when reported as fact, is, after all, filtered through the individual who reports it and is thus, interpreted through that unique lens.

Through a fast-moving and exciting story, a provocative portrait of Louisa emerges through *The Glory Cloak*. Susan is a vibrant, three-dimensional character in her own right, thus proving to be an excellent tool in shedding light on Louisa’s life. I didn’t agree with the portrait entirely, but it definitely caused me to think, and that, I believe is what Patricia O’Brien intended:

“Louisa’s true story is rich with possibilities and ambiguity. I hope those who care about Louisa are willing to imagine the unknown.” (from the interview with Patricia O’Brien).

*The Glory Cloak* guided me across that bridge for the first time, opening endless possibilities in all the future reading I will do.
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