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Lincoln Scholar Eager for Spielberg's Movie

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – In the midst of the buzz surrounding Steven Spielberg's biopic *Lincoln*, noted Lincoln author Robert C. Bray is quietly waiting to determine which Lincoln will show up in the film.

The author of an acclaimed book and two plays on Lincoln, Bray wonders if the film will show: Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president, forever deified in marble contemplation in the Lincoln Memorial? Or will the film center on Lincoln the grieving father, the shrewd politician, or even the racist? The R. Forrest Colwell Professor of American Literature at Illinois Wesleyan University, Bray is not sure which of the Lincolns – the myth or the man – will show up in the movie, opening in limited release Nov. 9 and nationwide on Nov. 16.

Bray's scholarly works add to the body of knowledge of an icon written about second only to Jesus Christ and Shakespeare. Yet Lincoln the man was truly known to only a few intimates. "Any good biography or movie ought to balance the inscrutabilities of Lincoln the man with the public acts," said Bray. "There is always going to be tension between the public and the private Lincolns, but I think this film will be a serious attempt to put Lincoln the man in the context of Lincoln the president."

Bray said the film's historical accuracy will hinge on the treatment of what he calls the big questions: the president's attitudes toward slavery, Lincoln's thoughts on religion, his racial attitudes and how Lincoln's marriage to Mary Todd Lincoln is treated in the film.

The movie's framing device is Lincoln's push for passage of the 13th Amendment which outlawed slavery permanently and nationwide. Bray cautions, however, that Lincoln's hatred of slavery did not mean he had notions of racial equality.

"I don't know that he ever got over his feeling that African-Americans were inferior, which doesn't mean he would have denied them much of anything by way of civil rights," said Bray. "He had trouble envisioning an America where blacks and whites lived together in harmony."

Bray further contends that had Lincoln not been assassinated, he would have argued for a reunited Union with no further punishment for the rebel states. "But, he died, that battle was lost, and Reconstruction pretty much killed racial relations in the United States for a long time," Bray said.

In interviews Spielberg said he has spent more than 10 years in bringing *Lincoln* to the screen. Bray has been studying Lincoln for more than 20 years. Even though he is a professor of literature and not a historian, Bray's work has been widely praised by Lincoln scholars. For *Reading with Lincoln* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), Bray examined the books Lincoln read and how they reflected his thoughts and influences. The book was the winner of the 2010-11 Illinois State Historical Society's Russell P. Strange Memorial Book Award, as well as the runner-up for the Lincoln Prize in 2011. Another Bray book, *Peter Cartwright: Legendary Frontier Preacher* (University of Illinois Press, 2005), examines the dynamic relationship between the 19th-century preacher and Lincoln who were political rivals for the House of Representatives in 1846. *Cartwright* is the first full-length biography of its subject and was the winner of the inaugural Saddlebag Selection of the Historical Society of the United Methodist Church for the best book on American Methodism.

With thousands of tomes devoted to Lincoln, why do Americans continue to be fascinated by him nearly 150 years after his death? Bray believes there are many – from Lincoln's untimely death to the continued interest in the Civil War – but ultimately he hopes *Lincoln* will do justice to Lincoln.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYjNFULhMGw&feature=player_embedded

*Above, Robert C. Bray talks about lessons that can be learned from Lincoln's character. Below, a **CNN segment** described Bray's take on what the 44th president can learn from the 16th.*

<http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2012/11/09/exp-erin-lincoln-obama.cnn?iref=videosearch>

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