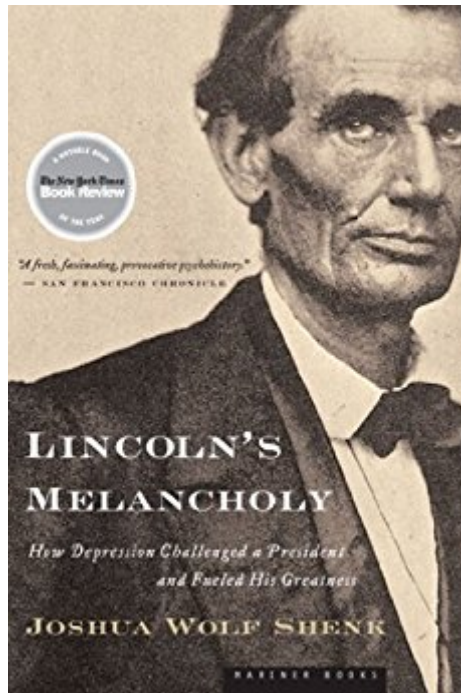


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Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged A President And Fueled His Greatness



Synopsis

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 a major depression in his twenties and thirties to a 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Lincoln endured and his efforts to come to terms with his melancholy, including a poem he published on suicide and his unpublished writings on the value of personal and national suffering.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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Customer Reviews

This is an excellent book on several counts. First, besides revisionist historians it is not known that Lincoln was a lifelong depressive. Second, the author advances that Lincoln's depression was more a source of insight than a mental flaw. In other words, Lincoln's character and intelligence seemed greater because of his depression. That's a pretty radical concept in our modern "Prozac Nation" when depression at any level is considered a serious mental illness that should be eradicated at all costs. Lincoln lived in an era way before anti-depressants. But, just like John Nash of "A Beautiful Mind" fame who preserved his cognitive capabilities by not taking the drugs he was prescribed, Lincoln had no choice but to do without. And, according to the author the history of our Nation has been so much the better for it. The author describes how Lincoln through the ages managed his depression through several different stages, including: Fear, Engagement, Transcendence, Creativity, and Humility. While the first stage [Fear] had a familiar and serious clinical component including recurring suicidal thoughts, the other four stages lead Lincoln to greater self-actualization, philosophical insights, spirituality, and commitment to guide and save our Nation. The message from this original biography is powerful. By accepting one's humanity, we can actually grow. Some serious introspection even if painful is actually good for you. There is no need to medicate all your blues away. You may actually learn and grow from them. And, what Lincoln dealt with was not just the occasional blues. As depicted by the author, based on thorough historical research, he had a very serious case of depression.

Carl Becker said that every man is his own historian, and so it seems fitting that Lincoln be reinterpreted in the light of modern approaches to depression and mental illness. What is most admirable about this book is the author's respectful approach to Lincoln and the past; he insists on viewing Lincoln's behaviors in the context of the mores and culture of his time, which were far different from those prevailing today. The author persuasively argues that there was a romantic connotation to melancholy back then. This, combined with the cultural acceptance of greater emotion from single young men, explains some of Lincoln's publicly expressed emotional troubles as a young man. On the other hand, the author insists on defining Lincoln as suffering two "breakdowns." It's not clear what relevance this modern term has, nor can the author distinguish between mental illness and the culturally acceptable level of melancholy and love-sickness a young

man was permitted to manifest at the time. In short, given the lack of data (most notably the inability to interview the subject, Mr. Lincoln) and the different culture back then, why even try to import these modern day notions of depression to the 1830's-1860's? Still, the book does make three points exceptionally well, which makes this a very worthwhile effort. First, he destroys the idiotic notions that Lincoln was gay by virtue of close emotional relationships with men that were permitted and encouraged by the culture back then. Superficial modern day notions of sexual identity have no place in a different time with different (and perhaps healthier) approaches toward the permissibility of emotional intimacy between men.

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