Lincoln: A Photobiography Short Guide

Lincoln: A Photobiography by Russell Freedman

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Overview

Freedman says in his Newbery Medal acceptance speech, "I picked Lincoln as a subject because I felt I could offer a fresh perspective for today's generation of young readers, but mostly I picked him because I wanted to satisfy my own itch to know." In presenting the man who is often considered the greatest American president, Freedman writes with a knowledge of what interests young readers. He knows that a young American will not accept the standard portrait of the perfect president and a faultless man. Though Lincoln was great, biographies of him should show his human qualities.

In the brief span of 145 pages, the author combines text and photographs to present a remarkable amount of information about Lincoln and his times.

Freedman is a thorough researcher who has covered every relevant source. His book should whet the reader's appetite to learn more about this appealing and perplexing subject.

About the Author

Russell Bruce Freedman was born in San Francisco on October 11, 1929, the son of Irene Gordon Freedman and Louis Freedman, the manager of the West Coast sales office for Macmillan Publishing Company. The Freedman home in San Francisco's Richmond District was filled with books, and occasionally such distinguished writers as John Steinbeck and William Saroyan dined with the Freedmans. It is not surprising that a boy growing up in such surroundings would become a writer himself. Freedman attended San Jose State College from 1947 to 1949 and earned a bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1951.

Upon graduating, he was inducted into the army and sent to Korea from 1951 to 1953, where he served in the Counter-intelligence Corps.

Once out of the army, Freedman went to work for the Associated Press in San Francisco as a reporter and editor. In 1956 he became a television publicity writer for J. Walter Thompson, an advertising company. He wrote publicity for such programs as "Kraft Television Theater," "Father Knows Best," and "The Real McCoys." From 1961 to 1963, he was an associate staff member for the Columbia University Press, working on the Columbia Encyclopedia. He subsequently worked at the Crowell-Collier Educational Corporation and the New School for Social Research. From 1969 onward he has been a free-lance writer, specializing in writing nonfiction for young people.

Freedman published his first book for young people, Teenagers Who Made History, in 1961. He had read an article in the New York Times about a sixteenyear-old blind boy who invented a Braille typewriter. He learned that Louis Braille was also only sixteen when he invented his system for helping blind people to read. Freedman wondered if other teen-agers had accomplished things of similar importance. His research showed that many had distinguished themselves, and Teenagers Who Made History remained in print for twenty years. Since 1961 Freedman has produced an average of one book a year.

One of his favorite books as a child was Ernest Thompson Seton's Wild Animals I Have Known (1898). In a 1986 article for Horn Book, "Pursuing the Pleasure Principle," Freedman defends nonfiction as literature, a defense ably supported by his own writing career, which spans more than thirty years. In 1969 Freedman collaborated with James E. Morriss on How Animals Learn. Since then he has written over twenty books using animals as subjects, and he says that he may write more. He often incorporates photographs as an integral part of his books.

But Freedman began his career as a biographer, and in 1980 he wrote Immigrant Kids, inspired by an exhibit at the New- York Historical Society, "New York Street Kids." Three years later he wrote Children of the Wild West. He published Cowboys of the Wild West in 1985 and Indian Chiefs in 1987. Immigrant Kids was named a Notable Children's Book of 1980 by the Association for Library Service to Children. Children of the Wild West was honored twice, in 1983 as a Notable Children's Book by the American Library

Association, and in 1984 with a Western Heritage Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

Cowboys of the Wild West was named a Notable Children's Book of 1985 by the American Library Association.

Lincoln: A Photobiography was the first nonfiction book to receive the Newbery Medal in thirty years and, even before the American Library Association made its decision, was hailed by critics as Freedman's best work. This reception proved very gratifying to Freedman, for it vindicated his conviction that factual books can be as literary as novels or short stories.

Setting

Abraham Lincoln was born in Mardin County, Kentucky, on February 12, 1809. The Lincolns moved to Knob Creek, below Louisville, two years later, where they farmed thirty acres of cleared forest land. When Abe was seven, the family crossed the Ohio River into southern Indiana, where the boy grew to manhood. At age twenty-one, Lincoln went with his family to Decatur, Illinois.

The following year, 1831, Lincoln set off on his own, and after a flatboat trip to New Orleans, he settled in New Salem, near Springfield, Illinois. His second bid for the Illinois legislature proved successful in 1834, and Lincoln went to Vandalia, at that time the state's capital.

He served four successive terms. Soon after Springfield became the new state capital, Lincoln opened a law office there. He served as a U.S. congressman for a single term and remained in Washington, D.C., from 1847 to 1849. During the 1850s, Lincoln resided in Illinois for the most part, and once again served in the state legislature. He actively opposed Senator Stephen A. Douglas's KansasNebraska Act, which allowed the people of Kansas and Nebraska to choose whether or not to permit slavery in their territory. In 1858 he unsuccessfully challenged Douglas for his U.S. Senate seat. His debates with Douglas took him to seven Illinois communities and earned him a reputation that extended far beyond the boundaries of his home state. His successful presidential campaign took him back to Washington, D.C., in March 1861, and he spent the rest of his life there.

Social Sensitivity

Russell Freedman has written other histories of the nineteenth century, and his knowledge of Lincoln's era is impressive. He has thoroughly researched every relevant aspect of Lincoln's life and times. Up until the Civil War, the U.S.

was both rapidly expanding and becoming more and more divided, and Lincoln carefully followed both developments.

Lured back into politics in 1854 after an absence of five years, he felt that the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act might result in slavery becoming legal throughout the country. Lincoln had hated slavery from the very first time he came in contact with it, but after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act, he began to actively campaign against it.

Freedman provides an excellent analysis of Lincoln's reaction to an institution that he found morally offensive and a threat to the freedom of all Americans.

Freedman also helps the reader to understand the hopeless situation talented black people faced in the nineteenth century. A few, such as Frederick Douglass did gain some recognition, but for the most part neither southern nor northern whites were willing to consider them as equal human beings. Lincoln freed the blacks from slavery, but his assassination prevented him from working on their behalf in the post-Civil War era.

Another valuable feature of Freedman's biography is that it gives the reader a sense of what growing up on the early nineteenth-century frontier was like. Lincoln heard wolves howling and panthers screaming outside of the cabin at night, whereas young readers today hear the roar of the freeways.

Freedman does not romanticize the frontier and its inhabitants. These people were both economically and culturally deprived. Lincoln's family was mostly illiterate. A number of Americans are illiterate today, but whereas most readers of this book accept a high school education as their birthright, Lincoln's family and neighbors regarded an interest in books as unnatural. Lincoln's skill with an axe impressed them, but his thirst for books they found incomprehensible. He later felt that his lack of education stigmatized him, and when he compared his family to Mary Todd's cultured family, he became aware of the large gap between his social class and hers.

Lincoln: A Photobiography sensitively describes a crucial era in the history of democracy in this country. Freedman has provided something that high school students cannot find in any of the leading history books currently in use in the nation's classrooms—a good biography of one of the greatest proponents of democracy the country has produced.

Literary Qualities

In his article "Pursuing the Pleasure Principle," Freedman explains that as a writer of nonfiction books for young adults he aims to provide accurate information on his subject and to provide readers with the same delight that they would derive from reading a novel, a short story, or a poem. Lincoln: A Photobiography satisfies both of these requirements. Freedman adheres strictly to the facts about Lincoln's life, but he presents these facts in such a way as to make Lincoln's biography as pleasurable to read as fiction.

The crisp sentences flow smoothly as Freedman provides precise descriptions in a conversational tone. Freedman praises Lincoln for the conciseness of his prose style, an effect he achieved by endlessly revising his texts. Freedman's own style has this quality, too.

While always respectful of his subject, Freedman avoids the reverential attitude that has characterized past books on Lincoln written for young adults. He quotes Lincoln's contemporaries frequently so the reader can get some idea of how they saw him. In addition to the photographs of Lincoln, many of them quite familiar, Freedman includes pictures of the places where he lived, of his contemporaries, and of newspaper items. These help the reader to visualize not only Lincoln but his era as well.

While the photographs complement the text as it describes the various events in Lincoln's life, Freedman makes it clear that the actual man in his complexity will never be fully known.

Lincoln's friends said that no photograph did him justice. Nor have any of the many biographies succeeded in fully explaining his character. But Freedman presents a remarkably balanced account of his subject's life, no easy task since Lincoln continues to be a controversial figure among historians.

In his Newbery Medal acceptance speech, Freedman cites the first Newbery Medal winner, Hendrik van Loon's The Story of Mankind (1922), as an important influence on his work: "I think it was the first book that gave me a sense of history as a living thing, and it kept me turning the pages as though I was reading a gripping novel." The book made learning a pleasurable experience; it simultaneously taught and entertained. Freedman has always tried for the same effect in his own books, and in Lincoln: A Photobiography he has brilliantly succeeded.

Themes and Characters

Freedman notes at the very beginning of his biography that while almost every American becomes familiar at an early age with the gaunt face and tall figure of Abraham Lincoln, much about him remains a mystery. Even his contemporaries did not really know him.

Despite this, Lincoln has become the most mythologized subject in American political history. The reasons for this are complex, but Lincoln's reticence about his early life has certainly contributed to his popular image. He did not enjoy remembering the life he had led in frontier Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. His Republican campaigners in the election of 1860 made much of Lincoln the onetime rail-splitter, working man, and humble son of the common people, but even though Lincoln was an expert with his axe, he preferred to forget the backbreaking labor of farm life. An ambitious person who realized that he possessed unusual abilities, Lincoln by his wits and intelligence became a prominent lawyer and politician in Illinois and, finally, the first Republican president of the United States.

Freedman's portrait of Lincoln gives him full credit for his greatness but also attempts to make him human. His biography emphasizes that the real human being is more fascinating than the legendary figure. Plagued at times by selfdoubts, Lincoln was particularly selfconscious about his lack of formal education. His sadness was what most people first noticed about Lincoln; upon further acquaintance his humor and intelligence became evident. Freedman gives Lincoln's mind the credit it deserves, describing a clear, logical intellect sharpened by the discipline of the law. Whether in the courtroom or in his writings, Lincoln usually succeeded in making abstract ideas simple and understandable. He was involved with 243 cases in the Illinois Supreme Court and won most of them. Legend has emphasized the Lincoln of the circuit courts, and Freedman points out that Lincoln loved working in them.

Despite his talents, Lincoln's melancholy was so intense at times that he feared he was going insane. During bouts of depression, his doubts about his worth as a human being seemed to overwhelm him. Freedman says that the worst bout of melancholy began early in 1841. Mary Todd's sister and brotherin-law Elizabeth and Ninian Edwards tried to prevent his marriage to their sister, and Lincoln, deeply offended, asked to be let out of the engagement.

For a week or so the intense depression continued but Lincoln recovered. As he would do all of his life, he struggled with his melancholy in solitude, but his strength of character would not allow his grief to incapacitate him for long.

When his son Willy died in February 1862, again he mourned alone, but even this loss did not prevent his continuing as an effective wartime president.

In addition to analyzing Lincoln's melancholy and intellect, Freedman reveals that Lincoln all of his life talked like a frontiersman and, until going to Washington as

president-elect continued to chop wood, milk his cow, and do other rural chores. He was also superstitious and believed in dreams, omens, and visions. These beliefs indicate a mystic side to Lincoln's personality, a conviction that under some circumstances a person's future may be revealed to him or her. Interestingly, the dream he described shortly before his assassination proved to be all too prophetic.

In addition to his fine characterization of Lincoln, Freedman includes brief sketches of the people in his life, beginning with his parents, Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and his stepmother, Sara Bush Johnston Lincoln.

Also well-described are Stephen A. Douglas, his great political rival; Lincoln's law partners; the members of his cabinet; and the generals with whom he worked to bring about a Union victory. Russell shows that Mary Todd Lincoln's foibles, which made their marriage difficult, were matched by quirks in Lincoln's own personality. They adjusted to each other as all married couples must do, and their love survived the adjustment. She was the one woman in Lincoln's life, and his death shattered her life.

Topics for Discussion

1. In your opinion, is Freedman justified in believing that the photos in this book are as important as the text?

2. Which of Lincoln's portraits impresses you most? Why?

3. What is the purpose of the first chapter of this book, "The Mysterious Mr. Lincoln"? Why doesn't Freedman begin with the earlier part of Lincoln's story instead?

4. While he corrects certain misconceptions about Lincoln's character, does Freedman also show that parts of the Lincoln legend are true? Which parts?

5. Although he was reluctant to talk about his backwoods past, were Lincoln's experiences as a poor farm boy useful to him in his later life?

6. As Freedman describes him, is it an exaggeration to say that Lincoln was superb as a self-educator? Would he have made a good teacher?

7. Lincoln, a chronically sad man, loved jokes and humorous stories. What role did humor play in his life?

8. Have the arguments of white supremacists changed that much since the days of the Lincoln-Douglas debates?

9. Most of the members of Lincoln's cabinet were better educated and more experienced in national politics than he.

How did he gain their respect?

10. In what sense was Lincoln, as Freedman describes him, a man of much greater vision than the other politicians of his day? What hopes did he have for the future of his country?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Lincoln developed a prose style that has made some of his writings part of world literature. Examine his most famous writings. How did he develop this style? Describe its characteristics.

How does it achieve its effects?

2. The idea that Lincoln himself may have been a better general than those whom he appointed to command his armies is not new. How accurate is it?

How successful was he in teaching himself military tactics and strategy?

3. In the 1860s, two men gained reputations as liberators: Alexander II of Russia and Abraham Lincoln. Compare these two men. Were they at all similar in character and methods? Was one more successful than the other?

4. Abraham Lincoln won a reputation as a very skillful lawyer. Examine his cases. What were his methods? What do they reveal about Lincoln's mind?

5. A literary man himself, Lincoln has been the subject of plays, poems, novels, movies, and television dramas. His character even appeared in an episode of "Star Trek." Which Lincoln do writers seem to prefer, the Lincoln of myth or the real man?

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With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln. New York: Harper and Row, 1977. Gates wishes neither to canonize Lincoln nor to disparage his greatness but to portray him as he actually was.

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Related Titles

Russell Freedman has published four other photobiographies. His Immigrant Kids is a tribute to the history of his own family, which along with thousands of other families passed through Ellis Island into New York City in the 1880s and 1890s. Some of the photographs are over a hundred years old, but the faces in them, Freedman says, are timeless.

Critics liked the book, but it was not a best seller.

Children of the Wild West, Cowboys of the Wild West, and Indian Chiefs appeal to young adults' interests in the perennially popular subjects their titles suggest. The books found a wide audience among young adults and were praised for their honesty and their fine contributions to the history of the West.

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