

Abraham Lincoln, Books, and Your Child

By Matthew Allen

There is no Frigate like a Book to take us Lands away. Emily Dickinson.

Mrs. Allen and I are reading out loud together Doris Kearns Goodwin's delightful biography of Abraham Lincoln, *A Team of Rivals*. The book provides a riveting account of how Lincoln brought his 1860 rivals for the presidency, William Seward, Salmon Chase, and Edward Bates, into his cabinet and won them over despite their initial skepticism and indeed, opposition, to his presidency.

Seward, Chase, and Bates – not Lincoln – were thought to be the great men of the day prior to Lincoln's ascendancy to the presidency. They each had significant childhood advantages that Lincoln did not. Seward attended a classical preparatory academy where he translated Caesar and deciphered Virgil before becoming valedictorian in his class at Union College and senator from New York. Chase learned Latin grammar from his sister, a school teacher, studied ancient history, memorized large portions of Scripture (including almost an entire gospel), and read Shakespeare's plays for entertainment. He entered Cincinnati College at age 13, transferred to Dartmouth, graduated with honors, and went on to become governor of Ohio. Bates composed poetry at age 8, studied mathematics, history, botany, and astronomy while a boy, and learned literature and the classics at a private academy in Maryland. He later became the first attorney general of the new state of Missouri and a U.S. Representative before joining Lincoln's cabinet.

Lincoln had none of the advantages of these men. He grew up in abject poverty. His mother died when he was nine. His formal education lasted less than a year. And yet he had one thing in common with Seward, Chase, and Bate: an abiding love of books. Lincoln did not have access to the same number of books as the others, but he made good use of what he had. One childhood friend later recalled that he "read & thoroughly read his books whilst we played."¹ As a boy, Lincoln read the King James Bible, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Aesop's Fables*, and William Scott's *Lessons in Elocution* (a book on rhetoric, or public speaking). When he first obtained a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, "his eyes sparkled, and that day he could not eat, and that night he could not sleep."² He read and reread the Bible and *Aesop* so many times that he could, as an adult, recite large passages from memory. These are the same books (or types of books) that your children read at Paideia. These are the treasures of Western Civilization that formed Lincoln and that are forming your children.

Literature allowed Lincoln, who as a child never left the frontier, to transcend his surroundings and explore foreign countries, history, and poetry. Your children too have the same possibility. Through good books and great ideas, your children too can be transported to imaginative worlds (the world of *Aesop*), important epochs in history (*The Story of the Pilgrims*, the frontier of *Little House in the Big Woods*, and yes, the time of *Meet Abraham Lincoln*). And this is just in second grade. Third graders branch out to Narnia, the world of the ancient warrior (*Hittite Warrior*), and talking spiders and pigs (*Charlotte's Web*). I could go on but the curriculum is on the website.

¹ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *A Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 49.

² *Ibid*, p. 51.

Lincoln simply loved to read. Everywhere he went, he carried a book with him. At times, his father had to rebuke him for reading at the end of a row while plowing. While Lincoln left the farm behind, he never left behind his love of literature and poetry. They became a part of him so much that he is regarded as our only poet president.

Do your children love to read? Are you intentionally cultivating in them a love of good books? One way to do this is to read out loud to your children on a regular basis before bedtime. We did this with our girls when they were young, and those times were magical. They remain some of our best memories. What should you read? The sky is the limit. Start with the *Little House* books, the *Chronicles of Narnia*, *the Hobbit* (at age appropriate intervals). Spend time at the bookstore with your children. Take the Paideia recommended reading list with you. And don't worry, your child's teacher can give you recommendations if you run out of ideas.

It was through voracious reading that Lincoln became the man who overcame his disadvantages and defeated his better educated rivals for the presidency. It was reading poetry that gave Lincoln the cadence and rhythm that resulted in the Gettysburg Address. It was a love of reading that made him one of our greatest presidents at one of the worst times in American history. What your child will be remains to be seen. But why not start with reading and see where it leads?