

Simple and true



Lindsay Nicholson

Lindsay Nicholson is the award-winning editor of *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Prior to that she edited *Prima* and launched the magazines *Prima Baby* and *Your Home*. Her first book *Living On the Seabed* is published by Vermilion in June 2005. She lives in London with her husband and daughter.

More than anything else as a child I wished for a sister. I only had brothers, quite a bit younger than me to boot. No good for playing games, or for sharing clothes or discussing intimacies. Instead I had to make do with my fantasy sisters: Meg, Beth and Amy - The Little Women of Louisa May Alcott's classic book. Naturally, I was Jo, the tomboy who cut off her hair and wanted to be a writer. I could never imagine anyone not wanting to be Jo and was absolutely amazed later in life to meet women who had identified with the spoilt, petulant - although undeniably artistic and pretty - Amy. Or the, to my mind, drearily conventional, home-loving Meg. But they had. So many young girls and women love this book and each take away something quite different from it. That is what makes it so enduring.

Anyone who hasn't read it might imagine it to be a rather saccharine tale but they couldn't be more wrong. When it was published in 1868, it was seen not only as a good read but as a powerful polemic,

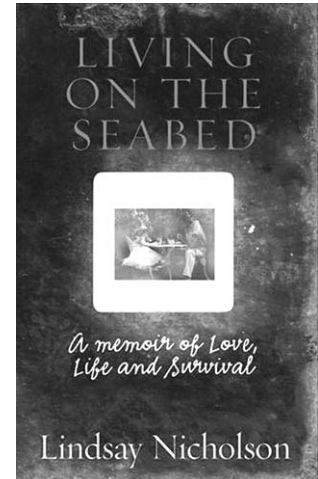
advocating education for women and that young girls be allowed to move freely and be healthy rather than laced into corsets and trained for marriage.

Louisa May Alcott grew up in New England. Her father was a progressive thinker and a teacher whose school was closed down because he admitted a black child. As a result they were very hard up and Louisa took to writing as much to earn money as for creative satisfaction. She specialised in lurid romances and blood-and-thunder adventure tales of the kind enjoyed by Jo in the book, until her editor suggested she should try her hand at a book for girls. Desperate to make money to pay off the family debts Louise dashed off a story based on the lives of herself and her three sisters in just a few weeks. It was not carefully honed but it was, in her own words, "simple and true".

Like Jo, I always wanted to write. I read avidly as a young girl (still do!) and dreamed up my own stories and plays, which I dragooned my brothers into performing. I chose to go into journalism because I love words but, again like Jo and her creator, I have always had to write to pay the bills.

My first husband died when I was only 36. At the time I had a young daughter and was pregnant with our second. I struggled for 12 years as a single parent, grateful that at least I was able to support my family by doing something that gave me so much pleasure. Life is hard for any single parent and the death of a partner is the reason that up to 10% of parents are left coping on their own. This fact is often overlooked by policy-makers yet widowhood compounds the problems of lone parents, often in the most appalling way. For us, it turned out that my elder daughter Ellie was also affected by the genetic disorder that killed her father and she too died when she was only nine.

This brought me to the lowest point in my life and it took years to rebuild my own and my remaining daughter's



shattered lives to the point where last year I had recovered enough to be able to fall in love again and re-marry. And having found out so much the hard way about bereavement, I wanted to pass on some of what I'd learned to others in similar situations.

But how to do it? I'd earned a good living all my life by writing but a book is different - especially on such a personal and difficult subject. I made several false starts then decided I would simply write as honestly as I could about my experiences. In the sequel to *Little Women*, when Beth the third of the sisters dies, Louisa May Alcott quoted verbatim from her own journals, describing the death of her real sister Lizzie. There is such power in the truth. So I dug out my old diaries and looked at what I'd written over the years. Some of it sounded unlikely - some of it frankly mad - but I put it in the book just the same. Simple and true.

The resulting book *Living On the Seabed* will I hope be a support to anyone who has suffered a terrible loss. Very few people ever have to suffer a situation as extreme as mine but we will all experience the death of someone we love. The only way to avoid it is by dying first, after all. And maybe by speaking the truth about what grief genuinely feels like, I will, in some small way, have helped other people to come to terms with their pain. I hope so anyway.