

Mr. Lincoln's Wars: A Novel in Thirteen Stories

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Recommended Citation

Hochbruck, Wolfgang (2003) "Mr. Lincoln's Wars: A Novel in Thirteen Stories," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss2/11>

Review

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Spring 2003

Braver, Adam *Mr. Lincoln's Wars: A Novel in Thirteen Stories*. William Morrow / HarperCollins Publishers, \$23.95 ISBN 006008118X

Telling Tales

Stories pivot around axis of Lincoln

There was a time in American Literary History when most of the fiction about the American Civil War kept re-fighting the war from one or the other, more or less, jaundiced point of view. The result was a dead pile of second and third-rate prose, often bordering on sermonizing and the secular tract. Only a handful of works and authors stick out: Stephen Crane and William Faulkner, of course, Ross Lockridge's sprawling *Raintree Country*, and that little gem of a novel: Stephen Becker's *When the War Was Over*. For the past twenty years, however, that war appears to be over for good -- gladly discounting the seemingly ineradicable annual crop of military novels and of that particularly dreadful sub-sub-genre, the novel of ancestral worship.

Adam Braver's novel **Mr. Lincoln's Wars: A Novel in Thirteen Stories** tries hard to join the ranks of (post-)modern prose of which the subject is Civil War just by chance, or as an ironic point of reference -- Allan Gurganus's *Oldest Confederate Widow Tells All* and Richard Brautigan's *A Confederate General From Big Sur* belong with this group. Within this field, and with the general knowledge and memory of the Civil War constantly waning, authors trying to take this approach seem to be limited as to their range of subjects: Anything with 'Confederate' in the title will do, or else Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln was, and still is, all things to all men (and women), or, as Adam Braver has Lincoln voice it himself: "I've been dissected into a million different me's that have just left their shadow as President Lincoln." A great sentence. There are many of this type and of this power of impact throughout the novel, and they convey an impression of the talent that Mr. Braver has and which

Stewart O'Nan praises in a blurb on the back of the novel. Sometimes he maintains the same level of narrative power for a whole story: "The Undertaker's Assistant" is one of them, "The Ward" is another, and I have read few passages in recent years that I found as gripping as the ending of "The Idiot Brother" when the 'idiot' Thaddeus feels around the railroad station platform crying and searching in vain for his brother who boarded a troop train there eight months earlier.

My favourite piece in the collection, however, is the first part of "The Necropsy," the evening of April 14th, 1865, from the perspective of John Wilkes Booth. It helps to keep in mind that Booth was a well-known man, that he was famous before the murder, and that there were other aspects to him than being the assassin of President Lincoln. Booth murdering Lincoln would be like Michl Douglas killing Jimmy Carter — the son of an actor then still better known than he was, murdering a President few of his contemporaries did not criticize, or ridicule, or both, and whose greatness would only be seen — and reconstructed — by hindsight. In these stories Mr. Braver is at his best -- bold, beautiful, and creating touchingly lucid sceneries and characters.

Unfortunately, there are other stories that fall wide off the mark and that sound and feel awkward and contrived. Braver does not always escape partisan and 'trendy' attributions, making Lincoln a morphinist and his wife a racist, and of course Union soldiers kill women and children as they burn their way through Georgia and the Carolinas — one wonders how much research went into this novel, and why so few people seem to read Mark Grimsley's *The Hard Hand of War*. Maybe all of this can be subsumed under poetic license: I find these timeworn formulas as regrettable as I find the numerous references to and explications of sexual intercourse onerous. Also, a number of avoidable anachronisms and mistakes mar even the better tales: Booth father and son smoke cigarettes, two soldiers guarding the Executive Mansion are supposed to have carried Winchesters, Booth calls Atzerodt a "kraut" and wants to send him back to a "Germany" that did not exist at the time. And Mr. Braver gets completely off track when he tries to be scientific and has the surgeons performing the autopsy on Lincoln throw around European measurements: Lincoln's head is supposed to have measured "51 centimeters", which would have made the man a microcephalic indeed, whereas his brains are supposed to weigh 1800 "kilos" — that's 1.8 tons.

From the point of view of genre theory, it is not quite clear what qualifies this collection of Lincoln-tales as a novel. Postmodernism may have done away with the integrated novel form and the story of more or less linear development, so we have come to almost expect a non-chronological order and disjointed narrative. However, the frequent reoccurrences of "sour breath" from somebody, and the use of "sonabitch" (sic) in every single story do not already constitute leitmotifs. Often enough they come in odd contexts. An African-American soldier from the 54th Massachusetts, unaccountably on guard duty in the house during the Lincoln autopsy, is supposed to say "Sonabitch if the world don't get stranger every day" to Assistant Surgeon General Ed Curtis, and Mary Lincoln is shown wishing that her husband would "[g]et really mad and scream out that he missed Willie like a sonabitch." Missing Willie constitutes a kind of thread, and no one doubts that the memories of a lost child can be haunting — but, please, not "like a sonabitch."

Other than that there is little to hold the stories together, apart from the obvious focus on Abraham Lincoln. The fact that Jesse Arnaud from "The Idiot Brother" does make a cameo re-appearance in one of the worst stories in the collection, "On to the Next Field," makes one long for the clever use of this connecting feature in that highly influential CW novel of them all, Shelby Foote's 1952 first novel *Shiloh*. From this point of view, it would have made more sense if "The Necropsy" had been divided up into the five parts that it comes in, thus lending additional weight and credibility to the Booth story, and then Booth would have returned in Part Five like Foote's Palmer Metcalfe.

It is too early to say whether Mr. Braver is one of those talents who is able to write the occasional brilliant short story but fails at the complexity and precision of a novel, or whether the narrative power visible in the best stories of **Mr. Lincoln's Wars** will at some time in the future mature enough to provide support and coherence to the long form. As it is, there are moments of brilliance in between stretches of less promising material.

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