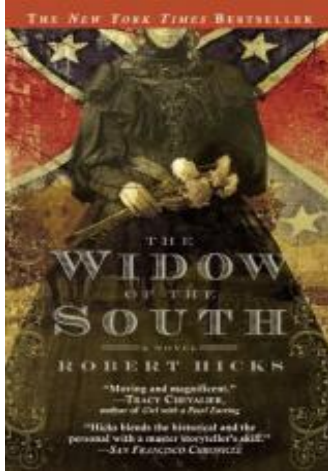


# The Widow of the South

by Robert Hicks

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## About the Book

Based on an extraordinary true story, this brilliant, meticulously researched novel flashes back to 1864 and the afternoon of the Battle of Franklin, five of the bloodiest hours of the Civil War.

While the fierce fighting rages on Carrie's land, her plantation turns into a Confederate army hospital; four generals lie dead on her back porch; the pile of amputated limbs rises as tall as the smoke house. But when a wounded soldier named Zachariah Cashwell arrives at her house, he awakens feelings she had thought long dead-and inspires a passion as powerful and unforgettable as the war that consumes a nation.

## Discussion Guide

1. It seems that Carrie doesn't come alive until literally everyone around her is dying. Why do you think it took her home being taken over by the Confederate Army and turned into a hospital to awaken Carrie out of her stupor?
2. Do you believe that Zachariah really wanted to die when he picked up the colors on the battlefield? Why does Nathan Stiles spare Zachariah on the battlefield specifically, when others carrying the colors were killed? Is Zachariah grateful to be spared, or is he regretful, or a little of both, and why?
3. Does John McGavock undergo a character transformation from the beginning of the novel, when he and Theopolis encounter the gang of ruffians in the woods, to the end, when we see scenes him of him wandering around Franklin somewhat aimlessly? How do you think he views the war? How do you think he views his role, or his non-role, in the war? And how does this compare with Carrie's attitude towards the war?

4. In the author's note Robert Hicks says of Mariah, "'I have concluded that Mariah may well have been the most complete human of them all.'" Mariah never let her enslavement define her. Do you agree?
5. Discuss how the death of their children affected both Carrie and John. What is the difference between the attachment mothers and fathers have with their children? Do you think John would have begun drinking whether his children had died or not? And do you think Carrie had a propensity for eccentricity and seclusion?
6. When Carrie first notices Zachariah in her upstairs guest room, she remarks: "Unlike most of the men, he looked ready to die. He looked as if he were welcoming it, urging it along?I wanted his eyes on me." Why does Carrie take to Zachariah, and why does she later give him special treatment? Do you think it was purely physical attraction? Does Zachariah's welcoming of his own death conflict with Carrie's values?
7. Faith plays a large part in each character's motivations. Discuss the role of belief in a higher power and how it guides Carrie, Zachariah, and Mariah in their actions. For most of us, our belief system changes or 'grows' over the span of our lives, one way or the other. How did Carrie's faith change over the span of the novel?
8. Why do you think Carrie beats Zachariah on the porch? Were you surprised by this or did you understand it?
9. Zachariah and Carrie have an intense love affair yet it's never consummated sexually. Do you think the fact they never were physically intimate takes away or adds to their relationship, or does it matter?
10. At one point Carrie tells Mariah, "You always could have left, even when you weren't allowed. I would have never stopped you." Do you think this is true? Carrie seems to think of Mariah as her best friend, but she was really her property, a "gift" her father gave to her as a child. Do you think Carrie tries to make herself appear a better friend/owner than she really was? Discuss Carrie and Mariah's relationship. Could friendship really transcend enslavement?
11. Among the political issues leading up to the Civil War was the South's strong adherence to the doctrine of 'state's rights.' Among the issues to come out of the war was the emancipation of the enslaved in the 'slave states,' whether they had remained loyal to the union or had seceded and joined the Confederacy. Yet, neither of these political issues is ever addressed 'head-on' in the book. Why do you think that is?
12. Carrie comes from a rich, educated family. She is "learned." Zachariah is poor, and almost illiterate. Yet do you think one is wiser than the other?
13. Robert Hicks has said, "good writing is about transformation." We see transformation in Carrie, Zechariah and in their relationship, in John, in his and Carrie's relationship, in Mariah and her relationship with Carrie. Are we left with any sense that Mr. Baylor ever comes to any real peace about what has happened?
14. What does Carrie mean when she says the following to Zachariah: "You are my key. You will explain things I have not been able to understand?I want you to explain to me why I wanted you to live and why I was able to make you live. Because I don't understand, not really, and the answer is very important to me." What is Carrie not able to understand about herself, and what answer does she think Zachariah will be able to provide?
15. Carrie takes Eli into her home and he quickly assumes the role of a surrogate son and Winder's surrogate brother.

How do Carrie's actions speak to her changing perceptions of family? Has her work running the hospital changed her maternal instincts or is she simply responding to the nature of war?

**16.** At the town party, Carrie remarks about how she doesn't fit in with the other women; Mrs. McEwen pokes fun of her efforts and jokingly calls her "St. **17.** In 1894, after John has died, and Mariah, Carrie and Zachariah are all elderly, why does Zachariah not profess his love for Carrie more overtly? Over time, did his love become more of respect and admiration for her heroism, or are his feelings for her just as romantically intense?

## Author Bio

Robert Hicks is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels THE WIDOW OF THE SOUTH, A SEPARATE COUNTRY and THE ORPHAN MOTHER. He passed away on February 25, 2022 due to complications from bladder cancer.

## Critical Praise

"A stunning and complex story,"

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