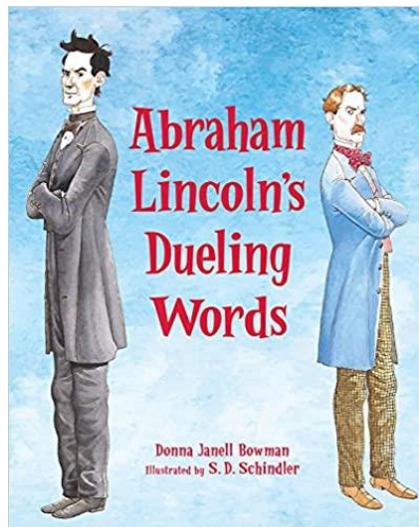


First Opinion: Evidence of Democratic Principles in *Abraham Lincoln's Dueling Words*

Bowman, Donna Janell. *Abraham Lincoln's Dueling Words*. Illustrated by S. D. Schindler. Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 2018. Print.

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Reading the book *Abraham Lincoln's Dueling Words* by Donna Janell Bowman was timely considering the current political landscape in the United States. Communication between politicians and the people they serve has changed dramatically, partly due to the advent of social media. If a democracy includes people exercising their rights through their elected officials, the communication between the people and the elected is critical to make sure all voices are heard. Recognizing how the politician communicates (e.g., through a debate) is a crucial cog in the democracy machine. For readers in grade 4 and above, it is important to understand what a democracy is and how communication improves or hinders it. As I began to read this book, I looked forward to finding out how Lincoln and Shields' dueling words would be revealed.

The book begins with an engaging piece of foreshadowing, the suggestion that Abraham Lincoln and James Shields would duel. After reading this, I first considered what I knew about Abraham Lincoln, which included him to be the "Great Emancipator" and debater. Because of

Bowman's use of foreshadowing, I was inspired to find out more about Abraham Lincoln. I'll reveal what I uncovered later in this response.

Next, the author gives a little background on both Shields and Lincoln, and the events that led up to the duel, including Lincoln name-calling Shields in letters to the editor signed by the fictional "Aunt Rebecca." Shields discovered who authored the letters and challenged Lincoln to a duel. Bowman goes on to describe how Lincoln decided that the weapons he and Shields would use would give Lincoln an advantage due to his long arms. Shields appeared to be unfazed and the duel looked like it would continue, until Lincoln apologized for writing the Aunt Rebecca letters.

Abraham Lincoln's Dueling Words provides two strong possibilities for readers to dive into a study of democracy. First, even a future president makes mistakes and owns up to them. Recognizing that our elected leaders can exhibit humanness may provide more opportunities for open communication between them and the people they serve. Young readers could reflect on their own mistakes and practice a sense of open and respectful communication. At the end of the book, Bowman alludes that Lincoln and Shields will work together during the Civil War, a potentially positive outcome of Lincoln owning his mistakes. This would be a great spot for the reader to do further research about the Civil War and what role each man took in this battle. The reader could also explore other moments in history where owning mistakes created civil discourse (or could have created it) and advanced the course of democracy.

A second pathway to a study of democracy through this book is that people can solve issues peacefully, and name-calling and disparaging others is damaging and can affect the progress of democracy. Certainly, this issue couldn't be timelier in an election year for president where the printed and spoken word (included in social media and other formats) has been a powerful mode of disparaging one person/group/race/political affiliation. This book could help to create a conversation on how a critical but respectful discourse can occur even if people have differing views.

I appreciated reading about Lincoln's transgressions, which showed that people make mistakes. However, I wanted to see a stronger connection to what Lincoln did to advance a critical yet respectful dialogue. I stated earlier in this response that I researched more about Abraham Lincoln. An event that occurred before the Civil War were the Lincoln/Douglas debates. The seven debates between Lincoln and Stephen Douglas during the Illinois state

election campaign brought the issues to the people of Illinois; particularly about how Lincoln viewed slaves as entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (Hölzer 185-233).

Additionally, while Bowman was able to highlight the transgressions of a future revered president, I wished I learned more about James Shields. Bowman describes Shields as a “hot tempered, well-educated Irishman with a knack for arguing” (unpaged). This statement plays into stereotypes of the Irish (hot-tempered and argumentative). Additionally, I wanted to know about Shields’ accomplishments within the text of the book. There was mention of some of his accomplishments in the Sangamo Journal entry on the last two pages. However, I didn’t understand Shields as a person as much as I did Lincoln.

It is to the advantage of young readers to explore many facets of a historical figure. I love it when a book makes me want to find out more information, particularly if it is non-fiction book. I appreciated the pathways from *Abraham Lincoln’s Dueling Words* to learn more about how democracy was shaped and continues to be in the United States.

Works Cited

Hölzer, Harold. *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004. Print.

About the Author

Jenny Brownson is an instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in the Elementary Education Department. Her research interests include culturally relevant pedagogy and pre-service teacher identity, particularly how pre-service teachers use social justice principles in their field placements. Prior to teaching at the university, Jenny taught grades 4 and 5, and was a drama specialist with grades K5-5th in Milwaukee Public Schools.