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### Jenny McPhee

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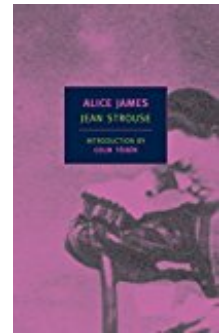
#### The Bombshell

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### "Arm Yourself Against My Dawn": Revisiting Jean Strouse's groundbreaking biography of Alice James

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In a colorful, chatty, and ironically self-aggrandizing letter to her Aunt Kate, Alice James concludes with a quip: "Forgive me all this egotism but I have to be my own Boswell." Alice James had to wait nearly a century, but she eventually found her Boswell in Jean Strouse. First published in 1980, Strouse's dazzling, bold, and formidable *Alice James: A Biography* has recently been reissued as part of the New York Review of Books Classics series and justly so. Strouse's study, composed in radiant prose, is easily a classic of biography, deftly and elegantly incorporating social history, family history, the history of the science of psychology, and literary criticism. Above all, the book is a paragon of feminist literature in which a marginalized life is brought into focus and examined from multiple perspectives, validating a previously neglected experience and suggesting alternative ways of approaching the past. Like Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Jean Strouse's biography of Alice James represents a major advance in the development of the genre, and is as relevant and powerful a piece of writing today as when it was first published.



Alice James was born in 1848, the fifth child and only daughter of Henry and Mary James, and sister of William James, the psychologist and philosopher, and Henry James, the novelist. Her father, who had lost his leg as a young man, was an eccentric writer and philosopher who devoted himself to his children's moral instruction. He thought travel the best education and much of Alice's early childhood was spent traipsing around Europe. This impermanency made an already insular family even more codependent. The family eventually settled in Newport and then Cambridge, Massachusetts. Alice's father doted on her and encouraged her learning but was adamant that she adhere to her true nature and duty as a woman. In an article entitled "Woman and the Woman's Movement" (*Putnam's Monthly*, 1853), he wrote "Woman is... inferior to man... She is his inferior in passion, his inferior in intellect, and his inferior in physical strength... Her aim in life is... simply to love and bless man."

Alice's mother did her utmost to comply with this ideal of maternal and wifely devotion. With the help of her unmarried sister Katherine, she ran a smooth household, shielding her husband and sons from any domestic worries while pursuing their higher intellectual callings.

Alice exhibited superior intelligence, pungent wit, marked ambition, and competitiveness. At first her precociousness fit in with the peculiarities of the James family universe. But, as is typical of so many girls, when Alice hit puberty, her own desires and expectations clashed dangerously with both the family ethos and that of the world at large. Life's lesson, she later wrote in her diary, was "to clothe oneself in neutral tints, walk by still waters, and possess one's soul in silence." Her solution to the problem of her existence took a violent, yet socially acceptable, form. She became chronically ill.

However atypical Alice James's life, her retreat into realms of female malady -- nervous ailments, headaches, bizarre psychotic episodes -- conformed to the "collective response to the changing shape of late nineteenth-century American life, in particular to the changing social positions and functions of women." Alice was praised by her family and friends for never complaining about her terrible limitations and suffering. "It was as if she ceded her body to the 'feminine' principle of frailty and submission," Strouse surmises, "while cultivating with her mind a 'masculine' strength and indifference to pain."

All of the James children were riddled with health problems. "It was as if each had received a devastating wound -- a 'moral equivalent' to their father's amputation." Strouse contends that the James family believed that if one of them was suffering another would be well; and when someone well began to suffer, a sufferer got well. The same went for success and failure. Failure paid for someone else's success, but his success came at the cost of the other's failure. In an 1867 letter to William, Alice writes of herself, "having so little mind may account for your having so much."

Though Alice had good relationships with her brothers Robertson and Garth Wilkinson, she was particularly close to William and Henry. Her relationship with William was highly flirtatious; he continuously praised her as his model of female perfection. When he announced he was to marry -- a woman who happened to be named Alice -- the original Alice had a particularly severe, lengthy attack that not only kept her from attending the wedding but put a pall over it. Henry seemed to understand Alice best of all, never pitying her as William did, but empathizing with her. She spent much of the end of her life living near him in England. After her death he wrote, "Her tragic health was in a manner the only solution for her of the practical problem of life." He lamented, "her talk, her company, her conversation and admirable acute mind and large spirit were so much the best thing I have, of late years, known here."

In her twenties, Alice toyed with the possibility of marriage though no suitor presented himself. Her health and generally negative opinion of men were serious obstacles. Alice did form a deep attachment beginning in 1879 to Katharine Peabody Loring, when they both taught correspondence courses instructing women throughout the United States without access to education. Alice describes Katharine as having "all the mere brute superiority which distinguishes man from woman combined with all the distinctively feminine virtues." Katharine became Alice's nurse and protector, absorbing what she could of Alice's pain "with unconditional love and sympathy, and proved her allegiance by adopting Alice's own stoical

attitude toward her troubles." They remained near-constant companions for the rest of Alice's life. Whether their relationship was also sexual remains unclear. Only Alice James, William's wife, ever speculated that this might be so.

Alice's life was a kind of non-life spent in and out of bed and institutions, in perpetual pursuit of a cure for diseases both real and imagined. Nevertheless, Alice managed to develop a rich interior world of rigorous intelligence, moral inquiry, and searing honesty that allowed her to make incisive observations, many of which have survived in her copious letters and in her diary, which she began four years before her death. "To a woman whose father had placed negative value on female intelligence and whose family suspected that one person's success was purchased by another's failure," writes Strouse, "addressing posterity even in this covert way seemed a dangerous undertaking."

Alice's diary exposed her ideas about moral courage, forbearance, and what constituted a sense of personal value. She included newspaper clippings on contemporary political matters and vented her radical opinions on "the foibles of the British aristocracy, the evils of imperialism, the stifling weight of tradition in politics, education, and religion." In a "detached, ironic tone -- sometimes bitter, sometimes bemused... she mocked her frailty while creating an impression of energetic vehemence and mildly erotic wit."

When a heavily edited edition of Alice's diary finally appeared in 1934, decades after her death, it was highly acclaimed by critics on both sides of the Atlantic: "Here is a mind so direct and unshrinking," praised the New York *Herald Tribune*, "a humor so penetrating, a gift of words so accurate and uncompromising that the journal has the tonic effect of sunlight itself." *The New Republic* enthused: "In some of her insights, some of her assessments of nineteenth-century humbug, Alice James went beyond either of her eminent brothers, and her judgments on the social history of her day have now the air of something like divinations." When the complete diary was finally published in 1964, *The Saturday Review* called it "One of the neglected masterpieces of American literature."

Nearing the end of her life, in a letter to William, Alice teases him in her inimitable fashion: "Arm yourself against my dawn, which may at any moment cast you and Harry into obscurity."

*Jenny McPhee's most recent novel is A Man of No Moon. She lives in London, but mostly resides at [www.jennymcphee.com](http://www.jennymcphee.com).*