

ing a period when racism would have affected the care of people who would be his patients or research subjects.

The book is not without limitations. The manner in which substantial sidebars are incorporated with the text, for example, is distracting. The sidebars are interesting tables and lists demonstrating how the topic being discussed relates to the history of medicine or to ethical issues. However, there is usually no indication in the narrative about the best time for the reader to direct attention to the sidebar. It is common to find oneself ready to turn the page, only to remember that the insert has not been reviewed. This not only interrupts the train of thought to which the narrative has led, but also diminishes the impact of the sidebar, since it is often out of phase with the text that has just been read.

Occasionally, too, the author gets too detailed or technical for most readers. The extensive description of HLA-typing, for example, makes one impatient to get to the more interesting aspects of the story, a trip to study specific HLA-type Inuit families in the Arctic, and the ethical dilemma posed by getting communal consent from the community elders to do so rather than individual consent from the research subjects.

These limitations are minor deviations, however. Mostly, the writing progresses interestingly, weaving the book's themes in a way that carries the narrative along, and allows us to get to know the author somewhat as a person as well. In fact, getting to know the author even partially is one of the inspiring elements of the book — not only because of who it reveals Dossetor to be, but as an example of something bigger — an example of what an inquisitive individual with broad interests, sensitivity and drive can accomplish.

#### Lawrence J. Hergott

Associate professor of medicine  
University of Colorado Health  
Sciences Centre  
Denver, Colo.



## Room for a view

### It's not all about the brain

Some time ago I read “Lowell’s Command,” an essay on Robert Lowell by Seamus Heaney.<sup>1</sup> In it, Heaney wrote: “In spite of the cruel cycles of mania, maybe even because of them, Lowell wrote extraordinarily and achieved eminence.” This seemed to me to be the final word on the subject of mental illness and creativity — essentially, who can know which is which, if the mental illness stole, or if it bequeathed? After reading this I imagined any biography that wished to split that hair could always be plausibly assaulted from either side of the argument; perhaps it was best, resignedly, to recognize accomplishment both as “in spite of” and “because of” and leave it at that.

The recently published book *Lincoln’s Melancholy*,<sup>2</sup> by Joshua Wolf Shenk, takes up this challenge. The book is very much an examination of the range and toll that depression manifested in the American president’s life. *Qua* Heaney, Shenk is mostly — but not always — a cheerleader, a member with reservations in the “because of” camp. Along these lines Shenk writes, “A person with a melancholy temperament had been fated with both an awful burden and what Byron called a ‘fearful gift.’ The burden was a sadness and despair that could tip into a state of disease. But the gift was a capacity of depth, wisdom — even genius.” But, *but ...* it’s that very big but that this book attempts to make the case for. Shenk puts it thus: “Lincoln didn’t do great work because he solved the problem of his melancholy. The problem of his melancholy was all the more fuel for the fire of his great work.” So in Lincoln’s melancholy we are given, to a small degree, a mental hagiography.

Well, on to my objections to this book. Stated outright on the dust jacket, Shenk has a personal investment in the topic, a potential bias: “With empathy and authority gained from his own experience with depression, Shenk crafts a nuanced, revelatory account of Lincoln and his legacy.”

Wait a minute. Alarm bells begin to sound. Would it be fair, then, to interpret this book through the empathy and authority I’ve gained through my own mental illness, if I had one? That would be an unfair injection of my own experience into the review; so is *Lincoln’s Melancholy* a potentially unfair personalization of a text that should, as much as possible, struggle for objectivity. I say potentially because Shenk is far too scrupulous a historian and writer to let his own life become a sideshow; his life does not intrude on the *life* of his subject. It is the dust jacket writers who should be censured.

Another immediate concern loomed for me as I read this book, a philosophical one: looking through the prism of mental illness, Shenk with the best of possible intentions reduces a great man to a case study. To my mind, somehow, in the final analysis, this is a reductive process. Surely Lincoln the man is more than just Lincoln the melancholic? Perhaps I am being too critical, wanting the book to be something it isn’t, for its stated aim is “... to see what we can learn about Lincoln by looking at him through the lens of his melancholy, and to see what we can learn about melancholy by looking at it in light of Lincoln’s experience.” To this end one whole section of the book attempts to determine if Lincoln suffered “clinical depression” of “the diagnostic categories of modern psychiatry.” I fear here that, with the best of intentions, the — historically speaking — rather modern DSM-IV as well as current psychological concepts have been thrown at Lincoln’s life, contemporaneously reinterpreting him as a depressive. This sort of thing is done all the time, and it seems to be a phenomenon that ultimately ends up diminishing its subjects; something is lost in the intense magnification upon one aspect of a personality. All the world is not a hospital! Though Shenk takes pains to mention that Lincoln is more than a diagnosis, more than a list of symptoms, ultimately the book’s real quarry *is* the diagnosis and the boon it proved to his life.

DOI:10.1593/cmaj.060698

But this is not to say that Shenk is blinkered in his approach. Somewhat disarmingly, he writes of others' works on Lincoln, "...historians must choose interpretive frameworks. And in this they are inexorably subject to the fancies and suppositions of the times they live in. As times change, so do popular dogmas and curiosities." An important point, but merely acknowledging this does not necessarily obviate culpability. There is also an opportunistic straining in the biography, definitely an eye to the present: "This is a story for our time. Affecting more than 100 million people a year, depression is the world's leading cause of disability. In 2000, about a million people worldwide killed themselves — about equal to the number of deaths from war and homicide that year put together." Yes, we are meant to be roped in, to show that this book has relevance, that Lincoln's struggle can speak to our own. Except that, to belabour an earlier point, it's our contemporary struggle and the author that's in turn reinterpreting Lincoln — and skewing him? — for our time.

And yet, despite these objections, the case made is nigh impregnable. It would be very hard after reading this book to argue, *contra* Shenk, that Lincoln was not a depressive. First of all, the matter of how the case is made. This is not a book overburdened with psychobabble. It is clear and lucid and the psychiatry it

Second of all, there is the nature of the case: Shenk has cobbled together an amazing factual basis for his thesis that depression moulded Lincoln. We consider the evidence of depression in the family tree, the harsh life conditions of the young Lincoln, his multiple bereavements, his suicidality (an ominous and recurring theme throughout the book), weather as one of his triggers, his relationships (salacious and no), his professional successes and disappointments, his eventual spirituality, etc. In other words, it's not all about the brain. It really is impeccably researched; every notable statement is corroborated by a reference, and I think this speaks to the omnivorous quality of the scholarship on evidence. (The book has over 20 small-type pages of references for the reader who wishes further study.) It's even eclectic; who would have thought Shenk would have quoted the modern poet Charles Bukowski?

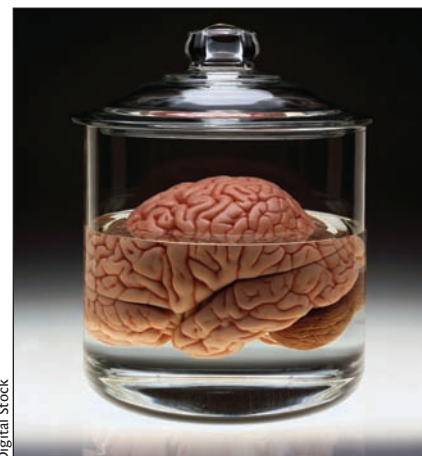
Third, perhaps the best comment that could be made about this psychobiography is that in attempting to get a grip on Lincoln's psychopathology it actually ends up celebrating him, his cast of mind, his intellectual heft. Lincoln's world is not all illness, Lincoln in a sense transcends illness. And the book celebrates its hero for the right reasons: that Lincoln was afflicted, and made the most of it, at times with superhuman

## Surely Lincoln the man is more than just Lincoln the melancholic?

contains is made immediately accessible. A layperson could read this book and comprehend Shenk's definitions. The style must also be commended: it's propulsive, mainly a steady propensity of declarative sentences, a clear clean flow. There isn't a wasted word; Shenk has been very careful in crafting this book. It is as if Shenk in terms of style wishes to mirror the object of his book: a cogent explanation of one man's mental processes. (What's more, the book is impressively literate: obligatory stump speeches are quoted in the same breath as Shakespeare and Aeschylus.)

resolve. Shenk really does prove that Lincoln "...felt deeper and thought harder than others[.]"

The real star here is Lincoln, his mind and his accomplishments, all portrayed in an admirable book that, to my mind, is only a little too enamoured of the romance of mental illness — namely, it is the impetus of creation, it builds character, and so on — and not enough to the detriments. Sometimes illness is a robber; Shenk should say, in a balanced way, as much. This aside, the book is fascinating in what it does do, which is: Lincoln comes alive.



Digital Stock

And, as a final comment, without really aspiring to, in explicating how mental illness toughened and enhanced Lincoln's character and experience, this book makes a case for a more forgiving politics in this day and age. Would a man or woman with *very public* mental illness — and as per Shenk's argument, a possible well of experience — ever be nominated for president of the United States or Prime Minister of Canada? As Shenk puts it, "...it may be that Lincoln began to express his melancholy at a time when he had especially wide cultural latitude to do so." Or perhaps this quote puts it better: "The young men of Illinois now chattered about Lincoln, and those who had seen him would always remember the moment. Hardly any of them who left a reminiscence failed to mention his melancholy, and hardly any thought it strange..." Which brings me to a final point, as much as the book is a biography of Lincoln, it is also an explication of his times: Lincoln is put in context, and that is the real job of biography, a biography helped along in terms of interest by its truly fascinating subject, an able biography of complication and, indeed, as the dust jacket prophesies, nuance.

**Shane Neilson**  
Family physician  
Guelph, Ont.

### REFERENCES

1. Heaney S. *Finders keepers: selected prose 1971–2001*. London, UK: Faber and Faber; 2002.
2. Shenk JW. *Lincoln's melancholy: how depression challenged a president and fuelled his greatness*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; 2005.