



How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the Educations That Made Them

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An engaging, provocative history of American ideas, told through the educations (both in and out of school) of twelve great figures, from Benjamin Franklin to Elvis Presley.

How Lincoln Learned to Read tells the American story from a fresh and unique perspective: how do we learn what we need to know? Beginning with Benjamin Franklin and ending with Elvis Presley, author Daniel Wolff creates a series of intimate, interlocking profiles of notable Americans that track the nation's developing notion of what it means to get a "good education." From the stubborn early feminism of Abigail Adams to the miracle of Helen Keller, from the savage childhood of Andrew Jackson to the academic ambitions of W.E.B. Du Bois, a single, fascinating narrative emerges. It connects the illiterate Sojourner Truth to the privileged Jack Kennedy, takes us from Paiute Indians scavenging on western deserts to the birth of Henry Ford's assembly line. And as the book traces the education we value – both in and outside the classroom – it becomes a history of key American ideas.

In the end, How Lincoln Learned to Read delivers us to today's headlines. Standardized testing, achievement gaps, the very purpose of public education – all have their roots in this narrative. Whether you're a parent trying to make sure your child is prepared, a teacher trying to do the best possible job, or a student navigating the educational system, How Lincoln Learned to Read offers a challenge to consider what we need to know and how we learn it. Wide-ranging and meticulously researched, built mostly on primary sources, this is an American story that begins and ends with hope.

How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the Educations That Made Them Details

Date : Published March 17th 2009 by Bloomsbury USA

ISBN : 9781596912908

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Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Education, History, Biography

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Stacy says

INTERESTING! This book shouldn't have been called How Lincoln Learned to Read, though, because many of the tales inside of this book are MUCH more interesting than his. Found this book at my library's "autodidactical" section and was not disappointed. I took notes extensively in some parts. The author is very well researched and I was absolutely delighted at how much care he took to use original quotes from their original sources. Although his casual use of their "nicknames" at first annoyed me, I could see why they were used - in order to make these "Great Names" into real people again - real people who came from humble beginnings and whose various educations could be imitated by other, lesser-known people, like the common reader of this book. Excellent.

I would like to add that, after reading some others' reviews, the opening and conclusion to this book were not really needed; at a page long or so, they were not solid at all, and definitely not solid enough to link twelve very different people. Still, within the book, I could see where the author was trying to link each different person to their established family and settings, and tried to give the reader the whole picture of the person in question's "education." I recommended this book to a history major friend of mine, and I would recommend it to those who are interested in self-education and would like to know how influential people themselves had been educated.

Andres says

This is a great collection of mini-biographies of an eclectic assortment of "Americans" viewed through the lens of their individual educations and how it affected their lives.

12 people are covered here and though I would say they range from the well known to the lesser known, it is the emphasis on their educations that brings to light little known facts about the well known and newly illuminates the lesser known.

I most enjoyed reading about people I had never really read anything about before ("Andy", "Belle", "Henry", "Willie", "Rachel") and was still engaged with those I had some familiarity with ("Ben", "Abe", "Jack", "Elvis", and surprisingly "Thocmetony"). The stories here are each titled with a 'familiarized' shortened name, which seems gimmicky at first until you realize it helps to start off thinking of these people *as* people and not the Big Time Name they eventually become.

I feel going into this book blind is the most rewarding approach, so I won't spoil who is covered in this book. If you're at all interested in how education shapes one's life, or in succinct, focused-on-one-aspect biographies, or both, then this is a great survey of a handful of people that spans almost 200 years of US history, which in turn showcases 200 years of evolving means of educating the individual and the masses.

Jenny says

This book asks the question "How do we learn what we need to know?" And it tells us how various famous

Americans learned what they needed to know (what they "needed to know" often seeming to be defined by the author as what they actually learned, and presuming that this was what they therefore most needed). Although I admittedly only made it part-way through this book--I found it a bit too dry--neither the chapters I read nor the short epilogue did much for me in the way of offering anything but the vaguest of arguments about education.

Some of the history here IS interesting--but I'd advise a reader to approach this as a book of solid historical profiles, and not as a book that fundamentally adds any insightful answers to age-old questions about education. Of course education is more than what's learned from books or in a schoolroom. And of course it's shaped by our time and place. This book could be worthwhile as history, but not so much in the way of offering new lessons about the nature of education.

Claire says

Each chapter is its own story about a socioeconomic slice of life, in a specific place and time. Lots of interesting observations about how those holding the strings of economic power controlled education. The only disappointing thing was the ending which I didn't quite get, but which didn't really matter. The chapters on the 12 Americans were the point of the book.

Phayvanh says

The first chapter, on Ben Franklin, is one of the most engaging mini-bios I've ever read.

Then it all goes downhill from there. I stopped reading mid-way through the Abe Lincoln chapter, and never convinced myself to pick it back up. My main frustration with that story was that I didn't know that the former president's grandfather had the same name, and the author spoke about them both.

This book is a scattered and snarky report on a dozen different "great Americans", most of whom many already have been the subjects of bios and other study.

I was deeply disappointed by the Abigail Adams chapter. He quotes her and says, "hard to believe that the person who wrote this sentence was wholly neglected", as if to say she was. Then a whole 9 pages elapses BEFORE he tells us she's been homeschooled, had access to a wealthy library, and could possibly have been afforded boarding at a private school.

I was deeply offended in the chapter about Sojourner Truth, where he digresses for 2 & 1/2 pages on Noah Webster, who writes a primer that she never reads (we're told she never learned to). The author describes different stages of her life as her "grade school", her "high school", as if these stages were the only way an education could be broken down. This author is obviously not an educator.

At one point (AFTER he'd taken great pains to tell us how horrible the school of slavery is), he states that her education "hadn't been all that different from Nabby [Abigail:] Smith's." For reals??!!

Young black slaves are not at all different from rich white chicks. This author is definitely not a woman.

I would have rather read a book about lesser known characters. Perhaps a wider range of characters would have made up for it. Where are the Asians? The Latinos? The scientists? The teachers? The immigrants?

It had great premise. Needed a great editor.

Rob says

How Lincoln Learned to Read is a book about the education of twelve famous Americans. However, Wolff's idea of education is broader than teachers and schoolrooms. He gives examples of a broad category of how people are educated through their own initiative, interests, and work. While interesting and well written, I would have to ask, so what? There is no real purpose to this book. Unless you want to guess at its purpose. It seems that Wolff's thesis is that education happens in more places than the classroom.

Alright, if that is his thesis, then has anything new been told to us? I would say no. Is he saying that education should be similar to the way these people were educated? Who knows, since the book is just a series of episodes, mostly about the early childhood of his subjects. Is this a study about what makes a person "great?" Who knows, since greatness is also in the eye of the beholder. Is it about reforming the education system? Who knows, since there are no constructive proposals put forward. Essentially you can take out of this book, what you want to take out of it.

Therefore, if one is looking about the childhood experience of a variety of different Americans, then this book is one to pick up. It was an interesting book from a historical perspective. But as to contributing something new, there is not much here. But, if you are interested in the historical part, I would pick it up.

Vivian says

Don't let the title lead you to think that this is just about Abe Lincoln's education (which I did). Proceed to the subtitle: "Twelve Great Americans and the Educations That Made Them". Flip to the "Contents" page and scan the list of "greats"... Ben, Nabby, Andy, Belle, Abe, Thocmetony, Henry, Willie, Helen, Rachel, Jack, and Elvis. How many do you recognize?

This fascinating list offers a glimpse of the genius of this very readable survey of the history of America through its many twists and turns of education -- both private and public. Wolff shares pertinent family history, local history, and national history to show the bigger picture. His choice of candidates is well-rounded, coming from differing racial and economic and backgrounds.

This work is so good, in fact, that half-way through my borrowed library copy I ordered a copy to keep, re-read, and mark up.

This work is very well researched, including some fifty pages of notes. There appears to be no political agenda involved. Praise and criticism are not present. Each chapter offers a time-capsule to examine.

Mike says

Spoiler: So... don't go to school, be a genius (or in the case of JFK, son of a millionaire) instead. Fun history, regardless.

J.D. says

This book took me quite a bit longer than I would have expected, and for the longest time I couldn't put my finger on why I just wasn't enjoying it as much as expected. Upon first reading the description of this book, I assumed it would be a study in education by means of 12 important figures (without odd childhood nicknames to "keep me guessing?"

" I might add also!). Instead, what we have are tiny biographies of the 12 individuals that are oddly specific in some cases and quite vague in other's.

Instead of having a steady stream of tracking the progress (or potentially lack thereof) that would tie these individuals together we have a chapter on each where the other's seem to be stretched to compare/contrast to the other's.

Overall while some of it was interesting I wish he would either have focused on a third of the people or really sought out to study education throughout the years. Either way, he did not do justice as a biographer of the 12 and as a historian or educator on education. It really is a shame because I had very high hopes for this.

ladydusk says

I really enjoyed How Lincoln Learned to Read. The book is a history of 12 Americans, or soon-to-be Americans, and the manner in which they gained the knowledge and skills that would become necessary for them to complete the role they would fulfill in their adult lives. Perhaps what is most fascinating to me is the variety of methods ... from Lincoln's general unschooling, to Franklin's start in Boston Latin, to Elvis' progressive education, to Sojourner Truth's total lack of formal education but clear ability to "read people," to JFK's boarding school education.

Most of the children profiled by Wolff are familiar to us adults; in fact, the only one I'd never heard of before was Rachel Carson (who had as close to a Charlotte Mason Nature Study early education as anyone in the book). It was fascinating to see what sort of educational background had produced such exceptional adults who had a task to accomplish. To see the work that was put into, say, Elvis' meteoric, accidental rise to fame and fortune. All of the people profiled here had intelligence; perception; talent; ability; a fascination; and perhaps, most importantly, drive.

Mr. Wolff, and even the people he profiles in his book, would not (I think) recognize God's providence, yet each story reinforced to me just that. For example, Henry Ford was a tinkerer as a child, interested in how machinery worked, was intuitive about the machinery ... the employment he gained as a young adult showed him how to (and how not to) run a manufacturing company. He was the right person, had the right history, to start Ford Motor Company.

The book makes me ask questions, not necessarily about the people profiled here. What about my education/history made me the person I am today? What fascination do I have? And, perhaps, more importantly, what fascination do my children have? What talents? Where do we want them to end up? How do we instill a sense of urgency and drive in them? Do we want to?

It took me several weeks to read this, not a difficult read but sometimes not as engrossing as it might have been.

Jo says

I started reading this for NF book group theme: education but didn't make it all the way through before the discussion and then bought my own copy to continue later.

My rating is probably a touch higher than this book deserves. The central thesis about education in America is a little vague - especially evident in the prologue and the closing paragraphs of each chapter.

BUT I found this really helpful as an overview of American history, dipping into the details of 12 famous people's lives, arranged chronologically from before the founding of the country (Ben Franklin) to the nearly-modern era (Elvis). The 12 people come from varied places and cultures within the country and we follow them through their childhoods, until an approximate graduation age (though few of them actually went through a school and received a diploma). I didn't know much about the backgrounds of any of these people, although I know where they ended up, and these stories were just enough to have a really good sense of who they were and where they came from without reading a detailed biography of each.

The chronological order was helpful in telling the story of the country's history too - showing how each generation built upon what had gone before and how the country shifted, again without having to read a very detailed history of each region and culture. I have some background in American history, but this book let me dig into some of the more specific stories of what it means to be an American.

There were very specific regional/socio-economic attitudes that persist in parts of this country to this day that this book helped me to understand historically - for example, the idea that "public" things like libraries and schools are a really intended as a charity for the poor, and should be bypassed if you have the wealth to buy a better version. Over and over we encounter the myth of the self-taught, self-made man, a man of the people, that hides the privilege of being born white and male and having access to a (more or less) decent education (and also the luck and strategy and striving and work that these men put into becoming something more or different than they were).

I'm not really sure what this book says about education - that people learn what they need to know to get ahead in their lives (if they're destined to become prominent leaders)? That even a small amount of education can be leveraged into something more? That education is highly contested and political and what and how we learn reinforces the limits society places on what we can be? That there is no one understanding of "well educated" but that society tends to reward those already privileged with an education that will further cement their position? Many people in this book did get ahead and make something more of themselves than one might expect, but they are the people who ended up being written about in the history books, the exceptions that prove the rule. If anything this book taught me that American education isn't very good and never has been and that we don't necessarily know why we teach or how and the purposes of schooling probably have little to do with some pure notion of education anyway.

Jan says

This nonfiction showcased twelve great Americans and the education that gave them what they needed to know:

Benjamin Franklin

Abigail Adams

Andrew Jackson

Sojourner Truth

Abraham Lincoln
Princess Winnemucca
Henry Ford
W.E.B. DuBois
Helen Keller
Rachel Carson
John Kennedy
Elvis Presley

As you can see, the Americans chosen spanned two and a half centuries. Many lived comfortably as children, one was enslaved, and several were impoverished. It was fascinating reading about their schooling and how they learned what they needed to know to be successful. Lovely read.

Sterlingcindy says

(disclaimer, I won this book on Goodreads) (copied synopsis w/my review following) Eclectic author and journalist Wolff looks at the training, formal or otherwise, of 12 unique Americans in an effort to identify aspects of a "good education." From Abe Lincoln's obsession with books and newspapers to Elvis' fascination with movies and their soundtracks, Wolff ties these varied biographies together with common historical threads, discerning how each was able to surmount difficulties and make his or her mark. We learn that Ben Franklin "finds his refuge in books" as a child and that Abigail Adams "entered the adult world through the library." W. E. B. DuBois was fortunate to be born in Massachusetts, where education was mandatory for 6- to 12-year-olds, black or white. Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, a Paiute Indian, opened her own Indian school, striving to keep the traditional ways alive in the face of white-run schools trying to exterminate Indian traditions. Enriched by historical details of the Civil War and world wars, the Great Depression, and the rise of unions, and backed by extensive primary sources, Wolff's essays provide enlightening glimpses into the often-serendipitous process of education.

I really don't know what the writer was trying to "prove" here. I learned a lot about growing-up years of the Americans he selected during the times when high school (or elementary schools) didn't exist. But I don't know if he was trying to show that these people succeeded because of their education, or they were lucky based on their geography, parents, etc. For example, would Jack Kennedy have succeeded without such an emphasis on sports in his education? In other words, does education make the man, or does the man pick the education to make him great?

I'm glad he picked Abigail Adams, because a woman had to be incredibly smart to running a house and farm back then. I grew up about 5 miles from where Rachel Carson did, and I knew nothing about her (and the pollution wasn't much improved in the '60s.) I had no idea about Helen Keller's educational route.

So I learned something and it made me think--2 great criteria for any book. But the writing was a bit dry in areas, so I knocked a star off. It was a relatively short book (lots of footnotes at the end), so I think he could have spent another 50 pages putting more energy and color in it. Examples of teaching materials (actual pages), photos of the schools and writing samples or homework submissions would have helped here.

Jim says

This is really about a dozen people & how they were educated, only one being Lincoln. Wolff does a great

job of showing us not only the schooling, but the environment & circumstance of each person's life & how that constituted their education. There are a lot of solid historical facts & they're arranged to show how these people developed into what they would be & why, not necessarily in chronological order. That made sections jump around a bit too much at times, but was worth it.

More, he takes a broad look at our educational system & how it developed. Sometimes his facts seem to be skewed a bit & other times he shows how the histories I've read prior were. Very good stuff! Made me think.

One fact that particularly struck me was how the early school books were written with the idea of teaching a common language & set of morals to children. It's an idea that is somewhat out of fashion today what with the press for diversity. Back in the first century of our nation, we had too much diversity & it was causing problems. Without a common language or purpose, the country couldn't work properly toward a common goal. Of course, that's a historical fact, which is why no one pays any attention to it today. (Did you see how poorly all the talking heads did on Jeopardy in the history categories? It was plain scary.)

On the other hand, he shows how straitlaced the educational system became & how poorly it fit some of these extraordinary people, their rebellion actually fueling their education. Some had no benefit from it at all, either being born before it came into effect or being denied it because of their sex or race. Still others used what they could to springboard their own studies.

All told, it's a pretty awesome look at what a varied education these people had & how it brought them to prominence.

Ben Franklin is a great example to start with. Wolff shows just how far off the autobiography was in places, which made it even more interesting. The contrast was excellent.

Nabby or Abigail Adams, wife & mother of presidents was inspiring. Here we're introduced to the amount of work an woman of the 18th & 19th centuries had to do. It was an amazing amount. No wonder they had servants & kids working, if they could. Running a household was more than a full time job. This chapter would have made me believe, if I hadn't already, that behind every great man there's a greater woman. (I know I fudged it a bit, but you read this & if Nabby doesn't just knock your socks off, nothing will.)

Andy Jackson was one tough SOB & it's not hard to see why after reading this brief bio of his early years. As the child of immigrants caught up in the American Revolution & Indian issues, he had to be. He didn't seem very likable, but it did explain a lot of his later policies.

Belle is Sojourner Truth. Her life sucked & she didn't get much of an education as I'd think of one, save for the school of hard knocks. Wolff definitely dispels some of the myths surrounding her & shows us the real person. She wasn't perfect, but wasn't even recognized as truly human for much of her life because she was both black & a woman. That she managed to bring any kind of positive message to anyone is incredible.

Abe Lincoln is another one where a lot of myths are broken. His story only covers his early life before he is 20. That's plenty since so much has been written about him. His mother is another example of how important the wife/mother was to the family. How the woman, the absolute central star of the family was ever looked down upon is beyond me.

Thocmetony is Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, a Paiute raised in both the Indian & White worlds thanks to her grandfather, Truckee. Well, I suppose thanks are in order. Her road might not have been as physically hard as Belle's, but I think it was harder mentally & spiritually. She serves as a realistic view of what the westward expansion cost, but also how important education can be & how easily it is ignored & even rejected.

Henry Ford is an icon, of course. Again, some myths perpetrated by him get busted & we get to see the real young man. He is an example of someone with a native talent that worked hard to complement it by learning on his own with the benefit of a public & standardized education. He used to recite a line from a primer by memory & others could recite the next one, even though they went to a different school in different years. I was raised on Dick & Jane, so can perform the same trick. That's kind of scary in some ways, comforting in others. One sized didn't fit all, but it creates an instant bond with most others around my age.

Willie Du Bois, founder of the NAACP was a charity case for his entire early life. That he had to be & still wanted & managed to get ahead is a testament to his drive. There's definitely a different perspective of the black/white schism here, especially in the different conclusions he came to about education from Booker T. Washington.

Helen Keller is another icon for education, those with disabilities, but more than that, her story teaches us about how we learn & how important language is to our thought processes. This chapter actually spends as much or more time focusing on Annie, her teacher, though. I liked that as it shows more on the thought behind tailoring education to individual needs. The insights into Helen's family weren't unexpected, but certainly the contrast between the north & south after the Civil War was well shown. IOW, more good historical facts & attitudes.

Rachel Carson, is the author of *Silent Spring*, the book that kicked up the environmental movement in the 60's. (It had been going for a while.) While there have been a few examples in earlier chapters about how we used up the land, that's the whole point of 'Silent Spring' & what she learned as a child growing up in a pest hole of pollution caused by industry run riot. Again we see how poorly early schooling fit her & find out how she really learned to love learning.

Jack Kennedy was raised with a silver spoon in his mouth & says he never even realized he grew up in the Depression except for reading about it. A great contrast for so many of the other stories here. While he was raised in affluence, in many ways his childhood was the most rigid.

Elvis Presley's education was of the least interest to me. I'm not a fan of his music nor did Wolff get into that too much, although the historical facts of the time & place were of great interest. How the economy & people were manipulated & held back by those with money was horrendous.

Overall, it is a super read. I'm a bit disappointed by some of the people that weren't covered, but I'm sure it was from lack of space. I would have liked to learn more about John Dewey. Reading this author's account of Booker T. Washington & being able to contrast it directly to his account of Du Bois' would have been a real bonus. They both managed an education when it was practically impossible & came to different ideas about how equality for blacks needed to be achieved & their debate has echoed for over a century.

(If you're not up on that debate or their differences, Atlantic Monthly has some great info including essays & interviews by both here:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/...>)

Anyway, an educational & interesting read. I can't recommend it highly enough.

Kevin says

Very interesting book on an important topic. If you're looking for an answer to the question, "how do we learn what we need to know?" you'll leave this reading without a direct answer. What Woolf offers is a dozen

case studies in non-traditionally educated, extremely successful individuals spanning centuries, ethnicities, and professions--from Elvis to Jack Kennedy to Abraham Lincoln. A total page-turner and a great thought-provoker for anyone interested in education. Short on practical advice but long on reassurance for someone who continues to wander through life connecting experiences and trying to develop the "beginning" of his story.

Sarah Truckee: "I attribute the success of my school not to my being a scholar or a good teacher but because I am a good Interpreter, and my heart is in my work."

Henry Ford: "An educated man is not one whose memory is trained to carry a few dates in history. He is one who can accomplish things."

Henry Ford: "Almost anyone can think up an idea. The thing that counts is developing it into a practical product."

"Elvis was asked one lesson he'd pass on to his son. 'I think my biggest thing would be consideration... consideration for other people's feelings.' Why? ' To keep yourself from being hardened.'"
