

# LITTLE WOMEN

Directed by Gillian Armstrong  
Produced by Denise DiNovi  
Distributed by Columbia Pictures  
Released in 1994

**M**ovies that feature stars usually perform better than those that do not. Is this because we are going to see the stars; because the movie is better thanks to the stars; or because a better written, better funded movie evidences a quality that attracted stars to the project in the first place? (In this last possibility, we go to see the movie, itself, the stars being ancillary.)

The 1994 incarnation of Louisa May Alcott's book Little Women provides something of a laboratory to test out theories on the appeal of the star. Kirsten Dunst, fresh from her breakout role in *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles*, appears as Amy—but only in her younger incarnation. When the story jumps ahead four years, we get Samantha Mathis instead. Now, Samantha Mathis is not, and will never be, a star. But at the time of the film's release Dunst, herself, was not a star. Watching the film from the future, do we give the film respect for retroactive stardom? Dunst, along with Christian Bale and Claire Danes, became well-known in the years that followed. There's a reason they became so successful. Dunst is bubbly and sardonic, providing a sort of running commentary on the goings-on at the March's very lively household. However, older Amy is as dry as burnt toast and utterly unconvincing as a back-up catch for Christian Bale's Laurie. She's still pretty, but the life seems to have been drained out of her since she relocated to France.

In contrast, Trini Alvarado's Meg is not too exciting, but at least she isn't shown up by a younger actress. And her character is supposed to be more reserved. And Claire Danes, in her first movie role, impresses with the best crying ever seen on film. Her quivering chin, eyes locked on a dread horizon, would become her hallmark. Her character dies before an older actress could ruin the movie.

Christian Bale is effective, but is not any more impressive than Eric Stoltz or Gabriel Byrne in their roles as the other sisters' beaux. No, but Bale has a commanding presence and it's quite understandable that he would later assume the mantle of Batman. But did Bale ever become a star? Or did he just play characters (particularly Batman) that were already stars? Consider: an actor is someone who tries to convince you that he is somebody else. But a star need only convince you that somebody else is him. Well, with Batman, and other established characters like James Bond and Sherlock Holmes, the character is the star and the actor playing him can trade on an audience's predisposition to like what they are seeing. His job is to manage audience expectations. (In the same manner, stars who try to broaden their repertoire find their otherwise loyal fans shunning any shift in genre.)

Susan Sarandon isn't given much to do in her role as Mrs. March, but considering that by 1994 she was a notable actress, if not already a star, her role takes on the flavor of an extended cameo. Paradoxically, we know her role must be important because it is Susan Sarandon playing it. Susan Sarandon would not take a role that was not important. So even if a role is not important, once she takes it on, it becomes important. Therefore, using an

established actor is a roundabout way of establishing a character without going through the trouble of character development. What we know, or think we know of Susan Sarandon (in her big screen persona), we attribute to Mrs. March. We feel the same respect for her that her daughters feel for her because we have respect for the actress playing the mother.

Finally, there is Winona Ryder. 1994 was the pinnacle of her career. She was a respected and beautiful actress who contributed much to films such as *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *Heathers*, and *Edward Scissorhands*. But was she ever a star? She got over-the-title billing for this film, and held her own amongst distinguished company. But while the cast supports her well, she does not resonate. Her character, Jo, is fascinating, but she, Wynona Ryder, is not.

So you don't have to be a star to get over-the-title billing. But some would argue that being a good actress is more important than being a star. Jo was believable. We root for her; we laugh and cry with her. We live her life for a couple of hours. And Winona Ryder makes that journey possible. Ultimately, being an actor is about giving. A star simply must be himself. He must make himself look good. An actor provides a space for his fellow actors, but, more important, he gives himself over to a character. And in doing so he gives to the audience. Indeed, *Little Women* would probably fail with a star at the helm. Just imagine Julia Roberts in the role and Winona Ryder's accomplishment becomes immediately apparent.