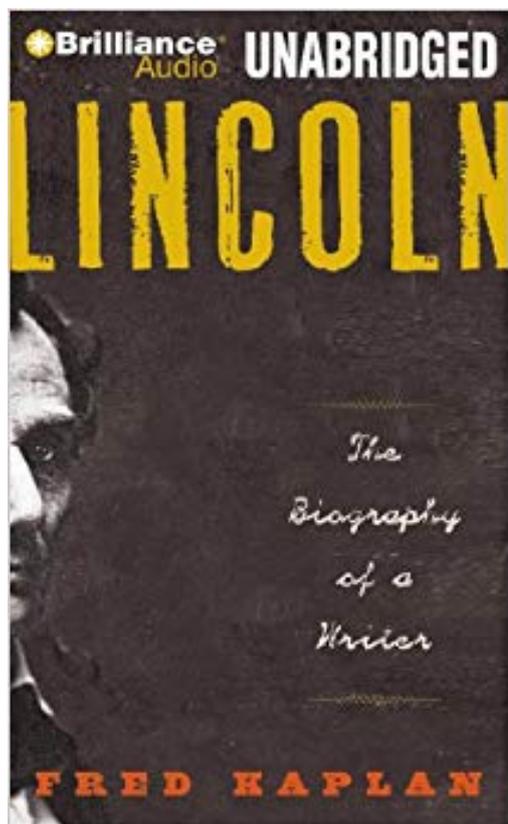


Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer *by* Dan John Miller, Fred Kaplan



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For Abraham Lincoln, whether he was composing love letters, speeches, or legal arguments, words mattered. In *Lincoln*, acclaimed biographer Fred Kaplan explores the life of America's sixteenth president through his use of language as a vehicle both to express complex ideas and feelings and as an instrument of persuasion and empowerment. Like the other great canonical writers of American literature - a status he is gradually attaining - Lincoln had a literary career that is inseparable from his life story. An admirer and avid reader of Burns, Byron, Shakespeare, and the Old Testament, Lincoln was the most literary of our presidents. His views on love, liberty, and human nature were shaped by his reading and knowledge of literature. Since Lincoln, no president has written his own words and addressed his audience with equal and enduring effectiveness. Kaplan focuses on the elements that shaped Lincoln's mental and imaginative world; how his writings molded his identity, relationships, and career; and how they simultaneously generated both the distinctive political figure he became and the public discourse of the nation. This unique account of Lincoln's life and career highlights the shortcomings of the modern presidency, reminding us, through Lincoln's legacy and appreciation for language, that the careful and honest use of words is a necessity for successful democracy. Illuminating and engrossing, *Lincoln* brilliantly chronicles Abraham Lincoln's genius with language.



Reviews of the [Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer](#) by Dan John Miller, Fred Kaplan

Coiron

I'm a big fan of Lincoln's prose. I consider him one of the great 19th-century American writers, along with Emerson, Thoreau, and Twain. I've read other studies, like Wills's Lincoln at Gettysburg, but these analyze specific works and assume Lincoln as an already-formed writer. Kaplan shows how Lincoln accomplished this. It seems to me that most of the carps about the work's historical accuracy (when the Emancipation Proclamation occurred, eg -- if I could care less, I would) are beside the point and do NOT engage with Kaplan's thesis. I found Kaplan's account fascinating and illuminating. Even Lincoln started from somewhere as a writer and achieved his mastery with a lot of hard work and a mountain of reading and self-education. Kaplan writes like a recovering academic. Certain sections fly by, others not so much. I don't mind academic prose if the thought is interesting, and Kaplan definitely passes that test. An essential Lincoln book.

Jesmi

An exploration of the effects of being articulate, well-spoken and obsessed with learning is especially relevant after watching Obama use those three traits to take the presidency. It's the author's point that Lincoln's log cabin story has obscured how impressive a writer and speaker he really was. More importantly, we forget that with the exception of Theodore Roosevelt we've never really had a president before with equal deftness in reading, writing and speaking. Normally they are good at one and abysmal at the others. There's a part in the book where he takes one of Lincoln's speeches and lays it out into a poem. It's just one example but an incredible way to make the book's central point: that Lincoln's understanding of the English language and the power of persuasion were so impressive they we're not even aware that he was using them.

Nothing personal

Mr. Kaplan's book begins promisingly, with a speculative, but apparently well-researched, perspective on the books that influenced Lincoln as a student and young man. He makes an interesting comparison between much of Lincoln's later writing and speaking and works like Dilworth's Speller that were accessible to him as a youth.

If the author had stopped there, or had fast-forwarded to Lincoln's writing/oratory when it was in full bloom during his presidential years, the book would have worked well. But there are many chapters, several of them mired in pedantry, about Lincoln's years as a small-town lawyer and businessman, and about the constant struggle of the auto-didact to rise above his humble past.

Since Lincoln is the most written-about president in our history, this is much too much information. Mr Kaplan has a difficult time staying on task. His discussion of the Lincolns' marriage is fascinating, but he gives you enough to whet the appetite and then more or less apologizes for getting off-track.

Worse than that, his conclusions at the end of the book as to where Lincoln's successors rank in terms of their comparative writing abilities is neither informed nor convincing. Considering that this book is only two years old, it is remarkable, if not laughable, that he refers to Jimmy Carter as one of the best writers to occupy the Oval Office, while failing to even mention the oratorical abilities, not to mention writing skills, of either John F Kennedy or Ronald Reagan. His blanket statement that "after Roosevelt, less talented speechwriters took over and the president's own language hardly mattered to the process" is simply inaccurate. Kennedy, Nixon and Reagan all had extensive writing and speaking backgrounds when they entered the presidency and continued to have a major influence on the words they uttered while occupying the Oval Office.

All in all, this book has its moments, but the author should have drawn more inspiration from his subject and erred on the side of brevity.

Minha

Mr. Kaplan's keen analysis of clearly voluminous materials exposes the reader the apparent prevailing influences and lofty ideas that morphed this common man into a pillar of strength and perseverance during some of the most trying times in the history of America. This well-written book aptly portrays the range of thoughts and words of Lincoln from his inherited coarseness to his acquired lofty and memorable. It was a good read of some of the rough and tumble of his early professional and political life and his immigration, given the times, to the language and causes that preserved the Union. It was a most interesting study of how he was molded by the powerful language and wisdom of earlier great works and how he drew on those ideas and that language to advance his righteous causes. I knew nothing of this book before randomly selecting it, and in my opinion this work is better than some of the better known works on Lincoln.

Kison

This book, though rather short, casts an entirely new light on Lincoln's life, with well-written chapters on his upbringing and on his political instincts and determination. I think only a writer could empathize this much with Lincoln, his hard-won self-education, his vital use of the American language and European thought and literature, and his humor, both sophisticated and backwoods. It's such a pleasure, after finishing this fine bit of work, to be able to see Lincoln in toto, not just as the assassinated President from a Kentucky log cabin. Many thanks, Mr. Kaplan, for your fine work.

sunrise bird

Really interesting -- necessarily an in-depth research project by the author. Well written, a compelling case for our favorite Lincoln seen as a writer -- which also involves his growth as an intellectual and cherished, perceptive man.

Ballazan

If you have ever been curious about how Lincoln thought...how his brain handled things and what his underlying personality was like...this is a good book to read. True, it gets a little slow (after all, it is not a mystery) at times, but the over all approach to understanding Lincoln's thinking is really laid out here.

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