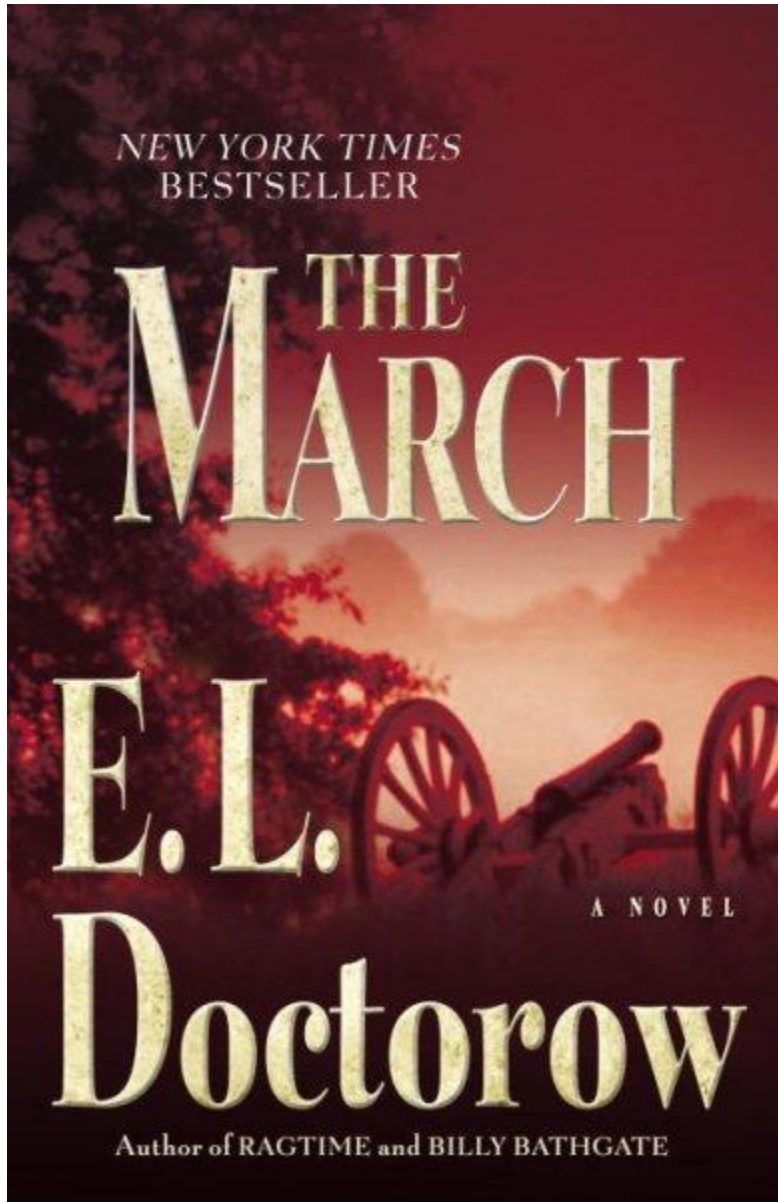


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

### About the Book



Union General William Tecumseh Sherman's devastating march through Georgia and the Carolinas during the final years of the Civil War has a profound impact on the outcome of the war, in a richly textured, evocative historical novel that captures the full experience of the diverse characters caught up in the struggle.

**About the Author** Source: <http://www.bookbrowse.com>

Named for Edgar Allan Poe, Edgar Lawrence Doctorow occupies a central position in the history of American literature. On a shortlist that might also include Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow is generally considered to be among the most

talented, ambitious, and admired novelists of the second half of the twentieth century. Long celebrated for his vivid evocations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American life (particularly New York life), Doctorow has received the National Book Award, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Edith Wharton Citation for Fiction, the William Dean Howell Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the presidentially conferred National Humanities Medal.

Doctorow was born in New York City on January 6, 1931, and, like the novelist Everett in *City of God*, attended the Bronx High School of Science. After graduating with honors from Kenyon College in 1952, he did graduate work at Columbia University and served in the U.S. Army, which stationed him in Germany. In 1954, he married Helen Setzer. They have three children. Doctorow was senior editor for New American Library from 1959 to 1964 and then served as editor in chief at Dial Press until 1969. Since then, he has devoted his time to writing and teaching. He holds the Glucksman Chair in American Letters at New York University and over the years has taught at several institutions, including Yale University Drama School, Princeton University, Sarah Lawrence College, and the University of California, Irvine.

With *The Book of Daniel*, his third novel, Doctorow emerged as an important American novelist with a strongly political bent. A fictional retelling of the notorious Rosenberg spy case, the novel deftly evokes the complex anxieties of Cold War America, shuttling back and forth in time from the 1950s, when Paul and Roselle Isaacson are convicted and electrocuted, to the late 1960s, when their troubled son, Daniel, a grad student at Columbia, must deal with the consequences of his unusual birthright. *The Book of Daniel* was adapted in 1983 into the film, *Daniel*, starring Timothy Hutton and directed by Sidney Lumet. Four years after *The Book of Daniel* came *Ragtime*, a dazzling reimagining of the United States at the dawn of the twentieth century by means of a plot that, like *City of God*, ingeniously brings together real-life figures—such as Henry Ford, J. P. Morgan, Harry Houdini, and Emma Goldman—with an array of invented characters. *Ragtime* was named one of the 100 best English-language novels of the twentieth century by the editorial board of the Modern Library and was adapted into a successful Broadway musical in 1998. *The March* was published in 2005.

Widely acclaimed for the beauty of his prose, his innovative narratives, his feel for atmospherics, and above all for his talent for evoking the past in a way that makes it at once mysterious and familiar, Doctorow has created one of the most substantial bodies of work of any living American writer.

## **Awards**

*The March* was the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award and the winner of the Pen/Faulkner Award.

## Reviews

### *BookPage*

Retracing Sherman's march to the sea

E.L. Doctorow begins his engrossing new novel, *The March*, with a 168-word-long, comma-laden sentence worthy of Faulkner. It is a fitting start for this fictional account of one of the defining episodes in the history of the American South—General William Tecumseh Sherman's destructive military campaign across three states, which brought a devastating close to the Civil War.

Doctorow is one of our great American storytellers, employing panoramic narratives to tell the stories of events and epochs that shaped us as a nation. There is often a strong undertow of violence in his work, whether he is depicting the underworld of the 1930s, as he did in *Billy Bathgate*, or cultural excess and racism at the turn of the 20th century, as in his masterwork, *Ragtime*. *The March* does not have the breathtaking, virtuosic synchronicity of plot and character that made the latter impossible to put down, but it does have an undeniably persuasive momentum that mirrors Sherman's relentless drive to the sea.

As the novel begins, Sherman's forces have already cleared Atlanta and have just taken Milledgeville. There, the first of many characters join the refugee parade. Pearl, a white-skinned slave sired by her master, is all but adopted by a company commander. Emily Thompson, daughter of a local judge who has just died of natural causes amid the chaos, casts her fate as a volunteer nurse with one of the Union military surgeons, a German named Wrede Sartorius. Two Confederate deserters, Arly and Will, don the uniforms of the fallen enemy and blend in with the massive exodus of soldiers and former slaves.

The intertwined fates of these and the numerous other characters introduced en route give the often-told story of Sherman's march a new heart and soul. A few will make it to the end of the novel (and the march); most will fall behind or even die along the way. The storyline, like the march itself, has room for all manner of saints and sinners, orphans and criminals, officers and foot soldiers, men and women, whites and blacks. As he often does, Doctorow introduces actual historical figures into the action, most notably Sherman himself. Grant, Lincoln and their wives make cameo appearances,

as does the fictitious Coalhouse Walker, Sr., father of the main character in *Ragtime*.

Giving away too much of the plot would spoil the pleasure that readers will encounter with each of Doctorow's clever narrative turns. Truth to tell, though, while intricate plots have always driven Doctorow's stories, here plot remains subordinate to the relationships among the characters. Still, there are some marvelous moments, including one that involves a Johnny Reb masquerading as a battle photographer in order to assassinate Sherman, and another in which a slave child is rescued by a British journalist. Pearl, arguably the central character of the book, has her share of adventures and awakenings on the road to freedom, and there is a wounded soldier with a spike in his head who won't quickly be forgotten.

Be forewarned: while the battle scenes in the novel are convincingly bloody, the true tests of the faint-hearted reader are the many vividly detailed scenes in the makeshift battlefield hospitals, where Dr. Sartorius attempts to repair and save the torn-apart casualties. These frequent moments provide the most lingering images in the novel, reminding us that this truly was the first modern war in terms of sheer brutality.

With this evocative novel, Doctorow puts a human face on something that for many today is just a footnote in history. Sure, we've heard about Sherman's march, maybe even studied it in school as part of the larger story of the Civil War. But a century and a half after the fact, it has become a dim glimmer in our collective memory. Few think about what it must have been like to live through (or die from) the unprecedented swath of destruction, to be one of the individual souls who today would euphemistically be labeled "collateral damage." *The March* rectifies this time-induced amnesia as perhaps only fiction can—reminding us that history is nothing if not the story of those who dare to stray into its path.

#### *Library Journal*

Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's long and bloody march to the sea remains one of the most enigmatic and fascinating chapters of Civil War history. Yet *Ragtime* author Doctorow's fictional re-creation of the event lacks compelling characters, forceful structure, and dominant themes and so fails to make it much more than a romp in the park. A sort of *Canterbury Tales* of the Civil War, the novel allows numerous characters to amble onto the scene and tell their stories, which the novel then generally follows until Lee surrenders and Sherman's march is finished. Among them are Pearl, a black child who passes for white because her color comes from her plantation master father; Stephen Walsh, a lieutenant in Sherman's army, who falls in love with Pearl and sweeps her away; Wrede Sartorius, a grim

and businesslike field doctor for whom medicine is life; Emily Thompson, a young Southern plantation belle who becomes Sartorius's nurse and momentary lover; and General Sherman himself, for whom war is the only life worth living. Doctorow paints his canvas with his typical attention to period detail, but he is no Shelby Foote (*Shiloh*), Howard Bahr (*The Black Flower*), or Madison Jones (*Nashville 1864*), and this effort simply fails to engage. Still, his fans will be clamoring for it; be prepared.

### *Publishers Weekly*

Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas produced hundreds of thousands of deaths and untold collateral damage. In this powerful novel, Doctorow gets deep inside the pillage, cruelty and destruction—as well as the care and burgeoning love that sprung up in their wake. William Tecumseh Sherman ("Uncle Billy" to his troops) is depicted as a man of complex moods and varying abilities, whose need for glory sometimes obscures his military acumen. Most of the many characters are equally well-drawn and psychologically deep, but the two most engaging are Pearl, a plantation owner's despised daughter who is passing as a drummer boy, and Arly, a cocksure Reb soldier whose belief that God dictates the events in his life is combined with the cunning of a wily opportunist. Their lives provide irony, humor and strange coincidences. Though his lyrical prose sometimes shades into sentimentality when it strays from what people are feeling or saying, Doctorow's gift for getting into the heads of a remarkable variety of characters, famous or ordinary, make this a kind of grim Civil War *Canterbury Tales*. On reaching the novel's last pages, the reader feels wonder that this nation was ever able to heal after so brutal, and personal, a conflict.

## **Literary Criticism**

### *Making War Hell*

Since everyone knows how they will end (as well as how they started), novels about great historical episodes had better have strong middles. Without the benefit of normal suspense to lure us onward through events, such stories have to seize and hold and carry us in much the same way a snake digests a mouse, by means of rhythmic muscular pulses that push and pull at the same time. Call it peristaltic storytelling: that process by which a writer captures his audience not by creating loose ends that must be followed, but by swallowing the reader whole and then conveying him -- firmly, steadily, irresistibly -- toward a fated outcome. E. L. Doctorow's heart-squeezing fictional account of Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's fiery, rapacious last campaign through the cities and countryside of the Confederate South moves along in the manner I've described -- a narrative

style that couldn't be more fitting because it reflects, we come to see, the way that Sherman's conquering army moved, like a sort of infernal carnivorous worm or slug. "Imagine," one character says, "a great segmented body moving in contractions and dilations at a rate of 12 or 15 miles a day, a creature of a hundred thousand feet. It is tubular in its being and tentacled to the roads and bridges over which it travels."

Most of the action in "*The March*" takes place in this creature's elongated gut as it traces its infamous historic course from Atlanta to Savannah and beyond, excreting smoke and rubble from its hindparts as well as thousands of indigestible skeletons. The monster eats everything. It's an omnivore, feeding on soldiers and civilians, men and women, black people and white folk, the rich and the poor, the aged and the young, and countless livestock, too. What Doctorow calls the creature's "small brain" (the self-consciously ragged and rough-hewn Sherman, who dresses down to show his solidarity with the troops who take his orders) is hardly a match for its bloated, glutted stomach. The notion that such a wartime organism can, in any meaningful sense, be led is laid waste to in the first few pages.

The rampant destructiveness of Sherman's march is, of course, the stuff of high school textbooks, but what isn't so obvious is the way that destruction transfigures and transforms, pulverizing established human communities and forcing the victims to recombine in new ones. Inside the churning belly of Doctorow's beast, individuals shed their old identities, ally themselves with former foes, develop unexpected romantic bonds and even seem to alter racially. Yes, war is hell, and "*The March*" affirms this truth, but it also says something that most war novels leave out: hell is not the end of the world. Indeed, it's by learning to live in hell, and through it, that people renew the world. They have no choice.

It's Sherman's swath of creation that interests Doctorow, and so he brings on characters such as Pearl, a light-skinned slave girl who's swept up in the march and mistaken at one point -- by Sherman, no less -- for a drummer boy. Because Sherman is grieving over a lost son, his subordinates indulge him in his error.

Later, Pearl, whose father was her slavemaster, falls in love with a white man and tentatively adopts an orphaned black child who, in the end, rejects her because of her light skin and whom she ruefully lets go of. The iron racial calculus that applied before Sherman rained chaos on the South has been replaced by the uncertainty principle. Not only has Pearl been nominally freed, even though she doesn't yet feel so free, she ultimately chooses to pass for white, even though she still considers herself black. When she confesses to her man that she feels confused inside, he tells her,

sighingly, "You will have to let the world catch up to you." He admits that this catching up may take some time, but only the reader and Doctorow know that Pearl will still be waiting when she dies. She'd be waiting if she were alive today, in fact -- just one of the melancholy ironies that hover over the novel like a dust cloud once the noisy armies have passed on.

In their quest to live another day, Will and Arly, two clownish Rebel stragglers, swap uniforms rather than racial identities and end up taking fire from both sides at various points along the march. War, for Doctorow, is a masquerade, a life-or-death circus of desperate opportunism that isn't merely forgivable but mandatory. Pretending to be what one is not, concealing what one is, and devising a whole new self if necessary, is the legitimate animal response to overwhelming political violence. It may even be an integral component in cultural evolution. When Emily Thompson, the pampered socialite daughter of a prominent Georgia judge, takes up with a stoic Union Army surgeon, her prejudices fall away as she learns that all head wounds are created equal. It's a trick we've seen before in similar books -- dip the princess in gore for a humanist epiphany -- but it isn't labored over here, and not every cliché can be avoided (including the field doctor with nerves of steel). When the subject is as large and old as war, the pursuit of pristine originality can thin a story down to nothing. To get through such tales aesthetically unscathed is a finicky, slightly cowardly objective that works against basic honesty and passion.

*"The March,"* if it were a movie, might be said to have a cast of thousands (and war, it's true, makes bit players of us all), but it also has a star, of course: the "small brain" atop the seething colossus. True to this rather minimizing metaphor, Doctorow doesn't spend much energy probing Sherman's inner self or itemizing his thoughts and feelings. Instead, he sets Sherman's body on a horse, gives him a broadly recognizable face and a head full of practical military wisdom, and sends him off into the story to wreak havoc as befits his temperament and training.

Unlike the idealistic leaders he serves and the more optimistic of the freed slaves who end up shuffling along behind his war wagons, prey to Rebel guerrillas and disease and unaware of the great social betrayal that will follow their emancipation, Doctorow's Sherman expects little more from victory than glory for himself and for his officers. He's as arrogant, condescending and patriarchal as any Confederate plantation owner and could easily be on the other side, we sense. (Luckily, Doctorow doesn't harp on this. The interchangeability of the combatants is an easy paradox in war novels, and it's better left latent than pushed up to the surface.) Sherman is most important in the novel not for what goes on inside his skull, but for the turbulent miniature cosmos alive inside his dragging, swollen belly. He's the

head of a serpent, and he doesn't march at all -- no more than history is said to march. It crawls along the ground with open jaws, and the world and its people pass through it and are changed.

*Source: Kirn, Walter. "Making War Hell." The New York Times Book Review 25 Sept. 2005: 1(L).Literature Resource Center.*

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

**Discussion Questions** *Source:*

[http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading\\_guides/detail/index.cfm?book\\_number=1701](http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading_guides/detail/index.cfm?book_number=1701)

1. In the opening chapter of the novel, Pearl prays, "Dear God Jesus . . . teach me to be free." To what extent is her prayer answered? How does she come to understand the difference between freedom and independence?
2. Is Arly, the Southern Rebel, simply a wily individual who takes advantage of any opportunity that presents itself, or is there more to him than that? What do you think motivated his final actions? Discuss both of the misfit soldiers: What redeeming qualities did Arly and Will have? Did each of them deserve the ending he had? Why?
3. General Sherman's description of death as "first and foremost, a numerical disadvantage" is very unemotional. Do you believe he was truly that unfeeling? What other places in the story does this "coldness" show itself? Where is his humanity evident?
4. Discuss Sherman's leadership style. Would you characterize it as paternal, moral, charismatic? Why do you think Sherman was successful (or not successful)? Are there other characteristics you would assign to General Sherman? List a few and discuss
5. Sherman's destruction of everything in his path left nothing with which to rebuild, or to help the freed slaves to begin their new lives. What was the purpose of the pillage and destruction along Sherman's march? Were these acts of opportunity, desperation, or both? Give an example of similar behavior from current events, and discuss the complexity of human reaction when confronted with such serious conflict.
6. Before Sherman's soldiers marched upon Milledgeville, Emily Thompson could not fathom the possibility of the war destroying her



comfortable lifestyle. What changes her mind? What compels Emily to link up with "the enemy" and seek protection with the Union army?

7. Describe Emily's attraction to Wrede Sartorius, and what tests her faith in him. How does Emily transform during the course of the novel?
8. Wrede Sartorius cares for his patients in a dispassionate manner. Does he excel as a battlefield surgeon because of, or in spite of, this outlook? How does this behavior affect his relationship with Emily?
9. Discuss Wrede Sartorius's medical ethics. Do you think they would have been different in peacetime? Give positive and negative examples of his bedside manner. What do you think his true feelings were for Emily?
10. At the end of the novel, Pearl and David are no longer slaves, but are they free? Has Calvin, who has never lived as a slave, ever lived freely? Are any characters free during the war? Colonel Sartorius, Stephen, Sherman, even Lincoln, live under constraints caused by their situations, commitments, and responsibilities. What is freedom? What makes us free? In 2005, has "the world [caught] up" yet?
11. Lt. Clark of the Union army is in charge of a foraging party. Clark has "always believed in reason, that it was the controlling force in his life." How do events in the novel refute this belief—for him and for many others?
12. What does "It's always now" mean in the novel? Why do some characters find that to be an obvious truth, while others find it terrifying? Why might that idea be especially meaningful to a soldier who is living from battle to battle?
13. Historians have debated whether Sherman's march to the sea was simply a particularly brutal act of war or whether it was a war crime. Do you think Sherman's march was justified? Why or why not? Did E. L. Doctorow's novel help you to understand Sherman's belief that this was not only a war between armies but also a war between societies? How did the unspoken orders of the rank and file shape the outcome of the march?
14. What insights does Doctorow give as to the reasons why the average Rebel soldier was fighting? The average Yankee?

15. Sartorius first views Lincoln as weak or diseased, but when he meets the President near the end of the war, his disdain turns to awe. Discuss the reasons you believe he had this change of heart.
16. The romance between Stephen Walsh and Pearl Jameson stands in stark contrast to the war and destruction surrounding them. Describe their relationship. Were you surprised that their connection lasted throughout the war? What do you think happened to them?
17. Hugh Pryce, the English journalist, was stunned to overhear ordinary soldiers discussing moral issues of the war. He believed their concern with substantive moral issues showed "quintessential American genius" and could never imagine Her Majesty's rank and file having such a discussion. Do you agree that this type of questioning and rationalization is uniquely American? Why or why not?
18. From the shrewd analytical mind of General Sherman, the stoicism of Wrede Sartorius, the compassion of Emily Thompson, the feistiness of Pearl and the comic relief of Arly, Doctorow show us the minds of his characters as they struggle to survive the cruelty of war. Which of these or other characters in the book do you think you would be most like in a time of crisis and why?
19. Describe your feelings as you read Sherman's Special Field Order to himself at the end of the war—to pitch a tent in the forest and spend one last night beneath the stars. Have you ever known someone in the military who found it difficult to transition back into civilian life?
20. There were many survivors in *The March*. Some survived with integrity and honor. What characteristics did these characters hold that helped them maintain their civility during war?

## **Multimedia**

### ***E. L. Doctorow on Sherman and 'The March' (Radio Broadcast)***

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4964601>

Discussion of the book on NPR's All Things Considered.

### ***Edgar Lawrence Doctorow: The March (Video Clip)***

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBdlwYeoNHI>

The author's appearance at the Prague Writers' Festival 2007.

## **Further Reading**

**Ragtime** by E. L. Doctorow

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1021211>

(Call number: Fiction Doctorow)

*Ragtime* captures the spirit of America in the era between the turn of the century and the First World War. The story opens in 1906 in New Rochelle, New York, at the home of an affluent American family. One lazy Sunday afternoon, the famous escape artist Harry Houdini swerves his car into a telephone pole outside their house. And almost magically, the line between fantasy and historical fact, between real and imaginary characters, disappears. Henry Ford, Emma Goldman, J. P. Morgan, Evelyn Nesbit, Sigmund Freud, and Emiliano Zapata slip in and out of the tale, crossing paths with Doctorow's imagined family and other fictional characters, including an immigrant peddler and a ragtime musician from Harlem whose insistence on a point of justice drives him to revolutionary violence.

***All the Time in the World: New and Selected Stories*** by E. L. Doctorow

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1374271>

(Call number: Fiction Doctorow)

Doctorow returns with an enthralling collection of brilliant, startling short fiction about people who, as the author notes in his Preface, are somehow "distinct from their surroundings-people in some sort of contest with the prevailing world".

***World's Fair*** by E. L. Doctorow

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1021213>

(Call number: Fiction Doctorow)

New York is the setting and a central character in this wonderfully moving and evocative novel of a boy growing up and a family surviving in the 1930s. Told in the voices of its young protagonist, his mother, and his older brother, the story unfolds against a background of the grim economic realities of the Great Depression and the indomitable hopes for the future as embodied in the wondrous exhibits of New York's World's Fair.

***Author's official website***

<http://www.eldoctorow.com/>

News and resources from the author.

## **Read-Alikes**

***The Widow of the South*** by Robert Hicks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1248071>

(Call number: Fiction Hicks)

Carnton Plantation, 1894: Carrie McGavock is an old woman who tends the graves of the almost 1,500 soldiers buried there. As she walks among the

dead, an elderly man appears--the same soldier she met that fateful day long ago. Today, he asks if the cemetery has room for one more. Based on an extraordinary true story, this brilliant, meticulously researched novel flashes back to 1864 and the afternoon of the Civil War.

***The Black Flower: a novel of the Civil War*** by Howard Bahr

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1119993>

(Call number: Fiction Bahr)

As John Bell Hood's Army of Tennessee literally disappears in a hail of cannon and rifle fire from the Union Army's entrenchments, young rifleman Bushrod Carter vividly imparts the Confederate charge and its deadly consequences. After he is brought to a makeshift hospital, Carter comes under the care of a young southern woman named Anna, who, even in the midst of battle and defeat, manages to find ways to express her love. Written with reverent attention to historical accuracy, *The Black Flower* is a powerful reminder that the war that divided America will not vanish quietly into the pages of history.

***March*** by Geraldine Brooks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1235833>

(Call number: Fiction Brooks)

From Louisa May Alcott's beloved classic *Little Women*, Geraldine Brooks has animated the character of the absent father, March, and crafted a story "filled with the ache of love and marriage and with the power of war upon the mind and heart of one unforgettable man" (Sue Monk Kidd). With "pitch-perfect writing" (*USA Today*), Brooks follows March as he leaves behind his family to aid the Union cause in the Civil War. His experiences will utterly change his marriage and challenge his most ardently held beliefs. A lushly written, wholly original tale steeped in the details of another time, *March* secures Geraldine Brooks' place as a renowned author of historical fiction.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

