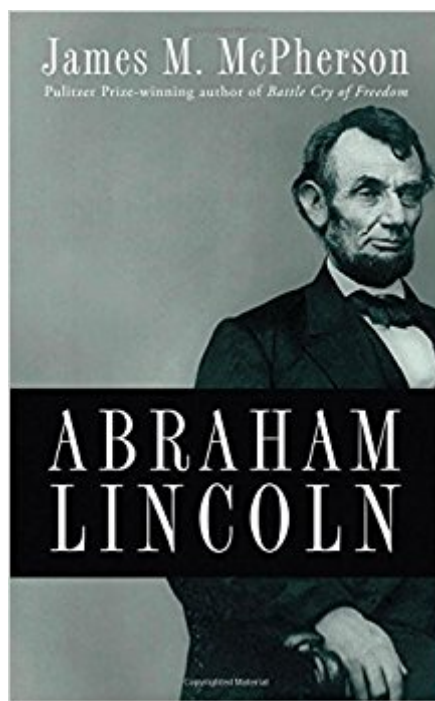


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Abraham Lincoln



Synopsis

Best-selling author James M. McPherson follows the son of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks from his early years in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, to his highly successful law career, his marriage to Mary Todd, and his one term in Congress. We witness his leadership of the Republican anti-slavery movement, his famous debates with Stephen A. Douglas (a long acquaintance and former rival for the hand of Mary Todd), and his emergence as a candidate for president in 1860. Following Lincoln's election to the presidency, McPherson describes his masterful role as Commander in Chief during the Civil War, the writing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and his assassination by John Wilkes Booth. The book also discusses his lasting legacy and why he remains a quintessential American hero two hundred years after his birth, while an annotated bibliography permits easy access to further scholarship. With his ideal short account of Lincoln, McPherson provides a compelling biography of a man of humble origins who preserved our nation during its greatest catastrophe and ended the scourge of slavery.

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Customer Reviews

Speaking as someone who admires Abraham Lincoln to a very deep degree, I found this small but powerful biography to be a beautiful addition to my collection of hefty Lincoln tomes. The book itself in hardcover is a joy to hold with its compact size, readable typeface and bound-in ribbon bookmark. Whoever worked on this project obviously did it as a labor of love. They worked the details on this one. You can't honestly compare this work to others like Carl Sandberg's "Lincoln" or "With Malice Towards None" or even my nice coffee table book of photographs taken of Lincoln. This work

COMPLEMENTS those more comprehensive volumes. That said, it is not incomplete. It does an excellent job of hitting the hundreds of high - and low - points in Lincoln's too brief life. The pace moves quickly and precisely along so that you never have the feeling that you're being 'written down to' if that's the phrase I'm looking for. This one has NOT been dumbed down for the reader. Personally I see this smaller volume as an 'annual read' to remind me of just how special Lincoln was as a man and as our nation's leader. He was willing, even at great personal cost, to do the right thing on the toughest, most entrenched issues in our nation's history to that point. Through all that he had to work through, he never lost his sense of empathy towards all who were involved. He knew personally what it was like to lose in what he thought was a good cause. And I guess that's what stands out most about this very brief work. As you read along, you still get the sense of Lincoln as a man and as our finest President, and you do it in such a short time! What's that worth these days? This would make an ideal first book on Lincoln OR it would make a fine addition to a collection of works on Lincoln... and it won't take you four score and seven years to read it.

One thing's for sure: this is a very short book. Not only is it a mere 65 pages, but the pages themselves are rather short. I read this in one sitting, and it took me less than an hour and a half (I would say that I read at a moderate pace). I must admit, I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was reading a magazine article or a chapter in a larger book about the great American presidents. I felt at times that rather than seeing a concise account of Lincoln's life, the author just breezed through the telling, i.e. This happened, then this happened, then this happened. Rather than painting a full picture of Lincoln, the book zeroes in on how a man from Illinois came to win the Civil War and free the slaves. No doubt, that's the driving force of any Lincoln biography, but to devote merely a couple of pages to Mary Todd is to ignore the fact that Lincoln married and lived with a woman with deep psychological problems. Lincoln's own depression is glossed over. And there is no mention, for example, of his premonitions regarding his own death. While the Big Events are accounted for here, the "poetry" of his life is completely ignored. On the other hand, I wasn't in the mood to sit down with a massive, 800 page biography of Lincoln. It was refreshing to read about him and not get bogged down in every last detail of every Lincoln/Douglas debate or of every Civil War battle. And, as I mentioned, I read this in one sitting. This is written in clear, concise language, and the story itself is among the most compelling (if not THE most compelling) in our nation's history. McPherson does not talk down to the reader, too. He speaks of the Dred-Scott case, and the suspension of habeus corpus, and if you aren't familiar with these things, you'll just have to look it up for himself. His analysis of the Gettysburg Address

requires that you already know it, because only his paraphrase is presented. Overall, I think the "short book" notion was taken a little too far. What was done in 65 pages could have had a little more flavor at perhaps 100 pages without losing the integrity of a "short account." But the goal of the book was achieved: As a brief overview of arguably America's greatest president, Abraham Lincoln: A Presidential Life succeeds.

Many noted authors have written countless volumes about the life and times of Abraham Lincoln. When I read that Civil War historian James McPherson had attempted, in only 65 pages, to capture the essence of the man who shepherded our nation through its greatest trials I was curious to see how well he could do. I had my doubts at the first. When the first sentence starts out with "Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809..." I started to worry that there would be no more substance than a high school term paper. Fortunately, McPherson soon soothed my misgivings. After a somewhat dry synopsis of Lincoln's early life, McPherson briefly and with great insight touches on each and every key facet of Lincoln's career. He addressed the debates with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's election and subsequent efforts to prevent secession, his role in the war, his relationship with his cabinet, his personal and official views on slavery and emancipation, and his attempts to negotiate a peace with the Confederacy. In every chapter, McPherson's admiration for our sixteenth president shines through, even when discussing Lincoln's questionable suspension of habeas corpus. I found this part especially interesting in light of recent events. The Bush administration used the same arguments that Lincoln put forth to justify its suspension of civil liberties. One could argue that, justifiably or not, Lincoln opened a Pandora's Box that subsequent less-scrupulous presidents have taken advantage of. I have read a great deal about this period in history and yet, on a page-for-page basis, there are few books that can shed as much insight into the heart and mind of our greatest president. I highly recommend this book.

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