

**MORE  
Listening  
for God in  
Contemporary  
Fiction**

**THE  
EMMAUS  
READERS**

**Edited by  
Susan M. Felch  
and  
Gary D. Schmidt**



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*For Jim and Shirley Weimer  
and for Michele and Ryan,  
with thanks for the ways you have helped me pay attention.*

—S.M.F.



*For Larry and Pat Perron,  
with thanks for the story you tell.*

—G.D.S.

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## Introduction

Having been together for several years now as the Emmaus Readers, it seems to us reasonable and just to offer some observations on Life Within a Book Club—which we now give here, with humility, recognizing that the experiences of book clubs will differ and that ours may be more than slightly affected by the long, gray winters of Michigan that end with the last frosts in the final week of May and pick up again with the first drifty snow that falls on golden September leaves. In such a cold, we here in Michigan tend to cling to our communities and to read about warm and blue places. It may be that those needs have affected both the selection of our books, and the frequency of our meetings. But, we suppose, all book clubs may similarly be seasonally adaptive, no matter in what part of the continent they find themselves. We may not be so different after all.

First observation: Everything in a book club goes better with good food and good drink. It really did not take us long to discover this. We began with bottles of water and quickly found that that would not do at all. We tried bright candy mints in small glass dishes and found that to be only marginally better. Cashews were better, but just by a bit. We now eat through most of our meetings and have introduced each other to European cheeses and spicy herbal spreads and twisted breads and berry jams and seasonal fruit and all manner of good things that start out in wicker baskets and find their way to the plates we balance beside our novel of the month. As for the nature of the drink we serve each other, we leave that discussion to those of wide latitudinal propensities.

What we have found is that there is something so absolutely right about this. Eating with one another is, after all, a communal act.

Sharing food creates the bonds and relationships that are essential to any community, and is simultaneously a celebration of the goodness and wholeness and marvelous nature of a world that can produce such good things, and of a God who is first the creator. These bonds and celebrations are not dissimilar from the bonds and celebrations that we establish in a book club, where we share the same reading, share openly and with some vulnerability our responses, share the same gladness of communal discussion, and share in thanksgiving for creativity that can produce such art.

Second observation: There are times when, as we gather to select books for the coming year, we think, How could our friend here, usually so sane and respectable, of such good opinion and sound judgment, have made such a loony suggestion as this novel? It is true, *loony* is the word that comes to mind. And how embarrassing that the usually sane friend pursues the choice, even when we try to push the book to the margins of our discussion, as if somehow once there, it might drop away to the oblivion it deserves. Still, the usually sane friend pursues the choice, until finally we yield, patting ourselves on the back for the grace and compassion we have shown in the face of this, well, looniness.

And then—and this is infallible—the book turns out to be wonderful, just the right one for the month, and perfect in the context of the other books we are discussing this year. How could we not have seen it at the time? How loony *we* were, and how glad we are that book clubs are there to teach us this truth: that at times, our own judgments may be narrow, provincial, parochial. A community such as this teaches us how wide is the world. A community such as this shows us how deep and wide is the love of God, who has invested creativity into his creation in such lavish measure.

Third observation: It is remarkable how frequently we come to meetings and, soon after the discussion about a book begins,

think: How extraordinary that they are all so very wrong! Didn't they get it? Didn't they understand the words on the page? So we press our point and then discover, strangely, that others in the group think that, goodness, *we* are wrong! How can that be? We must not have expressed ourselves clearly enough, so we persist. And they do, too! As if they believe themselves to be right!

Book clubs teach us the value of multiple understandings and judgments. Or, to be blunt, they teach us humility. They teach us the value of the other and the other's perspective. They teach us to walk carefully with our opinions, and to hone those opinions, of course, so that we can speak well and precisely, but also to listen carefully to those other voices that may see things in an entirely different light. This is especially true, we've found, when the voices are soft and unaggressive. We remember that God speaks in a still, small voice—and in still, small voices.

Fourth observation: Firelight will do.

Fifth observation: There are times when one of us, at some point in the conversation, will read aloud a line or two that she has found to be remarkable, either because of its meaning, or its sound, or its visual beauty, or for the evidence of the loving hand of the writer. And as that line is being read aloud—it may be just a short line from a five hundred-page novel—but as it is read aloud, heads nod, and there are smiles all around. We all remember it. Many of us have marked it. And perhaps the line isn't crucial to the meaning of the book, and perhaps it isn't all that significant even in the context of its chapter, but we all remember it. It is the line that, Emily Dickinson would say, you would tip your hat to.

We are, at that moment, in perfect communion. We have all come to the same place, separately, and now together. Perhaps that is what great beauty is in the world to do.

Sixth observation: Decaffeinated coffee will *not* do.

Seventh observation: Living in a book club is dang hard work. Living in a book club means reading a novel that may be very long, that you have not chosen, that you may not be particularly excited about, and that you must finish in four weeks or less. Living in a book club means reading this novel in the cracks of all of your other commitments, which may be legion. Living in a book club means adjusting your schedule and schlepping across town or from one town to another sometimes late at night, knowing that there will be good food and talk, but looking through the windshield and wondering if those snowflakes are going to start coming down a whole lot harder before you get home—and they probably will.

A book club is, in some small way, a commitment to another. In that sense, book clubs have at least a tinge of that best of human qualities: selflessness. We gather to express ourselves, yes. But more, we gather to learn from each other, and to teach each other—or, to give and to receive grace from each other. Living in a book club is dang hard work, but it smacks of all good hard work that looks beyond the immediate and the self-centered.

Final observation: All of us come to a book club meeting with the recognition that we should be bringing something to it. On the one hand, this means that we are responsible to each other to bring our own understandings and observations to the group. But this means first that we have come to the books at hand wholeheartedly. It may be that art can speak to an empty heart and a closed soul. But art, if it is to truly speak, must speak to people who live in the world, who come to it with all of the baggage of their lives, and who confront that work by being fully present, by giving it the attention it deserves. Living in a book club reminds us to give a book the attention it deserves. Living in a book club reminds us to pay attention—and anything that will do that in a world that throws up lights and gee-gaws and glitz and celebrity

so that we do not pay much attention is worth holding on to dearly.

The pieces that you are about to read represent the thoughts, musings, and observations of a group of readers like yourself, interested in the ways in which contemporary writers of fiction engage with the most significant spiritual questions and press us as readers to think seriously about how their art goes about that engagement. As in the first volume, the guides and discussion questions are meant to prompt and to prod and to point—they are not meant to serve as a substitute for reading the novels, nor are they meant to suggest that these are the sole ways of reading these novels. As we have written before, they are guides to thinking about these novels with spiritual eyes—meaning that they try to draw out the ways in which writers confront readers with the deepest matters of the spirit. In short, they suggest why it might be important to be paying attention.

As for the Emmaus Readers, we learn from each other that everything in this mortal life is transient. One of our readers will be moving to the Pacific Northwest within the year—and complains that the commute to Michigan would be terribly long, for which we have little sympathy. Another has committed more hours to his own writerly tasks, and we suppose, grudgingly, that we have to honor that. A theologian from Calvin Theological Seminary has joined the Readers and is represented now in this volume; we have tried not to designate him as the Token Theology Guy to whom we turn for clarification of ecclesiastical niceties, but sometimes we do. As for the rest of us, we read as we are given the grace to do so.

May you as well.

## The Battle Hymn of the Republic

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;  
His truth is marching on.

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
His truth is marching on.

I have seen him in the watchfires of a hundred circling camps;  
They have builded him an altar in the evening dews and damps;  
I can read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;  
His day is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never sound retreat;  
He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment seat;  
O be swift, my soul to answer him; be jubilant, my feet!  
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,  
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;  
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free!  
While God is marching on.

—*Julia Ward Howe, 1862*

PART  
ONE

“Mine Eyes Have  
Seen the Glory”

## “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory”

A year into the Civil War, Julia Ward Howe wrote her “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which in its language and martial qualities echoes the powerful, confident rhythms of righteous anger. One side, Howe asserts, heads into war armed with God’s truth—indeed, holding the terrible, swift sword of God himself. Certainly, ideals are powerful things to believe and to work toward, but Howe’s narrator has seen them fulfilled: “Mine eyes have seen the glory.”

But would that same narrator have come from the fields of Antietam, of Chancellorsville, of Gettysburg, of Shiloh, of Vicksburg, of Atlanta, having seen what happens when ideals clash, and still be able to sing confidently, “Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!”?

Perhaps. But what happens when ideals that we hold close and dear lead to disaster? What happens when our righteous anger leads to innocence defiled? What happens when our sure confidence leads to unexamined destructiveness? What happens to our individual ideals when, having been played out on a public stage, they lead in terrible, swift directions that we had never imagined? Or, what happens when ideals fail? What happens when the real world and the ideal world come up against each other and we come to impossible choices?

These are the questions the writers of this section ask, and their gaze is unflinching. In *March*, Geraldine Brooks pictures a man whose ideals are as lofty as the stars—but their loftiness itself creates their impossibility. In *Intuition*, Allegra Goodman examines the ideals of the scientific community and calls into question any real hope for objectivity in a world of human emotion and

motivation. And in *Fieldwork*, Mischa Berlinski shows the clash of many goods—scientific and spiritual—and asks what might happen to those who feel called to enact those goods and those whose lives are touched by their attempts.

“Mine eyes have seen the glory,” writes Julia Ward Howe. “Then hold on tight,” these writers warn everyone else.

## MARCH Geraldine Brooks

(2005)

**Synopsis** ■ *March* is a novel imaginatively constructed to push us to consider carefully its two large sources: Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and the diary and letters of Alcott’s father, Amos Bronson Alcott. From the first source, Brooks draws the characters of the four March daughters and the situation of their father being away during the Civil War. From the second source, she draws the characters of March and his wife, Marmee, as well as the description of the idealism that dominated Bronson Alcott’s life—and that warred with his interest in the practical matters of the world.

The novel begins with March as a chaplain (Bronson Alcott was a teacher and educator, but never a chaplain) fleeing a Union loss, helping a wounded soldier to escape, and encountering the first of his many failures: while crossing a river, the wounded soldier panics, and to save himself, March kicks at the soldier, who drifts away and is lost. Filled with remorse, March goes to an army hospital established on an old plantation and finds that it is the very plantation he had visited twenty years earlier. There he had met Augustus Clement, a wealthy, noble, and high-minded man to whom March was strongly attracted. He had also met Grace, a slave, and fallen in love with her. When, at her urging, he had taught another young slave to read, he was found out and removed from the plantation, but not before helplessly watching Grace being savagely whipped at the orders of the high-minded Mr. Clement.

March does well as a traveling merchant, and he returns to New England a wealthy man. There he meets Marmee Day. Attracted by her abolitionist ideals, he soon marries her, and they have four daughters together. But the past—and March's own ideals—keep intruding, so that when the Civil War is declared, March heads south with the army as a chaplain. There he fails in battle and, later, fails in his duties as a chaplain when those to whom he preaches find him false and absurdly unworldly. He is reassigned to a contraband experiment—a cotton farm on which an Illinois businessman, Ethan Canning, is trying to run a for-profit business manned by former slaves who are now being paid for their labor. March arrives with all of his idealism and naiveté intact, and he fails to understand the real conditions under which they all labor.

The farm is destroyed by Confederate forces, and all of March's hopes and expectations are thwarted; to save something, he tracks the Rebels who have taken some of the freedmen, planning to sell them into slavery. But this plan, too, is thwarted. March is shot, rescued, and sent to a hospital, where he once again finds Grace, who nurses him until Marmee comes down to the hospital. Faced with the loss of his ideals, March has no desire to return home. He does so only with Grace's urging, there to regain some sense of purpose.

■ Geraldine Brooks (b. 1955) grew up in a suburb outside Sydney, Australia, with an American father who had been an itinerant big band singer and an Australian mother who had been a radio announcer. A sickly and shy child, she resolved to overcome both encumbrances and entered into journalism, attending first Bethlehem College Ashfield and then the University of Sydney, as well as the graduate school

On the Author

of journalism at Columbia University. After working three years at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, she was hired by the Cleveland bureau of the *Wall Street Journal*, who later sent her as a foreign correspondent, first to cover Australasia, then the Middle East (which led to her book *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* [1995]), and finally Bosnia, Somalia, and Nigeria; she wrote of these days in her memoir, *Foreign Correspondence* (1998).

After an arrest in Nigeria, Brooks began to think about changing her career and finding ways to balance it with a family. She left the *Wall Street Journal* and soon after wrote her first work of historical fiction, *Year of Wonders* (2001), a novel set in the seventeenth century, in which the plague is transported out of London to a small country village that resolves to isolate itself to prevent further infection. This was followed by *March* (2005)—which won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction—and most recently *People of the Book* (2008), a reconstructed tale of the Sarajevo Haggadah, one of the earliest illuminated Jewish manuscripts.

Though her novels are at times described as anachronistic, with contemporary sensibilities overlaid upon historical events, they are also richly researched and textured works, with remarkably strong narration and a powerful imaginative interplay that evokes the historical period in complex and subtle ways.

#### ■ Considering the Novel

One of the items that attracts March's eye when he first enters the elegant reception hall on the plantation of Mr. Augustus Clement is *Bound Prometheus*, a sculpture that suggests something of Mr. Clement's wealthy, learned, ordered lifestyle. It refers, of course, to the punishment the

gods meted out to the titan who dared to bring fire to humanity against the divine will. Twenty years later, March returns to that same hall and sees the sculpture again, but now the plantation house has been commandeered by the Union army as a hospital. When March enters, he sees a wounded soldier lying beneath the sculpture, his face portraying the same contortions that mark those of the agonized Prometheus. The sculpture strikes him again, perhaps because now its meaning is clearer: Prometheus was a being of high ideals and high hopes for bringing enlightenment—literally—to those in need. But he came up against a world not particularly interested in enlightenment, in which raw power and greed and anger and hatred and lust for possession overpower his ideals and leave him bound and tortured.

The sculpture is, in fact, an emblem of March's own life, for this is a novel that asks this question: Can a man of good intention, with high ideals, with a strong belief in the goodness of humanity and its growth toward maturity and refinement, with a central affirmation of human integrity—can such a man exist in a world of woe? Or, at best, can such a man stave off complete disillusionment, given the practical realities of the world around him? What does the man who is “interested in laying up the riches of the mind” (18) do when those riches are suddenly tarnished? What happens when a man is “dipped in the river of fire” (242)? What do you do with the tortured, agonized soldier beneath the elegant, classical statue?

March is at first strongly attracted to Augustus Clement, fascinated by his manner, by the well-run nature of his plantation, by his library, by the quality of his wide-ranging mind. He is, in fact, so astonished by Clement's capacities that he is led by Clement to believe that slavery itself is a necessary and good institution, a duty imposed on a more refined and cultured race to bring along

an inferior race to a greater moral sensitivity; Clement's slaves, March concludes, are “fortunate” (27). Later, when he observes Grace being whipped for encouraging him to teach a slave child to read, he is disabused and comes to a different position. It takes a great deal to shock him to this new sensibility, so struck is he by Mr. Clement's high-mindedness, which seems, to him, to match his own. But when March dares to bring the fire of enlightenment to another, he sees the naked evil of the system firsthand. Lest the reader miss the huge shift in March's sensibility, Brooks uses names almost allegorically to show us how strongly March must be confronted: March observes Grace being whipped as fellow slaves Prudence and Justice—two of the cardinal virtues that Mr. Clement would have so prized—are forced, helplessly, to watch.

When we first meet March, he is idealistic and high-minded, yearning to be the teacher that leads others to his own nobility of mind. He believes his mission is attainable, but the reader and those around him—particularly the slaves—see him as naïve. When he begins teaching Prudence to read, he has been in Virginia for a full year, but he still seems unaware of the law against teaching a slave to read. He perceives Mr. Clement to be a kind and ordered governor of his estate and admires “the relations of affection and trust I had observed between master and servant” (24), but he fails to understand the undercurrents that suggest that there is another side to his governance. Despite multiple clues, March does not guess that Grace is Mr. Clement's daughter or that she has been violated by her brother. He fails to see the irony of the names of Annie's children, Prudence and Justice. Despite all of his vast reading, as Grace notes (31), he seems utterly impractical, utterly unable to negotiate his idealism in the avenues of the real world.

March is the Bound Prometheus, unable to understand or predict the failure of the ideal within the real world. He is unable

to do anything with this dichotomy between the real and the ideal. Grace's brutal whipping forces him to see in Clement the failure of the idealized world he so admires to act righteously and well in the real world, but he can do nothing with this insight. When he leaves the estate, he attends a church meeting and points out the hypocrisy of sending funds to Africa for missionary needs while selling slaves in the marketplace next door—but he fails to go to the marketplace to free a single slave. When he crosses the river after the battle that opens the novel, he tries to save a wounded man—but by fending off the soldier's panic in the river, he loses him: "I wonder where he lies. Wedged under a rock, with a thousand small mouths already sucking on his spongy flesh. Or floating still, on and down, on and down, to wider, calmer reaches of the river" (8). When March returns to the Clement estate after twenty years, his duty is "to bring comfort where I could" (49), but he is unable to help a single wounded soldier in any real way, much as the doctor fails to save any soldier on whom he works. In short, his idealism is utterly ineffective. But March seems unaware of this ineffectiveness. While he rejects the stern Calvinism of the army chaplain, he fails to feel the harsh justice of the chaplain's own condemnation of March's vague theology as a "love poem" (8). The reader wonders if March isn't indeed the "loping nimshi" (31) his father named him.

The opening of the novel expresses March's ambivalence about his ability to even convey truth. He writes a cheerful, hopeful letter to his wife and daughters, in which he seems to speak out of his lofty high-minded world. "Do you recall the marbled endpapers in the Spenser that I used to read to you on crisp fall evenings just such as this? If so, then you, my dearest one, can see the sky as I saw it here tonight, for the colors swirled across the heavens in just such a happy profusion" (3). But in reality, the colors he is imagining are the colors of blood and the silt eddies of

the river in which so many have just perished. He cannot express this to his daughters; perhaps, he believes, his silence will protect them. But in fact, it seems that his refusal to write the truth is a way to protect himself from the destruction of his own ideals. He muses that there is a reason that men have put their gods into the heavens above them: "For as soon as a man lets his eye drop from the heavens to the horizon, he risks setting it on some scene of desolation" (4). It is on the horizon that the Bound Prometheus dwells now. March does not want to look at the world as it truly is. He will write of Spenser's marbled pages instead.

Thus his sense that when he moves outside of his lofty world, he has moved into forbidden territory; usually, in his experience, this involves his encounters with Grace. When he first kisses her, his response sounds like something out of a sentimental novel: "The taste of her mouth was like cool spring water. The sweetness of it made me dizzy, and I wondered if I would be able to keep my feet" (34). He struggles between his lofty restraint and his passion, and he feels that he has failed when he yields to his passion. Twenty years later, he sees Grace again and tries to believe that his passion for her is a "moral act": "I wanted to give the lie to every claim of difference save the God-ordained one of Genesis: man and woman created he them" (56). But because he does try to be honest—at least to the reader—he also admits this: "I wanted her. The thought of her—arched, shuddering, abandoned—thrilled me to the core" (56). It is not clear whether the thrill is that of seeing her now, or that of recalling her whipping. He is not so free from this world of woe as he thinks; he, too, is bound.

Passion also dominates his responses to Marmee Day, who will become his wife. At first his responses seem very different from those he has given to Grace. Though her eyes astound him, he remarks that she is not beautiful, or even pretty—but

“noble” (60). He is attracted, too, by her conversation, which she holds “with an open manner and a lack of affectation that I found remarkable and refreshing” (62). He also notes her sense of self-awareness: “I am one of those who knows how I wish the world were; I lack the discipline to make it so” (64), she notes. Which is, of course, exactly true of March, though he lacks the self-awareness to articulate it. But later, by the shores of Walden Pond, under the moon, with the flute of Henry Thoreau playing in the distance, his interest in her is quite different: “At the mere glimpse of her, my mental reservations were swept aside by my bodily longing. I called to her” (86). The scene is not particularly different from the earlier encounter with Grace, and suggests again the precariousness—or impossibility, or foolishness—of believing that one lives only on the ideal plain.

This opening section of the novel sets the trajectory of March’s education in the real world, as he is forced to bring closer and closer together the world of his ideals and the world that he finds in his life directly around him. And it is a terrible forcing.

When twenty years have passed and he becomes a chaplain in the Union army, he still has not acknowledged in any real way the disjuncture between the ideal and the real; he has, in fact, become more certain of the ideal: “I find it suits me, this job of chaplain,” he writes back to his wife, Marmee. “I am, indeed, a ‘chapel man,’ who carries within himself all that’s needed for worship. At last, it is possible to have a part in faith without carved pulpit or Gothic arch, without lace altar cloth and without robes, save my suit of unornamented black” (58). The words are enormously self-satisfied, confident, and sure.

In fact, he is utterly wrong. The ideals that his self-satisfaction lead him to express as a chaplain seem superficial and naïve to those around him. After stopping an act of looting by Union soldiers, he brings the corporal in charge to the commanding officer,

eager to have him rebuked. Instead, the rebuke is turned against him: “You can’t seem to get on with anyone. You’ve irritated the other officers. . . . Even Tyndale can’t abide you—and he’s as much of an abolitionist as you are” (70). March tries to protest, but he is cut off and forced to face the strong gulf between his ideals and reality: “Be frank with yourself for once,” asks the colonel. “Why, there’re about as many genuine abolitionists in Lincoln’s army as there are in Jeff Davis’s. When the boys in this unit listen to you preach emancipation, all they hear is that a pack of ragged baboons is going to be heading north to take their jobs away” (70). But March will not be frank with himself; he never has been frank with himself. He refuses to believe that his ideals are not held elsewhere. It takes the colonel’s threat of revealing his liaison with Grace to move March to accept another assignment—this one with the freed slaves who are trying an experiment in farming for pay and profit.

March arrives at this experiment with his ideals intact; his first act is to insist that young Jimse, only recently freed, ride on a mule as he walks beside him—again, his ideals overreaching the world around him. But here, in this place, he is finally brought irrevocably face to face with the failure of his ideals—though it is still very difficult for him to be frank about himself and about his world. He arrives with the words of the hymn on his lips—“his truth is marching on”—even as he recognizes that the “truth” he writes back home to his family is hardly truth at all. “Tomorrow should see me at last arrived at my assigned destination: a thousand liberated acres where the Negroes now under our protection are learning the sweet savor of toil performed for the reward of wages. My heart is light tonight, as I think about my part in this first great experiment of equality” (89), he writes home. Yet immediately upon arriving, he makes judgments based upon these ideals, accusing the manager, Ethan Canning, of cruelty and

neglect. Canning's response, "You know exactly nothing" (104), is accurate. March makes judgments knowing nothing about the real situation in which Canning finds himself. March does not realize the sacrifices that Canning has made, the conditions under which he works, the things he has had to learn as a manager that he had never planned on, the fact that some slaves still serve the Rebels, and the fact that Canning drives no one on the farm harder than he drives himself. He does not even realize that Canning comes with a dual vision: first, to make a good living and a profit, and second, to better the position of the freed slaves:

I don't claim to be an evangel of abolition like you, Mr. March. I'm a businessman, simple as that. Yet we both have a role to play in the betterment of the Negro's condition. I came here with more than an ordinary interest in the free labor enterprise. I believe that the production of cotton and sugar by free labor must be both possible and profitable . . . for *them* as well as us. If we cannot prove our point, what future will these people have? (97)

He is, in short, well beyond March in marrying his ideals to the real world. But March is still unsure. So Canning advises, "Don't be a simpleton, March" (109), and his voice seems one in a long line. It is, in fact, echoed soon after, when March wonders why the Union general does not shut down a general store that supports the Rebel marauders: "Chaplain, you sure is an innocent man!" (138), the soldiers laugh. This innocence culminates in March's refusal to head to a safe place once the Union garrison is drawn down and there is no longer any protection for the farm. He is a noncombatant, he tells Jesse, who works on the farm with him. There are rules in war, and "the Confederate soldier is a hard and desperate fighter, but he is not a savage" (164).

Another set of ideals: There are rules in war. Men are not savages. But again, March is wrong, as he finds out in the most violent, horrific section of the novel. Rebel marauders do come, and there are no rules, and they are savages. They shoot Canning in both knees and cut off his ear. They burn the buildings down and destroy the crops. They behead one of the slaves and gather sixty more to sell. They bring the maimed Canning with them to ransom. When March and Jesse follow to attempt a rescue, their plan is utterly foiled by March's inability to use any sort of violence. Canning is shot in the face, some of the sixty slaves killed, Jesse captured, and he himself left to die. His miraculous rescue plunges him into a deep fever, so deep that even the narrative point of view shifts, and the voice becomes that of Marmee—who will discover that beneath the high ideals of her husband lies, possibly, an adulterous affair.

Now there is no place for March to hide, except in unconsciousness. The judgments of the colonel, of the soldiers, of Canning, of Annie, of Grace, of Augustus Clement—all of these come upon him. His innocence and idealism are not only impractical in the real world, they are disastrous. Everything that he has turned his hand to has failed—horribly. The world is not the place he thought it was; love poems are not enough to turn the human heart. There is cruelty and wickedness and horror, and he is unable to eradicate these. His judgments have all been wrong, and those he has tried to help are dead or enslaved. Even Jimse, the sweet boy whose curls he keeps, is dead. And he realizes, too, that his ideals have placed his own wife and daughters in a position of poverty and servitude.

The trajectory toward March's realization that the ideal and the real world must be in conflict is not a straight one. There are times when he recognizes that reality will put the lie to the high-minded vision. Before he heads to the contraband experiment that

will go so horribly wrong, he notes how frequently the ideal is not able to play out: “How often it is that an idea that seems bright bossed and gleaming in its clarity when examined in a church, or argued over with a friend in a frosty garden, becomes clouded and murk-stained when dragged out into the field of actual endeavor” (65). But he is unable to act upon this realization any more than he can tell the truth in his letters to his wife: “And every day, as I turn to what should be the happy obligation of opening my mind to my wife, I grope in vain for words with which to convey to her even a part of what I have witnessed, what I have felt” (65). Language, he finds, is not to convey truth, but in fact to hide and screen truth—until such time that that which is hidden is so open, so undeniable, so unable to be screened, that it must be told and consequences faced—even consequences that destroy utterly all ideals.

In this tumbled world, he lies in a hospital bed and must see himself in an entirely new light. His idealism, he recognizes, is falsehood. So, what to do now? The ideal cannot exist within the real, outside of personal blindness. And here, the novel does not posit any easy answer to the question of what to do with this new realization. When Marmee comes to the hospital, she suggests that one way to live is to recognize limitations; he is not responsible for the deaths around him; it is the cause of the war. “You are not God,” she tells him. “You do not determine the outcome. The outcome is not the point” (258). But March finds this rationalization wholly inadequate. When he asks what the point might be, she gives a sentimental and clichéd response: “The point is the effort” (258). She acknowledges frustration when the ideal comes up against the real: “To believe, to act, and to have events confound you—I grant you, that is hard to bear” (258). She, too, is struggling with the same loss of the ideal, as she has learned that much of her marriage has been, she thinks, false. But March

cannot accept the clichéd response or the easy absolution of guilt. The ghosts hover around him, and he feels it is only just to allow them their play. He resolves that he cannot return home until he has atoned for his failures.

But other answers to the problem of the ideal come as well. One comes in the poem of the dead soldier Cephas White, who writes just before his death, “I am no longer eager, bold & strong. / All that is past; / I am ready not to do / At last, at last” (265). The words strike March as wise; perhaps he, too, must be “ready not to do”—that is, not to foist his own idealism upon others, but to live in the world he finds. And this realization seems confirmed by Grace, who is now his nurse, as she urges him to return home to his family who need him, and to live in the world he finds, not the world he has imagined and hoped for: “I simply ask you to see that there is only one thing to do when we fall, and that is to get up, and go on with the life that is set in front of us, and try to do the good of which our hands are capable for the people who come in our way” (268). The freed slaves, she says, do not need him: “There are Negro preachers aplenty who know the true language of our souls. A free people must learn to manage its own destiny” (268)—immediately depriving him even of the self-satisfied sense that the role of the chaplain suits him well. “Be a father to your daughters. That, at least, you can do” (269). And he knows that this much is so. He heads home, where he feels that he is dissimulating as his daughters gather around him, until Beth, weakened by fever, rushes toward him, and “instinct opened my arms and I caught her—frail wisp that even I, depleted, could hold without effort” (271).

There are many ways in which the character of March is unlikable. He is arrogant and too sure of his idealism. He seems, at times, proud in his humility. He carries a terrible flaw in his inability to close the gap between the real and the ideal, and seems

to be unwilling to disabuse himself of his own innocence. He is the idealist who lacks wisdom.

But, even as we recognize that the idealist may not be able to live in the real world, we long for the ideals, and we long for them to be embodied—even in these clay pots that are our selves. We want there to be more in the world, and there is a strong sense in the novel that March, though he fails, fails while trying to point to something that is real and substantive and noble.

One of the paradoxes of the world is that the ideal *is* embodied in the real—and in very concrete ways. And this is what stories can point to: to see the ideal in the flawed real. Shouldn't there be more in the world beyond the merely real? stories ask. Shouldn't there be ideals we reach for, knowing we can never reach them? And even if characters like March fail, aren't we all the better for the dreamers, despite the costs? Or should Prometheus have never brought fire down to us at all?

#### ■ Discussion Questions about the Novel

1. *March* is a mixture of sources, including *Little Women* and the letters and diaries of Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's father. In what ways might a reading of *March* be enriched by a knowledge of these sources? Or, is a knowledge of these sources not merely enriching but a necessity? If so, does such a dependency suggest any failure on the part of the novel's craft?
2. Some have suggested that the character of March is anemic, weak, and really unable to carry a first-person narrative. Do you agree? Would this have been a stronger novel if it had been told by an outside narrator? How might that have changed our understandings of March, Grace, and Marmee?
3. One of the great American myths is that of the possibility of self-improvement. It is this myth to which March ascribes in *Little Women*, as he enjoins his daughters to always be about the task of improving the self. Does *March* seem to be a novel about self-improvement in any sense? Perhaps one way to approach this question is to examine March's realization—a realization that is slow in coming—that his idealism does not seem to work in the real world. He resolves, then, to “set my feet on the path of atonement, and find some niche in which a diminished man could be of modest use” (262–63). Does the novel suggest that this is an appropriate path for March? Is atonement a form of self-improvement?
4. The voice of March dominates the narrative, but during his convalescence, while he is as a character insensible, the voice of Marmee takes over the story. She finds out truths about her husband that she had not known, and comes to recognize, too, that words may be screens. Is this sudden shift in narrative point of view—a shift that extends for a few chapters, and is then dropped—a flaw in the novel's construction? Or does it help us understand March and Marmee better?
5. The word *March*, of course, refers to the protagonist's last name. But *march* is also a noun and a verb. “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” from which the protagonist quotes, contains the well-known line, “His truth is marching on.” And such marching seems appropriate to March's notion of the progression of the ideal. There is also the sense that the title can be a call to action, as if the reader, too, should be about the business of marching. But to where, and to what purpose? How might a consideration of the title in such ways

be productive in terms of your understanding of what March comes to learn through his own marching?

6. Is it fair to say that March's idealism colors the narrative? For example, we might argue that Grace is too idealistic a character. But is this true only because we see her through the eyes of March—and later, Marmee? Certainly March is himself accused of idealizing characters about whom he knows nothing. Does this tendency steer him toward becoming an unreliable narrator?

#### ■ Other Books to Consider

—John Banville, *The Sea*. New York: Knopf, 2005.

When Max Morden realizes that his life is being dominated by overwhelming disturbances, he decides to travel back to the seaside of his childhood, where one summer a half-century earlier, he had encountered the Grace family—with shattering consequences. The narrator moves between the story of that summer and the more recent slow death of his wife, but nothing is predictable, and much is illusory as the past and present intersect. Like March, Morden must face the past with guilt and sadness and regret, and find a way to try to live in the very real present.

—Denise Giardina, *Storming Heaven*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1987.

In Annadel, West Virginia, the coal company has stolen everything once owned by a small, close, family-oriented town. The story is told from four points of view, all focused on the ways in which people struggle to maintain ideals in the face of huge corporate greed—a greed supported by the power structures of the United States government.

—Sena Jeter Naslund, *Ahab's Wife: Or, The Star-gazer*. New York: William Morrow, 1999.

An adventure, a romance of epic proportions, this novel follows the career of Una Spenser, who escapes a restrictive religious home to move to the east coast of Massachusetts, where she will meet, in addition to historical figures such as Maria Mitchell and Margaret Fuller, Melville's Ahab. Their mutual passion and fierce desire to strike through the veil unites them in a novel whose construction vividly recalls *March*.

—Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*. New York: Scribner's, 1911.

When Ethan is a young man, he dreams of becoming an engineer and traveling the world. But when sickness comes to his family and he marries out of obligation rather than for love, it seems as if his earlier ideals have all given way to the gray reality of his life. Then, unexpectedly, Mattie Silver, his wife's cousin, comes to live with them—and the earlier ideals are rekindled, along with thoughts of love and passion.