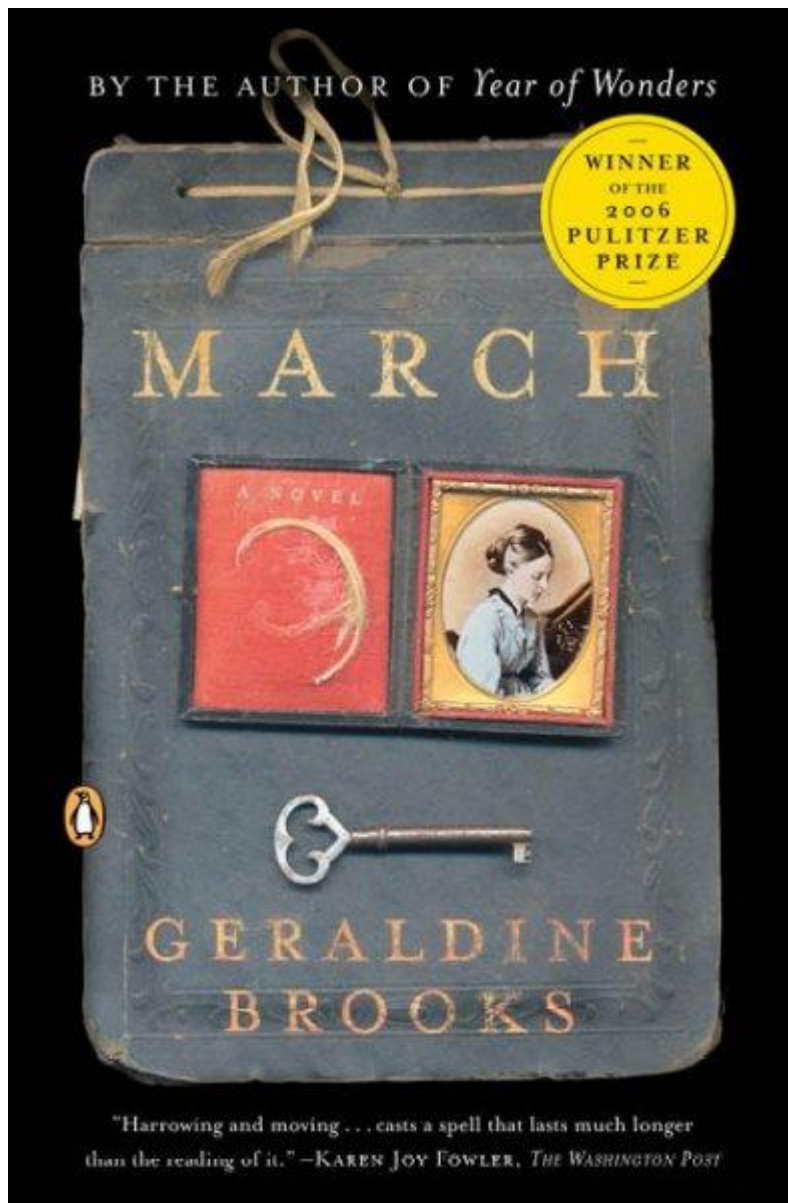


## **Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide**

### **About the Book**



As the North reels under a series of unexpected defeats during the dark first year of the war, one man leaves behind his family to aid the Union cause. His experiences will utterly change his marriage and challenge his most ardently held beliefs. Riveting and elegant as it is meticulously researched, *March* is an extraordinary novel woven out of the lore of American history.

From Louisa May Alcott's beloved classic *Little Women*, Geraldine Brooks has taken the character of the absent father, *March*, who has gone off to war, leaving his wife and daughters to make do in mean times. To evoke him, Brooks turned to the journals and letters of Bronson Alcott, Louisa May's father—a friend and confidant of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In her telling, *March* emerges as an idealistic chaplain in the little known backwaters of a war that will test his faith in himself and in the Union cause as he learns that his side, too, is capable of acts of barbarism and racism. As he recovers from a near mortal illness, he must reassemble his shattered mind and body and find a way to reconnect with a wife and daughters who have no idea of the ordeals he has been through.

Source:

<http://us.penguin.com>

## About the Author

Geraldine Brooks was born into 1950's Australia and grew up in the Sydney suburbs. Her father had settled in Australia after a life of big-band singing in America, and worked on the local newspaper. Her mother homeschooled her. Despite her shyness, Brooks studied journalism at Sydney University, then headed to the US for a graduate degree in journalism from Columbia University.

She landed a job at The Wall Street Journal and was sent on assignment to the Middle East, where she worked as a correspondent for many years and covered everything from America's intervention in Somalia to oil company scandals in Nigeria. Her years as a reporter led directly to her first book. *Nine Parts of Desire* was published in 1994 and provides a glimpse at the lives of Muslim women from across the region, including women such as Jordan's Queen Noor and the daughter of Ayatollah Khomeini.

*Foreign Correspondence* (1997) appeared three years later. It was quite a different book from her first; in it, Brooks talks about the penpals she had as a child, then goes on a quest around the world to find them.

Her first foray into fiction was 2001's *Year of Wonders*, a novel about a small town in England. When the plague breaks out in 1666 Derbyshire, the town of Eyam voluntarily quarantines itself in order to contain the infection, and Brooks weaves a story about how the townspeople deal with this historical event.

## Awards

*March* received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2006 (<http://www.pulitzer.org/>).

## Reviews

### *Booklist*

Brooks' first novel (*Year of Wonders*, 2001) was a straightforward historical novel of the plague. For her second novel, she has come close to creating a new genre; she imagines the life of Captain March, the father in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. This technique has been done before, most famously in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Brooks, however, has combined this idea with two other genres, historical fiction and fictionalized biography. The results, however, are mixed. March appears, much like Bronson himself, as a man whose convictions tread a thin line between admirable and aggravating. He is pure to the point of being ineffectual, and noble to the point of stupidity. The nineteenth-century writing style is accurate and entertaining, but it may be too ornate for some readers. The best moments in the narrative are the peeks inside the mind of the long-suffering Marmee, and thus we learn where Jo gets her famous spunk.

### *Publishers Weekly* \* Starred Review \*

Brooks's luminous second novel, after 2001's acclaimed *Year of Wonders*, imagines the Civil War experiences of Mr. March, the absent father in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. An idealistic Concord cleric, March becomes a Union chaplain and later finds himself assigned to be a teacher on a cotton plantation that employs freed slaves, or "contraband." His narrative begins with cheerful letters home, but March gradually reveals to the reader what he does not to his family: the cruelty and racism of Northern and Southern soldiers, the violence and suffering he is powerless to prevent and his reunion with Grace, a beautiful,

educated slave whom he met years earlier as a Connecticut peddler to the plantations. In between, we learn of March's earlier life: his whirlwind courtship of quick-tempered Marmee, his friendship with Emerson and Thoreau and the surprising cause of his family's genteel poverty. When a Confederate attack on the contraband farm lands March in a Washington hospital, sick with fever and guilt, the first-person narrative switches to Marmee, who describes a different version of the years past and an agonized reaction to the truth she uncovers about her husband's life. Brooks, who based the character of March on Alcott's transcendentalist father, Bronson, relies heavily on primary sources for both the Concord and wartime scenes; her characters speak with a convincing 19th-century formality, yet the narrative is always accessible. Through the shattered dreamer March, the passion and rage of Marmee and a host of aching human minor characters, Brooks's affecting, beautifully written novel drives home the intimate horrors and ironies of the Civil War and the difficulty of living honestly with the knowledge of human suffering.

### *Kirkus*

Brooks combines her penchant for historical fiction (*Year of Wonders*, 2001, etc.) with the literary-reinvention genre as she imagines the Civil War from the viewpoint of Little Women's Mr. March (a stand-in for Bronson Alcott).

In 1861, John March, a Union chaplain, writes to his family from Virginia, where he finds himself at an estate he remembers from his much earlier life. He'd come there as a young peddler and become a guest of the master, Mr. Clement, whom he initially admired for his culture and love of books. Then Clement discovered that March, with help from the light-skinned, lovely, and surprisingly educated house slave Grace, was teaching a slave child to read. The seeds of abolitionism were planted as March watched his would-be mentor beat Grace with cold mercilessness. When March's unit makes camp in the now ruined estate, he finds Grace still there, nursing Clement, who is revealed to be, gasp, her father. Although drawn to Grace, March is true to his wife Marmee, and the story flashes back to their life together in Concord. Friends of Emerson and Thoreau, the pair became active in the Underground Railroad and raised their four daughters in wealth until March lost all his money in a scheme of John Brown's. Now in the war-torn South, March finds himself embroiled in another scheme doomed to financial failure when his superiors order him to minister to the "contraband": freed slaves working as employees for a northerner who has leased a liberated cotton plantation. The morally gray complications of this endeavor are the novel's greatest strength. After many setbacks, the crop comes in, but the new plantation-owner is killed by marauders and his "employees" taken back into slavery. March, deathly ill, ends up in a Washington, DC, hospital, where Marmee visits and meets Grace, now a nurse. Readers of *Little Women* know the ending.

The battle scenes are riveting, the human drama flat.

**Discussion Questions** Source: <http://us.penguinroup.com/static/rguides/us/march.html>

1. Throughout the novel, March and Marmee, although devoted to one another, seem to misunderstand each other quite a bit and often do not tell each other the complete truth. Discuss examples of where this happens and how things may have turned out differently, for better or worse, had they been completely honest. Are there times when it is best not to tell our loved ones the truth?

2. The causes of the American Civil War were multiple and overlapping. What was your opinion of the war when you first came to the novel, and has it changed at all since reading *March*?
3. *March's* relationships with both Marmee and Grace are pivotal in his life. Discuss the differences between these two relationships and how they help to shape *March*, his worldview, and his future. What other people and events were pivotal in shaping *March's* beliefs?
4. Do you think it was the right decision for *March* to have supported, financially or morally, the northern abolitionist John Brown? Brown's tactics were controversial, but did the ends justify the means?
5. "If war can ever be said to be just, then this war is so; it is action for a moral cause, with the most rigorous of intellectual underpinnings. And yet everywhere I turn, I see injustice done in the waging of it," says *March* (p. 65). Do you think that *March* still believes the war is just by the end of the novel? Why or why not?
6. What is your opinion of *March's* enlisting? Should he have stayed home with his family? How do we decide when to put our principles ahead of our personal obligations?
7. When Marmee is speaking of her husband's enlisting in the army, she makes a very eloquent statement: "A sacrifice such as his is called noble by the world. But the world will not help me put back together what war has broken apart" (p. 210). Do her words have resonance in today's world? How are the people who fight our wars today perceived? Do you think we pay enough attention to the families of those in the military? Have our opinions been influenced at all by the inclusion of women in the military?
8. The war raged on for several years after *March's* return home. How do you imagine he spent those remaining years of the war? How do you think his relationship with Marmee changed? How might it have stayed the same?

## Multimedia

### ***Geraldine Brooks' Civil War 'March' (Radio Broadcast)***

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4527755>

A discussion with the author from NPR's *All Things Considered*.

## Further Reading

***Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey From Down Under to All over*** by Geraldine Brooks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1132401>

(Call number: 921 Brooks)

As a young girl in a working-class neighborhood of Sydney, Australia, Geraldine Brooks longed to discover the places where history happens and culture comes from, so she enlisted pen pals who offered her a window on adolescence in the Middle East, Europe, and America. Twenty years later Brooks, an award-winning foreign correspondent, embarked on a human treasure hunt to find her pen friends.

**\*Book Club To Go!\*** *People of the Book* by Geraldine Brooks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1299645>

(Call number: Fiction Brooks)

In 1996, Hanna Heath, an Australian rare-book expert, is offered the job of a lifetime: analysis and conservation of the famed Sarajevo Haggadah, which has been rescued from Serb shelling during the Bosnian war. Priceless and beautiful, the book is one of the earliest Jewish volumes ever to be illuminated with images. When Hanna, a caustic loner with a passion for her work, discovers a series of tiny artifacts in its ancient binding—an insect wing fragment, wine stains, salt crystals, a white hair—she begins to unlock the book's mysteries. The reader is ushered into an exquisitely detailed and atmospheric past, tracing the book's journey from its salvation back to its creation.

***Caleb's Crossing*** by Geraldine Brooks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1376940>

(Call number: Fiction Brooks)

In 1665, a young man from Martha's Vineyard became the first Native American to graduate from Harvard College. Upon this slender factual scaffold, she has created a luminous tale of love and faith, magic and adventure. The narrator of the story is Bethia Mayfield, growing up in the tiny settlement of Great Harbor amid a small band of pioneers and Puritans. Restless and curious, she yearns after an education that is closed to her by her sex.

***Year of wonders: a novel of the plague*** by Geraldine Brooks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1179597>

(Call number: Fiction Brooks)

When an infected bolt of cloth carries plague from London to an isolated village, a housemaid named Anna Frith emerges as an unlikely heroine and healer. Through Anna's eyes we follow the story of the fateful year of 1666, as she and her fellow villagers confront the spread of disease and superstition. As death reaches into every household and villagers turn from prayers to murderous witch-hunting, Anna must find the strength to confront the disintegration of her community and the lure of illicit love. As she struggles to survive and grow, a year of catastrophe becomes instead *annus mirabilis*, a "year of wonders." Inspired by the true story of Eyam, a village in the rugged hill country of England, *Year of Wonders* is a richly detailed evocation of a singular moment in history.

***Little women: or, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*** by Louisa May Alcott

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1005476>

(Call number: Fiction Alcott)

Chronicles the joys and sorrows of the four March sisters as they grow into young ladies in nineteenth-century New England.

***Author's official website***

<http://geraldinebrooks.com/>

Information, news, and resources on the author.

**Read-Alikes** *Source: NoveList*

***Gilead*** by Marilynne Robinson

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1230086>

(Call number: Fiction Robinson)



In 1956, toward the end of Reverend John Ames's life, he begins a letter to his young son, an account of himself and his forebears. Ames is the son of an Iowan preacher and the grandson of a minister who, as a young man in Maine, saw a vision of Christ bound in chains and came west to Kansas to fight for abolition: He "preached men into the Civil War," then, at age fifty, became a chaplain in the Union Army, losing his right eye in battle. Reverend Ames writes to his son about the tension between his father--an ardent pacifist--and his grandfather, whose pistol and bloody shirts, concealed in an army blanket, may be relics from the fight between the abolitionists and those settlers who wanted to vote Kansas into the union as a slave state.

***My Jim: a novel*** by Nancy Rawles

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1235058>

(Call number: Fiction Rawles)

A deeply moving recasting of one of the most controversial characters in American literature, *Huckleberry Finn's* Jim. Written in the great literary tradition of novels of American slavery, *My Jim* is told in the incantatory voice of Sadie Watson, an ex-slave who schools her granddaughter with lessons of love she learned in bondage. To help her granddaughter confront the decisions she needs to make, Sadie mines her memory for the tale of the unquenchable love of her life, Jim. Sadie's Jim was an ambitious young slave and seer who, when faced with the prospect of being sold, escaped down the Mississippi with a white boy named Huck. Sadie is suddenly left alone.

***Cold mountain*** by Charles Frazier

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1121182>

(Call number: Fiction Frazier)

Sorely wounded and fatally disillusioned in the fighting at Petersburg, Inman, a Confederate soldier, decides to walk back to his home in the Blue Ridge mountains and to Ada, the woman he loved there years before. His trek across the disintegrating South brings him into intimate and sometimes lethal converse with slaves and marauders, bounty hunters and witches, both helpful and malign. At the same time, the intrepid Ada is trying to revive her father's derelict farm and learning to survive in a world where the old certainties have been swept away.

***The Quiet American*** by Graham Greene

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1029619>

(Call number: Fiction Greene)

Into the intrigue and violence of Indo-China comes Pyle, a young idealistic American sent to promote democracy through a mysterious 'Third Force'. As his naive optimism starts to cause bloodshed, his friend Fowler finds it hard to stand and watch.

***The March*** by E. L. Doctorow

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1246364>

(Call number: Fiction Doctorow)

From a contemporary American master of historical fiction comes this account of General Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas in the Civil War, as he and his men burn everything in sight and live off the land. The story, told from many points of view, illustrates the confusion and sense of divided loyalties that the war created.

**Extra!**

Discuss as a group where their relatives were and what their lives were like during the 1860s. Was anyone related to people that lived through the Civil War? Were their relatives in other countries? What were their professions?

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

