



Why Am I Reading This? Theme Essay

From the moment Americans found themselves pulled into a civil war of unimaginable scale and consequence, they tried desperately to make sense of what was happening to them. From the secession crisis into the maelstrom of battle, from the nightmare of slavery into the twilight of emancipation, Americans of all backgrounds confronted the chaos with stories to explain how things had come to be. People continued to tell themselves those stories about the war and its meaning for the next century and a half, and they probably always will.

Book List:

- *March*, by Geraldine Brooks
- *America's War*, Anthology
- *Crossroads of Freedom*, by James McPherson

Additional Reading:

In the Presence of Mine Enemies, by Edward L. Ayers

The Black Flower, by Howard Bahr

Cloudsplitter, by Russell Banks

The Red Badge of Courage, by Stephen Crane

Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War, by Larry J. Daniel

The March, by E. L. Doctorow

Struggle for the Heartland: The Campaigns From Fort Henry to Corinth, by Stephen D. Engle

The Imagined Civil War, by Alice Fahs

The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery, by Eric Foner

Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, by Eric Foner

Cold Mountain, by Charles Frazier

Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand, edited by James McPherson and William Cooper

Gone With the Wind, by Margaret Mitchell
The Impending Crisis: 1848–1861, by David Potter
The Killer Angels, by Michael Shaara
Uncle Tom's Cabin, by Harriet Beecher Stowe
Patriotic Gore, by Edmund Wilson
Glory, directed by Edward Zwick (film)

Theme Essay

Stories about the American Civil War have been told in many forms, often disguised as something else. Most of the stories at the time came in letters or diaries or reports, fashioned from whatever materials were close at hand. Speeches, made up on the spot or carefully crafted for the world to read, told stories that placed blame and laid out strategies. Newspaper articles written overnight shaped fragments and reports into narratives of victory and loss. Memoirs, short stories, novels, and histories written months or years later wove new patterns of storytelling.

Whatever their origins or timing, all these stories tell more than appears on the surface. They speak, often in spite of themselves, of larger purposes and patterns. Looking back, we can see that they sometimes belied themselves, were often proved wrong by unfolding events, were full of wishful thinking and self-deception. The historical stories we tell today strive for balance and inclusion, but we must recognize that we tell them to ourselves for our own reasons.

The readings selected give us a glimpse of the vast sweep and profound breadth of Americans' war among and against themselves. Each kind of story carries its own power and its own limits. Eyewitnesses had the advantage of firsthand experience but could see things only through their own eyes. The passage of time offers perspective, but intervening events introduce their own distortions. Fiction allows us to engage with the interior lives of characters, but those characters did not actually walk and breathe; they are, unavoidably, projections of ourselves. History, despite its dedication to evidence, has roots in its own time as well as in the past.

“Making Sense of the American Civil War” is organized as a series of five “conversations” that are meant to be considered together. Each conversation is itself arranged as an unfolding story, moving forward in time. The selections necessarily foreshadow and fold back on themselves, for each aspect of life touched every other aspect during these densely packed years. Readers will want to pay attention to when the selections were written, for what purposes, and for whom. Some were composed for one reader – perhaps the author alone – while others were imagined for vast audiences. Some were written for a moment, others to endure for as long as people care about the United States.

The purpose of the selections is to give people interesting things to talk about. The American Civil War is intrinsically interesting, though it has often been buried in cliché and overfamiliarity. Historians’ understanding of the global significance of the war has shifted from fifty years ago, at the time of the centennial, when its major consequence seemed to be the unification of a nation that would stand against communism. Today, the Civil War matters just as much, it seems, for bringing an end to the most powerful system of slavery in the modern world. A hundred and fifty years after the defining war in our nation’s history, we are still discovering its meanings.

Each of the reading selections in “Making Sense of the American Civil War” adds a crucial voice to our understanding of the war and its meaning. The silences or anger or idealism that separates the voices are as important as their commonalities. The American Civil War was not a single thing, a simple thing. It changed shape from the beginning to the end. The war’s full significance was not complete in 1865 and it is not complete yet.

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