

Plagiarize This



Did you miss it? Maybe you've been too busy, what with endlessly emailing Amazon.com, begging for a refund of your copy of Stephen Ambrose's *Wild Blue*, and spending your evenings squinting at nine-point type, double-checking Doris Kearns Goodwin's footnotes. But while you were off pursuing putative plagiarists, the *Weekly World News* broke the American history story of the century: Abraham Lincoln Was a Woman!



Fig. 1. The Weekly World News, January 22, 2002

Thanks to "maverick historian Jessica Durbeen," we now know that Honest Abe was born Abigail Lincoln, a victim of Marfan's syndrome, a genetic disorder that can cause disproportionate growth. As a young girl, she decided to dress as a man to work as a rail splitter and, thanks to some Log Cabin luck, found a male transvestite to marry ("Take a look at a photo of Mary Todd Lincoln and you'll be convinced"), by whom she gave birth to six children while, possibly—and here Durbeen can go no further than the evidence allows—carrying on a torrid affair with John Wilkes Booth.

In a year when one front-page revelation after another has led Americans to question historians' credibility, perhaps you're right to be skeptical. How does Durbeen *know* all this? And why haven't we heard about "Babe-raham Lincoln" before? All is answered in the January 22, 2002 issue of the *WWN*: like any sex scandal worth its cigar, it begins with Bill and Hillary.

After the Clintons and their staff left Washington in January 2001, a secret cache of Mathew Brady photographs was discovered in the White House basement (under the sealed box containing all the missing *W*'s from the West Wing's computer keyboards?). In four Brady photographs, "reproduced" in a quite lovely

spread in the *WWN* article by Mike Foster, Lincoln sports everything from a housedress to a hoop skirt. (Note to Scarlett: Back off.) Faked photographs, you say. Photoshop is easy, you say. But there's more "striking evidence": "A jar of glue, used by actors to apply fake beards, found among Lincoln's personal effects at the Smithsonian Museum—along with a dozen sanitary napkins."

Don't get me started on the Maxi pads. What I want to know is, while the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* are gleefully covering Historygate, is anyone, besides the *Weekly World News*, talking about *history*?

It's easy to think that the *WWN* works just like the *Onion* (whose historical essays include, "[Newly Unearthed Time Capsule Just Full of Useless Old Crap](#)"), but it doesn't. *The Weekly World News* is not, or at least not entirely, spoof. The *Onion* sells ads for cell phones; the *WWN* advertises psychics. Rest assured that there are people who now believe that Lincoln was a woman. Not too many, but, to paraphrase Mark Twain, in such cases, one is aplenty.

Lincoln is, perhaps, a better candidate for tabloidization than those other famous Americans who populate our coins and bills. As cultural historian Tony Rotundo observes, "In the American pantheon, Lincoln plays Christ to Washington's God." Washington is austere, remote, and untouchable. Lincoln, because he suffered (from depression, a bad marriage, a rotten death) is vulnerable, and more recognizably human. Is that any reason to dress him as a woman? Of course not, but it does help explain Lincoln's mutability.

When two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner David Herbert Donald toured the country promoting his 1995 biography of Lincoln, the first question audiences asked was, invariably, "Was Lincoln gay?" One elderly radio listener phoned a call-in program to assert that she had read, somewhere, that Lincoln was black. "She thought she knew this," Donald recalls, sadly.

Americans are miserably ignorant of their nation's history and, truth be told, they're pretty darn gullible. Maybe "Americans are Gullible" isn't as good a headline as the *New York Times'* *Onion*-ish "Writers Beware: History Is an Art, Not a Toaster" (February 28, 2002), but it's surely at least as true. That Jessica Durbeen is nowhere to be found in the American Historical Association's 2001-02 *Directory of History Departments, Historical Organizations, and Historians* isn't likely to trouble the sleep of many readers of the *Weekly World News*, but it sure keeps me up at night. If journalists are going to lecture historians about accountability, maybe we could all take the time to think a bit harder about the past we're trying to protect from would-be plagiarists.

Meanwhile, take comfort that Jessica Durbeen was herself once a doubter: when she initially came across the claim that Lincoln was a woman in "a tattered old Confederate pamphlet," she found it preposterous: "At first, I thought it was just wartime propaganda, but then I took a closer look at a photo of Lincoln

and realized the beard does look bogus.”

This article originally appeared in issue 2.3 (April, 2002).
