



Welcome to our December book, Historians!

At our meeting on Tuesday, December 3 at 6:30, we will be discussing *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of a President* by Candice Millard published in 2011. Candice Millard is a favorite author of The Historians, and we have read and enjoyed her books on Teddy Roosevelt and Winston Churchill during the last three years. This book centers on the assassination of President James Garfield and on the state of American medicine in the last years of the 19th century.

Because he served for only 200 days as president, Garfield had little opportunity to sponsor major executive and legislative changes. For this reason, he is usually relegated to one or two paragraphs in American history. And those one or two paragraphs generally center on the assassination and its aftermath. Millard wants to enrich our understanding of Garfield by focusing on all the ability that he brought to the office of president. He was the last president to be born in a log cabin, a Major General during the Civil War, and an activist Congressman from 1862 to his nomination to the presidency in 1880. Millard wants us to understand what a tragic loss his death was because of what he could have done for a country still not fully recovered from the Civil War. His was also a personal loss for his wife and the five children he dearly loved.

Millard weaves together the biography of Garfield with the biography of his assassin, Charles J. Guiteau. A sadly modern story, Guiteau was a deranged man whose family tried to get help for him but to no avail. However, it was all too easy for him to buy a gun and stalk the President. Following the assassination, Millard gives us a detailed understanding of the very unsanitary conditions under which Garfield was treated. He actually died from infection from his medical treatment, not from the bullet. Trust me. After reading this book, you will be very grateful for 21st century medicine!

As you read, take note of Garfield's life. While we will not indulge in "what if" history, what strengths might he have brought to the presidency had he lived longer? What do you find admirable about the man now that you know him better? As for Guiteau, is Millard right to say that in strange ways the two men's lives mirrored one another—one capable of great things and one deranged, who in his mind believed himself to be great? And what about the medicine of the time? What shocked you? Is Millard right to argue that a large part of the problem was the arrogance of the doctors who refused to consider more current methods like the hygiene methods espoused by Joseph Lister? And were you surprised by the role played by Alexander Graham Bell?

As you can see, *Destiny of the Republic* is a story about people—the main characters and the people of the United States who truly loved Garfield. Millard introduces us to a president that we barely know and shows us a remarkable man. As we head into the Thanksgiving holidays, *Destiny of the Republic* gives us an opportunity to learn about and be thankful for a president we have neglected. Have a wonderful holiday and a fun read. I look forward to seeing you on Tuesday, December 3 at 6:30.

Donna McBride