

### I Am Abraham: A Novel of Lincoln and the Civil War

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## Review

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**Charyn, Jerome** *I Am Abraham: A Novel of Lincoln and the Civil War*. Liveright, \$26.95 ISBN 978-0-87140-427-5

### A Portrait of a Great Leader

The oft-used expression “brings to life” has been used before about books on Lincoln as a vague way of speaking, but it is a very accurate way of speaking about Jerome Charyn's novel as we listen to Abe Lincoln speak to us in the first person for 456 pages.

Paradoxically, this subjective approach does not give the reader the kind of communal experience books about Lincoln usually provide; rather it enables the reader's feelings to remain within Lincoln's own consciousness. It is an intense emotional and imaginative experience, into which pointed awareness of historical fact and intellectual analysis seldom intrude.

What a mind Jerome Charyn must have to be able to move from rendering intellect, emotions, imagination, and dreams from within the mind of Emily Dickinson in *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*, causing great controversy, to imagining the mind of a totally different person--although perhaps not so different--Abraham Lincoln.

Comparatively, this novel is unusual as a novel, a historical novel specifically, and as a work about Lincoln, fiction or nonfiction. By contrast, Kent Gramm's excellent meditation *November*, my choice of the best nonfiction on Lincoln, is clearly unique, but is so entirely different from Jerome's novel that *I Am Abraham* stands monumentally alone.

The novel begins with an imaginative structural device that is in itself a meaningful way of moving back from the end of his life at Ford's Theater to the beginning of his adult life in New Salem. In the “Prologue,” Charyn imagines Lincoln's having been preoccupied all day with thoughts of what happened to

Lee's famous silver sword at the surrender at Appomattox, imploring his son Captain Robert Lincoln (who was there) to tell him. Jerusalem is also on his mind, for he desires to visit that city when his second term ends, when he feels a sting behind his left ear. "Faces floated in front of my eyes. My mouth clucked like a maddened fish. *I'm President of the United--*" Then chapter one opens with: "Down into that whirlpool I went.... I must have blacked out and been washed ashore like a worthless piece of wood." He comes out of Sangamon River and into history, personal and public meshed.

The most powerful chapters thereafter are the ones that deal with the Black Hawk war, his ill-fated love for Ann Rutledge, the hanging of a mulatto cook, his courtship of Mary Todd, the death of ponies in a fire that parallels the death of soldiers, the death of Willie and its effect upon Lincoln and Mary, Elizabeth Kegeley's imprisonment, Lincoln at Gettysburg, the meeting of Lincoln with Grant, and Lincoln's visit to defeated, still burning Richmond.

In an unbroken process, Charyn imagines fresh ways of saying and describing events and people and rendering dialogue. "What invading foeman could never do, the silent artillery of time had done." In dream, Ann Rutledge rises out of her coffin to run away with Abe. "It was some kind of elopement *after* death."

Lincoln's experiences in the Civil War era is in this novel rendered in fresh language. If only historians of "the storm clouds were gathering" school would strive to make their own style more lively. He does not indulge in arbitrary or gratuitous figures of speech, similes, and metaphors such as overpopulate the writings of many novelists, although he does use "like some"--as in "like some talisman that would protect them"--almost 200 times, as do Cormac McCarthy and Thomas Pynchon. Charyn says in his interesting "Author's Note" that he set out to depict "Lincoln the prose poet rather than the politician," a perspective also well presented in Fred Kaplan's nonfiction work *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*. Describing his style, I should exercise restraint, so I will say only that it is brilliant, witty, in fact exhilarating.

Known as a master of farce, Charyn offers comic language, people, and events, along with authentic profanity and fine lyrical passages. Only in this long novel will the reader get a full sense of Lincoln's sexuality, always in explicit frontier terminology, including masturbation, anatomical particulars of women in general, but especially of his great love lost to "milk sickness," Ann Rutledge,

and of Mary, a very sensual being whom he may never have truly loved. Right after one of her tantrums, Mary comes to him in her nightgown. "I saw the little ripe roseola around her nipple, like a pink harvest.... She cupped her hand over her nipple." But when he touches her, she bolts out of the room.

Lincoln's prophetic dreams are well-known and well-rendered, along with some that Charyn imagines. Charyn adds nightmare remembrances of his flat boat trip down to New Orleans, where he first saw slaves.

Charyn's fictional rendering enables readers to experience intimately well-known historical persons solely through the first person narration Lincoln himself did not live to give us and that simultaneously enriches our sense of his life and may enrich the reading of any nonfictional narratives about Lincoln and those characters: his wife, Mary, and his children, especially the remote Robert; Jack Armstrong's gang of his primitive New Salem days; his Springfield partner, Herndon; his election debate opponent Stephen Douglas, Mary's onetime suitor; his cabinet, especially the difficult Seward; Elizabeth Keckley, Mary's ex-slave seamstress; his generals, especially Grant, his favorite, and his rival, slow-poke Little Napoleon McClellan.

To enhance our deeper experience of Lincoln's emotions, imagination, and intellect, Charyn expands upon what is known about a few major and minor characters, such as Joshua Speed and his prostitute lover; he completely imagines a few characters, especially Jack Armstrong's abused wife, Hannah, and a female Pinkerton operative, Mrs. Small, who saves president-elect Lincoln's life in Baltimore en-route to the White House and who helps him later get rid of one of Mary's odd, too-intimate friends, a blackmailer.

But Charyn's depiction of Mary through Lincoln's voice is the most complex and memorable. At various points, Abe calls possessive Mary his "Lexington Lioness," "Belle of the Ball," "the general," sequestered in her "office," her mind full of stratagems, "the demented queen," grieving Willie's death, and calls her fits of mental aberration "the blinders," which cause son Robert to recommend confining her in the insane asylum. Her southern origin and her harboring of a favorite second cousin inspire some folks in D.C. call her "traitoress." Of course, Lincoln himself throughout his short life was afflicted with what he calls his "unholies," or melancholia.

Mary's erratic mood swings are so unpredictable that Abe once thought "she'd had a spontaneous eruption of joy." Her blatant, jealous attacks in public on both the attractive and unattractive wives of generals are sadly predictable. She even accuses her free black dress-maker in residence, Elizabeth Keckley--to whom she was enigmatically, "absolutely devoted," and beloved by Abe and son Tad--of seductive behavior around Abe. Even so, Charyn imagines Mary's power as such that she molded Lincoln. Charyn enables us to know Mrs. Lincoln better, so that our love-hate regard for her is more intense and more memorable.

From page to page, Lincoln expresses compassion, overtly or explicitly, especially, of course, for slaves and, as Commander-in-Chief, for soldiers he sent into the battles that were swiftly-executed slaughter fields. For him, the White House sometimes had the familiarity of a morgue when he returned from visits to battlefields.

I have reviewed many books on Lincoln, especially in the past five years around the Lincoln Bicentennial, and this one is by far the finest, even though it is fiction. No other novel or nonfiction comes close to conveying a sense of the range of Lincoln's emotions and collective imagination as he experienced his life, especially the daily trauma of the Civil War. I consider this a special event in my experience of reading works about Lincoln.

I like very much the idea that the best book written on Lincoln before and during the Civil War specifically was written by a streetwise Jew who grew up in a crime-ridden neighborhood of the Bronx. (See his *The Black Swan and Bronx Boy*.) One would expect him to be inclined then to revel in the slang and colloquialisms of the talk of Lincoln's frontier days. The novel is a treasure trove of colloquial words and phrases: "learn by littles," "scarify," "embrigglements," "slap you silly." That language is a major element in the experience the novel provides.

He published his first novel in 1964. If this is not the finest of his 35 novels, I'm all the more eager to read the one that is. We might expect to find in his 11 nonfiction works traces of his fictional style in sensibility and perception, books mostly about the movies, including Marilyn Monroe, Quentin Tarantino, movieland's depiction and influence upon the Great American dream culture.

*I Am Abraham* should become an American classic, maybe the Great American Novel. If not in this great opus, we may expect his forceful energy,

even though he is eighty, to create one.

*Founding director of the United States Civil War Center and former Louisiana Commissioner for the Lincoln Bicentennial, David Madden has published many books in all genres, including a Civil War novel. The Last Bizarre Tale, his fourth book of stories, will appear in August and The Tangled Web of the Civil War and Reconstruction next year.*