Author Jeff Shaara discusses writing his first novel, "Gods and Generals," a prequel to his father Michael Shaara's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "The Killer Angels," which director Ron Maxwell turned into the major motion picture "Gettysburg." Shaara talks about his relationship with his father and explains why he chose to write about some of the famous Confederate and Union generals of the Civil War.

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Author Jeff Shaara on Civil War Novel "Gods and Generals"

KATIE COURIC, co-host:

It's been more than 20 years since Michael Shaara wrote his Pulitzer Prize-winning Civil War novel, "The Killer Angels." It was the inspiration for the highly acclaimed PBS series, "The Civil War," by Ken Burns, and also the basis for the movie "Gettysburg." Michael Shaara died in 1988. But now his son, Jeff, has written what he calls a prequel to his father's book called "Gods and Generals." And it's already on the best-seller list. Jeff Shaara, welcome. Nice to see you.

JEFF SHAARA ("Gods And Generals"): Thank you.

COURIC: Let's talk about the genesis of this book. Ron Maxwell, the director of "Gettysburg," approached you...

SHAARA: Right.

COURIC: ...and said, `Can you write a sequel or a prequel'--or not `Can you,' `Can you find somebody who might be interested?'

SHAARA: Exactly. It was Ron's idea that after all the story of these characters' does not begin and end on the field in Gettysburg. And after all this is a personal story of real people, not a history book, so the idea was to take-- follow these same characters backwards before the war, bring in the wives, the women, meet the families of these people and show how they came to be who they ultimately became to be in Gettysburg, which were these tremendous heroes.

COURIC: Jeff, why did you volunteer for the job? I mean, let's face it. You went to Florida State, you studied criminology, you've never written anything pretty much before.

SHAARA: No.

COURIC: Why did you say, `Hey, I can do this?'

SHAARA: Well, I didn't really say, `Hey, I can do this.' I...
COURIC: You said, `Hey, I might be able to do this is’?
SHAARA: I said `I think I would like to try,' because I thought, first of all, two things. I realized first of all this was-- this was a torch being passed, definitely. And Ron had known my father very well. They had worked together for many years to try to bring "The Killer Angels" to the screen. And, also, I just realized if anybody is going to continue my father's work, it should be me. And I had no real experience as a writer, but I thought I would like to try this. I called Ron and said, `I think I would like to try to write this book.' And he said, `I have been waiting for your call.' And he knew exactly what he was doing.
COURIC: As I mentioned, the--the--your dad died in 1988.
SHAARA: Mm-hmm.
COURIC: And the last years of his life were really lonely, sad years, and you all were pretty much estranged. And, in fact, during one interview, he said that you were dead. How difficult was that to sort of come to terms with your relationship and write this book?
SHAARA: Well, the relationship has actually gotten better, because I think I--in many ways I feel like my father had a hand in writing this book. I mean, I--I have a very difficult time taking credit for all the good things that--that surround this book already, all the wonderful things that have happened, because very often during the writing, I felt my father was in the room. It was a very strange experience. My father had a lot of difficulties in the latter part of his life. I mean, he had a bad heart, which was what--what eventually he--that's what he died from is heart disease.
COURIC: He was in a bad motorcycle accident that left him quite debilitated.
SHAARA: Exactly.
COURIC: He couldn't write.
SHAARA: Exactly.
COURIC: He was a very frustrated person.
SHAARA: Definitely. I mean, he was under contract, in fact, when he died he was under contract to write the life of Shakespeare, and he could not do it. He couldn't sit at the typewriter. He would go for five or ten minutes and lose his concentration. And I think that really took away all his joy of living. And so he was-- he was a very lonely man, a very bitter man when he died. And in some ways, if this is a way of redeeming that, of telling a story, that certainly if he were alive, this would be his story. I mean, he would have written this book.
COURIC: And somehow you feel as if it has brought you-- the two of you closer together?
SHAARA: Oh, very definitely.
COURIC: I know that you kind of followed his style, and yet you changed the cast of characters in the prequel. Tell me about that. You still talk about Robert E. Lee.
SHAARA: Right.
COURIC: And-- but you changed two of the characters.
SHAARA: Well, the-- it wasn't so much changing the characters, but just finding new ones.
COURIC: Right.
SHAARA: Originally, I had intended to stick with Lee and Longstreet as my father did in...
SHAARA: ...in "The Killer Angels." But it was the character of Jackson who emerged as just this marvelous three-dimensional--we learn our history often in school, and Jackson is an abbreviated paragraph. He's either a cartoon or a madman, and he was neither. He was this wonderful, sensitive character.

COURIC: He so captured your imagination, didn't he?
SHAARA: Definitely, yes.
COURIC: You felt a real emotional catch with him?
SHAARA: Yes.
COURIC: And you think in fact the war, the course of the war might have changed dramatically had--had he not been-- been killed by friendly fire, although he ultimately succumbed to pneumonia?
SHAARA: Oh, definitely. I think--Jackson's death clearly to me is the turning point of the war. Most people say it was the Battle of Gettysburg. But I think had Jackson been at Gettysburg, it would have been a very different affair.
COURIC: And you-- you substituted Winfield, Scott Hancock for Buford? Is that right?
SHAARA: Well, Buford, and also I tell the story of the wonderful relationship between Hancock and Armistead, which is brought out so well in the film "Gettysburg" by Richard--the late Richard Jordan who played Armistead. To tell that story from the point of view of Hancock made a lot of sense to me. I like the character of Hancock very much. He reminds me very much of my father, and plus, it balances the story. This is not slanted one way or the other, Confederate nor Union.
COURIC: Although you referred to the-- the Confederate generals as gods, "Gods and Gener--Generals," the title of the book. The gods are the Confederate generals, right?
SHAARA: Oh, certainly. And, in fact, if you consider that you had Confederate--a Confederate army that is often unclothed, barely clothed, no shoes, often had no food, and they go into battle against these vastly superior forces, and they win, so there's more there than just good commanders.
COURIC: And finally what do you think your dad would think of this, Jeff?
SHAARA: I hope my Dad would be very pleased that I began this project. I think he would be proud of the-- the reception it's received. And I just hope he's paying attention somewhere.
COURIC: I think he would be very proud indeed.
SHAARA: Thank you.
COURIC: The novel is "Gods and Generals," a novel of the civil war. Jeff Shaara, thank you so much, and best of luck.
SHAARA: Thank you.