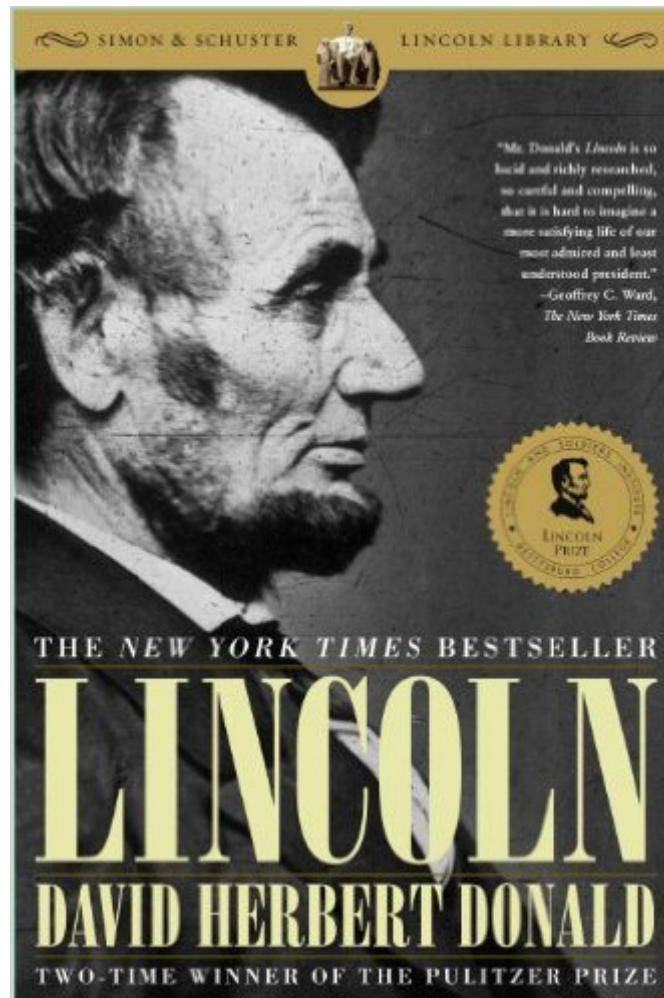


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Lincoln



Synopsis

A masterful work by Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* is a stunning portrait of Abraham Lincoln's life and presidency. Donald brilliantly depicts Lincoln's gradual ascent from humble beginnings in rural Kentucky to the ever-expanding political circles in Illinois, and finally to the presidency of a country divided by civil war. Donald goes beyond biography, illuminating the gradual development of Lincoln's character, chronicling his tremendous capacity for evolution and growth, thus illustrating what made it possible for a man so inexperienced and so unprepared for the presidency to become a great moral leader. In the most troubled of times, here was a man who led the country out of slavery and preserved a shattered Union—in short, one of the greatest presidents this country has ever seen.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Lincoln" is a remarkable look at Abraham Lincoln as he advanced from extremely poor, rural roots, in what was then the western United States, into both the Illinois legislature and the U.S. Congress for one term, through a career as a self-taught lawyer, and finally to the presidency. The author has extensively researched Lincoln's movements, first-hand accounts of his utterances, his formal speeches and writings, as well as official records kept in the discharge of his various duties and offices. It is a fascinating look at the evolution of the character and personality of a man of meager origins and virtually no formal education. Lincoln was driven to make something of himself; this is best seen in his insatiable desire to educate himself. Beyond self-development, Lincoln had an

inherent ability to relate to others. He combined humility with a great ability to tell stories. This ease among his fellow citizens led to his being elected to the Illinois legislature at a fairly young age and to a reasonably successful career as a lawyer. Lincoln was a Whig and devotee of Henry Clay and his American system of internal improvements. But it would be completely wrong to regard Lincoln as mostly an opportunistic politician. He was principled, if anything. Manipulating a political view to get elected would have never occurred to Lincoln. Furthermore, Lincoln was a man of his word. When elected to Congress in 1846, he returned home after one term as he promised, though undoubtedly he could have been re-elected. However, the author shows that Lincoln became very astute politically with a substantial network of political friends both at the state and national levels. Early in Lincoln's career, slavery was seldom an issue.

Before reading *Lincoln*, I had read David McCullough's *John Adams*. The latter is good but nonetheless unsatisfying, because McCullough clearly worships Adams. (See my review of McCullough's book.) I went right into *Lincoln*. All I can say is that it's astonishing. The organizing principle of *Lincoln* makes Donald's job very hard. When Donald met JFK during the latter's presidency, Kennedy attacked historians for retrospectively judging the worth of presidents. Historians, said Kennedy, had no right to make such judgments until they sat in the presidential desk and had to make the tough decisions. Donald wrote *Lincoln* in an attempt to honor Kennedy's wishes, and he more than succeeded. Every sentence in *Lincoln* is guided by the question, "What did Lincoln know at the time he made this decision? What information did he have on hand? What could he have been reasonably expected to know? Why did he make this decision?" At no moment does Donald judge Lincoln - he is a scrupulous researcher, not historiography's answer to God. Through this biography, we learn that Lincoln was very human. He made mistakes. Not only did he mess up, but Donald makes it clear that he wasn't always as revered as he is today. Through newspaper clippings, diary entries, and hundreds of other primary sources, Donald paints a picture of a man who very nearly lost the Union as well as his second term. Only through skillful politicking did Lincoln neutralize his enemies and get reelected. I came into this book curious how Lincoln moved from his first inaugural address, during which he said I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists.

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