



## WHY AM I READING THIS BOOK?

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)

# Book Summaries

## PART ONE – *March and America's War, Part I*

Geraldine Brooks' *March* tells its story through the characters of another novel: *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott's story of sisters and a mother, published in 1868, only three years after Appomattox. Brooks tells the story of the father and husband of those women, the Reverend March. In Alcott's story, he is beloved but significant mainly by his absence. In *March*, we see the story through his eyes, eyes that do not always comprehend clearly what they perceive. We travel with the chaplain into places where he is not wanted, where his values elicit ridicule and contempt. The harsh world of slavery, men, and war challenges everything the March family believes in, including one another. Brooks' novel is a lovely and powerful meditation on America as it descended into the chaos of war.

Another voice in the first conversation is Louisa May Alcott's, drawn from her journal of her experiences as a nurse for the Union in 1862. In this remarkably frank document, the unmarried 30-year-old tells of her determination to find a purpose for her life by helping in the hospitals of Washington, D.C., an important setting in Brooks' novel. Alcott experiences horror, satisfaction, and deep personal trials during her time with the wounded, ill, and dying men. Her journal allows us to compare fiction and firsthand testimony, and to think about what we can learn from each.

## About the Author

Australian-born Geraldine Brooks is an author and journalist who grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney and attended Bethlehem College Ashfield and the University of Sydney. She worked as a reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald* for three years as a feature writer with a special interest in environmental issues. In 1982 she won the Greg Shackleton Australian News Correspondents scholarship to the journalism master's program at Columbia University in New York City. Later she worked for *The Wall Street Journal*, where she covered crises in the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans. In 2006 she was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 2006 for her novel *March*. Her most recent novel, *Caleb's Crossing*, was a New York Times best seller. Other novels, *Year of Wonders* and *People of the Book*, are international bestsellers, translated into more than 25 languages. She is also the author of the nonfiction works *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Foreign Correspondence*. Brooks married author Tony Horwitz in Tourette-sur-Loup, France, in 1984. They have two sons—Nathaniel and Bizuayehu—a dog named Milo and a horse named Butter. They live by an old mill pond on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

**Louisa May Alcott**, the second daughter of Amos Bronson Alcott and Abigail "Abba" May was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania on November 29, 1832. Louisa and her sister Anna took to teaching small children and mended and washed laundry in an effort to help provide for the growing Alcott family. In 1852 Louisa's first poem, "Sunlight" was published in Peterson's magazine under the pseudonym, Flora Fairfield. Three years later, in 1855, her first book, Flower Fables was published. Louisa saw that her loving heart was needed by more than just her family and she headed for Washington, DC. in 1862 to serve as a Civil War Nurse. Like many other nurses, Louisa contracted typhoid fever and although she recovered, she would suffer the poisoning effects of mercury (the doctors at the time had used calomel, a drug laden with mercury to cure typhoid) for the rest of her life. Her stay in Washington prompted Louisa to write Hospital Sketches which was published in 1863 followed by Moods in 1864. At this point Louisa's publisher, Thomas Niles, told her that he wanted "a girl's story" from her. Having spent her life with three of the most interesting girls, Louisa wrote furiously for two and a half months and produced Little Women based on her own experiences growing up as a young woman with three sisters. The novel, published September 30, 1868, was an instant success and sold more than 2,000 copies immediately. In fact the country was so taken with Louisa's story that her publisher begged for a second volume. April 14, 1869 saw the release of the second volume with a response of more than 13,000 copies being sold immediately. Alcott's story of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy had launched her into stardom and helped to alleviate the family's financial problems. Louisa followed up her success with Old Fashioned Girl in 1870. Little Men was published in 1871 followed by Work in 1873, Eight Cousins in 1874, and Rose in Bloom in 1876. During this time, Alcott became active in the women's suffrage movement, writing for "The Woman's Journal" and canvassing door to door trying to encourage women to register to vote. In 1879 Alcott became the first woman in Concord to register to vote in the village's school committee election. Still writing as best as she could, for the mercury poisoning she had received early in life was beginning to take its toll, Louisa published Jo's Boys in 1886. Her father's health finally failed and he passed March 4, 1888. Two days later, at the age of 56, Louisa May Alcott died in Boston, leaving a legacy in wonderful books to be admired and cherished for generations to come.

## Discussion Questions

1. Talk about the significance of characters' names, especially Grace. How does she help March attain grace? Also Annie's children, Prudence and Justice. Was it prudent of March and Grace to try to teach the girl to read? Who, if anyone, receives justice in this story?
2. "A Good Kind Man" (Chapter 13, and again in Ch. 17). March is saved once by the slave girl Zannah writing on the scrap who he is and that he deserves to be saved, as he is a good, kind man. Grace counsels Marmee that if she wants to bring him back to life, she must give him hope and remind him that he is a good, kind man. Is he? Explain how/why we should perceive him that way. What about his cowardice and the dire consequences it had for others? What about his decision to teach Prudence and the consequences that befell Grace? Are these the acts of a good, kind man?
3. No one is without sin, Grace tells March. "It is folly to let this self-flagellation shape your future" (266)—spoken by one who was literally whipped because of March's lack of prudence.
4. "I do not ask your absolution," she tells him (268). But isn't it March who is seeking absolution—a state of grace—from her?
5. Compare the temperaments of Grace (see p. 41 for example) and Marmee (p. 64). Marmee describes herself as a termagant [from the Oxford English Dictionary: a harsh-tempered or overbearing woman; an imaginary deity of violent and turbulent character, often appearing in morality plays].
6. Discuss communication and miscommunication between March and Marmee and "letters filled with lies." What does Marmee learn about truth and lies when she sits down to write a letter home to the girls?
7. How is March changed by his experiences, from a man of "moral certainty...who knew with such clear confidence exactly what it was that he was meant to do" (184)?
8. What does the entry from Louisa May Alcott's hospital journal add to your reading of *March*?

## PART TWO – *America's War*, Anthology

Selections from *America's War* allow us to see through the eyes of people who had to decide for themselves where justice, honor, duty, and loyalty lie. Since struggles over slavery underpinned everything associated with America's Civil War, **Frederick Douglass** begins the conversation by challenging us with a searing speech from 1852. Asked by people much like the March family and their abolitionist friends to give a speech on the Fourth of July, Douglass gives them more than they asked for. His speech strips away any illusions white Americans may have had about their innocence, confronting them directly with the hypocrisy of a nation dedicated to freedom and built on slavery.

**Henry David Thoreau**, a character in *March*, confronts his friends with a blistering defense of John Brown after the aborted 1859 raid on the armory at Harpers Ferry. While much of the nation rushed to denounce and ridicule Brown, Thoreau celebrated him and all that he stood for. Such defenses confirmed the worst suspicions of white Southerners.

**Abraham Lincoln**, elected the year after Harpers Ferry, found himself confronted with disunion even before he took office. By the time he delivered his first inaugural address, presented here, the seven states of the Deep South had already formed the Confederate States of America. His speech was an attempt to reassure the voters who had elected him, announcing that he would not betray their trust by allowing the nation to be divided; that same speech was also an attempt to reassure white Southerners that he would not drive them away. **Alexander Stephens** of Georgia, the vice president of the new Confederacy, replied to Lincoln in the most direct way imaginable, celebrating slavery as the very cornerstone of the new nation.

With the alternatives so starkly drawn, a convention in Virginia debated, week after week, what course that state should take. Priding itself on being the birthplace of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, Virginia knew that its decision whether to join the new Confederacy or to remain with the Union would change everything that followed. **Robert Montague** and **Chapman Stuart** crystallized what many had been saying: Secessionists argued that they had no choice but to defend themselves; Unionists argued that choices did indeed remain, that the country must be saved. Such debates collapsed as soon as Lincoln called for militia from Virginia and other states to put down the rebellion in South Carolina after the firing on Fort Sumter. The convention in

Virginia, which had voted for union only weeks before, now voted for secession. Soon, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas would follow. The Confederacy would embrace eleven states, a vast new nation determined to make itself independent of the United States and to make its place in the world.

Robert E. Lee embodied the agony of disunion. A former commandant of West Point, a man who had lived his entire life in the United States Army, Lee traveled from his posting in Texas to his Virginia home not far from Washington, D.C., to confront the decision. In a recent work of imaginative scholarship, **Elizabeth Brown Prior** reconstructs the tortured days in which Lee struggled with the decision of whether to follow his oath to the United States – indeed, to command its armies – or to follow Virginia on a course about which he was profoundly ambivalent.

**Mark Twain** tells, with his characteristic self-deflating humor, of his own wayward path in the confusing early days of the war. Along with other boys of his Missouri neighborhood, Twain joined the Confederacy only to decide that he had no real stake in the war, and he headed west. **Sarah Morgan**, an 18-year-old girl in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, had been, like her father, a staunch Unionist. But in the first nine months of the war, with her town already occupied by the United States Army, Morgan alternated between defiant glorification of the Confederacy and deep doubt about the war and her own role in it. Like the March girls, her contemporaries in the North, Morgan finds herself surrounded by a way she feels herself powerless to alter.

## About the Editor

Edward L. Ayers is President of the University of Richmond and the author of the Bancroft Prize winning *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859–1863*.

## PART THREE – *America’s War*, Anthology

The horrifying Battle of Shiloh changed Americans’ understanding of the Civil War. Occurring in April 1862, almost exactly a year after Fort Sumter and the secession of Virginia, the battle near the Tennessee–Mississippi border not only redefined the boundaries of the military conflict but also the boundaries of the imaginable. Thousands of men with little training and no experience in war were thrown against one another in days of inexpressible suffering and waste. A desperate, defiant effort by the Confederacy to stop the progress of the Union Army and Navy in the Lower Mississippi Valley – indeed, to push the Union Army all the way back to the Ohio River – the Battle of Shiloh shattered any fantasies people had that the war would be won easily by either side. While the United States prevented the Confederacy from seizing the great victory it had imagined, Union general Ulysses S. Grant was widely attacked for incompetence and worse.

The third conversation in this series, which uses the Battle of Shiloh to confront the experience of war, also features voices from *America’s War*. **Ambrose Bierce**, perhaps the best writer to emerge from the American Civil War, offers an unflinching report of what he saw at Shiloh. Although writing in 1881, when formulaic and self–congratulatory memoirs of the war became bestsellers, Bierce wrote in a self–mocking, disillusioned tone of his own role at Shiloh. Four years later, **Ulysses S. Grant**, by now a hero and former president of the United States (and dying of cancer), tells what he saw of Shiloh. In what is often considered one of the finest pieces of writing to come out of the war, Grant’s *Memoirs* presents the Battle of Shiloh from the perspective of the general responsible for coordinating the movements of tens of thousands of men, many of whom will be killed or shattered for life.

**Shelby Foote**, later famous for his three–volume history of the war, juxtaposes the perspectives of Northerners and Southerners, enlisted men and officers, in his 1952 novel based on the battle. Foote, like Bierce, acknowledges that everyone in a battle sees only a small part of something no one can fully comprehend. In this selection, Foote adopts the perspective of a young Mississippi man, a boy really, who sees war for the first time. His innocence strips away the bombast of speeches he can barely hear. In a very different kind of story, written thirty years after Foote’s, **Bobbie Ann Mason** uses Shiloh as a window on life in our own times. The gory battlefield has become a picnic



spot, a bucolic park where a husband hopes that broken lives can perhaps be put back together.

The final selection for this conversation is only a single page long, a letter from Confederate **General Braxton Bragg** to his troops a few weeks after Shiloh. In his words, we see the fierce dreams that would keep the Confederacy alive for three more years, unbowed by the horror at Shiloh.

## Discussion Questions

1. On p. 115, the editor, Edward Ayers, says this “conversation across time as well as genre, focused on a single battle,” adds a new dimension to this series on America’s War. How does this collection of writing about Shiloh add perspective to deepen our understanding of the Civil War?
2. Is one writer’s account truer than another—Grant vs. Bragg vs. Bierce vs. Foote? Why? What gives an account veracity?
3. What did you think about the inclusion of Bobbie Ann Mason’s short story in this series? Does the use of fiction set against a battlefield trivialize the memory of Shiloh?
4. Talk about the use of simile and metaphor in Bierce’s descriptions. He says the flag snaps excitedly, “with a kind of fierce delight,” and men rush to their arms “in ringing cheers at the exhilarating” bugle call to assembly—the bugle call “which goes to the heart as wine and stirs the blood like the kiss of a beautiful woman” with “wild intoxication” (118).
5. Is this a common description of men going into battle? How do we see their attitudes change once they have witnessed the horrors of war? Yet, examine the final paragraph of Bierce’s piece and the apostrophe on p. 136: “Ah, Youth, there is no such wizard as thou!” in which he seems to be longing for the high intensity of the battlefield vs. the mundane life, the dull canvas that followed.
6. How did you feel about the question of whether to bayonet the dying soldier on the battle field (128)?
7. “Excerpt from the Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant”—Grant assumes that the scene at the rear of the Confederate forces looked much like his own—men lying in whatever might serve as cover, refusing to return to the battle (138). Are scenes such as these part of what we normally think about when we envision battlefield?
8. Grant says the battle of Shiloh “has been more persistently misunderstood than any other engagement between National and Confederate troops” (143). Why do you suppose this was/is?
9. “Excerpt from *Shiloh: A Novel*” Shelby Foote—p. 147: The men who had seen battle called it “seeing the elephant.” Why do you suppose that made sense to them?
10. P.155: The narrator describes the dead man running as “unreligious”—and the young soldier “didn’t want to have any more to do with this war if this was the way it was going to be...because even the dead and dying didn’t have any decency about them: Is that what war does to people—robs them of their decency?

## PART FOUR – *Crossroads of Freedom, America’s War*, Anthology

The fourth conversation in our series begins with James McPherson’s study of Antietam. The most widely recognized Civil War historian of the last quarter-century for his Pulitzer Prize-winning survey, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, McPherson works here on a smaller canvas. The historian does what novelists and writers of memoirs do not: tell the story in as objective a way as possible, with documentation. In McPherson’s understanding, Antietam, fought in Sharpsburg, Maryland, in September 1862 – months after Shiloh, but in a different theater of the war, with different leaders and armies – was the pivotal point in the war. As at Shiloh, neither the Union nor the Confederacy could claim a glorious victory at Antietam, but the Union turned back another Confederate offensive that could have altered the course of the war. For McPherson, the crucial victories at Antietam lay beyond the battlefield, in the diplomatic, political, and racial realms. England and France might well have sided with the Confederacy had it won in Maryland; Lincoln’s party, under relentless attack from the Democrats, gained credibility; and emancipation was announced as a war aim by the United States. After those three events, McPherson believes, the stage was set for ultimate Union victory.

Other historians, of course, differ in their interpretations, pointing out that the Confederacy fought effectively for two more years, that the European powers never came to the side of the United States, that Lincoln was barely re-nominated by his own party in 1864, and that slavery proved remarkably resilient in places where the Union Army could not reach. The selection from **Gary Gallagher** in *America’s War* emphasizes the strength of the Confederate Army and the nation it embodies across four years of all-consuming warfare, suggesting that Antietam may not have been as decisive a crossroads as McPherson argues. The Confederate Army fought many more battles after the summer of 1862, after all, and believed that the crucial test would come in the Northern election of 1864.

A different kind of perspective on the war appears in **Drew Gilpin Faust**’s prize-winning *This Republic of Suffering*, published in 2008. In the excerpt reproduced in *America’s War*, Faust shifts our focus from the course of battle and politics to the suffering of families and communities. She wants us to understand the many meanings of death and the ways death was confronted. Faust would not deny the importance of understanding the issues that McPherson and Gallagher wrestle with, but she would ask that we broaden our vision.

## Discussion Questions

1. The editors say the purpose of the Pivotal Moments in American History series is to encourage interest in problems of historical contingency. [Ref. “5 Cs of Historical Thinking” from historians.org]
2. How does McPherson present Antietam in terms of historical contingency?
3. Contingency reminds us that individuals shape the course of human events. Which individuals do you think most shaped the outcome of Antietam and therefore, as McPherson argues, the outcome of the Civil War?
4. What other battles were raging at the time—political, diplomatic and racial?
5. What impact do you think the new practice of battlefield photography has on the public opinion and leaders’ conduct of the war?
6. How did newspaper coverage at the time compare to media coverage of war in our own time? P. 48—*Harper’s* columnist: “But there is every reason for keeping our eyes steadily open upon the facts.” Do we do that any better today than citizens did during the CW of keeping our eyes steadily upon the facts?
7. What do you think of Gen. George McClellan? How might you explain his actions—or inaction?
8. Why were his troops so fond of him?
9. Why do you think it took Lincoln so long to replace McClellan (not until Nov 7, 1862; p. 152)?
10. Given their opposition to slavery why were Britain and France considering recognizing and supporting the Confederacy? What if Lincoln and the North had said from the outset that this was a battle for freedom, against slavery? [F. Douglass quote bottom p. 61]
11. Talk about Lincoln’s reasons for deciding to issue the Emancipation Proclamation: “a military necessity, absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union,” Sec’y Navy Gideon Welles recalled (70–1).
12. Why did Lincoln hold off until the end of the year (138–9).
13. What was Lee’s thinking in pushing into Maryland? (p. 91–2)
14. How did fighting in MD affect Union morale? (p. 106)
15. Why does the Civil War have such a hold on us, even today? Are we still trying to understand and find meaning in the death and destruction?

## PART FIVE – *America’s War*, Anthology

The final conversation in the series draws from readings included in *America’s War*, and concerns the most unanticipated outcome of the American Civil War: the immediate, uncompensated emancipation of four million people who had been held in slavery for over two centuries. The United States was the most powerful nation sustaining slavery in 1860, and few imagined the institution being abolished as rapidly as it was.

**Abraham Lincoln**, in the first selection, tries to persuade a group of visiting African American clergymen to support his plan for colonizing freed blacks in Central America. Lincoln thinks, at this early point in the war, that it would be better for white and black alike if the two races were separated. Even as Lincoln struggled with the issue, enslaved people were making themselves free whenever and wherever they had access to the Union Army. **John Washington**, in a memoir written for his family in 1873 but published only recently, tells of his escape from slavery in Virginia in the midst of the war.

Following the Union victory at Antietam, President Lincoln drafted the Emancipation Proclamation as a “necessary war act” that would take effect in January 1863. This act allowed **Frederick Douglass**, a decade after he despaired of the plight of African Americans in a United States that seemed determined to deprive them of their rights and their humanity, to rally black men to the defense of the United States because it is now fighting for their freedom. Lincoln himself steadily broadens and deepens his commitment to emancipation, as two letters expressing his thinking reveal. In his 1863 letter to James C. Conkling, the president argues with those who want to end the war without driving it to its conclusion; in the letter to Albert Hodges, the next year, Lincoln lays out the reasons why the war must end slavery. While the Gettysburg Address, given in November 1863, does not speak of slavery directly, its potent language frames the purpose of the war as freedom understood in its broadest terms.

After African American men were finally allowed, in 1863, to enlist for the United States, 200,000 black soldiers and sailors joined the service in just two years. The 1864 reports from **James S. Brisbin** and **Thomas J. Morgan** tell of their valor – and of the disrespect they often endured from their white

compatriots. After it became clear that the United States would win the war and bring freedom with that victory, black Southerners struggled to secure the tools to protect that freedom. In early 1865, **African Americans in Nashville** petitioned the white leadership of the Union party for their rights as citizens in a free America. Their petition is a powerful statement of the highest American ideals. There is no record of a response.

Emancipation was not a single event but a long and uneven series of struggles on plantations and farms, in cities and towns, all across the South. **Margaret Walker**, in a powerful 1966 novel, *Jubilee*, turns stories she heard from her grandmother into a novel about the coming of freedom. In her telling, freedom arrived in degrees of uncertainty, unclear in its reach or its ultimate meanings. **Leon Litwack's** groundbreaking history of the end of slavery, *Been in the Storm So Long*, published in 1979, uses remarkable research to tell the story of freedom as it emerged in the burning of Richmond in April 1865, almost exactly four years after the convention there voted to lead Virginia out of the Union.

Abraham Lincoln would visit Richmond with his son Tad only days later, soon after his inauguration for his second term. That term, so much in doubt over the preceding four years, began with what is generally considered the greatest speech in American history, a brief reckoning with divine purpose and human frailty, a humble effort to find meaning in so much suffering. Six weeks after the speech and two weeks after his visit to Richmond, where newly freed men and women surrounded him, he was assassinated in Washington, D.C. Another chapter in American history began with this death.

Images used throughout *America's War* are a combination of firsthand drawings by "Special Artists" and printed lithographs based on those drawings. These artists sketched what they saw in the army camps and the midst of battle, and often did so under life-threatening conditions. The images they produced offer a perspective and have an immediacy not readily accessible through period photographs, which could capture only images of subjects who were still and safe. In a final essay on "Images of the War," *America's War* illuminates how these artists enabled the public to picture the war as it progressed, and to help us make sense of the American Civil War today.

## Discussion Questions

1. In “Address on Colonization to a Deputation of Negroes,” Lincoln tells the delegation that both races suffer, that their “physical differences are a great disadvantage” to both. Did the white race suffer from the presence of Negroes? How?
2. How did you react when you read the words, “We need free black men capable of thinking like white men”—that is, not like the oppressed blacks, their intellect clouded by slavery?
3. In the Emancipation Proclamation and Lincoln’s letters to James C. Conkling and Albert G. Hodges, how is Lincoln arguing his case? Are his arguments persuasive?
4. What did the Emancipation Proclamation do, in addition to freeing the slaves? Why did Lincoln take that step?
5. Compare Lincoln’s words and attitude in his two inaugural addresses. How has his position changed?
6. In “Men of Color, To Arms!” what rationale does Frederick Douglass use to incite blacks to join the Union army?
7. Discuss the accounts of emancipation from the black point of view, both the eyewitness and fictional selections: “Memorys of the Past” by John Washington, excerpt from *Jubilee* and excerpt from *Been in the Storm So Long*.
8. Why did Vvry refuse to leave the plantation? Families of slaves had been torn apart during slavery when members were sold. Now freed slaves face separation because of their newfound freedom to move.