



## Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Penguin Lives)

By Thomas Keneally

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

Keneally offers up a new volume in the popular Penguin Lives series of short biographies. Some writers appear to benefit from the forced brevity. Keneally, however, seems inhibited and constrained by the limitation in his life of Abraham Lincoln. Unlike his previous, lengthier nonfiction outings (notably *The Great Shame* and the recent *American Scoundrel*), his life of Lincoln reads not as a great illuminating narrative placing past events in a fresh perspective, but rather like a Cliffs Notes version of better books by such scholars as David Donald. The facts of Lincoln's life as related are both true and readable, but the author offers no new insights, no imaginative or interpretive leaps, no poetry. Keneally is at his best, perhaps, in presenting Lincoln in his final stage, a calculating and at times ruthless war leader. This is the Lincoln whom Keneally's "American scoundrel," Dan Sickles, knew best and with whom Keneally also seems to be pretty well acquainted. Still, all the other Lincolns here—the wilderness child, the prairie lawyer, the husband, the father, the fledgling politician—come across as little more than hollow robots walking doggedly from one well-known benchmark to the next, lacking that one element so essential to real life: a soul.

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#### From Library Journal

Abraham Lincoln was several times accused of "spirit-rapping," whereby he called on the dead to speak. Novelist and biographer Keneally has worked just such magic in his eloquent and insightful brief biography of America's most complicated subject. Like Lincoln, Keneally tells a good story, finding the right anecdote to make his case and never forgetting the moral of the tale. Keneally's Lincoln is a self-actuated farm boy made good by self-discipline, savvy instincts, wit, the wisdom acquired from courtrooms, friendships, and political huckstering—and luck. He is an individual of principle committed to promoting the self-made man through government support for economic improvements and opening a West free of slavery. Keneally recounts Lincoln's early missteps in romance, business, and politics and his self-doubts and depression as his star dimmed several times, and he concedes Lincoln's erratic course toward emancipation and a successful strategy for Union victory during the Civil War. But in the end, Keneally's Lincoln emerges almost as a "father Abraham" anointed for his great role in leading a chosen people toward redemption and their rendezvous with destiny. This is an epic compressed into a tightly written biography that all Americans might read with profit. Keneally's occasional tendency to let folklore stand as fact notwithstanding, there is no better brief introduction to Lincoln and his American dream. For all libraries.

*Randall M. Miller, Saint Joseph's Univ., Philadelphia*

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#### From Booklist

The ever-popular Keneally, who previously depicted bad-boy Union general Daniel Sickles in *American Scoundrel* [BKL F 1 02], lends his talented pen to the publisher's series of 180-page biographies. The subject of Lincoln has been thoroughly mined, yet this author's skill at characterization reveals a new angle: a sensitive discernment of Lincoln's anxieties. Although Lincoln's depression is an old chestnut with Lincoln writers, not many crystallize it like this: "No man ever entered Springfield, a town that would become his shrine, as tentative, odd-seeming, and daunted as Abraham Lincoln." The sentence expresses the hesitancy with which Lincoln entered the marriage he made in that town, and Keneally regularly touches on Mary Todd's caprices in passages about Lincoln's political career, which his wife keenly promoted. This emphasis on Lincoln's worries also marks the description of his youth, his casting about as boatman, storekeeper, and surveyor--seeking anything but the subsistence farming that he grew up in and loathed. Keneally succinctly

and insightfully presents a humanized Lincoln. *Gilbert Taylor*  
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