Lincoln, a writer for the ages

Lincoln
The Biography of a Writer
By Fred Kaplan. Harper

> 406 pp. $27.95

Reviewed by Glen C. Altschuler

Writing, wrote Abraham Lincoln, "is the great invention of the world."

> Great in its range of analysis, writing enables us "to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and of space." Take it away, "and the Bible, all history, all science, all government, all commerce, and nearly all social intercourse go with it."

> In the 19th century, the written word dominated public discourse.

> Language, Fred Kaplan suggests, was the tool by which Lincoln "explored and defined himself." No president addressed his contemporaries or their descendants "with equal and enduring effectiveness."

> A professor of English at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Kaplan answers "the obvious question - why another book on Lincoln?" by focusing on the role of literature in shaping his mind and prose style and highlighting the application of "his gifts as a writer" to his political career and private life.

> Kaplan doesn't challenge or change the canonical view of Lincoln, the autodidact who devoured Burns, Byron, the Bard, and the Bible, and gave us, in the Gettysburg Address and his Second Inaugural, two of the greatest dramatic monologues in American history. At its best, however, Lincoln captures, vividly, the young Illinois lawyer and politician, by turns funny and melancholy, as he tried to give meaning to the power of his words by attaining "the power to implement them."
> Stretched out on an old leather couch in his office, with his feet propped on chairs above a dirty floor, Lincoln spent his days "reading newspapers and books, handling legal papers, scheming about politics, apparently neither happy nor unhappy, a difficult man to read, who loved jokes and stories, usually to make a point, but who otherwise was so self-contained that he seemed secretive, especially to chatty colleagues and friends."

> As a stump speaker Lincoln affected a colloquial casualness, mixing logic, satire and sarcasm. But he much preferred to speak from a prepared text. In his eulogy for Henry Clay, Kaplan shrewdly notes, Lincoln praised in his political idol an oratorical style "he no longer valued for himself." Clay was extemporaneous, emotional and grandiloquent. He framed practical, pressing issues of the moment by evoking vivid scenes that stirred emotions. A "craftsman of words and sentences, of balance and antitheses," Lincoln, by contrast, was more philosophical. He always had his eye on posterity.

> More than any other American politician, before or since, Kaplan suggests, Lincoln was willing to look into "the heart of the historical darkness." Who else would challenge a self-serving national myth by reminding his listeners that they were the Almighty's "almost chosen people" - and interpret the Constitution by the lights of the Declaration of Independence? Who else, in the midst of a bloody Civil War, would assert that Northerners as well as Southerners had unclean hands in perpetuating the sin of slavery? What other president, before a war had ended, would make it his duty to undertake reconciliation and reconstruction, "with malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right."

> Lincoln wrote almost every word he uttered. His public addresses were remarkably terse, tough, honest, and moving. And he was not a slave to public opinion. On the eve of the 200th anniversary of his birth, when Democrats and Republicans have all but abandoned political rhetoric that respects ideas, integrity, and relevance, even our admittedly imperfect 16th president seems much too good to be true.

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