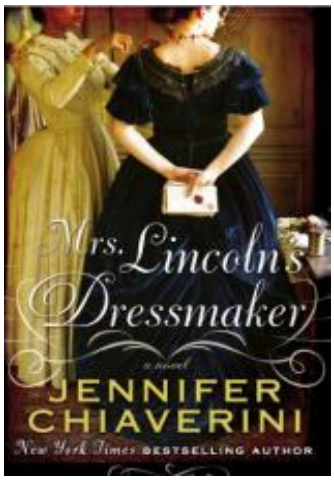
Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker

by Jennifer Chiaverini



About the Book

New York Times bestselling author Jennifer Chiaverini illuminates the extraordinary friendship between Mary Todd Lincoln and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, a former slave who won her freedom by the skill of her needle, and the friendship of the First Lady by her devotion.

In MRS. LINCOLN'S DRESSMAKER, novelist Jennifer Chiaverini presents a stunning account of the friendship that blossomed between Mary Todd Lincoln and her seamstress, Elizabeth ?Lizzie? Keckley, a former slave who gained her professional reputation in Washington, D.C. by outfitting the city?s elite. Keckley made history by sewing for First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln within the White House, a trusted witness to many private moments between the President and his wife, two of the most compelling figures in American history.

In March 1861, Mrs. Lincoln chose Keckley from among a number of applicants to be her personal ?modiste,? responsible not only for creating the First Lady?s gowns, but also for dressing Mrs. Lincoln in the beautiful attire Keckley had fashioned. The relationship between the two women quickly evolved, as Keckley was drawn into the intimate life of the Lincoln family, supporting Mary Todd Lincoln in the loss of first her son, and then her husband to the assassination that stunned the nation and the world.

Keckley saved scraps from the dozens of gowns she made for Mrs. Lincoln, eventually piecing together a tribute known as the Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt. She also saved memories, which she fashioned into a book, BEHIND THE SCENES: THIRTY YEARS A SLAVE AND FOUR YEARS IN THE WHITE HOUSE. Upon its publication, Keckley?s memoir created a scandal that compelled Mary Todd Lincoln to sever all ties with her, but in the decades since, Keckley?s story has languished in the archives. In this impeccably researched, engrossing novel, Chiaverini brings history to life in rich, moving style.

Discussion Guide

1. What are Elizabeth Keckley?s most admirable qualities? What makes her such an appealing figure?

2. Mrs. Lincoln and Elizabeth both suffer terrible tragedies. Elizabeth was born into slavery, raped by her white master, and betrayed by her husband. She lost her only son in the war and was the victim of a scandal that damaged her reputation and left her in poverty. Mrs. Lincoln lost three of her four sons, as well as her husband, and was also the victim of devastating scandals and financial distress. How do they respond differently to the trials that life throws at them?

3. What picture of President Lincoln emerges in the novel? In what ways does the novel deepen our understanding of Lincoln, both as a political leader and as a husband, father and friend?

4. Elizabeth likes to think ?that she too had played some small part in helping President Lincoln know the desires and worries of colored people better. She hoped she had used, and would always use, her acquaintance with the president and her time in the White House for the good of her race? [p. 192]. In what ways --- direct and indirect --- did Elizabeth helped the cause of people of color during her time in the White House? How might her personal example of dignity, compassion, and integrity have helped her cause? What actions does she undertake on behalf of her race?

5. Why is the press so eager to vilify Mrs. Lincoln? Are any of their criticisms deserved?

6. After her husband?s death, Mrs. Lincoln tells Elizabeth, ?You are the only good, kind friend I have anymore, and I don?t know how I shall get along without you? [p. 259]. Why does Mrs. Lincoln come to rely so heavily on Elizabeth? In what ways is Elizabeth a loyal and generous friend to Mrs. Lincoln? What does she offer Mrs. Lincoln beyond dressmaking?

7. Late in her life, Elizabeth tells the reporter, Mr. Fry, ?When I am most in distress, I think of what I often heard Mr. Lincoln say to his wife: ?Don?t worry, Mother, because all things will come out right. God rules our destinies? [p. 349]. Does the novel itself seem to confirm Mr. Lincoln?s belief in divine providence? Does Lincoln?s death seem fated?

8. What are some of the novel?s most moving scenes? How is Chiaverini able to bring the era, as well as the Lincoln family, so vividly to life?

9. What are Elizabeth?s intentions in writing her memoir? In what ways does the editor of Carleton & Co., Mr. Redpath, take advantage of her?

10. One reviewer of Elizabeth?s memoir, Behind the Scenes, writes that ?The Line must be drawn somewhere, and we protest that it had better be traced before all the servant girls are educated up to the point of writing up the private history of the families in which they may be engaged? [p. 321]. Why do the critics respond with such hostility --- and inaccuracy --- to her book? Why would they feel threatened by it?

11. How does MRS. LINCOLN?S DRESSMAKER complement and add to the portrait of President Lincoln in the recent, Oscar?winning film Lincoln?

12. Elizabeth learns from Mrs. Lincoln?s negative example that ?the only way to redeem oneself from scandal was to live an exemplary life every day thereafter? [p. 325]. In what ways is her life, not just after the scandal but her entire life, exemplary?

13. Reflecting on her teaching at Wilberforce University, Elizabeth feels that ?Her greatest legacy could not be measured in garments or in words but in the wisdom she had imparted, in the lives made better because she had touched them? [p. 339]. In what ways does MRS. LINCOLN?S DRESSMAKER also strengthen Elizabeth?s legacy? How much did you know about her before reading the novel?

Author Bio

Jennifer Chiaverini is the *New York Times* bestselling author of 36 novels, including critically acclaimed historical fiction and the beloved *Elm Creek Quilts* series. She, her husband and their two sons call Madison, Wisconsin, home.

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Publication Date: January 15, 2013
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Hardcover: 352 pages
Publisher: Dutton Adult
ISBN-10: 0525953612
ISBN-13: 9780525953616