

March

by Geraldine Brooks

About the Book

With her critically acclaimed and bestselling novel *Year of Wonders*, Geraldine Brooks was praised for her passionate rendering and careful research in vividly imagining the effects of the bubonic plague on a small English village in the seventeenth century. Now, Brooks turns her talents to exploring the devastation and moral complexities of the Civil War through her brilliantly imagined tale of Mr. March, the absent father from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. In Mr. March, Brooks has created a conflicted and deeply sensitive man, a father who is struggling to reconcile duty to his fellow man with duty to his family against the backdrop of one of the most grim periods in American history.

Praise for the Book

"Brilliant...Geraldine Brooks' new novel, *March*, is a very great book....Brooks has magnificently wielded the novelist's license."

—**Beth Kephart, *Chicago Tribune***

"A beautifully wrought story....Gripping....A taut plot, vivid characters and provocative issues."

—**Heller McAlpin, *Los Angeles Times Book Review***

"Honorable, elegant and true."

—**John Freeman, *The Wall Street Journal***

"Harrowing and moving...In her previous book, *Year of Wonders*, Geraldine Brooks proved herself to be a wonderful novelist. *March* has all the same virtues...casting a spell that lasts much longer than the reading of it."

—**Karen Joy Fowler, *The Washington Post World***

"Wholly original...deeply engaging."

—**Ron Charles, *The Christian Science Monitor***

"Inspired... A disturbing, supple, and deeply satisfying story, put together with craft and care and imagery worthy of a poet."

—***The Cleveland Plain Dealer***

Courtesy of Penguin

About the Author

Title: Geraldine Brooks

Australian Novelist (1955 -)

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2011. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Biography

Bookmark: [Bookmark this Document](#)

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2011 Gale, Cengage Learning

Updated:06/09/2011

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born October, 1955, in Sydney, Australia; married Tony Horwitz (an author), 1984; children: Nathaniel. Education: Attended Bethlehem College Ashfield and the University of Sydney; received M.A. from Columbia University. Addresses: Homeoffice: Sydney, Australia and Martha's Vineyard, MA.

CAREER:

Journalist. *Wall Street Journal*, Middle Eastern correspondent, 1988-1994. Freelance writer, 1994--.

AWARDS:

Greg Shackleton Australian News Correspondents scholarship, 1982; Hal Boyle Award, Overseas Press Club of America, 1990, for the best daily newspaper or wire service reporting from abroad; Pulitzer Prize in fiction, 2006, for *March*; Dayton Literary Peace Prize Lifetime Achievement Award, 2010.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under to All Over*, Anchor Books/ Doubleday (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*, Viking (New York, NY), 2001.
- *March*, Viking (New York, NY), 2005.
- *People of the Book*, Viking (New York, NY), 2008.
- *Caleb's Crossing*, Viking (New York, NY), 2011.

Contributor of essays to *Imazighen: The Vanishing Traditions of Berber Women*, by Margaret Courtney-Clarke, Clarkson Potter (New York, NY), 1996.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

March was recorded as an audio book by Penguin Audio, 2005. *Year of Wonders* has been optioned for film.

Sidelights

Author Geraldine Brooks has won awards for her Mid-East correspondence for the *Wall Street Journal*, which included covering the Persian Gulf War. She channeled a unique part of that experience into her first non-fiction book, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*. When Brooks first arrived in the Middle East she felt cut off, as a female correspondent, from much of Muslim society. But she turned that liability into an advantage when she donned the *hijab* (the black veil worn by most Muslim women in the Middle East) and thereby enabled herself to penetrate the cloistered world of Muslim women.

The title of *Nine Parts of Desire* comes from an interpretation of the Koran offered by the Shiite branch: "Almighty God created sexual desires in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men." As Laura Shapiro, writing for *Newsweek* commented, "Good enough reason to keep women under wraps." But Brooks uncovered a complex picture in her investigation of Muslim women's lives that goes beyond the Western assumption of women's oppression and isolation from public life.

Brooks interviews a wide range of Muslim women, from belly dancers to housewives, and from activists to female army recruits; her list of interviewees includes Queen Noor of Jordan and Ayatollah Khomeini's daughter. Her discoveries are fascinating and wide-ranging, if sometimes contradictory. According to Brooks, wrote *Booklist* contributor Mary Ellen Sullivan, sexual gratification is considered "an inherent right" for Muslim women, but genital mutilation is still a common practice. It may surprise some Americans to read that women fare better in Iran than the rest of the Middle East. Brooks explains, "To Muslim women elsewhere ... the Iranian woman riding to work on her motorbike, even with her billowing *chador* gripped firmly in her teeth, looks like a figure of envy." By wearing the *chador* herself, Brooks discovers a camaraderie among the women that she has experienced elsewhere, as when she bakes bread with Kurdish women. But when she notices a young boy sampling bits of bread that his sister sweats to make, she sees the negative side of strict sexual divisions as well: "His sister, not much older, was already part of our bread-making assembly line. Why should he learn so young that her role was to toil for his pleasure?"

In her *Booklist* review, Sullivan called Brooks "a wonderful writer and thinker," noting that her study gives readers new insight into the lives of Muslim women. A critic for *Publishers Weekly*

called the book a "powerful and enlightening report" that brings Westerners much closer to the reality of Muslim life for women. And Laura Shapiro of *Newsweek* admired the first-hand reporting that led Brooks to an "intimacy with these women [that] made it impossible either to romanticize or to demonize the tradition that ruled them."

A few years later Brooks followed up her first book with *Foreign Correspondence*, a memoir of her childhood that focuses on the importance of foreign pen pals to her sense of an independent identity and freedom from what she then considered the boring backwater of her hometown, Sydney, Australia. The frame of the narrative is the approaching death of Brooks's father, which brings her back to Sydney from her life as a foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*. While going through family papers she finds letters from pen pals--from as far as the United States, France, and Israel--she had long ago forgotten. Rereading these letters brings her back to her youthful sense of restlessness and early belief that "real life happened in far-off lands." During her childhood and adolescence, the pen pals fulfilled her yearning for the exotic, and gave a sense of breaking away, as *Booklist* critic Donna Seaman described, from "Australia's mid-century, Anglo-focused insularity." The experience was formative in bringing Brooks to her current position as a traveling journalist and "fireman" for the *Wall Street Journal* (the term identifies journalists who can report on controversial subjects and issues). Brooks's rereading inspired her to look up her old pen pals, and among other things to tell them the story of Joannie, her pen pal from the United States who spent the summer in Switzerland and Martha's Vineyard, but whose glamorous-sounding life ended early from the ravages of anorexia.

In her *Booklist* review, Seaman called the book a "magnetic memoir," while *Publishers Weekly* deemed it "competent but unexciting." A critic for *Kirkus Reviews* offered unadulterated praise, calling it an "evocative, superbly written tale of a woman's journey to self-understanding."

After the birth of her son, Brooks decided to try her hand at fiction, fully intending to write a novel set in Australia. But instead, she found herself being drawn into English history. "There was a story that had intrigued me for years, of a village that voluntarily quarantined itself to stop the spread of bubonic plague," she wrote on her Home Page. "It was this tale, rather than the Australian one, that most wanted to be told." The resulting novel was *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*, told from the perspective of Anna Frith, a widow who sees all of the horrors of both the plague and of the tensions during their year of seclusion.

"The author has captured the various human responses to grief, fear, hopelessness, and exhaustion," Joanna M. Burkhardt wrote in her *Library Journal* review of the novel. A *Publishers Weekly* critic offered unabashed praise of the novel, writing that *Year of Wonders* "is to conventional work in the genre as a diamond is to a rhinestone." The critic concluded, "This poignant and powerful account carries the pulsing beat of a sensitive imagination and the challenge of moral complexity."

Brooks followed her novel of England with a novel of the United States Civil War. Spun off from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Brooks told the story of the absent father from that novel, away fighting in the Civil War, in *March*. Basing her character loosely on Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's idealistic father, Brooks describes the life of Captain John March, a Union

chaplain, and scenes from his life before and during the Civil War. "The morally gray complications of this endeavor are the novel's greatest strength," wrote a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor, noting the discussion of "contraband": freed slaves still working in slave-like conditions on a cotton plantation. Christina Schwartz wrote in *Atlantic Monthly*, "Brooks's narrative is remarkably tight. Whereas much literary fiction wallows in digression, here every scrap of information propels the story forward." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor complimented the narrative style, writing, Brooks's "characters speak with a convincing 19th-century formality, yet the narrative is always accessible." And for readers who loved *Little Women*, critic for *Economist* assured, "Alcott fans will find "March" both respectful and sufficiently full in its own right that it might have thrived without piggy-backing" on the original.

March won over critics and received the 2006 Pulitzer Prize. The win surprised Brooks; in a statement published in the *Grand Rapids Press*, she described herself as "in a state of disbelief, really. I just can't believe it. It's like being struck by lightning." In the London *Times* announcement of the prize, Zoe Paxton wrote of the novel, "Grounded in historical truth and serious research, it is nevertheless an intensely emotional work of fiction, as eloquent about the marriage of March and Marmee as it is on the history." Brooks also told Paxton, "I just feel immensely privileged. I love what I do. I look forward to sitting down at my desk and beginning another day's writing."

After writing *March*, Brooks returned to the project she had intended to be her next nonfiction work, a book about censorship of Hebrew books in Venice during the seventeenth century. When she returned to the idea, she decided it would make better fiction, and so she wrote *People of the Book*, which focuses on a single Hebrew text created in Spain during the fourteenth century, and managed to survive through the expulsion of Jews from Spain, the Inquisition and Italy, and World War II. "There are so many mysteries about this book," Brooks told Weich on *Powell's Online*. "We can never know who created it or why it got out of Spain or why it was in Venice. We know certain facts: it was in Venice in 1609, but we don't know why or how. There are lots of voids. I'm having a lot of fun there." Margot Livesey of *Publishers Weekly* called *People of the Book* a "dazzling new novel" and concluded that Brooks's "gift for storytelling, happily, is timeless." Brad Hooper considered the story "a marvelously evocative journey backward in time" in his *Booklist* review.

Despite her successes with fiction set in England and the United States, Brooks hopes to write fiction set in her home nation. On her home page, Brooks wrote, "One day, I hope to write an Australian novel. But I now know I will have to work for it." Brooks also spoke with Dave Weich of *Powell's Online* about the difference between writing fiction and being a journalist. "As a reporter, if you don't know the truth, you can't write it, but in fiction you can make it up. It's wonderful when you hit that void, and you've got all the facts--that's your scaffolding, and now you can make your edifice."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), Teresa K. Weaver, "Tale of *Little Women* Dad Wins Pulitzer," p. E1.
- *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 2005, Christina Schwartz, "New Fiction: Finds and Flops," p. 115.
- *Booklist*, September 15, 1994, p. 88; November 1, 1997, p. 436; April 1, 2002, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 1316; November 15, 2002, review of *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*, p. 616; February 1, 2005, Marta Segal Block, review of *March*, p. 938; October 1, 2007, Brad Hooper, review of *People of the Book*, p. 5.
- *Cincinnati Post* (Cincinnati, OH), April 18, 2006, "New Take on Classic Leads Arts Pulitzers," p. C3.
- *Current Biography*, August, 2006, Selma Yampolski, biography of Brooks, pp. 16-21.
- *Economist*, March 26, 2005, "Our Father," p. 84.
- *Economist UK*, September 8, 2001, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 112.
- *Encore*, June, 2006, "Karmel to Helm Plague Film," p. 6.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, August 10, 2001, Megan Harlan, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 68; June 14, 2002, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 91.
- *Grand Rapids Press* (Grand Rapids, MI), April 18, 2006, "Imagined Adventures of Father of *Little Women* Takes Prize," p. A6.
- *Guardian* (London, England), March 10, 2007, review of *Nine Parts of Desire*, p. 19.
- *Hollywood Reporter*, May 6, 2005, Blake Murdoch, "Man of 'Year': Karmel Tapped for Period Pic," p. 12.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, November 1, 1997, pp. 1616-1617; July 15, 2001, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 959; January 1, 2005, review of *March*, p. 5.
- *Kliatt*, March, 2002, Jacqueline Edwards, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 54; September, 2005, Susan Allison, review of *March*, p. 52.
- *Library Journal*, July, 2001, Wendy Bethel, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 120; June 1, 2002, Joanna M. Burkhardt, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 218; September 15, 2005, Joanna M. Burkhardt, review of *March*, p. 99; November 1, 2007, Barbara Hoffert, review of *People of the Book*, p. 58.
- *Michigan Quarterly Review*, fall, 2006, Stacy Carson Hubbard, "The Understory of *Little Women*, pp. 722-726.
- *New England Quarterly*, March, 2006, Daniel Shealy, review of *March*, p. 163-166.
- *Newsweek*, February 13, 1995, p. 81.
- *New York*, August 6, 2001, Daniel Mendelsohn, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 55.
- *New Yorker*, September 17, 2001, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 169.
- *New York Times Book Review*, January 8, 1995, p. 14.
- *O: The Oprah Magazine*, May, 2007, Geraldine Brooks, "C Is for Courage," p. 249.
- *Publishers Weekly*, November 21, 1994, p. 64; October 27, 1997, p. 57; January 17, 2000, John F. Baker, "Foreign Correspondent to Novelist," p. 12; June 25, 2001, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 43; October 1, 2007, Margot Livesey, review of *People of the Book*, p. 34.
- *School Library Journal*, November, 2001, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 191; July, 2005, Jackie Gropman, review of *March*, p. 131.

- *State* (Columbia, SC), September, 28, "USC Class Gives Spotlight to Pulitzer Prize Author."
- *Time*, June 19, 2006, Lev Grossman, "Five Fine Books You Missed (We Did)," p. 61.
- *Times* (London, England), March 25, 2006, Christina Hardyment, "Christina Hardyment Is Enslaved by an Abolition Story," p. 17; April 29, 2006, Zoe Paxton, "March of History," p. 11.
- *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), April 8, 2007, Sheila Wolfe, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 2.
- *USA Today*, April 27, 2006, Jocelyn McClurg, "Pulitzer Surprise an Award All Its Own," p. 07D.
- *Washington Lawyer*, October, 2006, Ronald Goldfarb, review of *March*, p. 38.
- *Women's Studies*, June, 2006, Judith Strong Albert, review of *March*, pp. 413-418.

ONLINE

- *Geraldine Brooks Home Page*, <http://www.geraldinebrooks.com> (December 29, 2007).
- *Powell's Online*, <http://www.powells.com/authors/brooks.html> (March 9, 2005), Dave Weich, profile of and interview with Brooks.*

Source Citation

"Geraldine Brooks." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2011. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 15 Nov. 2011.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1000128898&v=2.1&u=lom_kentdl&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000128898

An Interview with Geraldine Brooks

Courtesy of Penguin

In your afterword, you make an amusing apology to your husband, a well-known writer and Civil War aficionado, for your previous lack of appreciation for his passion. Although you say you're not sure "when or where" it happened, would you talk a bit about your change of heart and what led to your new and profound interest in the American Civil War and eventually to the writing of *March*?

In the early 1990s we came to live in a small Virginia village where Civil War history is all around us. There are bullet scars on the bricks of the Baptist church where a skirmish took place; we have a Union soldier's belt buckle that was unearthed near the old well in our courtyard. The village was Quaker, and abolitionist, but in the midst of the Confederacy. The war brought huge issues of conscience for the townsfolk, a few of whom sacrificed their nonviolent principles to raise a regiment to fight on the Union side. It was thinking about the people who once lived in our house, and the moral challenges the war presented for them, that kindled my interest in imagining an idealist adrift in that war. I am gripped by the stories of individuals from the generation Oliver Wendell Holmes so eloquently described when he said: "In our youth our hearts were touched with fire." I'm still not all that interested in the order of battles, I still drive Tony crazy by failing to keep the chronology straight, and offered the choice between a trip to the dentist and another midsummer reenactment, it'd be a hard call. But sometimes, alone on a battlefield as the mists rise over the grass, I feel like a time traveler, born back by the ghosts of all those vivid, missing boys.

Grace Clement is such an extraordinary character and is pivotal in shaping *March's* life. You tell us that her voice was inspired by an 1861 autobiography, but what inspired you to create a romantic relationship between Grace and *March*? Were there any historical hints that Alcott had had such a relationship?

The idea of an attraction between *March* and Grace is entirely imagined and not at all suggested by Bronson Alcott's biography. It grew naturally out of the narrative: they are young and attractive when they first meet, he is an idealist, she is a compelling person in a dramatic and moving situation. It seemed inevitable to me.

A year after *March* enlists he says, "One day I hope to go back. To my wife, to my girls, but also to the man of moral certainty that I was . . . that innocent man, who knew with such clear confidence exactly what it was that he was meant to do." Do you think he can go back? Is it even possible? Would you discuss how you think *March* changes by the end of the novel and what parts of him remain intact?

I don't think he can go back. Nor do I think it is necessarily desirable. Moral certainty can deafen people to any truth other than their own. By the end of the book, *March* is damaged, but he is still an idealist; it's just that he sees more clearly the cost of his ideals, and understands that he is not the only one who must pay for them.

Your book *Nine Parts of Desire* deals with the issues of Muslim women. *Year of Wonders* had a female heroine, Anna Frith. How was it different writing principally from a man's point of view this time?

I have always believed that the human heart is the human heart, no matter what century we live in, what country we inhabit, or what gender we happen to be. This is a book about strong feelings: love and fear. I can't believe there's much difference in how a man or a woman experiences them. And then, I had the journals and letters of Bronson Alcott, which are perhaps as complete a record of a Victorian man's interior life as any you could find.

It is quite a surprise to suddenly hear Marmee's voice in Part Two. Can you talk about how and why you decided to change the point of view here?

The structure of *March* was laid down for me before the first line was written, because my character has to exist within Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* plotline. That meant March has to go to the hospital gravely ill and Marmee has to arrive to tend him. The alternative to switching voices would have been to continue the narrative in March's voice, disoriented by his delirium. But giving Marmee a voice seemed like an opportunity to me to better explore some of the themes of communication, and miscommunication, in a marriage. Also, the book was written against the tumult of my own feelings about the war with Iraq, and as I started to write in Marmee's voice I found that she could naturally articulate a frustration, grief, and confusion that seemed in common between us.

The American Civil War was enormously complex with different political, social, economic, and psychological factors all playing a role. What did you learn from your research that may have surprised you and, other than your obvious newfound interest, is your opinion of the war any different now than when you started?

Nations inevitably fall into the trap of romanticizing their militaries and are always astonished when the truth of awful atrocities is revealed, as it inevitably is in almost every war. There were plenty of hate-filled racists in Lincoln's army, fighting side by side with the celebrated idealists. March's growing dismay as he learns this in a way reflects my own journey to a more complete understanding.

Would you talk a bit about how your past work as a foreign correspondent informs your current writing? What do you think historical fiction can achieve that nonfiction cannot? Would you ever entertain the idea of writing a novel about current events?

Write what you know. It's the first advice given to writers. I did draw on some experiences of war from my correspondent years. You see things during war, and you can never unsee them. The thing that most attracts me to historical fiction is taking the factual record as far as it is known, using that as scaffolding, and then letting imagination build the structure that fills in those things we can never find out for sure. And to do that you use all the experiences you can. While I love to read contemporary fiction, I'm not drawn to writing it. Perhaps it's because the former journalist in me is too inhibited by the press of reality; when I think about writing of my

own time I always think about nonfiction narratives. Or perhaps it's just that I find the present too confounding.

What are you working on now?

Another historical novel based on a true story, but one where the truth is not completely known, and so there are intriguing voids for the imagination to fill. Like *March* and *Year of Wonders* it has a lot to do with faith and catastrophe.

Courtesy of Penguin

Discussion Questions

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?

Courtesy of Penguin