

## BRIGHT STARRY BANNER Reader's Guide

### Questions for Discussion

1. The novel opens with General Winfield Scott, retired general in chief of the United States Army, contemplating the Union forces' strategic situation in December 1862. What reasons, both military and political, make an offensive by the Army of the Cumberland imperative at this time?
2. General William Starke Rosecrans is a complex man. What do you see as his strengths and weaknesses as a commander? How would you describe his relationship with subordinates, from senior generals to common privates? Consider his internal life. In what ways does his devout Catholicism reveal itself in his external and internal life?
3. General Braxton Bragg is another man of considerable ability. What do you see as his strengths and weaknesses as a commander? How would you describe his internal life? What life experiences shaped his personality? How has the fame he won in Mexico affected his career? Why does he have such difficulty with his subordinates?
4. Rosecrans despises Ulysses S. Grant while Bragg is deeply resentful of Robert E. Lee. What are the reasons for these negative feelings?
5. The Confederate armies have mounted troops far superior to the Union army's cavalry at this point in the war. How does this affect the conduct of Northern campaigns? Considering the importance of his cavalry, why did Bragg strip his army of much of it in the weeks before the Battle of Stones River? Rosecrans chooses to advance only after Bragg dispatches Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Hunt Morgan on raids. Why? If the Union high command had forced him to advance before the departure of Forrest and Morgan, how do you suppose the outcome of the campaign might have changed?
6. The singing of "Home Sweet Home" by the men of both armies the night before the battle shows how much they have in common. Only hours later they will set about killing each other. What motivates them to fight and often die for their respective causes? The thief Eli Smith, a Union soldier who has assumed a new identity and quit stealing, has become "a true believer." To what extent do you think his reasons for fighting are shared by other Union soldiers? The Confederate soldier Com McGregor fights with great heroism when he might have escaped service because of his age. What do you see as his motives? What other examples can you find? On a scout between the lines, Bierce encounters two grievously wounded soldiers, one Union and one Confederate. What have these two concluded about the war?

7. Although small in number, the regular regiments play a significant role in the Battle of Stones River. How do the regulars differ from the volunteers in their attitudes toward warfare? toward life? In what ways does Col. Oliver Shepherd exemplify the hard-bitten regulars of the old Army?
8. Bragg thinks of General George Thomas as a traitor. Why? Thomas's experiences as a boy during the Nate Turner slave uprising helped mold his character. Discuss what Thomas means by "constancy" and how the principle subsequently affected his decisions as a soldier.
9. Among the most motivated men in the Army of the Cumberland are European immigrants such as Col. Hans Heg and Brig. General August Willich. What is the foundation for their dedication to the Union cause? Among them are a number of trained soldiers who fled to America after the suppression of the leftist uprisings in Europe in 1848. What do you suppose motivated these "forty-eighters" to take up arms against the established order in Europe? What motivates them to fight for the Union?
10. General Patrick Cleburne is also an immigrant. Yet despite liberal leanings on such matters as slavery, Cleburne fights for the Confederacy. What are the motives for his allegiance? What makes Cleburne a particularly effective commander? Although respected as a fighter by his fellow generals, most seem wary of Cleburne. What about Cleburne's personality makes other men uncomfortable?
11. Many of the senior officers at Stones River knew each other either at West Point or during their service in the former U.S. Army. How do you think this familiarity affected their decisions and actions during the battle?
12. Eventually Northern industrial power would be one of the major reasons for Union victory in the Civil War. What foreshadowing of this advantage is evident at Stones River?
13. The theme of reality and madness recurs throughout the book. What examples do you recall? What different types of madness threaten various characters? Bierce is horrified when the gentle Garesché seems carried away by a sort of battlefield lust. What in battle so stimulates some men to such heights of ferocity and disregard for personal safety? Are courage and bravery indistinguishable or quite different concepts?