

Between the Lines:
Reading about the Civil War
Book Discussion Group

**A Partnership between Linebaugh Library and
the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area**

***Killer Angels* (1974), by Michael Shaara**

Questions—History as Literature

When did you first read the novel?

Why do you think the novel is so popular? What makes it a “good read”?

What is your favorite part/who is your favorite character?

What aspects of the history of the battle covered in the novel would you like to know more about?

What about aspects of the battle that are not covered in the novel? Are there “holes” there that you would like to know more about? Could an author write an equally compelling home front novel about Gettysburg?

What do you think of Shaara’s decision to “update some of the words so that the religiosity and naivete of the time, which was genuine, would not seem too quaint to the modern ear” (p.xiii)? Does the language ever seem too modern?

Is there anything about the character profiles in the novel that date it to the mid-1970s? (The novel is now 35 years old!)

Questions—Gettysburg’s Confederate Generals

Who is your favorite character among the Confederate generals in the novel?

Who, in Shaara’s interpretation, are the weaker generals at Gettysburg? What are their faults?

What characteristics of General Lee does Shaara emphasize?

What kind of a man was General Longstreet, in Shaara's portrayal? (Also, what about the slavery issue? How does Longstreet differ from the other Confederate officers on this point?)

What did you think of the relationship between Lee and Longstreet? How is it portrayed by Shaara?

What does Shaara seem to be saying about generalship when he has Longstreet think (p. 206, before the second day's battle): "when you study war it's all so clear. Everybody knows all the movements. General So and So should have done such and such. God knows we all try. We none of us lose battles on purpose. But now on this field what can we do that's undone?"

Did it surprise you when Shaara has General Lee say, "If they [meaning the soldiers] fight, we will fight with them. And does it matter after all who wins? Was that ever really the question? Will God ask that question, in the end?"

What if Lee had listened to Longstreet's advice 1) to move to the right and cut off the Union army from Washington, DC, or 2) not to attack on the third day?

Questions—Gettysburg's Union Officers

Who is your favorite character among the Union officers in the novel?

Why do you think Shaara chose not to make General Meade or General Hancock one of his central characters?

What does Shaara present as John Buford's strengths?

On p. 47, Buford states that it is not death that makes him really angry and upset but stupidity. This makes his faith low. What was Buford's opinion of military leaders and politicians?

What characteristics of Chamberlain does Shaara emphasize?

How is Chamberlain the "hero" of the novel?

Why do you think that Shaara chose to use Chamberlain as the sole Union voice for the second and third days of the battle?

Questions—Gettysburg in American History and Memory

Garry Wills, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992), has called the Gettysburg Address "the best example in history of the fact that nothing is more practical than idealism, that ideas matter, that words are more important than weapons." Would we remember Gettysburg differently if there had been no Gettysburg Address?

What is your favorite part of the Gettysburg Address?

What are some of the other reasons that the Battle of Gettysburg has remained such a compelling story?

Who has seen the film *Gettysburg* (1993), and how closely does it resemble the novel?