

### The Emancipator's Wife:A Novel of Mary Todd Lincoln

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## Review

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**Hambly, Barbara** *The Emancipator's Wife: A Novel of Mary Todd Lincoln*.  
Bantam Books, \$25.00 hardcover ISBN 553803018

Sympathetic and exasperating

The many woes of Lincoln's lady

Throughout **The Emancipator's Wife**, Barbara Hambly, author of several books and a series featuring an amateur detective in 19th century Louisiana, keeps us off balance by transitioning from present to past, sometimes more than once in a chapter. The technique works well to break the narrative, but mainly it enhances the unsettling emotions that Mary Lincoln experienced during much of her life.

In addition to irrational angry outbreaks that she didn't understand and usually regretted, Mary Lincoln endured migraine headaches, female problems resulting from childbirth, and constant back pain from a carriage accident. Like many women of her day, she self-medicated with over-the-counter potions containing alcohol or opium that could be purchased in any pharmacy without prescription, and she often mixed them. From the stupor of these drugs come several of the story's transitions to Mary's childhood and earlier life.

By mixing truth and fiction in just the right proportions, Hambly constructs a credible picture of Mary's youth in gracious Lexington as it might have been, raised in a politically active, slave-holding household where she was well schooled and socially elite. Lincoln entered the picture when Mary arrived in backwater Springfield to stay with her married sister.

Hambly plays with the details of Mary and Lincoln's broken engagement and their sudden marriage many months later in a questionable manner. The calendar event that she uses is weak and could only be proposed in a work of fiction. Lincoln's supposed love affair with Ann Rutledge never appears in this

novel so perhaps Hambly sides with those who discount the evidence promoted by Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon.

As a bright, charming, independent-thinking woman, Mary Lincoln's political astuteness is often sited as responsible for Lincoln's political success, and several biographers claim he would never have aspired to the presidency without her. However, because she was also a difficult woman, her relationship with Lincoln must have been strained at best, especially after he gained national prominence. But he appears here as a patient husband, tolerant and understanding of her tantrums.

Her eldest and only remaining son, Robert Todd Lincoln, does not come off so well. The first chapter opens on May 19, 1875, the day Robert betrayed her with an unexpected, and from Mary's perspective, rigged trial to declare her insane and gain control of her money. As a result, she spent almost a year in Bellevue, a private asylum, before a second trial overturned the verdict.

John Wilamet, a major fictional character, becomes important to Mary at Bellevue. He and his family, runaway slaves introduced in the prologue, provide a connective thread from Mary's Washington days to her incarceration in the asylum where John works as an attendant. John understands Mary's outbursts as his mother, Phoebe, suffers similar emotional problems. The author uses Wilamet's struggles to comment on the economic and cultural difficulties of former slaves living in the North post-Reconstruction.

Areas of the book repeat Mary's physical and emotional sufferings without adding much new important material. Even though these events actually occurred, this is fiction and not everything needs to be included. The book would have benefited from tighter editing particularly in some of the travels she takes away from Washington.

Hambly writes a balanced look at Mary Lincoln (Mary never used Todd as part of her name). Considering the issues that she dealt with: misunderstood mental problems, untreated physical ailments, her beloved husband shot at her side, the loss of three children, and constant public criticism--some of it deserved, but much of it similar to criticism still leveled at high-profile women today--one can feel both sympathetic toward her and exasperated with her.

First of all, good historical fiction must be a good read, but besides introducing a subject entertainingly it should entice the reader to investigate non-fiction accounts that document characters, events, or contrasting views of both. **The Emancipator's Wife** achieves both these goals. Readers familiar with biographies of Mary Lincoln may be interested in how Hambly combines fiction with fact, especially to detail Mary's early years. For readers new to Mary Lincoln who wish to investigate further, the following books are a good place to begin:

*Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage* (Little, Brown & Co., 1953), by Ruth Painter Randall, paints a sympathetic portrait of Mary Lincoln. *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (W.W. Norton, 1987), by Jean Harvey Baker, presents a more balanced view. *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (University of Illinois Press, 1994), by Michl Burlingame, is more hostile toward Mary.

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