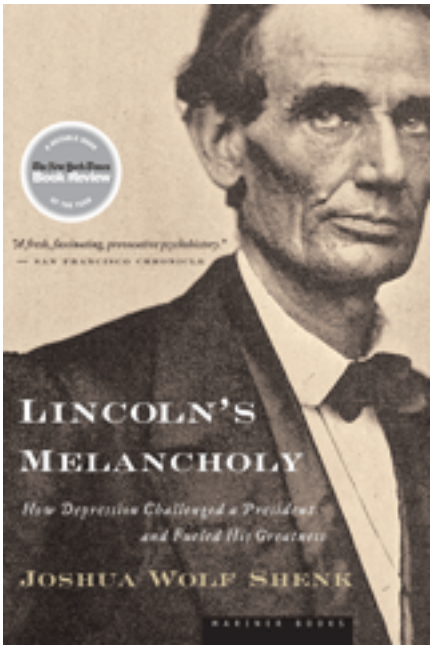


Lincoln's Melancholy

by Joshua Wolf Shenk

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Selected as a Best Book of the Year by the *New York Times, Washington Post Book World, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Recipient of an Abraham Lincoln Institute Book Award and a forWard Award from the National Mental Health Association

About the Book

In his award-winning book, *Lincoln's Melancholy,* Joshua Wolf Shenk demonstrates how the sixteenth president harnessed his depression to fuel his astonishing success. This revelatory work springs from Shenk's long search to establish credible reports of how Lincoln lived, what he felt, and how he grew.

Lincoln's Melancholy tells a story of great pain joined with great power. From a young age, Lincoln experienced psychological distress, which manifested in two breakdowns in his early manhood. Believing himself temperamentally inclined to suffer to an unusual degree, Lincoln developed strategies to endure and adapt.

One essential strategy was to search for meaning that made sense of affliction — a sense of purpose that transcended the self. By consciously shifting his goal away from personal contentment and toward universal justice, Lincoln gained the strength to transcend profound darkness. This proved an essential aspect of his mature character — and played a major role in his presidency. "As president," Shenk tells us, "Lincoln urged his countrymen to accept their blessing and their burden, to see that their suffering has meaning, and to join him on a journey toward a more perfect union."

"Intellectually energetic . . . Looking at his subject's darkness also means approaching his depth." — *Washington Post Book World*

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"Provocative . . . thanks to Shenk's own Lincoln-like sensitivity and sagacious commentary, we have a new perspective not only for understanding one of our most important political figures, but also for rethinking our assumptions about mental health and the full range of appropriate therapies in modern American life." — *San Francisco Chronicle*

"A profoundly human and psychologically important examination." — Kay Redfield Jamison

About the Author

Joshua Wolf Shenk is the director of the O'Neill Literary House at Washington College and an advisor to the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker, Harper's Magazine,* the *Atlantic Monthly,* the *Economist*, and other publications.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Lincoln's Melancholy* for every reader.

1. Shenk argues, "This is not a story of transformation but one of integration. Lincoln didn't do great work because he solved the problem of his melancholy. The problem of his melancholy was all the more fuel for the fire of his great work." What can we learn from Lincoln by looking at his accomplishments through the lens of his melancholy?

2. What can we learn about melancholy (and its common modern name, depression) by looking at it in the light of Lincoln's experience?

3. Lincoln is perhaps one of the most-studied subjects in American history. In researching this book, Shenk went back to primary sources to find information on Lincoln that had rarely been brought to the foreground. What facts presented in *Lincoln's Melancholy* did you find most surprising? How did the book alter or broaden your understanding of Lincoln and his achievements?

4. Shenk points out that "if Lincoln were alive today, his depression would be considered a 'character issue' — that is, a political liability." Do you agree? What changes in our society and culture have altered the way we view our leaders, with respect to their temperaments and character?

5. Shenk describes an array of coping mechanisms that Lincoln developed early in life as a way to contend with his depression. How do these devices and strategies contribute to Lincoln's personal, intellectual, and political development?

6. Lincoln often turned to poetry for solace. How did literature sustain him? What particular works was he drawn to? What sustains you in times of struggle?

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7. Shenk offers a number of impressions and descriptions of Lincoln from contemporaries who had met him and known him. What common threads run through these observances? Which ones most resonate with you?

8. While Lincoln was often perceived as a sad soul, he was also well known and loved for his sharp humor. How did these two sides of his character complement each other? Why do you suppose humor and pathos are so often intertwined?

9. Shenk observes that nineteenth-century literature gave rise to the works of Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne, and that "melancholy can be considered a cultural, not just an individual, 'condition.'" Was Lincoln, then, a man of his times? How would you describe the "condition" of the early twenty-first century? What do you think might be our particular social temperament or cultural character, broadly speaking of course?

10. In his account of the medical treatments for melancholy in Lincoln's time, Shenk described the case of Daniel Drake, a leading physician who suffered from depression and treated himself aggressively. "It took several years for the depression to fully lift," Shenk writes. "And when it did, he owed his recovery not to any of the medicines but to fresh air and exercise." What do you think of the nineteenth-century treatments Shenk described? What do you think of modern treatments for depression?

11. In a review of *Lincoln's Melancholy*, Andrew Solomon, author of *The Noonday Demon*, wrote, "The real radicalism of this book (and I say this as someone who takes and has advocated for the use of antidepressants) is that it shows starkly what we stand to lose when we lose depression." What, if anything, might we lose if depression were alleviated or eradicated? What positive lessons might depression offer?

12. As president, Lincoln endured great personal and professional difficulty. Yet Shenk's account shows how earlier conflicts — including the "fatal first" of 1841 — may have played a greater role in shaping Lincoln's life and character. In your opinion, what were the crucial turning points in his life?

13. Lincoln's most trusted intimates likely suffered from psychological ailments of their own. What role did Joshua Speed play in Lincoln's life, and how might his own afflictions have strengthened his bond with Lincoln and vice versa? How might Mary Todd Lincoln's struggles have influenced her husband's life?

14. What role did spirituality play in Lincoln's life, and specifically, how did it come to bear on his depression? At the start of chapter 10, Shenk quotes Aeschylus: "And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God above." Do you think this is in line with Lincoln's own beliefs? Is it in line with yours?

15. Shenk gives several examples of the notes of sympathy and condolences Lincoln wrote to acquaintances throughout his life. Often Lincoln offered expressions of encouragement and assurance with allusions to his own painful experiences. Why do you suppose Lincoln did this? In what ways was he bolstered by others in his times of need?

16. Shenk makes a provocative case for the uses of suffering, citing not only historical evidence but also modern psychological studies to support his claims. Does this cross-disciplined study make for effective history? How so or how not?

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17. One enduring trait in Lincoln's life was an unwavering political vision. Shenk writes that "Lincoln viewed all of American history as a struggle — one that the founders foresaw and made contingencies for." How did this philosophy shape Lincoln's approach to policy? How did it shape his own life?

18. Lincoln was a gifted and prolific writer and a persuasive speaker. How might his psychological state, his sensitivity and empathy, have contributed to his deftness with words and his articulateness? What themes thread through his personal correspondences and his public works?

19. In his afterword, Shenk offers a historiography addressing the changing perceptions of Lincoln throughout history. How does knowing about shifting historical theories affect your own perception of Lincoln? In light of this, what does *Lincoln's Melancholy* contribute to our understanding of the man and his legacy?

20. What is the single most important idea you will take away from *Lincoln's Melancholy*?

For Further Reading

The following titles may be of interest to readers of *Lincoln's Melancholy*:

Gettysburg by Stephen W. Sears

The Civil War by Bruce Catton

The Peabody Sisters by Megan Marshall

Memoirs of the Second World War by Winston Churchill

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