Review

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I don’t have to tell anyone who reads something called the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* that Abraham Lincoln had an affinity for humor. The stories of Lincoln making a telling point with a perfectly phrased joke are as numerous as the common people he supposedly said God must have loved so much because he made so many of them. And many of these stories about Lincoln telling humorous anecdotes are even true!

As a professional comedy writer, however, I find it dismaying that Lincoln’s relationship to humor is so often dismissed as a classic case of the sad clown who laughs on the outside because he’s crying on the inside. Too often the equation explaining Lincoln’s humor is written as “Depression = Need for Jokes” and then is set aside as if that’s all there is to it. If I can mangle an old joke, it puts me in mind of the man whose doctor tells him to ease his blues by going to see the hilarious President Lincoln. “But doctor,” pleads the patient, “I am President Lincoln!”

In a world where volumes have been written on the subject of each of Lincoln’s speeches, all of his limbs, and even his favorite meals, it seems there’s also room for a more nuanced exploration of this critical aspect of Lincoln’s personality. Luckily, Richard Carwardine is on the case in *Lincoln’s Sense of Humor*, a book from the Concise Lincoln Library that I would call necessary, important, and strangely practical—though possibly not for the reasons it was originally intended.

It’s a strange quirk that books about humor are often criticized for not being funny themselves—as if anyone would ever ding a cookbook because you can’t take a bite out of it. So let’s be clear: *Lincoln’s Sense of Humor* is not a funny book. It is considerably dry, but that’s not a problem. Carwardine isn’t wasting his energy trying to impress us by outdoing his book’s subject. Instead he’s wisely explaining Lincoln’s humor, Lincoln’s need for that humor, and what Lincoln did with that humor, without the burden of setting up jokes at the end.
of every paragraph. Carwardine’s wisdom in eschewing this chore is further illustrated by my own inability to pull it off well in this review.

To start with the closing, Carwardine’s final page notes, “When dehistoricized, romanticized, and supplemented by apocrypha, Lincoln’s humor loses much of its original and authentic richness” (134). As someone who works in comedy and is an avid Lincoln studies dilettante, I’ve had the experience many times of coming across a Lincoln joke-telling anecdote in my reading and not being entirely sure what it means, or even how to locate the punchline. I honor and celebrate President Lincoln as a force for morality in politics, a pragmatic leader of a chaotic people, a stirring writer and orator—but a comedian? Well, he’s always seemed to benefit from the relative lack of humorous competition among his nineteenth-century compatriots. And this is coming from someone who likes nothing more than to curl up with an old vaudeville routine and laugh his head off at jokes that were old before my grandparents were born.

Humor rarely ages well. From classic Greek comedies to the Canterbury Tales to Lincoln’s famous joke about George Washington’s picture hanging in the English outhouse, that which remains the most vitally humorous depends on humanity’s eternal familiarity and affection for the aspects of life politely described as “earthy.” Humor dependent on knowledge of a specific historical and political context has a built-in expiration date. Just try to recall the contemporary references and shorthands at play in each joke on an episode of The Daily Show from a few years ago. Even I don’t get those jokes anymore, and I wrote them.

It’s a shame, though, because with the proper understanding of a joke’s original time and place, it regains its power to create laughter, like a desert plant lying dormant only to bloom after a rare rainstorm. Every joke is a complicated construction of foiled expectations playing on specific principles understood by both teller and hearer. Bringing a modern reader to that frame of reference is a challenging mission Carwardine doesn’t take lightly: “Helping to recapture that complexity has been the animating purpose of this book” (134).

Carwardine goes about the job like Mr. Lincoln proving a case in court. First, he assembles a parade of eyewitness accounts testifying to Lincoln’s abilities as a joke teller, which are described in nearly mythic terms. He continues on to exhibit B, an exhaustive catalog of Lincoln anecdotes, from the above-mentioned hoary old chestnut about the English privy to jokes and anecdotes that were completely new to me. Here the book risks becoming overwhelmingly comprehensive. Rather than sailing on sparkling waves of wit, we feel we’re being
pulled under by an ocean of bumbling preachers, flinty farmers, and destructive barnyard animals. No type of Lincolnian humor goes unexamined: “quick wit, irony, logical fallacy, satire, and—notoriously—dirty jokes and stories” (43), not to mention puns and racially insensitive material. Carwardine admirably places the humor in context, though again he can go only so far in making them actually funny.

That’s fine, because the why of Lincoln’s humor is much more interesting than the actual humor itself. Carwardine asks why Lincoln was attracted to hearing and telling jokes. The answer would seems to be self-explanatory: because jokes are fun, and as Dr. Seuss once hypothesized, fun is good. But surprisingly, most people don’t have a talent for humor, and as I’ve often discovered, they don’t much appreciate being in the presence of humor either. Why was humor so important to Lincoln? Why was the development Carwardine traces from the biting, hostile wit of young Lincoln to the more sympathetic tone of President Lincoln “part of a larger personal transformation” (15)?

Carwardine points us in two directions. The first is, of course, Lincoln’s personal enjoyment of it, which, of course, includes talk of Lincoln’s “dark moods” and “recourse to the comic” (88). But to Carwardine’s credit, he doesn’t fixate on Lincoln the sad clown. Instead, he turns his focus to the public aspect of Lincoln’s humor: the uses of jokes “designed to secure political or personal advantage” (5). This is where the book goes from interesting to invaluable.

In the course of anatomizing Lincoln’s humor, Carwardine has managed to write a vital manual for anyone intending to use humor in politics. This is guidance a surprising number of people have clamored for. Sometime in the past twenty years it was decided, without supporting evidence, that humor was the most effective way to spread political messages. Advocacy groups of all types began groping for a way to use humor to convince America of things. (I know, because at one point or other they all seem to have asked me to help them do it.) It’s a curious turn of events, since, as Carwardine says Lincoln believed, “it was doubtful whether turning the laugh on anybody really gained any votes” (26).

Perhaps Lincoln only felt that way because, in the nineteenth century, few aside from him had grasped the power of humor to persuade, assuage, and direct public attention. Through him, Carwardine addresses some vital questions about political humor. When is humor appropriate for achieving a political goal? When is it inappropriate? How far is too far to go in using humor against your opponents? What kind of humor will communicate your message rather than
muddying it? What kind of humor will be understood by the people you’re addressing? These were questions that Lincoln grappled with, and Carwardine touches on all of them. He also addresses the pitfalls of relying on humor, reminding us in depth that Lincoln’s humor “has come to be regarded with a sentimental fondness that was far from universal among his contemporaries” (5). *Lincoln’s Sense of Humor* shows how, in a time of national tragedy, the public could often only see the humor and not the grief that triggered it, and so they misread the joke teller as insensitive or worse. The book also shows how Lincoln’s opponents used humor against him, with the examples at hand suggesting that their arguments scored few points because their jokes weren’t as good.

These are subjects I’ve never seen handled quite so clearly. Carwardine could have easily slapped a self-help subtitle on the cover (something like *Ageless Lessons in Humorous Communication from the Great Emancipator*), added bullet points to the ends of chapters and sold it as a handbook at public speaking and motivation conferences. The world could certainly use an education in what Carwardine identifies as the central root of Lincoln’s humor: a moral outrage against hypocrisy and irrational thought and action.

It’s somewhat unfortunate Carwardine’s subject is Lincoln’s humor specifically, because it means he says little on an aspect of political humor that Lincoln partook in less and less as he rose in significance but which is worthy of greater analysis. Of course, it’s unfair to criticize a book for ignoring something totally outside its stated portfolio, but I couldn’t help feeling that this was only half the treatise on political humor that I wanted it to be. Carwardine sources Lincoln’s humor in a certain moral sense, and it’s easy to assume that all humor must be similarly moral and therefore a good thing for a leader to possess. But there’s another sort of political humor: that of the bully who spits on the powerless from a position of authority. This kind of humor—unmoored from morality and sprung from a love of exercising personal force—we see far more today. If the greatest message of this book is that a moral humor is a potent political weapon, then it calls out for a companion guide on the opposing but equally powerful danger of immoral humor. After seeing Professor Carwardine’s work here, I would very much like to see his take on that subject. Of course, Abraham Lincoln won’t make much of an appearance in that one.