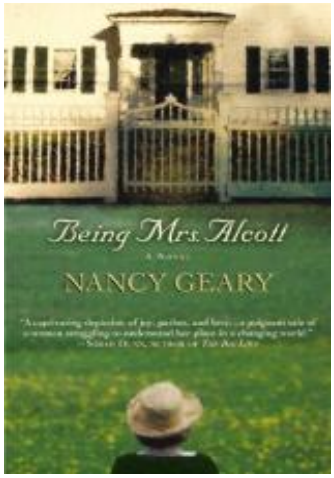
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Being Mrs. Alcott

by Nancy Geary



About the Book

All her life, Grace Alcott has followed the proper path, a legacy of her impeccable New England upbringing. As an elite member of Beacon Hill society, she attended all the right schools, socialized with all the right people, and married the right man.

Putting aside her own needs, she became the perfect wife of Bainbridge Alcott, the scion of a prominent North Shore family who dreams of writing the great American novel. In their beautiful Cape Cod home Grace has led a life of quiet domesticity, and for forty years has been a paragon of wifely virtue in the blue-blooded circles in which the Alcotts effortlessly travel. Yet beneath her gracious façade run deep, unrequited sorrows: the tragic death of her firstborn daughter, Sarah; the emotional distance of her two sons; the loss of her own identity in deference to her strong-willed husband. And now, the most shattering blow of all...

This time becomes even more difficult when her husband decides to make momentous changes in their family's life. Soon Grace must sift through the personal detritus of nearly half a century and make choices that, for the first time, will take her beyond being Mrs. Alcott to being a woman who can both hold her family together and assert her own independence.

Once again, Nancy Geary offers an eye-opening glimpse into the rarefied world inhabited by America's aristocracy. The story of a longtime wife and mother embarking on a journey to discover who she is, where she's been, and where she's going, **Being Mrs. Alcott** captures the pain and ineffable longing lying just beneath the glossy veneer of privilege-and reveals the enduring strength of a woman's love for her family.

Discussion Guide

1. A recurring question in **Being Mrs. Alcott** is whether life unfolds as a result of accidents or choices. How do you

think Grace ultimately interprets her own life?

2. There are three marriages featured in the novel: Grace and Bain, Prissy and Kody, and Erin and Marley. Are there any similarities? What does each marriage reveal about the nature of commitment?

3. Few parents would ever admit that they are disappointed in their children. Do you find Grace's criticisms of her sons realistic? If there is blame to place, do you think Grace, Bain, Hank, or Erin is at fault for the family's inability to communicate?

4. Inheritance in various forms is a complex part of the narrative. Grace ponders genetics and the age-old debate between nature and nurture, wondering what, if anything, her sons have inherited from her. Inherited wealth-or the lack thereof-shapes the relationship between Hank and his parents. What do you think the story reveals about what can and cannot be passed between generations? How do Grace, Bain, Ferris, Erin, and Hank reflect attitudes toward inherited traits or inherited wealth?

5. Eleanor Montgomery's stoicism is a point of contention between Ferris and Grace, and yet both siblings keep their personal pain secret in much the same way. Is this Eleanor's legacy? Is it the same one that Grace passes on to her own children?

6. Prissy's background differs substantially from the other major characters and yet part of her appeal is that she's different. What is her role in the novel? What does she reveal about Grace? Do you find her sympathetic?

7. How is "clamming" used as a metaphor?

8. The Cape Cod landscape is more than just the setting for this novel. How does it contribute to the feel/tone of the book? How does it illuminate the characters?

9. What is the author saying about the nostalgia of a "family home"? Is it the product of the imagination? Can memories be separated from the places in which they occurred? How do Grace, Bain, and Erin treat their memories-as sores or as solace?

10. Erin, even as an adult and father of his own children, is still heavily dependent upon his parents for financial and emotional support. Is there a time when children ever outgrow the need for a parent? Is Bain's anger justified or cruel?

11. Grace has deferred to Bain on many critical decisions throughout their life together and yet she comes to recognize Bain's tremendous dependence upon her. How do you interpret the last line?

Author Bio

Born in New York City, I was raised in two very different worlds. My father was the principal of a specialist firm on Wall Street. He was extremely disciplined and determined to teach his children the importance of hard work and financial self-sufficiency. He also was a man who cherished ritual and continuity. He bought a home in Southampton, New York, and joined several private country clubs there so that we could return to the same community summer after summer. My mother is a photographer. She didn't insist that I go to school and often took me to museums or the movies

instead. I missed a week of fourth grade to see an entire Katherine Hepburn film festival. She and her husband entertained a constant stream of artists, actors, writers and musicians and I remember many evenings where bedtime was forgotten so that I could participate in the conversation. My mother tried to instill in me an appreciation for diversity and creativity. She urged me not to fear a lack of convention.

After four years in public service as an assistant attorney general in the Criminal Bureau of the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office, and two years in private practice at a large Boston law firm, I abandoned my legal career. I had fantasized about being a writer for years, but was apprehensive about giving up my profession. After a number of family traumas forced me to examine my own life, I realized that I would rather be a failed author than a dreamless lawyer.

I wrote most of **Misfortune** while living on Cape Cod. I recently moved with my son and our two dogs to a small town about an hour from New York City.

My favorite childhood authors were William Steig and E.B. White. I still read E.B. White's essays whenever I feel uninspired. Some of my favorite authors now are Kazuo Ishiguro, Joyce Carol Oates, Anita Shreve, Louis Begley, David Guterson and Wally Lamb. P.D. James inspires me because of her development of rich characters within a novel of suspense framework. John Berendt's **Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil** greatly influenced me in writing **Misfortune** because of his skill in capturing the essence of a society.

NANCY GEARY was a prosecutor for the Criminal Bureau of the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office, a participant in the Attorney General's Urban Violence Strike Force, and an attorney with Choate, Hall & Stewart in Boston. Her family summers in Southampton. She is completing work on her second novel.

Critical Praise

"Nancy Geary writes brilliantly about the world of old money, manners, mores, and morals."

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