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Log by Log: Building Abraham Lincoln in American Youth Consciousness

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Oral Presentation 1.2

LOG BY LOG: BUILDING ABRAHAM LINCOLN IN AMERICAN
YOUTH CONSCIOUSNESS

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"What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors."
- James Baldwin

More books have been written about Abraham Lincoln than about any other American, and the books keep coming. Lincoln has become our country's Charlemagne, our King Arthur. Biographers attempt to give their readers an overview of Lincoln's character and accomplishments, but if we compress fifty-six years into a manageable volume, nuances of his character and details of his life are necessarily lost. How accurately, then, can a historical figure be portrayed in biography? Books, plays, toys, poems, and reenactments remind each generation that we have not yet fully unraveled the complex nature of Lincoln and his life. And yet, even in his complexity, we allow Lincoln to speak for us.

The issue of historical correctness sharpens into focus when we discuss biographies written for young readers. If an author paints a portrait of a venerated historical figure with a brush that glosses over or omits events from the subject's life, can the work truly be representative of that life? In an era when free speech and "the people's right to know" are often wielded for political ends, how much good is done when children see their role models as less-than-legendary?

I contend that Lincoln is best remembered in his complexity: as a fallible, but great, human being. Lincoln's image plays such a vital role in our national folklore that to alter his saintly character at all, especially in the venue of juvenile biography, would be to significantly change the way Americans think about their heroes and themselves. Biography is often intended to be "inspirational literature," and this is especially true in books written for children. If we warmly embrace our imperfect leaders in the venue of historical biography, then we will be able to teach children that imperfection is not only a part of life, it is a part of history and a part of the writing of history.