



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

By Joshua Wolf Shenk

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**Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness** By Joshua Wolf Shenk

**A thoughtful, nuanced portrait of Abraham Lincoln that finds his legendary political strengths rooted in his most personal struggles.**

Giving shape to the deep depression that pervaded Lincoln's adult life, Joshua Wolf Shenk's *Lincoln's Melancholy* reveals how this illness influenced both the president's character and his leadership. Lincoln forged a hard path toward mental health from the time he was a young man. Shenk draws from historical record, interviews with Lincoln scholars, and contemporary research on depression to understand the nature of his unhappiness. In the process, he discovers that the President's coping strategies—among them, a rich sense of humor and a tendency toward quiet reflection—ultimately helped him to lead the nation through its greatest turmoil.

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**Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness** By Joshua Wolf Shenk **Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

### **From Publishers Weekly**

Davidson delivers a fine performance in this exploration of Abraham Lincoln's depressive nature and its influence on his political life. From boyhood through assassination to legacy, Shenk probes all chambers of the 16th president's troubled heart. Davidson's voice is perfectly complementary for such historical and intimate matter, offering up an inviting rocking-chair-by-the-fire feel. So fitting is his voice that it feels anachronistic when Shenk veers into the present, bringing Davidson's earthy, log-cabin tones along with it. But the narration is, for the most part, flawless (save for a few surprising mispronunciations). Davidson's engagement with the material never flags despite the sometimes abrupt time-hopping and dense side paths Shenk periodically travels. Davidson recites several poems beautifully and renders an excellent Irish brogue. Listeners may find the musical cues confusing, though. For example, moody piano lines occasionally close out sections in the middle or latter part of a disc, falsely prompting the finger toward the eject button. The production also features several extras including a somewhat superfluous NPR-style interview with Shenk plus an excerpt from an upcoming Benjamin Franklin biography. Overall, despite a few quirks, a full and worthy listen. (*Reviews, July 11*) (Sept.)

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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 Lincoln's 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 Lincoln's 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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#### **Rodolfo Odum:**

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#### **Nancy Gump:**

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