



# House Divided

*Ben Ames Williams*

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## **House Divided** Ben Ames Williams

First published in 1947, this bestselling historical novel is cherished and remembered as one of the finest retellings of the Civil War saga—America's own *War and Peace*. In the first hard pinch of the Civil War, five siblings of an established Confederate Virginia family learn that their father is the grandfather of Abraham Lincoln. The family's story, and the story of their descendants, is presented in this tale that includes both soldiers and civilians—complete with their boasting, ambition, and arrogance, but also their patience, valor, and shrewdness. The grandnephew of General James Longstreet, the author brings to life one of the most extraordinary periods in history, and details war as it really is—a disease from which, win or lose, no nation ever completely recovers.

## **House Divided Details**

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Author : Ben Ames Williams

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Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Military History, Civil War, Fiction, Novels

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## From Reader Review House Divided for online ebook

### MARY ANNE says

loved this booked, the history and the family drama often left me with my mouth open.  
great classic

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### Susan says

Finishing this read on Memorial Day 2015, 150 years since the end of The Civil War is perfect timing. This is a five star read make no mistake.' House Divided 'is a historic compelling, extraordinary, informative, micro/macro soul searching book. I have been humbled. The author , Ben Ames Williams begins with defining the Currain family tree.

He then connect this family with the beginning of battles from Fort Sumter to Appomattox Court House. At times, this book was so descriptive about the battles, I had to take a break, before reading on. The Currain Famiy became unbelievably alive by portraying all human emotions existing. Medically, this time in history did not yet know about bacteria or viruses, sanitary precautions, impact of poor nutrition or deadly dysentery. Also note is the technological advancements in the Civil War.

One of my favorite lines is from Lieutenant-General James Longstreet..."Well gentlemen.... The war is ended. It is time for us to ride to our homes and take up the harder task of peace.". pg. 1460

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### Ann says

In my top 5 for historical fiction. Because it's based on a family in the south during the civil war, it does not end upbeat, but he's a great writer. That's why I have to find his sequel "Unconquered" about the reconstruction era.

I appreciate that he was a journalist before he was a novelist so he succeeded in showing the bigger scope of why, what and how decisions were made along the way and the public perception of them at the time.

Normally I get confused by a big cast of characters. Not this time. He made each character so strong that they stayed in their own orbit through all the plot turns and twists.

Because it was written in the late 1940s, he was able to talk to oldsters who were young during the era. He started writing the book because he found out that his great uncle was a general. As a result he was able to obtain a lot of primary source material. He also had volunteers going through personal diaries and old newspapers of the period. It took him 15 years to research it and 3 years to put it together. The richness of all that background material shows.

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### **Karla says**

I'm relying on memory here since it's been over 10 years since I read it, but I recall it was a super-fast read (3-4 wks) and I got caught up in the vast network of characters and stories. HUGE, sprawling family saga against the backdrop of the Civil War. Might give it a re-read to see if memory serves.

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### **Chris C. says**

Not only is this tome, clocking in at a respectable 1500+ pages, the longest book I've read, it is probably one of the most interesting and engaging books about the Civil War I've come across. House Divided is billed as a historical novel, centered on actual Southern family, set during the war betwixt the states. Ames combines two very important aspects of writing in a seamless manner. The factual technicality of this war, as told through actual locations, people and events, melds quite well with the fictional interactions, conversations and thoughts of the characters. While there is no absolute record of the Currain's day to day thoughts and feelings, Ames' 20 years of research of the surviving archival materials provides the foundation around which a very convincing story of loss, love, brutality and self discovery is constructed. I highly recommend this to anyone interested in good historical fiction.

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### **John Melvin says**

There are great novels about our Civil War: Andersonville by Kantor is the best I've read, The Killer Angels by Shaara is almost a docudrama of Gettysburg, and even Mitchell's Gone With the Wind is so dramatic in both writing and film as to demand attention. Crane's The Red Badge of Courage is such a deep look at the nature of fear and courage, and the vagaries of misunderstanding (I thought here of Dear Evan Hansen, oddly enough).

House Divided is good and long and worthy, but it is not one of these. It is outstanding in one way, however: It clarifies the details of the widespread war into meaning for the Virginia theatre. In touring battlefields (I've dragged my wife to scores, perhaps hundreds), never did I understand the connectedness of First Bull Run and eventually Malvern Hill, the conscription of southern troops in a nation founded on states' rights, Fredericksburg and eventually Wilderness, Spottsylvania, the Crater, and eventually the race to Appomattox. This novel was outstanding for teaching the course and possible strategies of the war.

I recommend the novel to anyone with the time to read a book that delves into the lives of a family undergoing the stresses of nearby war, the deaths andcrippings and corruptions. I liked the story, loved the history; Williams worked for many years on the book, and it shows.

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### **Sue says**

Wonderful huge pot-boiler Civil War novel, far superior to Gone With the Wind. While the story is vast in scope, the large and involving cast of characters allowed the author to address many aspects of the American Civil War that most other fiction had ignored. I first read this book when I was in high school, and spent

many years trying to track down my own copy. While it's certainly dated to some degree (written in 1947) it is still the best fictional chronological of the American Civil War I've ever read. Travis, Cinda, Brett, Faunt - darn it, now I have to go read it again!

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## Laura says

I have to admit that I was a tad intimidated when I began reading "House Divided"--it clocks in at 1,519 pages after all. If you are a fan of great literature, an in-depth story line, well developed characters, and thought provoking conflict stay with it though. I'm glad I did! Ok, now that disclaimer is out of the way. Ben Williams introduces us to the world of the Currains. They are rich, powerful land-barons with plantations in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Tony, Cinda, Travis, Tilda, and Faunt...along with their assorted children & spouses...make up the majority of the fictional story. Cinda and her husband Brett purchase a home in Richmond before the war starts, so much of the story focuses on Virginia's reluctance to secede, and then the impact the war has on her citizens. I found a lot of food for thought in the descriptions of debate leading up to secession, and see many parallels to debates and divides that have occurred since then. Consider Faunt's cautioning statement "The North has been told so many things that aren't true, and so has the South, that we're beginning to believe them. When lies are repeated often enough even wise men begin to accept them. Most of the evil we believe about the North is probably as false as most of the evil they believe about us." A few weeks later Brett gives a similar sentiment. "There's been so much bitter, passionate talk, we're probably bound to come to blows. I wish more Southerners knew the North as I do, knew its power and capacities. They wouldn't be so ready to believe in our superiority. Nor so ready to hate Northerners. I suppose anyone who begins to be sure that he's a better man than his neighbor is just confessing his own ignorance; and probably it's out of ignorance and the feeling of superiority that goes with it that most wars arise."

Most people did not share those sentiments though, and so the politicians continued to feed the flames of hate and further divide the nation until the inevitable Battle of Fort Sumter ignited full blown war. Into that war marched most men aged 17-45. Ironically most of them (around 95%) had never owned a single slave. Many of them didn't have a clear concept of what they were fighting for. They just wanted to support their state and their neighbors. For each of the young men, there was a grieving mother at home, and Cinda gives poignant words to their fear. "Children grow up," she said. "We'd like to keep them sheltered and protected; but to do so would be to rob them of half of life itself. To hide, to hug safety, to spend nothing of yourself--a man who did that might continue to exist for a thousand years. But--he'd never live! To live is to strive and to venture and to win--or to lose. To live is to assume responsibilities when you should, to accept duty, to love. To earn your own respect and the love of those you love is to make yourself terribly vulnerable to loss and grief; but--its worth it, Brett Dewain."

Williams, in the midst of the horrors of war, does an excellent job of depicting love as well. He shows the long-lasting, grounding love of happily married people (Brett and Cinda), he shows energetic new love (Vesta and Tommy), he shows strained love (Travis and Enid), and he even explores forbidden love (Faunt/Mrs. Albion & Tony/Sapphira). He also talks of the love between mothers and their children, as well as the love siblings have for each other. It almost feels deliberate...the way Williams paints war in broad brush strokes, and then shows intimate personal relationships between various characters. He finally acknowledges this contrast on page 967. "By thinking of battle in terms of generals, the civilian shut his mind to the agonies of individuals; and as long as he never visited a battlefield, he could continue to do so. Longstreet wondered whether, if politicians were set to the task of cleaning up the debris of battle, hurrying to bury the dead men before maggots and beetles and rats and foxes and hogs devoured them, moving bodies which had swollen and burst after a day in the sun, they would be quite so ready to lead a people to war." It doesn't take long (perhaps 12-18 months) for the valiant ideology which spawned the war to be replaced by the drudgery of day to day battle. The men became gaunt as they marched hundreds of miles, faced battle upon battle, and dealt with short rations. The women had to manage tasks they never thought of before (such

as running a plantation, and balancing financial books) while also volunteering at food distribution centers, making bandages, and staffing hospitals for the wounded. They lost sight of why the war started, and doubted an end to the fighting would ever come. Trav pondered that "War was a disease, which just as smallpox sweeps a city sometimes swept a nation. War was a disease of the human heart, changing the heart's beat and pulse and all its functioning, making gentle men into murders, entering into the hearts of men to turn them mad. Diseases came from none knew where; men were stricken or not; they lived or they died. It was so with war, the worst disease of all." General Longstreet has a more specific idea of why they are still fighting though. He is incidentally the Great Uncle of Ben Williams, and his words have a clear warning for us today. "Lies are the tools of politicians." Longstreet spoke sternly. "Good tools, too; because you can never catch up with a lie. And a lie is usually more interesting than the truth, so it's listened to more readily. The politicians feed us lies till they persuade us we believe things we really don't believe at all. It's their talk, poured into our ears or thrown at us by the newspapers, that brought us into this war. People will always be easily led to war as long as they believe what they hear and what they read, instead of thinking for themselves. And of course the lie most easily believed is that they're better than other men. The abolitionists think they're better than we are, and we thinking we're better than they are. So we're all fighting to prove it." That sentiment is the heart of "House Divided". Williams deftly showed us how \*Americans\*, many of whom were related, were led to believe there was an unreachable divide between them, and then bitterly fought for 4 years, while hundreds of thousands of young men died or were maimed to prove their side of the divide was right. He showed that often the ones who fight and die are not the ones who created the conflict, and aren't even the ones who stand to benefit. The saddest lesson of all is that since the ones who start wars don't generally fight as infantry, they never feel truly beaten....and so the cycle continues to this day. I highly recommend this novel. Given 5 stars or "Perfect."

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### **Nancy says**

This Civil War story was published in 1947; I found it on Amazon as part of its Rediscovered Classics (there are some really good books there!). It took me forever to read because it's 1500 pages long (it should have been split into a trilogy, though I don't know how)and I had several books to read for book group in the meantime.

It's an unromanticized portrayal of the Civil War through the experiences of a Richmond family. I've read quite a bit about the Civil War, but this time I learned a lot about how the war affected the daily lives of Southerners.

The author of the book is the grandnephew of General Longstreet, so Longstreet plays a prominent role in the book. The only time it bogged down was during the very detailed portrayal of the battle at Gettysburg.

If you're interested in the Civil War, you'll love this book.

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### **Alice Beyrent says**

This is my third reading of this book, 50+ years since my first two readings. This mammoth novel covers the years leading up to the Civil War, the actual war, and the immediate end of the war when Lee surrendered at Appomattox. Ben Ames Williams is a grandnephew of General James Longstreet, so a good deal of the war story centers around Longstreet and his perspective of battles and the war itself. The focal point of the story is about the family Currain who collectively own four plantations in Virginia and the Carolinas. Upon

discovering that they are related to Abraham Lincoln, each member of the family reacts differently to the news, thus changing them forever. The book reflects the culture, society, social networks, politics, and differing attitudes about the war in great detail. Of special interest to Civil War afficianatos is the great detail on campaigns and battles, especially the Battle of Gettysburg. The author reflects the day to day life of Southern soldiers, the conditions, barriers, attitudes and thoughts, and most of all the actual battles. He is skilled at reflecting the sights, sounds, smells, and struggles of the soldiers fighting the war, leaving indelible marks on those who survived to fight another day or return home, permanently wounded in body and spirit. I was particularly fascinated by the author's description of his writing process in the years before computers.

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### **Laura Davis says**

I read this book for school and was not disappointed in the slightest. If you liked *Gone with the Wind* then you'll love *House Divided*. While the family dynamics can get confusing, you'll still enjoy reading about the characters, who are dynamic and likeable.

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### **Amy S says**

I have one of the original 1947 copies given to me by my Grandfather. My caveat is that I have not read this book since I was about 25, so a re-read is in order with fresh perspective. I consider this one of my favorite all-time Civil War novels, about a truly divided family. During the war, the Southern Currain family finds out that they are not-so-distantly related to Abraham Lincoln. This has different effects on different members of the family. We see a lot of development in characters and a family's journey from the beginning of the Civil War to the end. It is very comparable to "*Gone with the Wind*" in a few ways, from it's epicness, to the fact that at times it views race relations from the lens of the pre- Civil Rights 1940s.

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### **Paula Hebert says**

house divided is an overly long-1500 pages- book about a family, 2 sisters and 3 brothers, living through the civil war in and around richmond for the most part. the family story and dynamic was interesting, wealthy gentry dealing with their downfall, how they viewed slavery, and what they took for granted. also, the book focused on some factors seldom dealt with regarding the souths defeat, and that is the speculators who made fortunes, the ineptitude of the politicians, and the poorly trained army. it seems that no southern white man would take orders from another white man, they were too proud to do so, and it lead to a lot of problems. that being said, the book was very unsettling to read because at least twice per page I would come upon a sentence with a prepositional phrase just plopped down where it did not belong. some polish friends of mine would laugh about their grandparents saying things like "throw your father down the stairs his hat", or "where the street car turns the corner around". the sentence structure is not quite that absurd,but it is very offputting. was the editor someone who has english as a second language? also I skimmed through much of the battlefied pages, I've read so much about them I felt I could skip them, just to get through this book,which is much too large for its light weight story

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### **Pamela Reband says**

This has been one of my favorite books since I read it back when it was a fairly new novel. Complex, engrossing, it goes beyond adventure and into the realm of deep psychological study. How would you react to the knowledge that your worst enemy is actually a family member?

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### **Janice Robinson says**

I have read over a thousand pages of this book, so I think that's enough for a review. For the most part, I've enjoyed it, although I would never ever say it's as good as "Gone With The Wind". BUT.....two thirds of the way in, there is a 130 page chapter that relates, in great detail, The Battle of Gettysburg from the viewpoint of James Longstreet. Only a few of the book's characters make an appearance in this lengthy chapter, and those few only very briefly. Now I don't like reading accounts of battles. I have trouble really understanding battle tactics and troop movements, and a lot of trouble picturing topographical details as relating to battle strategy. And there is no suspense! Everyone already knows what the result of The Battle of Gettysburg was! Getting through those 130 pages was a real SLOG. But I did it, as I did want to finish the book, and can't stand skipping chapters or skimming anything. I know the author was a great-nephew of James Longstreet, and honestly, it started to feel like James Longstreet at The Battle of Gettysburg was what he really wanted to write about, and the book was just an excuse to write that one chapter. Other than that, it's been interesting enough, and gives a feel for what it was like to live through The Civil War, which is what I am reading it for. But I am deducting one star for that Gettysburg chapter.

\*\*\*\*\*Also I HATE FAUNT. I HATE HIM SO MUCH. I am just waiting for him to die because I HATE HIM. Seems like he's going to die of sickness in his bed, but he deserves far worse than that. DIE FAUNT DIE.\*\*\*\*\*

EDIT: Somebody asked, "How would you react to the knowledge that your worst enemy is actually a family member?" I started to type this in a comment, but then I thought I'd just edit my review:

Yes, how would you react? Unfortunately, we don't know, because the author of this book never tells us. The knowledge that their father was the also the father of Abraham Lincoln's mother doesn't seem to affect Tony, Travis, or Tilda at all. Faunt goes off the deep end in regard to his hatred of the North and of Union soldiers, and we're left to surmise that this is due to his knowledge of his genetic relationship with Lincoln, but his thought processes are never explained.

Cinda has a personal meeting with Lincoln, but the meeting isn't even described! What a rip-off! She says, "I've seen Abraham Lincoln" the way you'd say, "I've seen God", yet later when Lincoln is assassinated, she says she's glad because she hates him. Why the turnaround? And why was she awestruck to begin with? We don't know, because we're not told. And when she was awestruck, hw did the knowledge that they were related make her feel? Proud? Did she wonder if she could have inherited some of the greatness that Lincoln did? We don't know. We're not told.

This author had a good idea, as far as Southerners finding out that they are related to Lincoln, and it's entirely historically possible because it's not know who the father of Lincoln's mother was. But the author then did nothing with the idea. I'm docking it another star, down to three stars.

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