



Lincoln's Bodyguard

T. J. Turner

Oceanview Publishing (Apr 7, 2015)

Hardcover \$26.95 (221pp)

978-1-60809-143-0

An alternate history works as a period detective story and an adventure yarn about heroes on the run.

In *Lincoln's Bodyguard* by T. J. Turner, a half-Native American bodyguard takes on a special mission from Abraham Lincoln, traveling to the South to rescue the president's secret mistress and arrest the rebel leader who could end the war. It's a setup for a pulpy adventure story, and the book delivers. Though the alternate take on history sometimes proves more hindrance than asset, the main character is distinctive, and constant action keeps the story moving.

The tale takes place in an alternative history in which the protagonist, Joseph, saved Lincoln from assassination by killing John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theatre. The result is a nation still divided, with the war over only in name, rebel forces still carrying out attacks, and a "draft" that sends Southern children to work in Northern factories. The violence made Lincoln serve additional terms, and the widowed president has an African American mistress whom Joseph must bring north.

Much of the period detail is handled well—particularly the dialogue, which avoids modernity without feeling like it's a conscious effort to do so. While the high-level history works, sometimes the specifics feel unnecessary. Lincoln's character isn't defined differently enough for the far-fetched scandal or the child draft to feel real. And while some of the alternate-history ideas are intriguing—the West possibly seceding, the guerrilla war continuing into the novel's 1872 setting, Lincoln's extended term—they raise more questions than they answer.

Most of the alternate history is explained in an author's note after the narrative rather than in the story, and parts of it aren't fleshed out enough to be more than a backdrop for the main plot. It's never quite clear why Lincoln's survival kept the war going in a way his death did not, or why Andrew Johnson is still a player, or how the North enforces the draft in areas it struggles to control.

Luckily, the core of the story—Joseph's mission—works just fine on its own terms as a period detective story and an adventure yarn about heroes on the run from deadly pursuit. Joseph's mission includes characters who would feel at home in a 1930s noir, from a prostitute with a heart of gold to a mysterious assassin who leaves origami calling cards to a series of strangers who help or betray Joseph along the journey. The character's backstory includes a daughter taken hostage by the Confederate leader who also murdered Joseph's wife, as well as a knowledge of Underground Railroad stops thanks to his conductor mother.

Turner builds the stakes nicely and changes them along the way, making the smaller story work.

JEFF FLEISCHER (April 30, 2015)

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