# March by Geraldine Brooks

## Synopsis

October 21, 1861. March, an army chaplain, has just survived a brush with death as his unit experienced the small but terrible battle of Ball’s Bluff. When he first enlisted, March was an idealistic man. He knew, above all else, that fighting this war for the Union cause was right and just. But he had not expected he would begin a journey through hell on earth, where the lines between right and wrong, good and evil, were too often blurred.

He is directed to a makeshift hospital, an old estate he finds strangely familiar. It was here, more than twenty years earlier, that he first met Grace, a beautiful, literate slave, who changed the course of his life. Now, he finds himself back at the Clement estate, and what was once the most beautiful place he had ever seen has been transformed by the ugliness of war. However, March’s sojourn there is brief and he finds himself reassigned to set up a school on one of the liberated plantations, Oak Landing—a disastrous posting that leaves him all but dead.

Though rescued and delivered to a Washington hospital where his physical health improves, March is a broken man, haunted by all he has witnessed and “a conscience ablaze with guilt” over the many people he feels he has failed. And when it is time for him to leave he finds he does not want to return home. He turns to Grace, whom he has encountered once again, for guidance. “None of us is without sin,” she tells him. “Go home, Mr. March.” So, March returns to his wife and daughters, and though he is tormented by the past and worried for his country’s future, the present, at least, is certain: he is home, he is a father again, and for now, that will be enough.

## Discussion questions

1. 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*?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. “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 in the end?
5. 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?
6. 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?

*Synopsis/Discussion questions from https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/292811/march-by-geraldine-brooks/9780143036661/readers-guide/*