

Thomas Jefferson's America: Stories of the Founding Fathers

Jim Weiss

Greathall Productions (November 2005)

Unknown \$14.95 (pp)

978-1-882513-86-4

History buffs would be hard pressed to find a more complicated personality than Thomas Jefferson's. Although he was a lifelong believer that "slavery destroys morals," his family kept slaves, and he did not make arrangements to release them upon his death. His interests were varied and expensive, driving him (and subsequently, his family) to near financial ruin. A brilliant conversationalist, Jefferson could also be prickly with people who did not share his education, beliefs, and background.

The author, a professional storyteller, retells Jefferson's story using a framework narrative on this audio CD. Acting the part of Jefferson talking with his grandchildren toward the end of his life, Weiss is able to convey the urgency, emotion, and importance of the times. Instead of resorting to musical interludes, he changes the pitch and quality of his own voice to recreate the way he imagines the speeches of Patrick Henry, John Adams, and George Washington. Arranged chronologically, the recording portrays Jefferson's life within the context of the history of America, most particularly, the problems that led the Colonies toward independence from England.

The CD is divided into eleven sections, such as "The Governor of Virginia," which features James Madison and the Marquis de Lafayette; "Jefferson versus Hamilton" which introduces Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, John Adams, and George Washington; "The Presidency and the Louisiana Purchase," with James Monroe, James Madison, and Lewis and Clark; and "Coming Home: Monticello / University of Virginia," featuring the Jefferson family and John Adams.

There are also small morality tales embedded in the story. Weiss uses the relationship between John Adams and Jefferson as a metaphor for the ways in which close friends don't always agree. By pondering Jefferson's feelings about the various deaths in his family, Weiss explains how work can be therapeutic. Also, the author's discussions of Jefferson's inventions are used to explain and explore creativity.

Weiss has created more than three dozen CDs of stories for children and young adults, including tales that he wrote as well as recordings of books by other authors. He has worked with historical figures, literary classics, and folklore. His style is authentic and charming, never condescending. This CD is intended for listeners age seven and up, but the story is told with such integrity and richness of language, that adults will also find it enjoyable. Weiss, who has won awards from the Parent's Choice Foundation, the Oppenheim Toy Portfolio, The Film Advisory Board, and The American Library Association, manages to include an immense amount of information in a brief format. His tales, designed to encourage children to seek out and read books, also encourage imagination.

PAM KINGSBURY (August 18, 2009)

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