



Lincoln's Body: A Cultural History

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In a stunning feat of scholarship, insight, and engaging prose, *Lincoln's Body* explores how a president ungainly in body and downright "ugly" of aspect came to mean so much to us.

The very roughness of Lincoln's appearance made him seem all the more common, one of us—as did his sense of humor about his own awkward physical nature. Nineteenth-century African Americans felt deep affection for their "liberator" as a "homely" man who did not hold himself apart. During Reconstruction, Southerners felt a nostalgia for the humility of Lincoln, whom they envisioned as a "conciliator." Later, teachers glorified Lincoln as a symbol of nationhood that would appeal to poor immigrants. Monument makers focused not only on the man's gigantic body but also on his nationalist efforts to save the Union, downplaying his emancipation of the slaves.

Among both black and white liberals in the 1960s and 1970s, Lincoln was derided or fell out of fashion. More recently, Lincoln has once again been embodied (as both idealist and pragmatist, unafraid of conflict and transcending it) by outstanding historians, by self-identified Lincolnian president Barack Obama, and by actor Daniel Day-Lewis—all keeping Lincoln alive in a body of memory that speaks volumes about our nation.

Lincoln's Body: A Cultural History Details

Date : Published February 8th 2016 by W. W. Norton Company (first published February 9th 2015)

ISBN : 9780393352634

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Format : Paperback 432 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History, Military History, Civil War

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Counsel182 says

Adding this to the pile of books that came out this year to commemorate the 150 year 'anniversary' of Lincoln's death and the end of the war this book stands out given its unique approach. Granted, it is at times "a stretch" to link Lincoln's "body" to some of the topics discussed in the book, Fox does chronicle how Lincoln has been viewed over the years--from the initial attempts to deify him to later attempts to demonize him. It is an interesting journey and at times the topic seemed to be like a PhD thesis trying to grasp on some new thread in which to explore Lincoln--but seriously, did Fox really have to include Saturday Night Live's parody of Spielberg's own historically inaccurate (but apparently brilliantly acted) "Lincoln" as well as the film "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter 2012" in the mix? Some things are best left unsaid--or unwritten.

David Bales says

This cultural history deals with the public's fascination with Abraham Lincoln down through the last 150 years, his physical body as well as the interpretation of his presidency, from national hagiography to revisionism. It starts with a brief rundown of Lincoln's life and career and then explains how Lincoln's life and presidency was portrayed in books, plays and films throughout history.

Kyla says

I've never actually considered the importance of any historical figure's literal, physical body before. More conventional history tends toward examining the life events, or the thoughts, or the effects of a person, not the meaning invested in their tangible, physical carcass. In "Lincoln's Body: A Cultural History," however, Fox does just that. He begins with the impact of Lincoln's taller-than-average, lean and muscular physique, how imposing he, with his height, broad shoulders, pronounced cheekbones and shaggy dark hair, was when he came into a room. He moves on to the assassination itself, the moving of the body across the street and who was present with Lincoln in his last hours. From there the narrative continues to the funeral train, the condition of the body along the way and the effects of travel, then the burial.

The book does not end with the final disposition of the flesh and blood body of Lincoln, but proceeds to examine references to the body in poetry and literature, the use of the body to inspire sculpture, and even the physicality of actors who have portrayed The Railsplitter on stage and film.

Fox has done his research, yet is never dull or dry or overly academic. "Lincoln's Body" falls into that pleasant form of non-fiction where you find yourself learning new things painlessly and pleasantly. I recommend it for any history buff or Lincoln aficionado, or anyone who just wants to consider a historical figure in a different light.

Sparrow says

This book is a mess – a chaotic series of disconnected essays which constantly depart from the metaphor they’re supposedly pushing (something about the connection between Abraham Lincoln and his physical body). “Lincoln’s Body” is repetitive, painfully obvious – and the guy who reads it on CDs, Pete Larkin, sounds quite a bit like John Wayne. (That’s a complaint.) Mostly “Lincoln’s Body” attends to areas that have been neglected by historians: the relationship between African-Americans and the 16th President, the question of whether Abraham had syphilis. “Cultural history” seems to mean a bunch of heterogenous facts the author slams together with no effort at coherence.

The actual information about Lincoln’s body is pretty interesting: he was widely considered unbelievably ugly, but many people felt that he willingly sacrificed his life for America, not unlike Jesus dying for the sins of humanity. In the 19th century, you had to have an open casket, and Lincoln’s corpse decomposed on the long funeral tour. (By the time the body reached Chicago, it looked pretty weird.) After he was buried, Lincoln’s son was terrified of graverobbers – because some thieves nearly DID run off with Abraham’s corpse.

[My review is a little inspecific because a book on CD disappears after you read it; you can’t flip back through the pages and notate details.]

Ai Miller says

I was expecting to be totally uninterested in this book- I figured it was just another book about cultural memory around Lincoln, and like, I've read Merrill Peterson and Barry Watson so what more could be said? And admittedly, some sections of this book *do* read like those books--there were parts that I went "eh, this isn't super duper new information to me, or a new way of analyzing it." But some parts--particularly the opening chapter about Lincoln's body as a political tool, where I was like screaming with excitement--really were new and refreshing to read. The last chapters also were great, as Fox goes over the latest Lincoln-related stuff, and that was super interesting because I consciously remember that time (it sort of ends with Spielberg's *Lincoln*, which was something of a landmark moment in my life.)

Fox is also very attentive to the differences in memory between white Americans and Black Americans across history, which is awesome! It also made me reflect a lot on the regional differences he doesn't quite touch on--he divides the country between "north" and "south," which makes some sense, but doesn't really get into the "west" which I think is super interesting, and even within those, there's a radically different sense? Like as someone who used to live in the Land of Lincoln and now lives about an hour and a half from Mankato (site of the largest mass execution conducted in the US, where 38 Dakota men were killed on orders from Lincoln himself) there is an entirely different sense about Lincoln there and here. And while that's not necessarily Fox's fault--he acknowledges in his Notes on Sources that he couldn't find the archival material to address other racialized groups in the US--it does leave some interesting gaps.

Nonetheless, I really think this book is valuable, particularly for Fox's body analytic--even if Lincoln/dead white dudes aren't your thing, if you're interested in thinking about embodiment in history, this could be a really really valuable book for you!

Mike Stewart says

Fox uses Lincoln's body and his unusual physical appearance as a springboard to discuss how Lincoln was viewed by his contemporaries and, for most of the book, his place in American politics and culture since his death.

People were often put off by Lincoln's appearance which they found awkward, homely, ungainly, etc. until they saw him smile or engaged with him. Lincoln was of course aware of, although hardly obsessed with his appearance and the impression it made on others. However, his self-deprecating humor tended to disarm his critics.

From the days immediately following his death until the present day, Lincoln has been viewed in many different ways by different audiences- martyr, preserver and reconciler of the Union, the great emancipator, folksy sage, secular saint, etc. and this is the meat of Fox's work.-the exploration of the various Lincolns in culture, literature, and cinema.

David Kent says

Historian Richard Wightman Fox employs a unique concept in discussing Abraham Lincoln: Lincoln's body. His body - the physical, the figurative, the aura, and the memory - is used to trace how he was perceived at the time and during several periods since then to the present day. In doing so, Fox has successfully provided a mirror onto not only Abraham Lincoln, but ourselves.

The book is split into three main parts ostensibly covering three broad concepts and also three broad time periods. The Public Body (1840-1865) focuses mostly on how Lincoln's physical attractiveness (or lack thereof) was used both to promote and dismiss him during his political lifetime. These chapters also discuss his initial martyrdom, impact of the lack of any "last words," and bodily degradation during the funeral.

The second part, The Enshrined Body (1865-1909), examines the memorialization of Lincoln, the use of him as a symbol, and the "reinterpretation" of him such that he was either for or against political goals, including "black emancipation" and "white reunion." This section gets us up to the centenary of his birth.

In the final part, The National Body (1909-2015), Fox looks at the various stages of development of what could best be termed the Lincoln "cult" and "anti-cult." He looks at the development of two memorials that solidify the "cult" (Lincoln Memorial and Sandburg's Lincoln), and also at Lincoln has been depicted on the screen. Most importantly, Fox does an excellent job looking at Lincoln's role (and sometimes lack of role) in the Civil Rights era. His discussion of Martin Luther King is one of the best parts of the book. Finally, this part spends considerable time on the more recent cinematic (and Disney) treatments of Lincoln, with a clear appreciation of the Spielberg/Kushner/Day Lewis movie, "Lincoln."

The writing is fluid and readable. The use of the "body" thread throughout the book is well done - enough to carry the theme without making it groan from its own weight. But the real value of the book is in how Fox reflects the body of Lincoln in all its senses back on our changing views of liberty, race, and democracy over the course of the 150 years since Lincoln's body made that last long railroad trip back to Springfield.

Jill Meyer says

This year, 2015, is the 150th year anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Many books have covered Lincoln's life and his death; Richard Wightman Fox's new book, "Lincoln's Body: A Cultural History", looks at how Lincoln has fared as an historical figure since his death.

Richard Fox, professor of History at the University of Southern California, begins his book with Lincoln's assassination, a well-documented story. But he concentrates both on how Lincoln perceived himself before his death and how others perceived him after. His death on April 15, 1865, unleashed mourning throughout the country. An elaborate program of his body's laying-in-state in Washington, DC, as well as in selected cities on the train trip back to Springfield, Illinois, made the nation a partner in his family's grief. He was finally laid to a somewhat unquiet rest in Springfield.

In the succeeding years, monuments and statues were erected in his honor, books were written, and his legacy was being assessed. Was Abraham Lincoln an emancipator of slaves or the man who fought to hold together the Union? Or both? How would he have governed in those difficult days after the Civil War ended? Would he have welcomed the South back into the Union or would he have imposed harsh penalties? Certainly "his" Reconstruction would have been different than Andrew Johnson's.

Fox's excellent book examines how the regard for Abraham Lincoln has risen and fallen and risen again in the last 150 years. Was he the saint who had lost his one chance at love with Ann Rutledge's early death or was that romantic tripe, made up to soften Lincoln's image after his death. Was he a dreamer or a realist about our country's future. Perhaps the low point of the "Cult of Lincoln" was Gore Vidal's "fictional biography", "Lincoln", published in the mid-1980's, where he tries to "humanize" the president.

Richard Wightman Fox presents a nuanced look at the "Cult of Lincoln". His book is a very readable account of a time in America's history when our national view of a beloved figure was turned into a cultural icon.

Marla says

Very interesting book.

Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says

Though this book states from the title it is a cultural history of Lincoln's body, it is so much more, following the national obsession as it ebbed and flowed from the time Lincoln was assassinated right up to the here and now.

Firstly, I find it so utterly strange how people in Lincoln's time were so obsessed with his physicality - and took any opportunity they had to point out he was not particularly attractive. I guess I've never noticed this before, I've never found him hideous or grotesque. To me he looks like a normal man, ages by the stress of leading a nation being torn apart at the seams.

I found that how the book was divided to be interesting. Fox references Lincoln's body in three different categories: first there is his physical body, the living, breathing Lincoln. Then in the aftermath of his

assassination come the monuments and shrines. Finally, there is the metaphorical body that belongs to the nation as a whole, and exudes what Lincoln stood for - and how he is interpreted now, 150 years after his murder.

I've had a kind of fascination with Lincoln since 8th grade, on our class trip to Washington, D.C. I remember standing there at the monument, marveling at how huge it was, and I wish I had taken more time to ponder, taken more photos to remember it, and really understood at the time what he meant to the nation and what he continues to mean as a symbol of hope.

Chris Burd says

Both the name and the official book jacket description indicate a focus on Lincoln's physical form in the way that he is memorialized and remembered. While there is much discussion of Lincoln's physical body, physical movements and traits - and even a rather detailed history of Lincoln's corpse - the book strays from this primary focus. Some of the most interesting chapters are not about Lincoln's physical form at all, but rather about the memorial poetry, speeches and narratives of his life.

Overall, Mr. Wightman Fox delivers an extensive look into how we have remembered and memorialized Lincoln in the years since his death, but he stretches in places to tie this into the stated theme of Lincoln's physical form with unfortunate results. The book ends up feeling forced in many chapters, and utterly irrelevant in others.

Caroline says

Whilst I found the connection to Lincoln's physical body throughout this book somewhat tenuous in places, as a exploration of Lincoln's cultural afterlife it was excellent. As Wrightman Fox points out, other US presidents have been respected, lauded, mourned, but no other is loved in the way that Lincoln was and continues to be. Washington may be equally as honoured and venerated, perhaps more so, but he is not beloved in the way of Lincoln. A large part of this, the author argues, is because of Lincoln's homeliness, his awkward shambling physical presence, his lack of pretence or polished veneer, his openness and honesty, his willingness to make himself physically accessible to the people in a way few other Presidents did before or since.

That physically accessibility, of course, is what led to his assassination in Ford's Theatre on April 14th 1865. And yet even in dying Lincoln seemed to represent more than just his physical self - in death he became an icon for the nation, a martyr, self-sacrificed in his hour of greatest achievement. For the freed slaves he died for them; for the white population he died for Union. But few doubted that he died for something, that his death had meaning, and it was that firm belief that gave rise of the cult of Lincoln, the almost religious veneration of his life and death, so conveniently occurring on Good Friday.

Wrightman Fox explores the way America has understood and represented Lincoln in the years since his death - through the mourning rituals attendant on his funeral train; through the religious and mythological memories of the freed slaves; through biographies and portraits, through literature, theatre and film; in memorials and statues, most notably the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC; through his symbolism during the Civil Rights movement; right up to the modern day with Spielberg's Lincoln and Disney's Hall of

Presidents exhibits.

I found this a thoroughly enjoyable read, although I'll admit I'm predisposed to enjoy anything about Lincoln. But it is a curious thought that Wrightman Fox raises - whilst beloved as an individual, perhaps only Washington rivals Lincoln in the force of the symbolism that he represents, the idea that he exists simultaneously as a real historical person and as a emblem of something greater than himself. Too often the latter has obscured sight of the real Lincoln - he is remembered as society needs him to be at any given moment, and the real plain-spoken, humble, rough-at-the-edges man is often forgotten.

Ashley says

This was not the book that I expected. With a title like "Lincoln's Body" and a description that emphasized the president's physicality, I anticipated that this book would be more a specific history of the materiality of Lincoln's body after death-- how people made sense of his lanky features, the use of his body in mourning rituals, and the development of his tomb. Although all of those items are discussed in Fox's "Lincoln's Body," the book is a much more a expansive history of how Americans from the 1860s to today have understood Lincoln. Rather than narrowly focus on Lincoln's body, the book covers everything from poetry about Lincoln after his death, to memorials, to video games and films. Readers familiar with scholarship on 19th century mourning and death in the Civil War, will find that "Lincoln's Body" ably applies these concepts apply to the former president. Likewise, readers familiar with literature on memorials (especially Kirk Savage's Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America) may find those chapters an excellent review of key themes. The book is well-illustrated and includes a lengthy list of works cited that can lead the interested reader to additional sources.

Richard Fox's book is an excellent starting point for readers interested in a general overview of how Americans have made sense of Lincoln's unique role in American history. His prose is approachable and the book analyzes a number of different kinds of memorials. I could easily imagine teaching with this book given its breadth. However, readers who want to know more about how embalming impacted mourning rituals, how Lincoln's height shaped his public image, or what it meant to display a body may want to look elsewhere for a more detailed analysis.

Larry Richardson says

Would actually give it a 4.5. I've read several books on Lincoln and and if a book has some new and interesting facts then I consider it a good read. And, even though the premise was a little strange, it provided a wealth of new facts.

Patrick Macke says

a very original way of looking at ol' Abe and well executed ... many people, then and now, feel some physical attachment to Lincoln, and associate his physical characteristics to what makes him endearing - his lined facial appearance connects to his authentic concern for all citizens, his wiry, muscular frame a testament to his work ethic, etc. ... it is said he gave his very body for the republic, and as such, his lasting impact on our nation and culture among rich & poor, black & white, north & south, is a singular American

phenomenon ... the book points out that Lincoln's legacy really comes down to two words: union and emancipation - subjects either ignored or exalted based on your point of view ... still, the sadness of the book lies in its "what if?"; i can't help but think about the trajectory of history had Lincoln lived and led us to what was to come after emancipation and i think of how disappointed he would be to see that emancipation still resembles nothing like freedom - even in the greatest republic on earth, even after 150 years
