

Vanderbilt Holdings

Collections and collectibles



Girl Power in the Victorian Age

Peabody's Bert Roller Collection preserves the life and times of an American icon. By MICHELLE JONES

JANE ROLLER SIGHTS, BS'41, WAS always happy at Peabody. Her father, Bert Anderson Roller, was a professor of children's literature at the College from 1922 until his death in 1934, and Sights attended Peabody Demonstration School. Before that the elder Roller met his future wife, Helen, when he took a psychology class at Peabody while enrolled as a part-time student at Vanderbilt. Given her family's long connection to the College, it is no surprise that Sights chose to entrust Peabody with her collection of early children's literature. Known as the Bert Roller Collection, the 200-plus books include works by such famed illustrators as Kate Greenaway and Randolph Caldecott. The true highlights of this collection, however, are the many books by respected children's author Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888) and the relationship that developed between the Roller and Alcott families over the years.

In 1927 Professor Roller moved his wife and three daughters to Cambridge, Mass., where he was to spend a year studying at Harvard. The experience made a lasting impression upon young Jane Roller, who talks of the adventure as though it all happened last week. Not long after the family settled into their new quarters, Frederika Wendte, daughter of one of Louisa May Alcott's cousins, came to call. Sights describes her as "a prop-



er Bostonian" and explains that her family's minister in Nashville, a native New Englander, had written ahead to friends, asking them to look in on the Rollers.

A bond quickly formed between the families, with Mrs. Roller and Miss Wendte attending plays together and the elderly Mrs. Wendte sharing stories about her famous relative. "She was so happy to have someone interested, who knew something about it," Sights explains. "So the dear old lady told my father a whole lot of things ... little things that nobody would have known about." Bert Roller incorporated those tidbits into a series of articles he wrote about Alcott.

In addition to visiting the Wendte household, the Roller family spent their weekends making excursions in the area, visiting neighboring towns and significant places such as Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, burial site of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alcott, and other luminaries of American literature. "I was only 6 or so, and mother and I had just read *Little Women* and were beginning *Little Men*," Sights says. The family visited the home of Emerson and toured Orchard House, where Louisa May Alcott wrote and set many of her books, including the seminal *Little Women* (1868).

"She was really the most significant author, woman author, in a time when we had the turn towards adventure stories for children," says Peabody College's Ann Neely, associate professor of the practice of education, about Alcott. "Previously, books for children had been mainly didactic. In the late 1800s we

began to see a lot more books that would entertain children." This was when Alcott's publishers approached her about writing a book for girls, something, explains Neely, that would counter the types of books—the Horatio Alger books, for example—being written for boys. "*Little Women* was a very big success because girls were seen as capable of doing things that they had not been seen as doing in past books for children."

Though Alcott died more than a century ago, her popularity continues. Fans delight in adaptations of *Little Women*, ranging from the 1933 film starring Katharine Hepburn to the more recent Winona Ryder version. The characters also show up in modern fiction, in Katherine Weber's *The Little Women* (2003), which transports the March sisters to modern-day New York City and New Haven, Conn., and in Geraldine Brooks' *March* (2005), a novel about Mr. March's experiences fighting the Civil War. Time and time again, Jo emerges as the all-time favorite character.

A young Jane Roller also connected with the book's heroine. "I liked the fact that she was a tomboy and I was, too," Sights says. "I thought that was something that hardly anybody at that time ever wrote about. They were trying to be little ladies, and she liked to run and climb and ride. She didn't care a thing about being in a ball gown or dressing up."

While in New England, the Roller family frequented bookstores as Professor Roller indulged his passion for rare children's books.

"Father was always darting into bookstores," Sights says. Many of the purchases he made that year are now in the collection at Peabody.

Most intriguing, however, are the books he didn't have to purchase—the Alcott books. "Mrs. Wendte's daughter continued writing to us after we came back to Nashville," Sights says. "She would send us little things for Christmas, and then she would send poems [by Alcott] that had never been published. It was such a good friendship because nobody up there at that time particularly cared about [collecting works by Alcott], and we were fresh to the thing and were just so excited about it."

These items—the books, some of the letters and the poems—will be incorporated into a new display in the recently renovated Peabody Library. There had been a display on the third floor of the library, but some changes were necessary. For one thing, the books hadn't been catalogued, explains Sharon Gray Weiner, director of the library, so the staff spent nearly two years entering the books into the Online Computer Library Center's (OCLC) WorldCat database. "If anyone is searching for materials about Louisa May Alcott and they go into this database," says Weiner, "they will find the materials that we own here."

Among those likely to seek out the collection are scholars, researchers and aficionados of Alcott's work. Neely says she likes to share the collection with her graduate students as they study the history of children's literature. Those who do seek out the collection will find *Flower Fables* (1855), a two-part edition of *Little Women*, and an edition of *Little Men* from 1875. There are also several books featuring perennial favorite Jo, including *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag*, v. 2: *Shawl Straps* (1872) and *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag*, v. 5: *An Old Fashioned Thanksgiving* (1882). Various collected letters, journals and short stories round out the 17 Alcott books in the Roller Collection.

Along with the desire to make the books accessible, their preservation was another concern in the recent overhaul and was one of the reasons Sights donated the books to the library in the first place. On the day of her graduation from Peabody, Jane Roller married Air Force pilot Pete Sights and began a life of world travel. She left her beloved books with her mother in Nashville. "It was safer for her to keep them," Sights says. When Sights finally moved back to the area, she became concerned about protecting the books. At first she considered giving them to the University of Virginia and even went to Charlottesville to discuss the matter. "I came home and talked to the family and decided we could see them here [at Vanderbilt], whereas we'd have to make a trip if they were in Virginia."

The collection came to Peabody in 1983, but things did not get off to a promising start; in fact, not much happened for several years. When Sights learned about this, she "borrowed" the books until they could be properly cared for. "When I got here a couple of years ago, I saw in the files that this had happened, and I called Mrs. Sights," Weiner says.

Top: 19th-century books from the Roller Collection include antique editions by British author/illustrators Randolph Caldicott, Beatrix Potter and Kate Greenaway.

Bottom: A signed photo of Louisa May Alcott, a gift card from Alcott that accompanied a copy of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* for her young cousin, a bonnet-shaped pin cushion made by Alcott, and an 1869 edition of *Little Women*.

Digging through boxes filled with books still in protective plastic bags, Weiner pulls out some for show. "Here's one from 1859," she says. "That's 1827," she says, holding up another, "but you can see, this book is in awfully good shape for 1827." Some of the Bert Roller Collection books needed special boxes, and covers in charcoal or deep wine colors were made for especially fragile books. Those showing signs of deterioration got special treatment. New bookplates were added, with Sights joining Weiner and library assistant Lara Beth Lehman to place them.

The next step is to install the books in one of the new archival-quality display cases—recent gifts from Charles Kurz II of Philadelphia, father of a current Peabody student—in Peabody Library's ground-floor reading room. Weiner stresses that the entire collection, all 200-plus books, will be kept together in the case. How is it possible to fit all those books in one case? "Some of the books

are very tiny, only about one-inch square, so they don't take up that much space," Weiner explains. The display case also will hold paper dolls contemporary to Alcott's time and a bonnet-shaped pin cushion, one of the last items Alcott sent to her cousins. "She was confined to a nursing home for a long time before she died, and she sewed all the time," Sights says. "What a sweet thing."



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