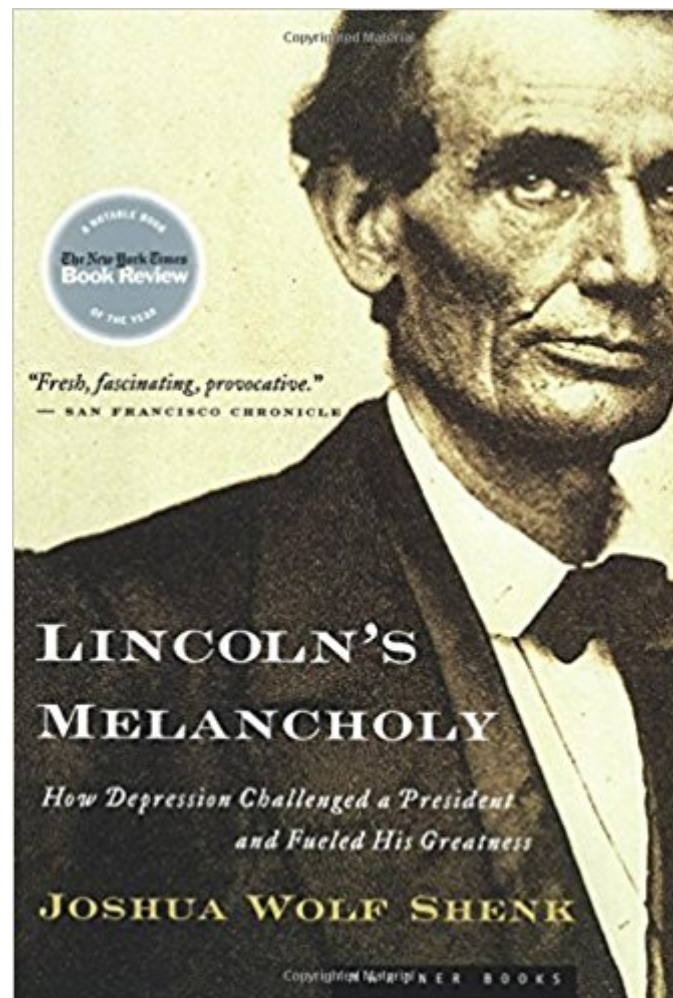




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# Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged A President And Fueled His Greatness



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

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 author's ability to assess his subject's mental state based on eyewitness accounts and Lincoln's own words. Shenk assumes his readers have a grasp of the period's 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 Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

A good book, but towards the latter half of the book it goes from less of an analysis on Lincoln's melancholy to more of a biography with little mention of his sadness. It is clear that most of the evidence Shenk uses is from Lincoln's early life as during his time as President there is hardly any letters documented by Shenk that highlight Lincoln's bout with depression. This isn't a bad book and it is insightful, it just falls off around chapter 8 and the quality is diminished. It also felt like Shenk would dive too much into the historiography of psychiatry and spent too much time interpreting definitions.

This book is one of the most compelling biographical accounts of a complex psychology as I have

ever read. It's structured in such a way that it avoids clichés and then explains the controversies surrounding the great man from an early age to his civil war victory. Astounding insights, comprehensive research and fine writing make it a page-turning read for anybody. The author's depiction and understanding of clinical depression as a disease is also well-researched and objectively presented, and can be almost of textbook application. Further, he identifies how depression (melancholy) from Lincoln's era carried vastly different connotations than it does today. If you wish to know our greatest and most challenged leader or if you've ever suffered from chronic depression, you MUST read Lincoln's Melancholy...Ed Tasca Author, playwright and life-long depressive

This biography of Lincoln carefully presents facts from historical documents and is appropriately skeptical of previous myths and assumptions while presenting a balanced, honest picture of the whole man. It is also so well-written it moves like a Toni Morrison novel (dare I say?). I write only to second all the 5-star raves. I got the book from the library, but felt compelled to own a copy. Much of Lincoln's wisdom from his own hand is in this book: "Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man's nature--opposition to it, is his love of justice" (p. 127). But the author does not shy from telling us that Lincoln also told racial jokes and stories (thankfully none are reproduced). We see the arc of Lincoln's feeling that he had a purpose in life and eventually finding his way to that purpose and strength. Interesting too that what we call "depression" now was not so stigma-filled in his time. AND! We get reproductions of Lincoln's poetry: the stuff he wrote as well as the poems he admired: "Oh why should the spirit of mortal be proud! ... He passeth from life to his rest in the grave." This is an amazing biography.

The majority of this book sets up Lincoln's personal life, background and new [to me, anyway] insights into his spells of depression in his young adulthood and time in Indiana and Illinois before he appeared on the national stage. This narrative of Lincoln's difficult early years is masterfully told, and this is a cliché term, but I felt like I could feel Lincoln's pain. The only thing that kept me from giving this book a 5 star review was that I felt like the author "rushed" Lincoln's depression within his actual presidency at the end. A very small percentage is devoted to his time in Washington. Perhaps this was because his presidency is so well documented that the author felt most of the details would be redundant information. Or, Lincoln's ability to handle the daily toil of managing a Civil War as president could make the case on its own that the personal turmoil and tragedies he had endured prior to the White House *were* his qualifications. It just left me wanting more tales of

how Lincoln's depression carried the country through a devastating time in our history. Maybe I need to read it again.

William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner, once said of him "He dripped melancholy as he walked." Oddly, a cheerful, joke- telling Lincoln is less appealing than his sad persona, and although he was melancholic long before he became president the sad and careworn face seemed to be an echo of the weight of the Civil War resting on Lincoln's shoulders. In fact, melancholy is in itself appealing. Can you imagine a gleeful Lord Byron or a laughing Hamlet? Author Shenk quotes Edgar Allen Poe: "A fitful strain of melancholy will ever be found inseparable from the perfection of the beautiful." Can you even imagine Poe smiling let alone telling a joke? We can easily imagine Lincoln finding melancholy in the beautiful and he loved Poe's "Raven." Shenk's biography is revealing and you may see Lincoln as you've never seen him before, because Lincoln has not been examined as a chronic depressive. The observations by the people who rubbed elbows with Lincoln all along the way are vital because they reveal Lincoln on a day to day basis. We see Lincoln as a boy, annoying his illiterate father by reading books instead of doing the chores. Then Abe the rail-splitter, Abe the strong- armed man of the frontier became a symbol of what America is all about. And at the end of his life his melancholy face reflected the burden he carried in finally ending the Civil War. But always, always he gave the impression of being extremely sad. Lincoln's face is the story of nineteenth century America and the Civil War. Lincoln most certainly suffered from a chronic depression but he was not a manic depressive because even when he was jocular and joking he was not manic. He was unipolar. The author points out that in the nineteenth century it was much more common for men to give in to their emotions, discuss their feelings among their friends and even weep in public. Anyone currently running for public office in this country and labelled a depressive would be removed from the slate. (Remember Thomas Eagleton?) Any modern would-be senator who has seen a psychiatrist is in deep trouble politically. We must look at Lincoln in his own century when men were able to air their emotions without seeming unmanly. Lincoln's two major collapses, the first after the death of Ann Rutledge, the second after Lincoln told Mary Todd he didn't love her, are discussed in detail. When Ann died, he threw himself on her grave during a heavy storm because he didn't want her gravestone to get wet. In the second episode, Lincoln was almost certainly pining over the rejection of the beautiful Matilda Edwards when he broke his engagement to Mary Todd. But his appalling breakdown is hard to understand because he seemed to be in overkill, in other words he over- reacted to the point he considered suicide, frequented doctors and went to bed for days on end. The author makes it clear that Lincoln's repudiation of Mary Todd was

only one factor that contributed to his nervous breakdown. His political life was in shambles and incredibly, he thought he might have syphilis. When he finally recovered and went back to Mary, a child, seeing him dressed up on his wedding day, asked him where he was going. "To hell, I suppose," answered Lincoln. A characteristic of Lincoln throughout his life and which was noted and marveled upon by everybody who knew him was his frequent withdrawal into some world of his own. He would regress into a sort of cocoon, his mind far away and the odd episode could happen anywhere. Depressives are known to withdraw but Lincoln's withdrawal was not only distinctive, it was unusual and he often sealed himself off in public. The author quotes the psychiatrist Leston Havens as saying that Lincoln "seemed to be as hard as granite and as soft as a cloud." But Lincoln knew when to be hard and when to be soft. And in those withdrawals Lincoln was perhaps organizing his mind, preparing himself for what he must do. Joshua Shenk's book is very pithy and full of fascinating anecdotes. He cites many nineteenth century depressives who made their mark on the world including Charles Darwin, Emily Dickinson, Benjamin Disraeli, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and of all people, Queen Victoria. But Lincoln used his melancholy as an instrument of growth: "Lincoln lived, suffered and grew." Our debt, as Americans, to Abraham Lincoln, who knew and understood his demons and used them wisely, is immense.

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