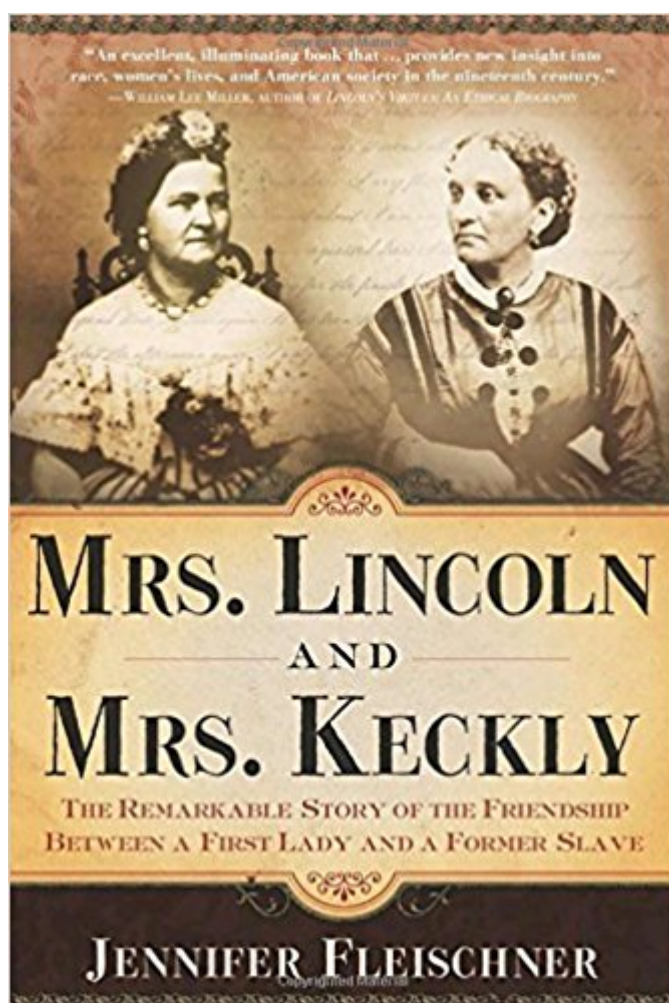


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Mrs. Lincoln And Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story Of The Friendship Between A First Lady And A Former Slave



Synopsis

A vibrant social history set against the backdrop of the Antebellum south and the Civil War that recreates the lives and friendship of two exceptional women: First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln and her mulatto dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckly. “I consider you my best living friend,” Mary Lincoln wrote to Elizabeth Keckly in 1867, and indeed theirs was a close, if tumultuous, relationship. Born into slavery, mulatto Elizabeth Keckly was Mary Lincoln’s dressmaker, confidante, and mainstay during the difficult years that the Lincolns occupied the White House and the early years of Mary’s widowhood. But she was a fascinating woman in her own right, independent and already well-established as the dressmaker to the Washington elite when she was first hired by Mary Lincoln upon her arrival in the nation’s capital. Lizzy had bought her freedom in 1855 and come to Washington determined to make a life for herself as a free black, and she soon had Washington correspondents reporting that “stately carriages stand before her door, whose haughty owners sit before Lizzy docile as lambs while she tells them what to wear.” Mary Lincoln had hired Lizzy in part because she was considered a “high society” seamstress and Mary, an outsider in Washington’s social circles, was desperate for social cachet. With her husband struggling to keep the nation together, Mary turned increasingly to her seamstress for companionship, support, and advice—and over the course of those trying years, Lizzy Keckly became her confidante and closest friend. With Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly, pioneering historian Jennifer Fleischner allows us to glimpse the intimate dynamics of this unusual friendship for the first time, and traces the pivotal events that enabled these two women—one born to be a mistress, the other to be a slave—to forge such an unlikely bond at a time when relations between blacks and whites were tearing the nation apart. Beginning with their respective childhoods in the slaveholding states of Virginia and Kentucky, their story takes us through the years of tragic Civil War, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the early Reconstruction period. An author in her own right, Keckly wrote one of the most detailed biographies of Mary Lincoln ever published, and though it led to a bitter feud between the friends, it is one of the many rich resources that have enhanced Fleischner’s trove of original findings. A remarkable, riveting work of scholarship that reveals the legacy of slavery and sheds new light on the Lincoln White House, Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly brings to life a mesmerizing, intimate aspect of Civil War history, and underscores the inseparability of black and white in our nation’s heritage. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

This double biography opens with an arresting image: two middle-aged women, one white, one black, are seated on a park bench in New York's Union Square in 1867. The white woman is Mary Todd Lincoln, widow of the president and desperately in need of money. The black woman is her dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckly, who is trying to help Mrs. Lincoln realize some profit out of the sale of the clothes that Mrs. Keckly made for her in happier times. Neither woman has been treated well by history. Mrs. Lincoln has gone down as a compulsive shopper whose own son tried to have her declared a lunatic; Mrs. Keckly was at one time thought to be a figment of the abolitionist imagination. Although Fleischner (Mastering Slavery), a former Mellon Faculty Fellow in Afro-American Studies at Harvard, is sympathetic to Mrs. Lincoln, the first lady's portrait here will not enhance her reputation significantly. But Fleischner's rehabilitation of Mrs. Keckly, portrayed as a strong-minded and talented woman who bought her freedom from slavery, lost her son on a Civil War battlefield and wrote a detailed biography of her former employer, is a revelation. Of particular interest is the glimpse provided into the vexed and ambiguous nature of the relations between the races both before and after abolition, a terrain the author negotiates with tact and sensitivity. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Adult/High School-A fascinating look at the lives and friendship of two women-one about whom historians have told us much, the other, a person who deserves far more recognition than she has

received. But before it is possible to understand how two seemingly unlikely people could become friends, it is important to know the circumstances that brought a president's wife and a former slave and dressmaker to the moment of their fateful meeting. To take readers to that point, the author uses alternating chapters to discuss the circumstances and people who molded each woman. Lincoln was used to others stepping in and taking care of her when life got too tough and Keckly took on that role. As their friendship progressed, they shared difficult and heart-wrenching situations. When the president was assassinated, Mary sent for Lizzy. The book gives an in-depth look at a time, a friendship, and two very different women. The author's almost conversational writing style will keep readers engrossed. Peggy Bercher, Fairfax County Public Library, VA
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Interesting & an added dimension to someone interested in the Lincolns. But I thought the book couldn't decide if it wanted to be a historical novel or a documentary. The authors covered the same ground over and over again with slightly different wording. And gave way too much by way of excuses for Mary's insanity.

My wife read these books. She really enjoyed them.

I was expecting a novel and what I got was more like a documentary. While parts of it were interesting, I had to 'fast forward' every so often just to get through it. It was, however, well documented and gave all the background you would ever need to 'know' Mary Todd Lincoln and Lizzie Keckly, as well as the tenor of the day.

I was very surprised by things I did not know about Mary Todd Lincoln. I was equally surprised and amazed about the lives of slaves. Mrs. Keckly was an amazing woman. I admire her so much. I always felt sorry for Mary Lincoln for the losses in her life. But after reading this I found out that she had personality issues before she suffered the losses. She was a piece of work! Abraham Lincoln would have been better off had he not felt duty bound to go through with the marriage. Pretty sad story all around but very insightful!

Fleischner did her homework for this study. Once I got through the inevitable tedium of too many details about their early lives (especially Mary Lincoln's) I found a thoroughly fascinating narrative of

both women's lives and how they came to know one another. Elizabeth Keckly was a remarkable woman, and so was Mary Lincoln for that matter. Their real lives defied stereotypes and, for Mary Lincoln, the many unflattering presentations that abound.

This was one of the most interesting books on Mary Lincoln and her life that I have read and I love the Lincoln's. Elizabeth Keckly was an amazing woman and should be more well known.

Ms. Fleischner does an excellent job of using historical facts to make an interesting book. She shows the parallel lives of the two women beginning from their childhood. She doesn't hold back on the negative effects of slavery. Who knew that Mary Todd Lincoln had an interest in fashion design and was a seamstress in her own right?

This work is based on solid scholarship yet accessible and compelling. Although Elizabeth Keckley is a courageous and talented individual in her own right, her association with Mary Lincoln as her modiste and confidante has brought her what fame she has. Many historians have found Keckley's autobiography, "Behind the Scenes," to be accurate in its depiction of the Lincolns at home.

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