



Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* recommended by Ronald Hoffman

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, Ronald Hoffman—author of *Princes of Ireland*, *Planters of Maryland: A Carroll Saga, 1500-1782*, the 2001 Virginia Literary Award winner for non-fiction—recommends *The Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara.

Mentally paging through my favorite titles I recognize a pattern—I love books that inspire. And while many come to mind—especially several of Herman Wouk's—Michael Shaara's novel about the battle of Gettysburg, *The Killer Angels*—once again, as always, bests the field. One incredible moment early in the book never ceases to speak to me. It is the day before the battle. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, a former professor at Bowdoin College and now colonel of the 20th Maine, an infantry regiment composed of volunteers, is suddenly forced to deal with 120 mutineers from another Maine regiment who have been assigned to his command. Before he speaks to this group of desperate and disillusioned men, Chamberlain tries to sort out his deepest convictions about America and the cause for which he is fighting. In Shaara's words, these are Chamberlain's thoughts:

The faith itself was simple: He believed in the dignity of man. His ancestors were Huguenots, refugees of a chained and bloody Europe. He had learned their stories in the cradle. He had grown up believing in America and the individual and it was a stronger faith than his faith in God. This was the land where no man had to bow. In this place at last a man could stand up free of the past, free of tradition and blood ties and the curse of royalty and become what he wished to become. This was the first place on earth where man mattered more than the state. True freedom had begun here and it would spread eventually over all the earth. But it had begun *here*. The fact of slavery upon this incredibly beautiful new clean earth was appalling, but even more than that was the horror of old Europe, the curse of nobility, which the South

was transplanting to new soil. They were forming a new aristocracy, a new breed of glittering men, and Chamberlain had come to crush it. But he was fighting for the dignity of man and in that way he was fighting for himself. If men were equal in America, all these former Poles and English and Czechs and blacks, then they were equal everywhere, and there was really no such thing as a foreigner; there were only free men and slaves. And so it was not even patriotism, but a new faith. The Frenchman may fight for France, but the American fights for mankind, for freedom, for the people, not the land.

What Shaara captures in that extraordinary passage—and what I think makes his novel such a work of genius—is a distillation of the central axis of American history—the unceasing contest over liberty. It seems to me that the radical egalitarianism unleashed by the American Revolution and the equally powerful forces of containment that oppose it wage a perennial contest for the conscience of this nation. The battlefields are familiar—race, class, bigotry, gender—and on them various contenders struggle to expand the egalitarian ethos of the Revolution against opposing forces determined to restrict it. The freedom white men won in the American Revolution did not extend to women and blacks. White women did not manage to claim their birthright of liberty until the second decade of the twentieth century and African Americans only in the last half of that century. Thus, at heart, the history of this country is the history of these countervailing tensions, and if there is any "secret" as to why the United States

has survived for more than two centuries, I suspect that it lies in its elasticity—its ultimate ability to stretch and bend, after great pressure has been exerted, to include an ever-broader segment of the population in the civic enterprise.

Joshua Chamberlain, in his speech to the mutineers at Gettysburg and in Shaara's shaping of his character, becomes the personification of the most radical sentiments in the history of America and the modern world—liberty and equality. The Maine professor becomes the knife Shaara uses to cut to the very core of the war. Aware of the South's insistence that the conflict is about "states' rights," not slavery, Chamberlain expresses the truth that Abraham Lincoln later articulated in his Gettysburg address—that the day when the right to hold

persons in slavery had been a "state's right" had forever passed. For Chamberlain, the practice of race-based slavery was the horrible, unacceptable antithesis of the inspirational ideals of freedom and equality embedded in the founding of the United States, and at Gettysburg, he came to understand that he would give his life to the cause of resolving this terrible contradiction.

It is a measure of Michael Shaara's skill as a writer that these great themes are so seamlessly interwoven in his story of those four critical days in July 1863. His exceptional rendering of all the characters in this stirring drama—Lee, Longstreet, Stuart, Pickett, Armistead, for the South, and the North's Reynolds, Buford, Meade, Hancock, Chamberlain—bring them and their seminal battle alive in ways that stay with the reader forever.

Virginia Festival of the Book

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