
Leo Tolstoi was wrong. Happy families are not all alike—nor is every unhappy family unhappy is in its own way. Enduring marriages, in fact, are—serially and simultaneously—happy and unhappy. As Daniel Mark Epstein reminds us, they rarely follow "a simple trajectory," proceeding instead "in a jagged arc, as husband and wife agree, disagree, compromise, and experience estrangement and reconciliation in the adventure of their life together."

So it was with the less than perfect union of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln. Married in 1842, they had more than their share of joys and sorrows: the birth of four boys and the death of two of them; defeat, political oblivion, and election to the presidency of the United States; a civil war, which pitted members of their families against one another; and, of course, assassination soon after Abe's second inaugural address.

With *The Lincolns*, Epstein enters a crowded field with a sensitive and sensible portrait of a complicated relationship. A biographer, poet, and dramatist, based in Baltimore, Epstein supplies fresh details about the couple's sixteen years in Springfield, their sojourn to Lexington, Kentucky, Mary's home town, the First Lady's extravagant expenditures, and her awkward attempts to cover them up. He speculates, provocatively, that Abe broke off his courtship with Mary because he feared he had contracted syphilis.

Epstein does not challenge received wisdom about the character or characteristics of Mr. or Mrs. Lincoln. Nonetheless, he brings each of them back to life, vividly and often poignantly, as they wrestle with their own demons, and engage or evade one another, with disappointment and devotion.
Epstein has a much better command of personal than political issues. He mis-characterizes William Seward, Lincoln's rival for the Republican nomination in 1860, as an "abolitionist," and Charles Sumner, the Radical Republican senator from Massachusetts as a "liberal." He asserts, without evidence, that Lincoln "accomplished little to redeem himself in the eyes of those who had elected him to Congress" in 1846. And he suggests, erroneously, that President Polk, a Democrat, might have lobbied to some effect against a patronage position for Lincoln in the administration of Zachary Taylor, a Whig.

Like other Lincoln scholars, Epstein squeezes significance from the "pittance" of letters between Abe and Mary that have survived. And he relies on reminiscences from relatives, acquaintances, and friends, many of them recorded decades after the end of the Civil War. Under any circumstances, he acknowledges, distant memories are anything but "impeachable." They are particularly problematic for Lincoln biographers because the "singularly tragic" history of "Her Satanic Majesty" from April 15, 1865 to her death from apoplexy in on July 15, 1882 "warped most views of her marriage."

Epstein, alas, doesn't always take his own advice. He accepts as "not out of character" an allegation that first surfaced in the 1930s that Mary threw a cup of hot coffee in her husband's face when he scolded her for appearing late for breakfast. And he endorses as "a precious source of information" the recollection of Julia Taft Bayne, recorded sixty years after she worked for the Lincolns as an unpaid baby sitter, that Mary snatched the purple ribbon from a friend's hat because she "wanted what she wanted when she wanted it."

Despite these questionable judgments, however, Epstein makes acute and accurate assessments of the relationship between Abe and Mary. Marriages, he writes, "sometimes thrive upon agreeable illusions." Mary Lincoln believed she was a better judge of character than her
husband—and he let her believe it as long as it caused him no harm. In the White House, his strength of character "came to the fore and flourished," while she, "deprived of his attention and guidance," became disoriented and destabilized. "Like a lost child in some cautionary tale," she succumbed to sycophants, scoundrels and her own "critical mania" to possess pretty things.

It all ended across the street from Ford's Theater. Unable to arouse her husband, Mary shrieked and appeared to faint. Edwin Stanton, Lincoln's Secretary of War, ordered her removed from the room. "Banished, broken," Epstein writes, Mary turned away. Perhaps she realized, with foreboding, that now, she, too, belonged to the ages.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.