



Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness

By Joshua Wolf Shenk

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Drawing on seven years of his own research and the work of other esteemed Lincoln scholars, Shenk reveals how the sixteenth president harnessed his depression to fuel his astonishing success.

Lincoln found the solace and tactics he needed to deal with the nation's worst crisis in the "coping strategies" he had developed over a lifetime of persevering through depressive episodes and personal tragedies.

With empathy and authority gained from his own experience with depression, Shenk crafts a nuanced, revelatory account of Lincoln and his legacy. Based on careful, intrepid research, Lincoln's Melancholy unveils a wholly new perspective on how our greatest president brought America through its greatest turmoil.

Shenk relates Lincoln's symptoms, including mood swings and at least two major breakdowns, and offers compelling evidence of the evolution of his disease, from "major depression" in his twenties and thirties to "chronic depression" later on. Shenk reveals the treatments Lincoln endured and his efforts to come to terms with his melancholy, including a poem he published on suicide and his unpublished writings on the value of personal—and national—suffering. By consciously shifting his goal away from personal contentment (which he realized he could not attain) and toward universal justice, Lincoln gained the strength and insight that he, and America, required to transcend profound darkness.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Abe the Emancipator, argues *Washington Monthly* contributor Shenk, struggled with persistent clinical depression. The first major bout came in his 20s, and the disease dogged him for the rest of his life. That Lincoln suffered from "melancholy" isn't new. Shenk's innovation is in saying, first, that this knowledge can be illuminated by today's understanding of depression and, second, that our understanding of depression can be illuminated by the knowledge that depression was actually a source of Lincoln's greatness. Lincoln's strategies for dealing with it are worth noting today: at least once, he took a popular pill known as the "blue mass"—essentially mercury—and also once purchased cocaine. Further, Lincoln's famed sense of humor, suggests Shenk, may have been compensatory, and he also took refuge in poetry. Unlike Americans today, Shenk notes, 19th-century voters and pundits were more forgiving of psychological and emotional complexity, and a certain prophetic pessimism, he notes, was appropriate to the era of the Civil War. Occasionally, Shenk chases down an odd rabbit trail—an opening meditation on whether Lincoln was gay, for example, is neither conclusive nor apposite. Still, this is sensitive history, with important implications for the present. (Sept. 20)

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—In 1835, Lincoln, a likable, gifted law student, was so depressed that his community, who accepted his mental state as a component of his brilliance, put him on a suicide watch. The reaction to his depressions by those who knew him, and by Lincoln himself, is a revelation of 19th-century thinking. In his day, melancholia was seen as a personality type that, along with disadvantages, had attributes such as deep self-reflection. Blessed with insight into his condition, Lincoln used it as a resource, providing self-therapy in an era when professional therapies were scant. The man also was blessed with a sense of humor and, above all, good friendships that alleviated major life traumas, including the loss of two children. This is not a full biography. Emphasis is placed on aspects of Lincolns life that contributed to his mental burdens, such as his estrangement from his father. The value of this book is the authors ability to assess his subjects mental state based on eyewitness accounts and Lincolns own words. Shenk assumes his readers have a grasp of the periods history, making the book challenging, but teens interested in Lincoln or psychology will find the content compelling.—*Jo Ann Soriano, Lorton Library, Fairfax County, VA*

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From Booklist

The spin on the sixteenth president continues. A recent book generated controversy by insisting Lincoln was gay, and now this one underscores the great president's depression. Shenk's study is, despite his stylistic tendency toward clinical stiffness, a responsible response to defining the enigmatic Lincoln's personality and, further, its effects not only on individuals but also on his performance as a wartime leader. Shenk's investigation of Lincoln's behavior (granted, with the disadvantage of time and distance) from his twenties to his death in the White House leads Shenk to discover strategies that Lincoln employed--in fact, invented for himself, in those pre-couch-and-consultation days--to combat his "melancholy," strategies that included, most notably, the telling of humorous stories. One of the most compelling aspects of Shenk's version of Lincoln's mental state is his indication that Lincoln's realization of a larger purpose in his life, his ambition for and sense of greatness, actually drew strength from his illness, a phenomenon called "melancholic success." An estimable contribution to the Lincoln literature. *Brad Hooper*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Patrina Eaton:

This book untitled Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness to be one of several books in which best seller in this year, that's because when you read this reserve you can get a lot of benefit upon it. You will easily to buy this kind of book in the book retail store or you can order it via online. The publisher of this book sells the e-book too. It makes you quicker to read this book, because you can read this book in your Touch screen phone. So there is no reason for you to past this e-book from your list.

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Robert Wallace:

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Michael Blossom:

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