Novel about president overflowing with robbery, murder and mayhem

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Stephen Carter’s fifth novel opens two years after Abraham Lincoln has survived the assassination attempt by John Wilkes Booth. At odds with the radicals who dominate his own Republican Party, the president has been charged with suspending habeas corpus, censoring newspapers and seizing private telegrams during the Civil War and failing to protect freed slaves or obey the authority of Congress during Reconstruction.

The House of Representatives has impeached Lincoln – and the Senate is preparing to try him.

Two young clerks at Dennard & McShane, the law firm retained by Lincoln, join forces to defend the president against what appears to be a conspiracy involving the highest levels of American society and government: the wealthy and White Jonathan Hilliman, scion of New England merchants; and Abigail Canner, a brilliant African-American graduate of Oberlin, from a middle-class Washington, D.C. family.

Carter’s ‘plotboiler’

A law professor at Yale University (and the author of nine non-fiction works), Carter has proven himself to be a master of what might be called “the plotboiler.”

“The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln” is filled to overflowing with burglary, highway robbery, arson, prostitution, murder and mayhem. And in Carter’s Washington, D.C., which has secret ciphers, couriers, spies, and double agents, hidden motives always lurk behind stated motives, secret motives behind the hidden ones, and beyond them all “a true motive, almost never discovered.”

As in his much acclaimed novel, “The Emperor of Ocean Park,” Carter is adept here at unearthing the (often overlooked) middle-class social experience of African-Americans.

Ambitious course

Abigail grew up in a two-story brick house on Tenth Street, not far from the Smithsonian Institution, Carter tells us, in a neighborhood that had several “better colored families” and plenty of poor folks. She kept a safe distance from the shanties out of fear that if she strayed from the straight and narrow she might wind up as “just another negro, utterly irrelevant to the course of history.”

And she came to understand how much her ambition, including a craving for the respect and admiration of White people, was set by a desire to escape the “rejection, exclusion, and condescension” that constituted the price exacted each day from her race, “like a special tax on darkness.”

On Lincoln’s side

Along with action, intrigue, melodrama, romance, and credulity-straining coincidences, “The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln” raises important, relevant, and timely questions about our system of checks and balances.

In times of crisis, Carter asks, how far can a president of the United States stretch the Constitution? Is impeachment “a political disagreement dressed in the language of high crimes and misdemeanors”? And if it...
In the end, although they have considerable sympathy for the political agenda of the Radical Republicans, Abigail Canner (and Stephen Carter) side with Abraham Lincoln.

**World-weary politician**

Dismissed by many of his contemporaries as a poorly educated, ugly, slangy, story-telling bumpkin who would have "made an excellent farmer, a fair mayor and a poor governor," the president was a wily, witty, and world-weary politician.

He did not destroy slavery as quickly or fight the war as aggressively as the Radicals wanted, Carter suggests, but he may well have done "better than anyone else would have."

Great people can also "do terrible things," Carter adds. So it is rather surprising that he concludes with Abigail's observation that history "is larger than any one man, even when that man is Abraham Lincoln."

And rather strange that she claims as well that in 1865 the destiny of the United States was fixed. Does she believe, one wonders, that the abolition of slavery was inevitable?

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