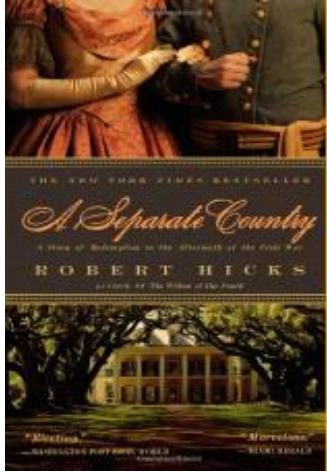


# A Separate Country

by Robert Hicks

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## About the Book

Set in New Orleans in the years after the Civil War, **A Separate Country** is based on the incredible life of John Bell Hood, arguably one of the most controversial generals of the Confederate Army--and one of its most tragic figures. Robert E. Lee promoted him to major general after the Battle of Antietam. But the Civil War would mark him forever. At Gettysburg, he lost the use of his left arm. At the Battle of Chickamauga, his right leg was amputated. Starting fresh after the war, he married Anna Marie Hennen and fathered 11 children with her, including three sets of twins.

## Discussion Guide

1. What role does the city of New Orleans play in the lives of Hood and his family?
2. Describe the relationship between Eli and General Hood. Why does Hood call upon Eli to complete the task of transporting/destroying his memoirs? Why does Eli accept the request? What would you have done in Eli's place? Hood's?
3. What is the 'separate country' to which the title alludes? Is there more than one answer to this question? If so, name them.
4. What do Anna Marie and Hood provide one another? What is their relationship based on? How does this change over the years?
5. How do the three different narrative voices affect the reader's perception of the story?

6. Why do you think it is that Hood fell from wealth and respect to poverty and dishonor? Can his fall be entirely blamed on the war? If not, what were the other factors?
7. What is the effect of having two narrators and one intended reader (Lydia) who pass away at the beginning of the story? Does the power and symbolism of the writing change with the passing of their authors?
8. How does meeting Michel, Rintrah, and Paschal change Anna Marie? Is it a positive change or a negative one?
9. Discuss Eli's assertion that "Beauty was accidental and fleeting, and even if you were on the lookout and caught it at the right moment, that beautiful thing would break your heart no doubt, and all you'd have to show for it was ashes" (page 100). Here he is discussing his old feelings of revenge for Hood, but to what other aspects of the story could this quote be alluding to?
10. Upon seeing the portrait that Anna Marie painted of him, Hood comments, "I must live up to it now. That is the face of a different man" (page 112). In her letter to Lydia, Anna Marie wrote, "I thought he was insulting the painting, or making a joke. Later, I knew he was talking about himself. He would have to become the different man." What changes did Hood have to make after the war? Was he successful? How did his attempt at change affect Anna Marie and the others around them?
11. In talking to his daughter about Hood, Anna Marie's father says, "a man who is willing to face criticism, ridicule, failure, because he prefers to believe that men are good, such a man is closer to God than the rest of us" (page 132). Is he proven correct in his assessment? Would Hood agree with this evaluation of himself? Would Eli?
12. How are Hood and Anna Marie affected by the lynching of Paschal at the hands of Sebastien? Why does Sebastien continue to have a presence in the couple's lives?
13. When explaining her relationship with Paschal, Anna Marie admits, "Acquiescence was the price of eternal membership in a society that would swaddle me and give me warmth for as long as I lived" (page 153). How does this concept come up throughout the story? How can it be applied to society today?
14. Why do Hood and his wife hide acquaintances from their past from one another? Were these decisions wise?
15. Is it true that Hood "created" Sebastien Lemerle? Can one battle during a war really alter a man completely?
16. Before encountering Paschal, Hood asserts that he did not want to be forgotten (page 196). Was his desire reasonable, and did he effectively move toward achieving it while he was alive? In what ways did his wishes come true?
17. Hood and Anna Marie both take blame for Paschal's death. In what ways were they at fault, and in what ways (if any) was his death inevitable, regardless of what either of them did?
18. Hood declares again and again that his sole strength and purpose is to fight and kill. Do you think that people have a set function in life, as Hood believes? If so, did Hood correctly identify his?
19. Hood admits to Sebastien that he refuses to fail at aiding the sick, but has more ambivalent feelings toward his family

and his business (page 251). Why are his convictions so seemingly conflicted? He makes some conjectures about the reasons, but what do you think draws him to those who suffer from yellow fever?

**20.** Anna Marie reminds her daughter, "Epidemics, whether of disease or of violence or of heresy, rob the living of a sense of the past or the future. All is compressed into this day, and this night. The living become paranoid, at first vigilant against strangers and outsiders, and then suspicious of neighbors and friends. The things that once seemed important seem insignificant" (page 267). Discuss how this observation applies beyond the yellow fever outbreak of 19th century New Orleans.

**21.** How much truth is there in Sister Mary Therese's accusation that Anna Marie purposefully cast Paschal out of her life (page 271)?

**22.** Why does Anna Marie take it upon herself to visit M and ask her to take care of Eli?

**23.** Do you agree that Eli owes his survival in New Orleans to Paschal, as Rintrah asserts when he's coercing Eli to help him kill Sebastien (page 291)?

**24.** "All roads led back to the mother superior, it seemed like" (page 301), Eli observes. Describe Sister Mary Therese's part in the story. How is she connected to each of the characters?

**25.** Hood surprises himself when he states "There can be honor in poverty" (page 330). Is this true, is it merely an excuse for the situation that he and the other generals have found themselves in, or something else?

**26.** Compare Hood's perception of the lottery drawing to Eli's. What is revealed by each man? What does each reveal about himself?

**27.** What do Sebastien and Hood have in common? Why did Hood leave Sebastien to read his manuscript and decide whether or not Hood "cast off the demon"?

**28.** Eli muses over the place of generals in the American mind: "Do folks want their generals to be the kind of men who write about their families, their children, as if there was nothing else in the world? Do they want to remember their generals as flesh-and-blood sinners like the rest of us, capable of regret and of change? I don't think we want that from them. I think we want them to be gods in an American mythology, unchanging creatures who are purely what they seem to be, and different from the rest of us. Because if they aren't different, if they are like us, then what the hell are we capable of?" (page 413). What does the story of John Bell Hood prove or disprove about Eli's observation? What people or positions are untouchable in this same way today?

## **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.

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