

THE KILLER ANGELS by Michael Shaara

Steve Flanagan

The tide of America's great and vicious struggle, the Civil War, turned on a hot and sultry July afternoon in 1863 just outside a quiet Pennsylvania farmtown called Gettysburg. In and around the hills and fields there two huge armies stumbled onto each other like angry dinosaurs and clashed. For three days the fate of the Union itself hung by a thread until the outcome of the battle was decided by a last, vain, terribly costly charge that has become famous in folklore and history.

The momentous events that took place at Gettysburg in that second summer of civil war are excellently related in Michael Shaara's novel The Killer Angels. Shaara tells the story of the men who participated and directed the action on both sides. He has succeeded in skillfully weaving together the historical events that happened with the sights, smells, fears and feelings of the man in combat.

Introduced to the reader are Robert E. Lee, the revered and brilliant tactician; James Longstreet, a sad man who struggles to execute orders that he knows cannot succeed; John Buford, the Union cavalry commander who picked the ground upon which the battle would be decided; Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, a man of sensitivity and great bravery, and many others.

Perhaps the best thing that Shaara has done in this book is to help us to experience what it feels like to be in combat. War is shown in all its aspects of savagery, death, fear, glory and futility.

Shaara is a fine storyteller and the book maintains a steady pace with none of the lulls that can be the death of a novel. A number of clear and simple maps are included that make the understanding of the battle much easier.

I must admit that I had underestimated the value of novels in helping one to understand historical events and the people that make them happen. My skepticism was rewardingly relieved after a few chapters of The Killer Angels. The vehicle Shaara uses is the battle of Gettysburg but the book is about people and is highly recommended.