

Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President by Candice Millard

About the book...

James A. Garfield was one of the most extraordinary men ever elected president. Born into abject poverty, he rose to become a wunderkind scholar, a Civil War hero, and a renowned and admired reformist congressman. Nominated for president against his will, he engaged in a fierce battle with the corrupt political establishment. But four months after his inauguration, a deranged office seeker tracked Garfield down and shot him in the back.

But the shot didn't kill Garfield. The drama of what happened subsequently is a powerful story of a nation in turmoil. The unhinged assassin's half-delivered strike shattered the fragile national mood of a country so recently fractured by civil war, and left the wounded president as the object of a bitter behind-the-scenes struggle for power—over his administration, over the nation's future,

and, hauntingly, over his medical care. A team of physicians administered shockingly archaic treatments, to disastrous effect. As his condition worsened, Garfield received help: Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, worked around the clock to invent a new device capable of finding the bullet.

Meticulously researched, epic in scope, and pulsating with an intimate human focus and high-velocity narrative drive, *The Destiny of the Republic* will stand alongside *The Devil in the White City* and *The Professor and the Madman* as a classic of narrative history. (From the publisher.)

About the author...

Candice Sue Millard is an American writer and journalist. She is a former writer and editor for National Geographic and the author of *The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey*, a history of the Roosevelt–Rondon Scientific Expedition, Theodore Roosevelt's exploration of the Amazon Rainforest in

1913 and 1914. The book was published in 2005. Millard's second book, *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine & the Murder of a President*, was released in 2011. Both books have been best sellers.

Millard is a graduate of Baker University, Baldwin City, Kansas, and earned a master's degree in literature from Baylor University. She lives in Kansas City with her husband and three children.

Book Reviews

This rendering of an oft-told tale brings to life a moment in the nation's history when access to the president was easy, politics bitter, and medical knowledge slight.

James A. Garfield, little recalled today, gained the Republican nomination for president in 1880 as a dark-horse candidate and won. Then, breaking free of the sulfurous factional politics of his party, he governed honorably, if briefly, until shot by an aggrieved office seeker. Under Millard's (*The River of Doubt*) pen, Garfield's deranged assassin, his incompetent doctors (who, for example, ignored antisepsis, leading to a blood

infection), and the bitter politics of the Republican Party come sparklingly alive through deft characterizations. Even Alexander Graham Bell, who hoped that one of his inventions might save the president's life, plays a role. Millard also lays the groundwork for a case that, had Garfield lived, he would have proved an effective and respected chief executive. Today, he would surely have survived, probably little harmed by the bullet that lodged in him, but unimpeded infection took his life. His death didn't greatly harm the nation, and Millard's story doesn't add much to previous understanding, but it's hard to imagine its being better told. Illus. *Publishers Weekly*

Millard (*The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey*) presents a dual biography of the 20th U.S. President and his assassin. James A. Garfield and Charles Guiteau were both born into hardscrabble Midwestern circumstances. While Garfield made himself into a teacher, Union army general, congressman, and President, Guiteau,

who was most likely insane, remained at the margins of life, convinced he was intended for greatness. When he failed to receive a position in Garfield's administration, he became convinced that God meant him to kill the President. At a railway station in the capital, Guiteau shot Garfield barely four months into his term. Garfield lingered through the summer of 1881, with the country hanging on the news of his condition. In September he died of infection, apparently due to inadequate medical care. Millard gives readers a sense of the political and social life of those times and provides more detail on Guiteau's life than is given in Ira Rutkow's *James A. Garfield*. The format is similar to that in *The President and the Assassin*, Scott Miller's book on President McKinley and Leon Czolgosz. Verdict: Recommended for presidential history buffs and students of Gilded Age America.

**—Stephen L. Hupp, West Virginia Univ. Lib., Parkersburg
Library Journal**

What a shame for himself and for the country that the kind, intelligent, and

charming president James Garfield did not see his administration through to completion. (He had been in office only four months when, in July 1881, he was shot by a deranged office seeker; in September, he died.) That is the sentiment the reader cannot help but derive from this splendidly insightful, three-way biography of the president; Charles Guiteau, who was Garfield's assassin; and inventor Alexander Graham Bell, whose part in the story was an unsuccessful deathbed attempt to locate the bullet lodged somewhere in the president's body. Garfield, who largely educated himself and rose to be a Civil War general and an Ohio representative in the House, was the dark-horse candidate emergent from the 1880 Republican National Convention. Guiteau, on the other hand, led a troubled life and came to believe it was his divine mission to eliminate Garfield in revenge for the new president's steps against proponents of the spoils system. Bell could have been the hero of the whole sad story, but his technology failed to save the stricken president's life. Millard's book, which follows her deeply compelling *The River of*

Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey (2005), stands securely at the crossroads of popular and professional history—an intersection as productive of learning for the reader as it undoubtedly was for the author.— *Brad Hooper, Booklist*

Discussion Questions

- 1. Before you started this book, how much did you know of James A. Garfield? Do you agree with Millard that Garfield would have been considered one of the country's great presidents? Is Millard's case for Garfield potential greatness convincing?**
- 2. How would you describe James Garfield? Discuss his numerous accomplishments outside the field of politics. What do you find most impressive about him?**
- 3. To what degree did Garfield's early years shape the man he later became? How do you account for his spectacular rise? In fact, trace his steps as he rose from his work on the Erie and Ohio Canal to become President of the United States.**

4. Talk about the convention madness that catapulted Garfield into the candidacy for the U.S. presidency. Compare the political environment of the time: would you describe it as more polarized than today's...or similar?

5. What were Garfield's political views?

6. Charles Giteau was no stranger to Garfield or to members of his family and administration. He also made his intentions to murder the president quite clear. What could/should have been done, within legal bounds, to prevent him from carrying out his assassination of Garfield? Talk about Guiteau. How would you characterize the madness that led to his carrying out the assassination?

7. Perhaps the most shocking revelations in *Destiny of the Republic* are those concerning the maltreatment at the hand of the Garfield's doctors, who seemed almost willfully ignorant of sound medical practices. How do you explain their mistreatment? What was the medical establishment's attitude toward Joseph Lister's theory on antisepsis? How did Dr.

Bliss gain so much power of the president's medical care?

8. Discuss the patronage system and the way in which Americans felt entitled to government appointments irregardless of competency. Would you say that today's system, based on merit, is an improvement, even though it can be difficult to remove underperforming employees?

9. Why was the courtship between Lucretia and James Garfield so difficult? Talk about the fault lines in their marriage and later their deep attachment to one another.

10. Talk about how Garfield's participation in the Civil War affected him. He made the comment later that "something went out of him...that never came back; the sense of sacredness of life and the impossibility of destroying it." What did he mean? Is his disillusionment common for soldiers of any war? Or was the Civil War particularly savage?

11. Talk about Roscoe Conkling and his relationship with President Chester

Arthur. How would you describe Chester's subsequent administration after Garfield's assassination?

Questions by LitLovers

Read Alikes

Assasination Vacation by Sarah Vowell

From Buffalo to Alaska, Washington to the Dry Tortugas, Vowell visits locations immortalized and influenced by the spilling of politically important blood, reporting as she goes with her trademark blend of wisecracking humor, remarkable honesty, and thought-provoking criticism. We learn about the jinx that was Robert Todd Lincoln (present at the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley) and witness the politicking that went into the making of the Lincoln Memorial. The resulting narrative is much more than an entertaining and informative travelogue -- it is the disturbing and fascinating story of how American death has been manipulated by popular culture, including literature, architecture, sculpture, and -- the author's favorite -- historical tourism.

Though the themes of loss and violence are explored and we make detours to see how the Republican Party became the Republican Party, there are all kinds of lighter diversions along the way into the lives of the three presidents and their assassins, including mummies, show tunes, mean-spirited totem poles, and a nineteenth-century biblical sex cult.

James A. Garfield by Ira Rutkow

James A. Garfield was one of the Republican Party's leading lights in the years following the Civil War. Born in a log cabin, he rose to become a college president, Union Army general, and congressman--all by the age of thirty-two. Embodying the strive-and-succeed spirit that captured the imagination of Americans in his time, he was elected president in 1880. It is no surprise that one of his biographers was Horatio Alger.

Garfield's term in office, however, was cut tragically short. Just four months into his presidency, a would-be assassin approached Garfield at the Washington, D.C., railroad station and fired a single shot into his back. Garfield's bad luck was

to have his fate placed in the care of arrogant physicians who did not accept the new theory of antisepsis. Probing the wound with unwashed and occasionally manure-laden hands, Garfield's doctors introduced terrible infections and brought about his death two months later.

Ira Rutkow, a surgeon and historian, offers an insightful portrait of Garfield and an unsparing narrative of the medical crisis that defined and destroyed his presidency. For all his youthful ambition, the only mark Garfield would make on the office would be one of wasted promise.

The President and the Assassin: McKinley, Terror, and Empire at the Dawn of the American Century by Scott Miller

In 1901, as America tallied its gains from a period of unprecedented imperial expansion, an assassin's bullet shattered the nation's confidence. The shocking murder of President William McKinley threw into stark relief the emerging new world order of what would come to be known as the American Century. *The President and the Assassin* is the story of the momentous years leading up to that

event, and of the very different paths that brought together two of the most compelling figures of the era: President William McKinley and Leon Czolgosz, the anarchist who murdered him.

The March by E.L. Doctorow

In 1864, Union general William Tecumseh Sherman marched his sixty thousand troops through Georgia to the sea, and then up into the Carolinas. The army fought off Confederate forces, demolished cities, and accumulated a borne-along population of freed blacks and white refugees until all that remained was the dangerous transient life of the dispossessed and the triumphant. In E. L. Doctorow's hands the great march becomes a floating world, a nomadic consciousness, and an unforgettable reading experience with awesome relevance to our own times.