

LAND OF LINCOLN

Adventures in Abe's America



ANDREW FERGUSON

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Before he grew up and became one of Washington's most respected reporters and editors, Andrew Ferguson was, of all things, a Lincoln buff — with the photos hung on his bedroom wall to prove it. Decades later, Ferguson's latent buffdom is reignited. In *Land of Lincoln*, he embarks on a curiosity-fueled coast-to-coast journey through contemporary Lincoln Nation, encountering everything from hatred to adoration to opportunism and all manner of reaction in between. He attends a national conference of Lincoln impersonators; attends a leadership conference based on Lincoln's "management style"; drags his family across the three-state-long and now defunct Lincoln Heritage Trail; and even manages to hold one of five original copies of the Gettysburg Address. Along the way he weaves in enough history to hook readers of presidential biographies and popular histories while providing the engaging voice and style of the best narrative journalism. This is an entertaining, unexpected, and big-hearted celebration of Lincoln and his enduring influence on the country he helped create.

Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe's America Details

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Author : Andrew Ferguson

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From Reader Review Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe's America for online ebook

Karl says

As a former U.S. history teacher I loved reading Ferguson's wry and insightful comments about the changing perspectives of presenting history, as educators and historians, and the way public perception of history has changed as well. I have led students on hands-on "we the people" museum field trips that bored both them and me silly. And I've stood with students on the battlefield at Gettysburg and watched them as they were overtaken with awe by "standing right here where it really happened". I've also been through many workshop experiences, and Ferguson gets those dead right too. I finished the book (which I'd picked up the day before on a whim having heard nothing about it) feeling well-entertained, well-served and just a little bit more patriotic than I had hours before.

John says

Read this book in conjunction with "Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War" by David Horwitz and knew they were not point, counter point but thought they would run loosely along similar themes. Of Course Lincoln, with about 14,000 books written about him and as ubiquitous as his images are, is never too far from our thoughts especially here, in "The Land of Lincoln." I found myself chuckling at times over Ferguson's nuanced, wry and sometimes quirky writing style but it was very engaging and light on the mind. The author's odyssey takes him through several states following Lincoln's travels or his artifacts and ends on a very high note at the Lincoln Memorial.

Ferguson particularly laments the Disneyesque imprint on history to the Chicago History Museum and The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois. Coincidentally, I visited The Chicago History Museum a few weeks ago which at one time exhibited a plethora of Lincoln artifacts and lore but now, in terms of Lincoln, only exhibits the bed upon which he died. I also had been in the Peterson House across the street from Ford's Theater many years ago and had assumed the bed there had been authentic; now I know only the bloodstained pillow encased by plexiglass was authentic. As an aside, the chair in which Lincoln was sitting while in the box at Ford's Theater is appropriately, I guess, housed in the (Henry) Ford Museum/Greenfield Village in Dearborn Michigan.

The Disney approach in the ALPLM is even more evident where written text is sparse and is replaced by sight and sound effects. Among the exhibits is one entitled "The Civil War in Four Minutes" consisting of a huge relief map of the United States covering an entire wall with several benches provided to sit down. As the war progresses, flashes erupt at the appropriate spot on the map representing a battle being fought while a counter in the lower corner clicks off the mounting number of casualties being suffered on both sides. Then presto! Four minutes later the war is over. Purists simply cannot condone coverage of the Civil War in a mere four minutes. Nevertheless, it is a clever effort to engage the minds of young people, grasp their hearts, pour in some emotion and who, according to the conceived design and hope, will take up a book and read about it later. Designers did not want to glorify war or the machinery of war either so no real weapons are included in displays. However, looking at a picture of John Wilkes Booth's derringer used in the assassination, a 9 or 10 year old boy standing next to me turned to his mother and asked "Where's the gun?" After a period of silence when I knew his mother couldn't answer, I told them the derringer was displayed in a glass case in the basement of Ford's Theater in Washington D.C. A simple sentence under the picture would have fed his mind and satisfied his natural curiosity. What other questions went unanswered for him that day? Further illustrative of the point, Ferguson reported the glee of another 9 year old boy departing the

ALPLM, "It's great! So much fun! I didn't have to read anything!"

Shawn says

The author's approach here is simple and effective: take an enormous historical figure and explore the ways his life and work have been distorted by various groups - whether revisionist historians, artifact collectors, members of the petroleum industry, or hosts of business "workshop" retreats. The exploration makes for interesting reading, aided in no small part by quacks and fanatics (lovers and haters alike).

But what is probably the book's strongest suit is Ferguson's refusal to dissolve completely into a relativist assessment of Lincoln (though there is enough juxtaposition and montage to make you question whether anyone ever met the same Lincoln twice.) Sure, in the end Ferguson essentially attributes the varied perceptions of Lincoln to an intense need for healing and meaning after such an intense and bloody nightmare -- or **any** bloody nightmare, as we gather from the coda's spotlight on the Prague concentration camp survivor who visited Springfield, presumably to pay tribute to his guardian angel before kicking the bucket. The thing that holds the book together, though, is that it doesn't denigrate or devalue that type of response; it simply posits that a glimpse of the real Lincoln, untainted by our needs and desires, probably doesn't exist anywhere these days.

So, why the tepid three-star rating? Mostly aesthetic reasons. This could be purely subjective, but the excitement/steam with which I read the first few chapters of the book started to fizzle out maybe half to three quarters of the way in, and I felt like I was slogging through the end of it. I'd attribute it to a sort of ambivalence I'd developed about Ferguson's authorial style by that point; on the one hand, I liked the easy-going, "regular dude" prose he used - almost anti-academic. It seemed fair to the people he spoke with, conveying a lack of judgment and a conference of dignity. On the other hand, he seemed to have no qualms about putting on the pedant's hat when advantageous. As much as he tired me with the "scholars differ" bit, he still summoned a scholarly preference when sneering at the pathos of the Disney imagineers (not exactly emotion-over-fact, but emotion supported by the more convenient fact).

Again, mostly aesthetic - my aversion to the slyly incongruous narrator. It's one of the reasons I'm not a big fan of first-person narration in non-fiction that isn't exactly about the narrator. By and large, I give Ferguson a pass - since it's a book about the amalgamation of personal reactions to the iconic Lincoln (his included.) But, before I sign off, I have to thrust my critical spear into a couple of things. The first is a bit of overwriting I found particularly egregious, and that is when, as he describes the "Museum of Funeral Customs," he compares the bright lighting to "an operating theater or the set of a porn movie." Mind you, he describes this in first-person recollection. I just have a hard time believing this guy's been on the set of a porn movie, and I felt kind of deceived by a guy who, for the previous 200 pages, has been on a mission to divest Lincoln of embellishment. I had a similar reaction to his oft-quoted daughter, who seemed a little too witty and well-spoken for reality. (Maybe she's older than I imagined? Did anyone make note of an age? I'm going off of one passage in particular when "The kids went out the rear door to run on the grass behind the temple" and she is quoted shortly later saying "Young Abe Lincoln once carried this garbage for fourteen miles in the snow ... He did it to repay a farmer who had lent him a stack of phone books that he would read by the fireside. Suddenly, he was attacked by bees..." Maybe I'm overly cynical, but this seems too well-formed a wise-ass comment for a kid who just left a temple to run in the grass.

Anyhow, I had a good time reading the book and think it was, for the most part, pretty fun to accompany the author on his historical excavation.

Courtney Homer says

I love Lincoln, and this was a fascinating perspective on not only the man, but how we view the man in America. Ferguson's writing is accessible, witty, engaging, and engrossing. His book is a little about him and a little about Lincoln, but it's largely about Lincoln in America – how we honor him, criticize him, and use him in our national story. Ferguson gives consideration to both Lincoln skeptics and worshippers, ultimately deciding that Lincoln the icon has a place in America as the preserver of the Union, as a symbol of our nation that stands for equality and democracy. Lincoln means different things to different people, and that's ok. But for Ferguson, Lincoln the icon, the man who preserved the Union, is the one that endures.

Scott says

This is one of the best Lincoln books I've read in a long time, and certainly the most fun. Whether you are a certified Lincoln buff, or if you just wonder why there are so many of us, this book will make you laugh, maybe even cry once or twice, and definitely will help you find your "inner Abe."

Jacob Lines says

This is a book about how Americans celebrate Lincoln. Ferguson is smart and witty, but I was really ready for this book to end. I don't know if I was turned off by the things he was describing – attempts to attract tourists and make money and sometimes crass commercialism behind the Lincoln industry – or his relentlessly uncharitable cynicism in describing it. Very few people or ideas get a positive mention in this book. Nearly everyone and everything is denigrated or ridiculed. I am not sure how the reviewers on the book jacket found the book funny. The ground Ferguson covers is pretty interesting, but it would have been much better if he had cut some people a little slack – maybe just a tiny benefit of the doubt – rather than declaring judgment on them all. The parts most worth reading? The chapter about Lincoln as a management expert, the Lincoln impersonator convention, and the chapter about the Lincoln Memorial. Maybe because those are the chapters in which he has something nice to say.

Danielle says

I consider myself a Lincoln Buff that's still learning. I've lived in Illinois all my life and I've been down to Springfield several times in my lifetime. So when I was looking for a book that would solve my yearning for a book about Abraham Lincoln, I chose this one. Andrew Ferguson wrote a funny book about Lincoln in today's world and where he stands. But Lincoln means so many things to so many different people it's impossible to pin him down. Reading this book, I found out things that I didn't know, like that there is a statue of Abraham Lincoln and singer Perry Como in Gettysburg. Or that there was a Lincoln Heritage Trail.

Andrew Ferguson traveled all around the States viewing different ways the Lincoln name and legacy is being

used today. He visited the woman who holds a lot of the Lincoln items, Louise Taper. Quite a few of her items are on loan to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum and being there twice I can recall seeing her name there. He also visits the museum before it opened, a meeting of Lincoln presenters, Lincoln haters, and a business workshop that uses Lincoln as its model. He also takes his family to Springfield, Indiana, and Kentucky to visit places that Lincoln lived before he was President. My absolute favorite part of the book came in the Postscript. It's a story of a man who works in the Springfield Hilton and someone who came to visit there. I won't give away the story but I thought it was beautiful and a great way to finish the book.

Overall, I thought the book was great. I did feel, though, that Mr. Ferguson had a slight negative view wherever he visited. It came across as jaded, maybe. He seemed to have a problem with at least one thing at each sight that he visited. Not every Lincoln sight is going to please everyone. He seems to take offense on what the museum is. I personally think that the museum is fantastic. I can see that maybe it's not to everyone's taste but I think it's still serving a great purpose. And with the Lincoln home in Springfield, I've never seen what it was like before it was owned by the Park Service so I can't comment on which is better. But I still think that the book was pretty good and it shouldn't be a book that a Lincoln buff or anyone interested in Abraham Lincoln should pass up.

Don says

Huh. I don't know if I have ever read a book that annoyed me so much, but then shocked me with a great chapter.

The book was a 2. But Chapter Seven was a 5.

This is presented as a funny, rollicking look at the way Lincoln has become everything to everybody. It's not a terrible book. It's written technically well. It's got a lot of interesting anecdotes and information.

But what comes across loud and clear is a deep, disturbing cynicism that reads like a disgusted reality TV producer dismissing everybody, including Lincoln, as, well, a bunch of losers.

Snark and condescending sarcasm seem to be the object of the book -- not funny, engaging -- mean and dismissive. Lincoln is just the vehicle for Ferguson's need to express that worldview. It got very old after a while.

But just as I was going to give up, Ferguson takes on a "Leadership by Lincoln" workshop and the snark and sarcasm worked beautifully.

Suzy says

Since today is Lincoln's birthday, I thought I'd mention this delightful book. Rather than a scholarly work or biography, the author looks for Lincoln in America today and tries to make sense of what Lincoln means to us as a society. Ferguson grew up in Illinois and Lincoln was a big interest of his. One of the best parts of the

book is when he tries to recreate with his teenage kids the wonderful experience he had with his Dad exploring The Lincoln Trail. (The Lincoln Trail stretches from Lincoln's birthplace in Kentucky to New Salem, in Illinois.) I wonder how they will remember this experience when they are adults.

This book is funny, informative and thought-provoking. I highly recommend listening to this book. The reader adds greatly to the enjoyment

Andrew Breslin says

A lot of people out there have an unhealthy obsession with our 16th president. To the point of psychosis. They're just Abemaniacal. And yes, granted: Reading this book, I got a little caught up in all the excitement, sure.

But, incidentally, if you decide to engage in creative pogonotropy in an effort to evoke the Great Emancipator, just remember that at least in the Philadelphia region, people are just going to think you are Amish. It was more than a little disappointing. Did anyone ask me to recite the Gettysburg address? No. Second inaugural? Not a word. All that memorization down the drain. They just wanted me to point them in the direction of some good shoo-fly pie.

All kidding at least very briefly aside, there really are a lot of people who are obsessed with Lincoln, and that's what this book is all about. It's not about Lincoln himself, it's about our collective relationship with him, illustrated by some of us who take it a little more seriously than others. Some people love him. Some hate him. Some people--the really strange ones--go around and dress up like him.

That, incidentally, was my favorite chapter of the book, all about an annual gathering of Lincoln impersonators, but don't call them impersonators because a) they consider it demeaning to the great man they are evoking and whose indomitable spirit they celebrate in their Lincoln "presentations" and b) you don't want to piss them off because they're very tall.

Other memorable chapters include the one about obsessed and obscenely rich collectors who haunt auction houses in a ghoulish endeavor to snap up anything having an even transitory connection to our late president. One entertaining diversion took the reader on a journey along the Lincoln trail, giving us a firsthand account of our author's ambitious attempt to recreate the magic he'd experienced falling under the Lincoln spell as a boy and his almost complete and utter failure to transfer his virulent addiction to his own offspring.

But the most telling chapter, the one that gets to the heart of why Lincoln remains the ineffable icon that he is, and, along the way, gets into everything that is wrong with America today, is the one about the rancor and outrage evoked when some damned Yankee had the unbridled audacity to erect a statue of Lincoln in Richmond, Virginia. Because the problem with our nation is that Lincoln's most celebrated accomplishment--a goal he considered more important even than that of freeing the slaves: preserving the Union --is maybe something he shouldn't be given credit for. Because it's becoming clearer and clearer that the Civil War still hasn't ended, and the Union has not exactly been preserved. Not when you still have Virginian hillbillies referring to that conflict as the "War of Northern Aggression."

Lincoln the man has been dead for almost 150 years now. Now he belongs to the ages, and the ages aren't

giving him back. He's a symbol, now, transcending his mortal limitations. He's Obi Wan Kenobi, after Booth Vader has cut him down, a spectral presence grown more powerful than he was before. This book is an attempt to connect with that most enigmatic of all Americans, acknowledging even as it does that the "real man" behind the symbol is almost irrelevant.

Now if you'll excuse me, I have a barn to raise.

Don says

I don't usually mind snarkiness, but this author goes over the top and at times obscures some good information about how we have celebrated and do celebrate Abraham Lincoln in our country. He's a big deal and some reverence is advisable--not to say that the author doesn't work that in on occasion--but it's hard to tell if he really appreciates Lincoln or more appreciates his childhood memories of appreciating Lincoln.

Nordy says

So, since moving to the Land of Lincoln and getting engaged in front of his historical home in Springfield, I've kinda developed a curiosity (ie. obsession) about the "Great Emancipator." So, when I saw this book in our school's book fair, I thought I'd pick it up.

I liked this book, because instead of focusing on who Lincoln was, it focuses on the many different ways that Americans see Lincoln or portray him. As Ferguson (who, if the back cover photo is accurate, looks eerily like the late Kurt Vonnegut) travels around the country, he encounters people who all have differing views - Lincoln the war criminal, Lincoln the idol, Lincoln the romantic, Lincoln the Christian, Lincoln the Jew, Lincoln the racist, Lincoln the rationalist, Lincoln the corporate manager, and so on.

The book reviews listed on the cover led me to believe the book would be funnier than it was. The funniest people in this book are Ferguson's kids, who were less than pleased about spending their summer vacation tracing the Lincoln trail. I could almost hear echos of what my future children will be saying when we inevitably drag them across the country to historical or educational sites. Such as, "There's a cornfield! There's another cornfield! Oh, look over there, another cornfield!" or (in reference to the docent at the Lincoln historical home in Springfield saying that the banister was originally part of the house and that they were touching something that Lincoln once touched) "This must be ecstasy for you dad."

Jason X says

I listened to this pre-Goodreads. I recall liking it okay, but I also recall liking it better when it was called Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War.

I was reminded of this book after I completed Lincoln in the Bardo. Maybe I was inhabited by a spirit?

Lani says

Bought this from a bargain rack at B&N during a burst of retail therapy a week or two ago. Picked it up because it was cheap, was about Lincoln and middle America, and I figured my dad might enjoy it.

For whatever reason I read it today. I wasn't thrilled with it and didn't identify with much in it, but I hope my dad will enjoy it.

There is quite a bit of commentary on "new" history, and the new interpretations of Lincoln, which I found interesting. Education and museums are certainly designed differently now than they used to be, and I've seen this in my own experiences with the Smithsonian and other DC museums.

Unless you're from the mid-West and have the Lincoln buff syndrome practically bred into you, I can't imagine this is a particularly interesting book. I was a little offended to find that Vandalia (my Dad's hometown and Illinois' first capitol) was not mentioned ONCE in the whole book. I expected more about Southern and Central Illinois and the time Lincoln spent on the circuit, but really only Springfield and Chicago are visited.

Lots of anecdotes about family roadtrips through the area during the era that my father would have made the same trips, and a few references to books I've read and phenomenons I've read about in other books. It's always nice to find connections.

All in all I was left with a sense that I still hold my mental image of Lincoln as a hero, despite that view's apparent unpopularity now. I loved the rickety old museums I went to as a kid, and rubbing Lincoln's nose at his tomb, and I am unbearably jealous of the author's chance to hold the Gettysburg Address. Apparently I'm outdated.

Nathan Albright says

As someone who reads a great deal of books about Abraham Lincoln, it is pretty clear that I would likely fall into the category of being a buff, as this author would like to say [1]. Instead of writing a book about Lincoln though, the author is seeking someone more nebulous, and that is the contested place that Lincoln holds in American society and how he is viewed and marketed. I have to say that I greatly appreciated the author's approach, as he was highly critical of many of the tendencies of political correctness that are a part of the "new" social history. For the most part, though, this book tries to adopt a sort of neutrality where the author shows an interest in the wildly different viewpoints of people who are fond of Lincoln as well as those who are highly critical of them either because they blame Lincoln for the way things are in contemporary society that they don't like (this would be the case for DiLorenzo and his ilk) or for those who dislike Lincoln as an icon and want to cut him down to size.

In terms of its contents, this book looks at Lincoln in the public memory with a special interest to museums, collections, statues, and other aspects of historical preservation and presentation. The result is a trip through some very odd areas of the United States, beginning in all places in Richmond, Virginia, where the

placement of a statue of Lincoln sparked a massive conflict with those who thought that the statue was a sign of yankee cultural imperialism. After that the author takes a look at Hearndon's value in trying to determine the inner Lincoln, a task that continues to interest many. A trip to Chicago follows with a look at the decline of interest in many museums over the past few decades due to the culture wars in academia. After this the author goes to Springfield to look at what state money can do for the creation of massively expensive infotainment. A chapter about Lincoln collectibles then follows before the author visits a conference of Lincoln impersonators as well as a business seminar in Gettysburg that uses Lincoln as a way of educating people on virtues that would otherwise be largely ignored by business audiences. The author then closes the book with a look at the largely defunct Lincoln trail in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, the fact that there is a whole lotta Lincoln in contemporary culture even with changing tastes, and that the iconic view of Lincoln in the Lincoln memorial is something worth defending.

Ultimately, the author remains as confused about Lincoln after his study as before. The general phenomenon one notices in Lincoln studies are noted by the author, including the way that many people see in Lincoln people after their own hearts and interests and ideological commitments. For many, Lincoln is famous for being famous, almost like Paris Hilton, while for others Lincoln is the placeholder for what is wicked and corrupt about contemporary leftist politics, and for others Lincoln is someone whose cultural cachet can serve the interests of those who want to write books promoting some aspect of his complex character. Is it inevitable that complicated people with many facets and complexities who are a bit shy about exposing the deepest parts of their feeling to others be seen as an empty vessel to fill with whatever presuppositions and ideologies that people want to promote? I would hate to be used in such a fashion when I was not able to defend myself with a fierce pen. Part of the defense of the icon is that while Abraham Lincoln was a complicated man, he was also a noble man, and deserves to be remembered as a human being who can also inspire us to better versions of ourselves than we might otherwise be.

[1] See, for example:

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