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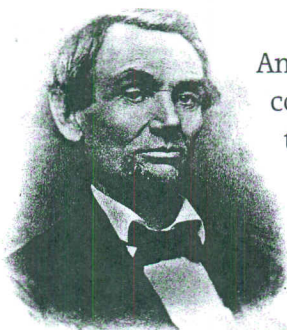
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# Abraham Lincoln in Recent American Fiction

By James Tackach

**Editor's Note:** James Tackach is a professor of English at Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island, and the president of the Lincoln Group of Boston. He is the author of *Lincoln's Moral Vision: The Second Inaugural Address*. Professor Tackach received a course-release grant from the Roger Williams University Foundation to Promote Scholarship and Teaching to complete this article.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN  
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Abraham Lincoln began to appear as a character in American fiction shortly after the Civil War, but the Lincoln novel matured during the second half of the twentieth century. Earlier treatments of Lincoln in American fictional works, such as Henry Ward Beecher's *Norwood* (1867), Edward Eggleston's *The Graysons* (1888), and Honoré Morrow's *The Last Full Measure* (1930) tended to portray Lincoln as a saintly and sentimentalized figure, a heroic individual without flaws or personal demons. By 1950, however, Lincoln scholars had already begun to show the man's warts, and novelists would follow suit. Richard Hofstadter's influential essay on Lincoln in *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, published in 1948, pulled Lincoln off the pedestal on which he was placed after his tragic death in 1865. To Hofstadter, Lincoln was an opportunistic politician rather than the American redeemer who saved the Union and freed the slaves.<sup>1</sup> Hofstadter's Lincoln provided a sharp contrast to the sentimentalized Lincoln depicted in Carl Sandburg's massive six-volume

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1950, however, Lincoln



HENRY WARD BEECHER'S CARTOON  
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biography, published in 1926 and 1939, and in early Lincoln fiction.

A new era of serious Lincoln fiction commences after the publication of Hofstadter's essay. The three most noteworthy Lincoln novels to appear in the second half of the twentieth century are Irving Stone's *Love Is Eternal: A Novel about Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln* (1954), Gore Vidal's *Lincoln: A Novel* (1984), and William Safire's *Freedom* (1987). These three novels have much in common. All three depict Lincoln positively—as a great leader with heroic inner strength, impressive political skills, and great compassion. However, Stone's, Vidal's, and Safire's Lincoln is not the cardboard character of early Lincoln fiction, the sentimental protagonist of Sandburg's biography, or the Honest Abe of American mythology and folklore; in these three modern realistic novels, Lincoln is presented as a fully human character—a man who makes mistakes, who expresses personal doubts and anxieties, who at times acts ruthlessly and vengefully. Susan Baker and Curtis S. Gibson's comment about Vidal's *Lincoln* might also apply to Stone's and Safire's *Lincoln*: "The Lincoln of Vidal's novel is not the humbly born, rail-splitting, emancipating Honest Abe of schoolroom legend. He is, instead, a complex and sometimes devious politician driven by a vision that will eventually forge a nation anew."<sup>2</sup> In creating Lincoln, Stone, Vidal, and Safire make great efforts to stick to the historical record rather than to rely on Lincoln myths and folklore. To support their claims of historical accuracy, Stone's and Safire's novels contain lengthy bibliographies similar to those found in biographies of Lincoln; and Vidal's *Lincoln* includes an afterword asserting that the characters in the novel were drawn accurately from the standard historical documents—letters, journals, newspapers, and diaries.<sup>3</sup> Safire's novel also contains more than seventy-five Civil War-era photographs.

In the twenty-first century, however, a new kind of Lincoln novel is emerging. In Richard Slotkin's *Abe: A Novel of the Young Lincoln* (2000) and Adam Braver's *Mr. Lincoln's Wars: A Novel in Thirteen Stories* (2003), Lincoln is depicted as a rather ordinary man, not the demigod or the great national leader presented in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fictional works.



**CARL SANDBURG**  
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Furthermore, Slotkin and Braver are not bound to the historical record; they freely create incidents in Lincoln's life that certainly did not happen. These new Lincoln novels are highly speculative and, therefore, quite troublesome to readers or Lincoln scholars who believe that the events in historical novels must adhere closely to historical events.

Their fidelity to the historical record notwithstanding, Stone, Vidal, and Safire prepared the way for the more speculative recent Lincoln novels by depicting the Great Emancipator as an imperfect human being. In some episodes in *Love Is Eternal*, Stone's Lincoln reveals himself as the Honest Abe of American mythology who, for example, divides the profits from his law business fifty-fifty with his new partner, Bill Herndon, despite Mrs. Lincoln's suggestion that the young and inexperienced Herndon deserves less than a one-third cut of the law practice proceeds. In *Love Is Eternal*, Lincoln is



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not a politician motivated merely by selfish personal ambition but by a dedication to lofty democratic principles: "[B]efore, Abraham had been interested in politics as a means of rising in the world. . . . Now that he was fired by the determination that slavery must not spread, his self-interest dissolved in a dedication to principle."<sup>4</sup> In Mary Lincoln's view, Lincoln "is not a lawyer, he is not a politician, he is not even a statesman. He is a poet."<sup>5</sup> But Stone balances these flattering and sometimes sentimental comments about Lincoln by often presenting him as a man with flaws and doubts. He proposes marriage to Mary Todd, then, unable to commit to the relationship, absents himself from her life for two years. He is often lonely and sometimes, according to one of Lincoln's acquaintances, "in the grip of a



hopeless melancholy.”<sup>6</sup> His title notwithstanding, Stone chronicles the serious problems in the Lincoln marriage.

Vidal presents Lincoln through the eyes of others. Vidal’s omniscient narrator never enters



**SALMON CHASE**

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Lincoln’s mind. This narrative technique allows Vidal to present, through characters surrounding Lincoln, a critique of Lincoln that makes him more human being and politician than demi-

god. As Baker and Gibson suggest in their study of Vidal’s fiction, Vidal’s Lincoln is not “the sentimentalized icon of legend.”<sup>7</sup> Early in the novel, as Lincoln is discussing with the members of his cabinet his options regarding Fort Sumter, William Seward sees Lincoln as “a presidential Hamlet,” and Salmon Chase sees the president as lacking “entirely that moral foundation without which no great work may be accomplished



**SENATOR BENJAMIN WADE**

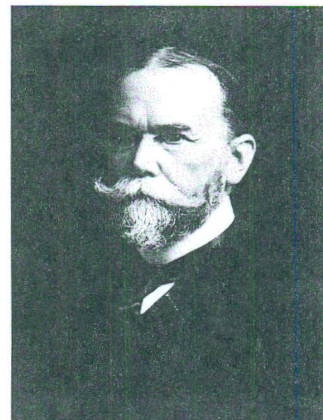
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in the world.”<sup>8</sup> Later in the novel, as Lincoln is discussing the Conscription Act, Seward sees Lincoln not as a tentative Hamlet but as a “single-minded dictator,” a political genius who made himself “absolute dictator without ever letting anyone suspect that he was anything more than a joking, timid backwoods lawyer.”<sup>9</sup> Vidal’s Lincoln, as reported by Herndon to John Hay, contracted syphilis in 1835. At times Lincoln appears tentative—in a conversation with Senator Benjamin Wade, Lincoln confesses that he



**WILLIAM SEWARD**

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**JOHN HAY**

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lacks Wade's certitude that the Union cause is just and the Confederate cause evil—but Hay does conclude, at the very end of *Lincoln*, that "He was always very sure of himself."<sup>10</sup>

In *Freedom*, Safire, in the words of one critic, "dispels our romantic notions of the Great Emancipator" and "presents us with a Lincoln blemished by human imperfection."<sup>11</sup> In the Prologue of *Freedom*, a fearful Lincoln anxiously paces in the Executive Mansion, anticipating with dread a Confederate invasion of Washington, from which citizens have been fleeing: "[T]he sudden desertion of the city left Lincoln shaken."<sup>12</sup> Safire's Lincoln drifts ever so tentatively toward emancipation—"Too soon. It's too soon," he states in 1862.<sup>13</sup> He tolerates his wife's tantrums, suffers from the "hypo," endures insults to his face from political opponents like Senator Wade, makes serious blunders as he shuffles Union military commanders, and second-guesses himself: "Was this [war], as Seward had once said, an 'irrepressible conflict,' with great subterranean strains and pressures building up for a century that necessitated some terrible earthquake, or could a wise President have averted war, keeping the Union intact with compromises?"<sup>14</sup>

Safire fabricates a secret diary authored by Hay as "a fictional device to show what is happening around the White House."<sup>15</sup> The diary, which occasionally draws on the real Hay diary that was published during the twentieth century, allows Safire to present a critical view of Lincoln by one of his admirers. In one of his diary entries, Safire's Hay eloquently puts into focus the kind of Lincoln whom Safire wants his readers to see:

I respect him. I admire him. I even love him, and it will be my goal in life to make certain the world knows what a great man he is, but I also know he is neither the lovable Lincoln of the funny stories and Western ways, nor the hateful dictator-baboon of the newspaper legends. He is a hardened man who gives in at the edges but will not give an inch on his central idea, who knows how to say no, who puts the fervor of the Declaration of Independence ahead of the compromises of the Constitution, and who is looking for a general who is willing to take and inflict heavy casualties to save the Union. And there is a dark side to his brain that has him worried all the time about death and madness, in those around him and in himself. I like to think he is a man of balance, using the



weight of others' arguments to pitch his own forward, but I suspect he is frightened of the imbalances within himself.<sup>16</sup>

Hay's Lincoln is a war-weary man who "has to fight a half-dozen wars at the same time"<sup>17</sup>—against the Confederate armies, against the peace Democrats, against members of his own cabinet, against Congress—but still manages to hold together his fragile nation.

Slotkin's *Abe* takes us far from war-torn Washington back to the landscapes of Lincoln's youth and young adulthood. Slotkin, an honored American studies scholar who authored *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992) and other scholarly studies of the American frontier, could probably have written a compelling scholarly biography of Lincoln's childhood and young-adult years. Instead, Slotkin chose to create a work of fiction, a series of hypothetical episodes that reveal how a frontier youngster came to hold the views that would drive him into national politics. Describing the endeavor that concluded with the creation of *Abe*, Slotkin stated, "[A]s a novelist, I take the critical consciousness of history that I've developed as a scholar and revise the mythology, in the language of mythology. And what I hope to produce is a kind of revisionist myth, or I'd even call it a counter-myth. Which is in the same language of myth but works toward a different end."<sup>18</sup>

The young Abe of Slotkin's counter-myth is no saint. As a young man, he comes to detest his own father: "I ain't *his* to hire out. I ain't his horse. I ain't his nigger. Nor I ain't his son, neither."<sup>19</sup> In one episode, Abe gets into a fight and beats a man to the point of death. He loses his virginity to a prostitute. In New Orleans, he inadvertently triggers a riot among law-abiding blacks. Yet in numerous episodes in the novel, Slotkin's Abe shows a sense of empathy and sensitivity that was probably fairly uncommon among boys who grew into manhood on the American frontier during the early decades of the nineteenth century. For example, watching a black man being beaten by whites, Abe "felt a sickly disgusting down-suck inside, like it was himself spread-eagled helpless his own belly swung that way naked over the ground."<sup>20</sup> He also develops, early on, a thirst for book knowledge.

One of the main goals of Slotkin's novel appears to be to show how young Lincoln overcame the racial prejudices of his time and place. He was born in a slave state, and grew to adulthood in a state that Stephen B. Oates claims was "racist to the core" during Lincoln's time.<sup>21</sup> How did this young frontiersman



become the president who oversaw the abolition of slavery and called for voting rights for African Americans? Biographers have provided us with very few examples of Lincoln's interaction with blacks during his formative years. Lincoln himself mentions only one specific incident. Riding a riverboat in 1841, Lincoln witnessed slaves chained together "precisely like so many fish upon a trot-line. In this condition they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going to perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any other..."<sup>22</sup> In *Abe*, Slotkin imagines a series of episodes from Lincoln's boyhood and young manhood to suggest how young Lincoln might have gained sympathy for the plight of the slave.

Slotkin's Abe, as a youngster listens to his father discuss slavery with his peers. One man asserts that slavery is "Contrary to our free institutions" and that the Founding Fathers wished to do away with it "in the fullness of time." When he sees slaves for the first time, young Abe notes that "Up close they looked like people, if people was turned the color of horses and smoked wood." At age seventeen, he reads the Declaration of Independence for the first time and focuses on the clause that asserts the equality of all men and their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. "Reasonable?" Abe asks himself after studying those words. "That was better than reasonable. That was all a body could wish. To be equal to any and every other man? To have a right to be happy?" Later, Abe hears Frances Wright, the Scottish-born abolitionist and social reformer, deliver a stirring antislavery lecture. Afterwards, Abe's "ears were ringing with the aftersound of her voice."<sup>23</sup>

The key event in Slotkin's novel is a flatboat trip that Abe, as a hired laborer, takes on the Mississippi River from Illinois to New Orleans in 1828-29. The trip, which calls to mind Huckleberry Finn's river journey in Mark Twain's classic novel (or at times Marlow's voyage in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), serves as an initiation experience in Lincoln's life—a "turning point in Abe's development," according to Slotkin's comment in his novel's afterword.<sup>24</sup> Midway through the journey, a refugee slave named Sephus, who survived an attack on his owner's boat by river pirates, comes aboard Abe's flatboat, giving Abe his first opportunity to interact closely with a slave. Sephus plays the role that Jim plays in Huck Finn's moral development. Abe gradually comes to recognize the manhood of Sephus, even as Abe begins to surmise that Sephus actually murdered his master to escape from slavery.



After a while, Abe sees Sephus as "proud, stubborn, and smart." Abe speculates that if his boss sells Sephus to a plantation owner on the Red River, Sephus would be dead in six months, and "Money they got for Sephus would have blood on it, and Abe was partner enough in the voyage for the blood to come on his hands too."<sup>25</sup>

To save Sephus from slavery at its worst, Abe concocts a plan to convince his bosses, Offutt and Gentry, to sell Sephus to Frances Wright, who is scheduled to be in New Orleans at the time that Abe and his boatmen would arrive there. Wright had developed a scheme to purchase slaves, care for them on a plantation that would be run like a utopian commune, and eventually set them free so that they can relocate to Haiti. Abe surmises that Sephus "was the very man Miz Wright needed to run her plantation. Offutt and Gentry would get their money, maybe not Red River money but there wouldn't be any blood on it. . . . And Sephus would get an education of Frances Wright, then go free to Hayti, where he could have a republic of his own. He might even earn enough to buy his wife and children free."<sup>26</sup> But when Abe's flatboat reaches New Orleans, Offutt and Gentry sell Sephus to a slave trader—they buy Abe a ticket to see Junius Booth perform in *Richard III* to get Abe out of the way when the sale is made. Abe refuses to accept any of the money raised from Sephus's sale. Slotkin suggests that Abe's ordeal with Sephus on the Mississippi River when Abe was twenty years old sours Abe on slavery and points him in the direction of abolition.

In his afterword, Slotkin states that *Abe* "draws deeply on historical scholarship, but it is not a biography. Rather, it is an imaginative re-creation of life as a young Abe Lincoln might have lived it, and the people, scenes, and influences that helped produce his character and shape his conscience." Slotkin claims that his portraits of Lincoln's townsmen and of the historical figures in *Abe* are based on "extensive research" and "the standard biographies." He took the liberty of transforming indirect or "reading" relationships with these individuals into "face-to-face encounters, dramatizing some of the influences that played upon Lincoln's developing intelligence."<sup>27</sup>

Braver's *Mr. Lincoln's Wars* contains no such explanation to defend his portrait of Lincoln. Braver's text, which consists of a novella and twelve short stories, is less worshipful of the historical record than any earlier Lincoln fiction. Braver's Lincoln drinks alcohol and uses morphine as a hedge against depression ("a double dose in the day when the pressure starts to back up and the whole chore is too overwhelming").<sup>28</sup> He uses four-letter words.



Although most of the stories in *Mr. Lincoln's Wars* are plausible enough and are built around actual events in Lincoln's life—the war, his son Willie's death, his stepmother's death, his troublesome relationship with his wife, his assassination—most of the text's episodes are obviously imagined by Braver; they simple could not have actually occurred.

Braver's Lincoln is, first and foremost, a grieving father who is utterly unable to cope with his son's death. Indeed, many of the stories and episodes



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in *Mr. Lincoln's Wars* feature Lincoln as a man who has been psychically shocked by Willie's passing. In the text's opening story, "No Time for Tears," Lincoln paces his office, remembering himself "falling to his knees and fighting for breath," drowning in grief over Willie's death.<sup>29</sup> Another story, "His Stepmother's Sister," concludes with Lincoln picturing Willie near death; in his grief, Lincoln forgets that he is president and hurries to his office to inject himself with morphine and temporarily forget Willie's death. In "The Willie Grief," Mary Lincoln observes that her husband has been unable to look her in the eye since Willie's death. In "On to the Next Field," Lincoln sees in a wounded Union soldier on the battlefield his own Willie "face-up in the coffin with his eyes drawn closed like he was sleeping." Looking at the soldier, Lincoln once again feels "the shame of a father who couldn't protect his son."<sup>30</sup> In *Mr. Lincoln's Wars*, Braver creates a series of fictional episodes that highlight Lincoln's overwhelming grief.

In "The Undertaker's Assistant," for example, Braver conceives an unlikely chance meeting between Lincoln and the undertaker's assistant, Mr. Jackson, who helped prepare Willie for burial. Lincoln urges the man to reveal to him everything about his work on Willie's body, as if some piece of information about Willie's corpse will in some way assuage Lincoln's grief. "Since Willie died all I've done is walk the floors all night," Lincoln tells the undertaker's assistant. "Back and forth. One foot in front of the other." Mr. Jackson listens patiently as his president explains, "I'm in charge of a divided nation where boys on both sides seem to have been born to just pass through too quickly. Maybe that's why the Lord put them here, I don't know. But He included my twelve-year-old boy, and I don't understand. I don't understand."<sup>31</sup> The incident in "The Undertaker's Assistant" is certainly fictional, but the story



conveys Braver's idea that Lincoln was a man weighed down by unrelenting grief—grief over what was happening to his nation and what had happened to his son.

One of the most compelling stories of the collection, "On to the Next Field," places Lincoln on a battlefield in Pennsylvania shortly after battle. Lincoln has made the visit at the insistence of Secretary of War Stanton—"Give these troops something to believe in."<sup>32</sup> When Lincoln arrives on the battlefield, the smoke and stench of battle are still in the air: "[T]he whole area smelled like death, and the ground was stained by patches of blood and dead boys; and the air was filled with the combustion of body parts as the fires burned over the cremated ruins."<sup>33</sup> As Lincoln walks the battlefield, he comes upon a wounded soldier named Delbert Jackson writhing in pain from a leg wound. While they wait for the surgeon, Lincoln tries to comfort the young soldier: "Stay strong, son." He grips Delbert's shoulder and tries to explain that "wars are cancers that eat away at the kindness of men."<sup>34</sup> The surgeon arrives and decides that an amputation of the young man's leg is called for. Lincoln holds Delbert's hand as the surgeon saws through flesh and bone. During the amputation, as the soldier writhes in pain, Lincoln urges him to hold his strength because "It's too damn dark on the other side."<sup>35</sup> Nowhere in the historical record is there evidence of Lincoln visiting a Pennsylvania battlefield immediately after a battle and assisting a surgeon in the amputation of a soldier's damaged leg. But Braver creates the episode to reveal the internal sufferings of this war president.

Braver's Lincoln is neither the Great Emancipator nor the courageous president who held the Union together and saved the American republic. He is an insomniac, pacing the Executive Mansion in grief and private pain. During a visit with Orville Browning, Lincoln appears to be a man in trauma, shell-shocked by his private and public wars—calling to mind, perhaps, Ernest Hemingway's Nick Adams in wartime stories like "Now I Lay Me" or "A Way You'll Never Be." "I lay awake all night, Orville," Lincoln says. "And all these disjoined fragments of my past start weaving in and out. . . . I swear to God, Orville, my life is unraveling before me in a very purposeful manner."<sup>36</sup> Earlier Lincoln novelists such as Vidal and Safire occasionally provide readers with glimpses of Lincoln suffering this kind of private pain; but these earlier Lincoln novelists also portray Lincoln as the great president who won the war, saved the Union, and freed the slaves. Braver's Lincoln has no such moments of triumph to counterpoint the grief and pain. He is an ordinary



man suffering from private and public shocks; and in the end, he is brought down by a "harmless-looking," "nondescript," "almost laughable" bullet.<sup>37</sup>

The Lincoln depicted in *Mr. Lincoln's Wars* is not the great orator whom generations of Americans have come to admire. On the contrary, Braver's Lincoln fumbles for words. Trying to comfort Mary Lincoln after Willie's death, Lincoln is "unsure of his words."<sup>38</sup> In "On to the Next Field," Lincoln arrives on the Pennsylvania battlefield and greets soldiers "unsure of what to say." He can only stammer, "Good afternoon." When he attempts to comfort the soldier whose leg is about to be amputated, Lincoln resorts to platitudes: "Stay strong, son" and "Just hold your strength, son." Lincoln begins to articulate to Delbert, the wounded soldier, a profound idea—"wars are cancers that eat away at the kindness of men"—but, perhaps unsure of how to develop that idea, Lincoln "stopped himself."<sup>39</sup> Throughout *Mr. Lincoln's Wars*, the composer of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address gropes for language to convey his thoughts and feelings.

Braver's and Slotkin's texts follow a postmodern impulse in American fiction to blur the distinction between fact and fiction. E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) is an early example. Doctorow's narrator is Daniel Isaacson, a young man whose parents have been executed for leaking atom bomb secrets to the Soviets. The Isaacsons are and are not the Rosenbergs. In *Libra* (1988), Don DeLillo weaves the lives of characters from his earlier novels with the life of Lee Harvey Oswald as he plots the assassination of President John Kennedy. William Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* (1982) creates in fictional form the life and times of Shoeless Joe Jackson, a central figure in the 1919 World Series fix.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps, the future of Lincoln fiction points in this post-modern direction. Future Lincoln novelists might be less likely compelled than their twentieth-century counterparts to include in their texts extensive bibliographies and afterwords that attest to the historical accuracy of their texts. The protagonist of future Lincoln fiction will more likely be an antiheroic everyman than a heroic president.

Lincoln has made two other appearances in recent fiction that merit mention. He plays a cameo role in Doctorow's *The March* (2005), a novel based on General William T. Sherman's 1864 March to Sea. Near the end of Doctorow's novel, Sherman pays General Ulysses S. Grant a visit at Grant's headquarters on the James River in Virginia; and Lincoln is on hand when the two generals talk strategy. Lincoln is pictured through the eyes of one of Doctorow's fictional characters, Wrede Sartorius, a Union surgeon:



He had the weak, hopeful smile of the sick, a head of wildly unmanageable hair, he wore a shawl over his shoulders and house slippers, and Wrede Sartorius realized with a shock, this was not the resolute, visionary leader whose portrait photographs were seen everywhere in the Union. This was someone eaten away by life, with eyes pained and a physiognomy almost sepulchral, but nevertheless, still unmistakably, the President of the United States.<sup>41</sup>

Doctorow's Lincoln is, like Braver's Lincoln, a common man consumed by grief and pain. He "had about him the quality of an elderly woman, fearful of war and despairing of its ever ending." He is a humble man who dwells on a "darkling plain," whose "agony was where his public and private beings converged." Surgeon Wrede concedes that a "proper diagnosis [of Lincoln's condition] was not in the realm of science. His affliction might, after all, be the wounds of the war he'd gathered into himself, the amassed miseries of this war-torn country made incarnate."<sup>42</sup>

A most unusual portrait of Lincoln appears in "Lincoln, Arisen," a short story by Steve Almond that originally appeared in *Antioch Review* and is included in Almond's 2005 short story collection titled *The Evil B.B. Chow and Other Stories*. The story opens plausibly enough. It is March 14, 1865, and Lincoln dispatches a messenger to invite Frederick Douglass for tea at Soldier's Home. As Lincoln awaits Douglass's arrival, he imagines a flatboat ride that he and Douglass took years ago on the Mississippi River. When Douglass arrives, Lincoln says to him, "I have a sense we have met somewhere before. . . . Somewhere without all of this"—gesturing to "the dark wainscoting of his office, the massive leather chairs."<sup>43</sup> (Of course, they have—in real life. Douglass visited the Executive Mansion during the summers of 1863 and 1864 and again On March 4, 1865, at the reception following the Second Inaugural Address.) The narrative of Lincoln's meeting with Douglass—during which the two men discuss the recruitment of black troops and other war matters—is interrupted by the imaginary flatboat journey on the Mississippi River. As the boat drifts downriver, Lincoln asks Douglass to tell him about slavery. Lincoln buys a flask of liquor and takes a swig, but Douglass refuses to imbibe. The two men swap stories. Lincoln attends to "the business of the presidential bladder" by urinating into the river. At night, "Douglass lies in the crook of Lincoln's arm." In an almost erotic moment at the end of the



river journey, Lincoln and Douglass stare intently at each other, and "Each man can hear the other's breath. They are so close they might embrace."<sup>44</sup>

Toward the end of Almond's story, Lincoln paints for Douglass an unflattering self-portrait:

There was once a man who found no happiness in his life. He was sad every moment of the day. His duties were many and without mercy. Senators ran to him in anger. Common men blackened their hearts on his behalf. A nation of mothers cursed his name. He hoped to make himself content through an adherence to God's will, but when he examined his beliefs he held none. His wife went insane, Douglass. His children died like flies. His one love perished. . . . He behaved nobly, but for reasons he could not fathom. His faults were but the shadows his virtues cast. He saw himself grimly advancing on history, but came to understand it was the other way around. He grew bored of his own stories and savored none of his achievements. His single respite was sleep. And then that left him too. Hold me, Douglass. All the strange checkered past seems to crowd now upon my mind.<sup>45</sup>

This speaker is the Lincoln of postmodern fiction—no demigod, no national hero, neither the Great Emancipator nor the redeemer president, but a human being caught up in the swirl of historical events and personal crises, struggling to make sense of it all. He inhabits a world partly real and partly imaginative. And he appeals, perhaps, to readers who wish to consider parts of Lincoln's life and regions of his psyche that biographers and historians cannot explore.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948), 93-136.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Baker and Curtis S. Gibson, *Gore Vidal: A Critical Companion* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Two prominent Lincoln scholars, Richard N. Current and Roy P. Basler suggested that Vidal's *Lincoln* was more fiction than fact. See C. Vann Wood-



- ward, *The Future of the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 238.
- <sup>4</sup> Irving Stone, *Love Is Eternal: A Novel about Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954), 242.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.
- <sup>7</sup> Baker and Gibson, 84.
- <sup>8</sup> Gore Vidal, *Lincoln: A Novel* (1984; New York: Galantine, 1985), 103.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 654.
- <sup>11</sup> Dean C. Hammer, "The Historical Novelist as Didactic Ian: Safire's Lincoln." *Journal of Popular Culture* 28 (1994): 105.
- <sup>12</sup> William Safire, *Freedom* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1987), xvii.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 981.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 581-82.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 689.
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in Jeff Sharlet, "A Historian Breaks and Makes Myth in a Novel on Lincoln's Youth," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 May 2000, A21.
- <sup>19</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Abe: A Novel* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 154.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.
- <sup>21</sup> Stephen B. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 66.
- <sup>22</sup> Roy P. Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), I: 260.
- <sup>23</sup> Slotkin, 120, 123, 151, 200. In an afterword to *Abe*, Slotkin admits that there is no historical evidence to suggest that Lincoln ever met Frances Wright.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 477.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 368. The Red River was notorious for abusive slave owners. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the notorious Simon Legree owns a plantation on the Red River.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 477, 478.
- <sup>28</sup> Adam Braver, *Mr. Lincoln's Wars: A Novel in Thirteen Stories* (New York: William Morrow, 2003), 234.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.



<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 17, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 138, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 231-32.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 137, 138, 140.

<sup>40</sup> The year after Braver's *Mr. Lincoln's Wars* appeared, Philip Roth published *The Plot Against America*, a novel about a Jewish boy named Philip Roth who grows up during the presidency of Charles Lindbergh, who, in Roth's text, defeated Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election. It is also worth noting that just as postmodern fiction writers have blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction, contemporary biographers have done the same. In *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999), Edmund Morgan, the official biographer of Reagan, created an imaginary narrator to relate the story of Reagan's life.

<sup>41</sup> E. L. Doctorow, *The March: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2005), 331.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 334-35.

<sup>43</sup> Steve Almond, *The Evil B.B. Chow and Other Stories* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005), 103.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 116, 120, 126. C. A. Tripp, the author of *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*, might find an embrace between Lincoln and Douglass quite plausible.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 125.