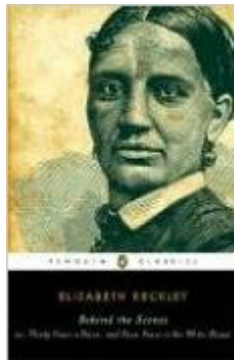


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Behind The Scenes: Or, Thirty Years A Slave, And Four Years In The White House (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Originally published in 1868 when it was attacked as an indecent book • authored by a traitorous eavesdropper • Behind the Scenes is the story of Elizabeth Keckley, who began her life as a slave and became a privileged witness to the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Keckley bought her freedom at the age of thirty-seven and set up a successful dressmaking business in Washington, D.C. She became modiste to Mary Todd Lincoln and in time her friend and confidante, a relationship that continued after Lincoln's assassination. In documenting that friendship often using the First Lady's own letters Behind the Scenes fuses the slave narrative with the political memoir. It remains extraordinary for its poignancy, candor, and historical perspective. First time in Penguin Classics

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was enthralled by every page of this book. I couldn't put it down and was disappointed when it ended. As I was reading the book, I felt like I was stepping back in time witnessing the ordinary, human, day-to-day life behind the historical events we studied in school. The story was simple and yet it presented a very intimate glimpse into the genuine personalities of Abraham and Mary and the life the author shared with them. Elizabeth Keckley was not writing to impress anyone with her "insider" position in the White House, she was just sharing her story. The stories about her life as a slave also offered the reader an opportunity to experience slavery through the eyes and heart of a

slave. How lucky we are that she wrote this book.

Well, you can't get closer to being in the Lincoln White House than this. The story of Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker is written by the seamstress herself, Mrs. Keckley. She gives a fine, but brief, narrative of herself - starting out as a slave, a brief marriage and eventually buying her own freedom from the talent of her needle. Selling dresses to the wealthiest women around, she eventually catches the interest of Mrs. Lincoln and becomes her dressmaker. Her interactions with the President up to his assassination, though few, are remarkable and give us another eye witness glimpse of the Personal Lincoln. Most interesting is her account of Mary Lincoln after leaving the White House. Detailed are Mary Todd's efforts to sell her dresses for income, with the assistance of Mrs. Keckley. She tells about Mrs. Lincoln traveling incognito, which is extremely interesting. Mrs. Keckley writes in a very educated manner and shows her caring self through her words. A short book, and nominally priced, it is good for pleasure reading or as a source book for researchers, containing information that may not be found elsewhere.

Elizabeth Keckley's memoirs caused shock waves when they appeared in 1868. The press lambasted Keckley for daring to unveil the secrets of her betters. Mrs. Lincoln, who always called Elizabeth "my best and kindest friend," abruptly dropped her. And Lincoln's eldest son had the book suppressed. Why Elizabeth Keckley wrote this intimate chronicle at the height of her involvement with Mary Lincoln is a puzzle. She thought she was justifying Mrs. Lincoln, whose erratic behavior was always under fire by observers and the press. We must read between the lines for insights into Keckley's motivation, and that's precisely what makes the book so fascinating. Keckley revered President Lincoln as the liberator of her people. But she portrays Mary Lincoln as paranoid, jealous, capricious, extravagant and prone to hysterics. At the same time, Keckley shows great sympathy for Mrs. Lincoln's sufferings. The memoirs begin with an account of Keckley's life as a slave and how she rose to become a fashionable dressmaker, able to buy freedom for herself and her son. As a free black in Washington, her talents and entrepreneurial spirit won her the patronage of the elite. Eventually she became Mrs. Lincoln's dress designer, personal maid and confidant, heavily relied upon in every crisis. She also became an activist, organizing relief for penniless newly freed slaves. What followed the memoirs? Troubles of every sort. Mrs. Lincoln was at one point committed to an insane asylum by her son. Keckley never benefited from her memoirs. She spent her last years in a home she herself had founded for destitute women, a picture of Mrs. Lincoln hanging in her room. Elizabeth Keckley's autobiography is a remarkable document, and I heartily recommend it

to anyone interested in Black history, the Civil War - or the complex psychology of human relationships.

I got a copy of this book from a book fair not on purpose. As a non-native English learner, what strikes me is the ability of Keckley to express rich emotions in very simple words and sentences. I always like reading first person narratives, fictions or true stories, but seldom find one as captivating as this. A five-star from me and it's a pity she didn't seem to have written other books.

"Behind the Scenes" is a historical account of the Lincoln's White House. Elizabeth Keckley was part of this history. I am reading this as a follow up to "Mrs Lincoln's Dressmaker" which follows the main events of "Behind the Scenes" to the tee. Now that I know that and had to choose one book I would read "Mrs Lincoln's Dress maker" would be my choice. I think Elizabeth Keckley's book is good but it tends to jump around. Both books give you an understanding of the relationship between the president and Mrs Lincoln as well as a look into the history of the time.

I found this book fascinating. I could not put it down. She tells about her time as a slave-the abuse and well treatment alike. How she bought her freedom and how her seamstress business led her to the white house and much more. Her time with the Mary Todd Lincoln and how she loved her. She understood Mrs.Lincoln like no one else could.

It is the quintessential reading if you have followed the Lincoln's, especially Mary Todd Lincoln. It fills in the gaps left by supposition regarding Mary Todd Lincoln and the real story as known and witnessed first hand. One may choose to believe it or not.....it is a very good read!

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