

Reading Guide for *THE MELANCHOLY FATE OF CAPT. LEWIS: A Novel of Lewis and Clark* by Michael Pritchett

About the Book

Bill Lewis is taking on the most challenging battle of his life. Having spent years facing the ills of depression, he has emerged from a particularly tough year determined to find peace and happiness in life and to finally write the book that has been haunting him—the definitive biography of Meriwether Lewis.

If only life didn't get in the way.

Bill's relationship with his wife is stagnating as midlife sets in. His teenage son, Henry, isn't eating and may be afflicted with depression himself. Bill has no friends to reach out to, and at the high school where he teaches history, one girl who is about to give birth will soon start to change Bill's life radically. And most of all, why can't Bill get to the heart of his book—not just the details of Meriwether Lewis's exceptional life but finding a way to solve, once and for all, the bizarre circumstances surrounding his death. With remarkable tenderness and understanding of the human condition, Michael Pritchett has crafted a mesmerizing debut novel. In *The Melancholy Fate of Capt. Lewis*, the lives of two men living centuries apart parallel each other in remarkable ways and resonate with vitality and humanity. From the shattered remains of the life of Meriwether Lewis, one man gets a second chance to face his demons and possibly find what has always been missing from his world . . . hope.

About the Author

Michael Pritchett is also the author of an award-winning collection of stories, *The Venus Tree*. He is the winner of the 2000 Dana Award for a novel-in-progress. His stories have appeared in *Passages North*, *Natural Bridge* and *New Letters*, among other noteworthy magazines. He teaches fiction writing at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

To the Reader

Until I read the journals of the Lewis & Clark expedition, I saw myself as a purely contemporary writer, and never dreamed I'd write a historical book. But something about Lewis's story, his short life and tragic death, wouldn't leave me alone. Along the way, what I discovered I love about historical fiction is its absurd impossibility, how it allows us to pretend we're living the life, and thinking the actual thoughts, of some famous person living hundreds of years in the past.

As a fiction writer, I'm not terribly interested in the world "as it is" or "as it was" because of what a dubious assumption it is that, when we look at reality, we really see it "as it is." I think our senses, imaginations, memories and emotions make that impossible most of

the time. But what I find terrifically interesting is why we believe a thing to be true, about the present or the past, and what we offer to ourselves as proof.

To past generations of Americans, Lewis, Clark, Thomas Jefferson, and the founding fathers are the good guys, the heroes. Just recently, however, they are the bad guys, imperialists, usurpers. From some perspective, both of these beliefs are "true" which has created an identity crisis for the entire nation.

As I started writing the book, I discovered I couldn't do it "straight," meaning, as a purely historical novel. That's why Bill, the book's modern writer/hero, joined the story, as the writer writing the historical book the reader is reading, and a guy struggling and apparently failing to get at the truth about anything relating to Lewis, America, or himself. Nothing comes easy to Bill, given his love/hate relationship with his own life and times. Like Lewis himself, it's hard to say, sometimes, whether Bill is a good guy or a bad one.

Does a man have to be "good" in order to be a worthy subject for an American tragedy? Nobody in the book seeks after the answer to this question harder than Bill.

Interview with Author

Do you remember when you first learned of Meriwether Lewis? Do you remember how you felt back then?

My first real knowledge of Lewis was Stephen Ambrose's UNDAUNTED COURAGE, which had a surprise twist at the end, or at least it was for me: Lewis's suicide three years after the expedition. I then read an abridged edition of the expedition journals and highlighted certain phrases that seemed to predict a bad end for Lewis or at least to reveal some big contradictions in his personality. I probably did that sometime in 1999 or 2000. Much later, actually in the final draft of the novel, those highlighted phrases finally found a place in the book as the chapter titles.

What fascinates you about Meriwether Lewis now? How did you start to become interested in his life and become a scholar of it?

There just appeared to be a good, untold story about Lewis, which is exactly what a writer is always looking for. Ever since Lewis's death, right up to the present moment, quite a number of people have insisted that Lewis was actually murdered, that it wasn't suicide. There's a very strong resistance, it seems to me, to accepting that an American hero and one of our nation's favorite sons took his own life. As if, somehow, this diminishes us as a people, if true. As I looked into the many books on the subject, and the novels in particular, I noticed that nobody had ever written a book focusing on the last three years of Lewis's life, almost as if they were trying to avoid a shameful family secret.

What do you find most people know about Meriwether Lewis today? And how much don't we know?

Most people know that Lewis explored the West but don't know what the expedition did to help create the nation we are living in today. They don't know about Lewis's untimely death. They don't know that he wrote the first government policy regarding Native Americans, largely ignored after his death, that attempted to prevent white settlement of the West.

Can you describe the actual process of writing this novel? Did you write the two components separately? How did you manage to keep a linear narrative throughout?

I wrote the historical part first and, in fact, never intended to include a contemporary storyline. But four drafts of the novel showed me that I couldn't tell Lewis's story without his modern incarnation, Bill, another depressed American male. I decided to make Bill's story clearly parallel to Lewis's, almost absurdly so. Which reflects a truth about storytelling, that you often find your life becoming ironically similar to your character's, as if they shape your reality as much as you shape theirs. Once I had Bill in the book, I had someone who could "think aloud" about Lewis, his fate, and his often strange, unpredictable behavior. That gave Bill's story a defined, linear shape and I knew then that I could construct the novel this way.

What first drew you to make a parallel between Meriwether Lewis and a modern man?

I've read somewhere that at least one American attempts suicide every minute of every day. We've got the most technologically advanced healthcare system in the world and the highest standard of living. But we still don't know what to do, it seems, about the desperately miserable and despairing person. When I learned about the nature of Lewis's life and death, I began wondering whether American life has really changed much in 200 years.

Could you recommend other books to read about Lewis or the Lewis and Clark expedition?

The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, edited by Gary E. Moulton, University of Nebraska Press, is the most recent and complete edition of the journals, in 13 volumes, and great for a day-to-day, coast-to-coast picture of America before white settlement. Also, *Jefferson's Nephews*, by Boynton Merrill, Jr., provides an extremely thorough portrait of plantation life in middle America and documents a slave-murder and trial, the suicide of one of Meriwether Lewis's cousins, and the New Madrid earthquake of 1811.

Do you agree with Bill's assessment that the Enlightenment never occurred?

I think Bill feels—as I do—that true enlightenment has to include more than just scientific advances. It's difficult to look at American society in Lewis's time, which

included slavery and massive slaughters of Native Americans and their dislocation to concentration camps, and call it a post-Enlightenment culture. But Bill has the same difficulty with his own time—as I do—and still sees widespread admiration and advocacy of the use of force—the death penalty, military action—for solving problems at home and abroad.

Bill battles a very aggressive depression. How did you approach that while writing him? Why did you choose to give your protagonist this condition?

I think it was Fitzgerald who said that a writer spends their entire career writing about just a few experiences they found particularly “dazzling” and unforgettable. I write about depression and anxiety disorders and other widespread illnesses because I’ve had them myself. And while I wouldn’t describe the experience as “dazzling,” it’s definitely been unforgettable. The thing I do find “dazzling” or stunning is that so many people come down with these illnesses and yet society doesn’t collapse. People go on functioning through these disorders, usually with great difficulty, and often the people around them don’t even realize they are ill. So I wanted to show how that’s possible, in Bill’s case and in Lewis’s, how a deeply depressed, high-functioning person gets through the day.

How long did you spend writing this novel?

The idea first came to me as long as eight years ago. But I actively began writing on May 23, 2001, which is the exact month and day that the expedition shoved off from St. Charles, Missouri. I wrote about seven full drafts, plus two or three half-drafts after the book was accepted.

Bill struggles desperately with writing his book and often feels like giving up. Were there times when you felt the same way while writing *The Melancholy Fate of Capt. Lewis*?

That’s a great question. The reason that so many people set out to become novelists and so few succeed, I think, is that each time you do another draft of the book, it’s such a different experience than the last time, it’s almost like starting over. And doing seven drafts, which isn’t an outrageous number, is like writing seven different books, one after the other. The old saying is that you never step in the same river twice. That’s definitely true of a novel, too. Every time you return to page one, you face the peril of failing, of discovering that the book is actually no good, of not being able to keep the story moving all the way to the end, all over again. It’s hard enough to take this chance once, since producing a draft of a 400-page book will probably take a year. But you have to take that chance multiple times. So, with this book, I seriously considered quitting seven times.

Ultimately, who did you end up relating to more—Meriwether or Bill Lewis?

Probably Bill, since we’re both teachers, and in our mid-40s, and living in the Midwest. All along the way, I found Bill’s experiences and emotions slightly comical and

overwrought and absurd. He's actually got a pretty good life, but he can't always feel that, for mysterious, complicated reasons, which makes it hard for him to see it, too.

What are you working on next?

A Pilgrim book. Before the pilgrims fled England for the New World, some were living in the same London neighborhoods during the same years as Shakespeare was when he was first writing and staging his plays. That strange coincidence has always interested me.

Discussion Questions

1. After reading *The Melancholy Fate of Capt. Lewis*, are you inclined to read the journals of Lewis and Clark? Why or why not?
2. Does Bill Lewis battle depression admirably? What does he do right or wrong? What could he do to change his situation?
3. When the book begins, what do you think of Bill and Emily's relationship? Who is primarily responsible for their lack of communication?
4. On p. 48, Bill notices he is "becoming spiritually blank, losing the ability to know his feelings." What does this mean for him? In what ways does he try to reconnect with his emotions, and are his attempts productive?
5. Why do you think Bill's son Henry is not eating? What is his emotional status, and how much of it directly relates to Bill or Emily?
6. How does Bill try to influence Henry. Does he try to turn him into the kind of man Bill will never be? In what ways does he seem to want Henry to emulate him? How does the issue of sports complicate things?
7. Aside from sharing the same last name, why is Bill so fascinated with Meriwether Lewis? In what ways do their lives mirror each other's?
8. What are Bill's motives in pursuing a relationship with Joaney and what kind of relationship is he imagining? Are his intentions noble? What is Bill's relationship with women in general?
9. Why does the Lewis and Clark expedition provoke such a profound response from people today? In what ways did their journey enlarge or diminish the national imagination and the idea of "manifest destiny"? Were Lewis and Clark really "patsies," as they are called by Bill in the book? If so, in what ways?
10. Bill remarks several times, in reference to the Lewis and Clark expedition, that the Enlightenment never happened. Why does he feel this way?

11. How much did you know about Meriwether Lewis's life (and death) before reading *The Melancholy Fate of Capt. Lewis*? What were you surprised to learn? Did it change your views on him substantially?

12. Is it important to understand *why* Meriwether Lewis died the way he did? Bill says a number of times that it is the central question that he as a biographer needs to answer. Why is it so important to Bill? Does he finally come to understand why Meriwether Lewis took his own life and, if so, does that help Bill cope with his own problems?

13. Ultimately, who lives the more honorable life—Meriwether Lewis or Bill Lewis?

14. What does this book have to say about the stresses that American culture through the ages have placed on the family and, especially, on the role of men in their relationships with the opposite sex?

15. What does the ending of the book signify to you? How do you interpret it?

Recommended Books

The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, edited by Gary E. Moulton

The Venus Tree by Michael Pritchett

Jefferson's Nephews, by Boynton Merrill, Jr.