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# How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the Educations That Made Them

*By Daniel Wolff*



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**How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the Educations That Made Them** By Daniel Wolff

**An engaging, provocative history of American ideas, told through the educations (both in and out of school) of twelve great figures, from Benjamin Franklin to Elvis Presley.**

How Lincoln Learned to Read tells the American story from a fresh and unique perspective: how do we learn what we need to know? Beginning with Benjamin Franklin and ending with Elvis Presley, author Daniel Wolff creates a series of intimate, interlocking profiles of notable Americans that track the nation's developing notion of what it means to get a "good education." From the stubborn early feminism of Abigail Adams to the miracle of Helen Keller, from the savage childhood of Andrew Jackson to the academic ambitions of W.E.B. Du Bois, a single, fascinating narrative emerges. It connects the illiterate Sojourner Truth to the privileged Jack Kennedy, takes us from Paiute Indians scavenging on western deserts to the birth of Henry Ford's assembly line. And as the book traces the education we value – both in and outside the classroom – it becomes a history of key American ideas.

In the end, How Lincoln Learned to Read delivers us to today's headlines. Standardized testing, achievement gaps, the very purpose of public education – all have their roots in this narrative. Whether you're a parent trying to make sure your child is prepared, a teacher trying to do the best possible job, or a student navigating the educational system, How Lincoln Learned to Read offers a challenge to consider what we need to know and how we learn it. Wide-ranging and meticulously researched, built mostly on primary sources, this is an American story that begins and ends with hope.



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### Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—Wolff allows that several factors are involved in achieving greatness, but his focus here is on the role of childhood education (roughly toddler to teen) in the success of 12 notable Americans, discussed chronologically from Benjamin Franklin to Elvis Presley. He examines the education, both in school and out, of Abigail Adams, Andrew Jackson, Sojourner Truth, Sarah Winnemucca, Henry Ford, W. E. B. Du Bois, Helen Keller, Rachel Carson, and John F. Kennedy. Employing a lively narrative style and impressive research, Wolff presents the interlocking stories that together form a brief history of what it means to be successful in this country. These individuals range from having no formal education to attending the best schools in the land, from having a reverence for book learning to having a reverence for tinkering, from facing enormous challenges to having specialized interests. But what they all hold in common is that they managed to learn what they needed to know, often against tremendous odds. All were consistently true to themselves and to their deepest interests. And from that starting point they pursued the particular education that best suited their needs. This provocative book is not only an important addition to the history of education in America, but also a valuable contribution to the history and understanding of the country's ideas and culture. It should appeal especially to those teens who wonder where their particular education might lead.—*Robert Saunderson, formerly at Berkeley Public Library, CA*

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From [Booklist](#)

Eclectic author and journalist Wolff looks at the training, formal or otherwise, of 12 unique Americans in an effort to identify aspects of a “good education.” From Abe Lincoln’s obsession with books and newspapers to Elvis’ fascination with movies and their soundtracks, Wolff ties these varied biographies together with common historical threads, discerning how each was able to surmount difficulties and make his or her mark. We learn that Ben Franklin “finds his refuge in books” as a child and that Abigail Adams “entered the adult world through the library.” W. E. B. DuBois was fortunate to be born in Massachusetts, where education was mandatory for 6- to 12-year-olds, black or white. Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, a Paiute Indian, opened her own Indian school, striving to keep the traditional ways alive in the face of white-run schools trying to exterminate Indian traditions. Enriched by historical details of the Civil War and world wars, the Great Depression, and the rise of unions, and backed by extensive primary sources, Wolff’s essays provide enlightening glimpses into the often-serendipitous process of education. --Deborah Donovan

Review

“Wolff excavates the origins of his subjects deftly...His essays remind us that greatness in America can bubble up just about anywhere, and that even the great have trouble understanding the ingredients of their own success.” ?*Wilson Quarterly*

“This is a terrific book. It's compact (25 pages or so per individual) but rich and thought-provoking. It gave me new insights into great Americans I thought I knew pretty well, and it taught me much about those I'd barely heard of before. Broad in scope, peppered with detail, insightful, it could be the basis for a classroom or book club review of American history from our founding as a nation through the 20th century.” ?*Christian Science Monitor*

“Daniel Wolff's fascinating tome, *How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the*

Educations That Made Them examines the training, formal or otherwise, of Lincoln and 11 other unique Americans in an effort to identify what makes for a "good education." From Lincoln's obsession with books and newspapers to Elvis Presley's fascination with movies and soundtracks, Wolff ties these and other personalities (W.E.B. DuBois, George Washington, Abigail Adams, Helen Keller, JFK, and more) together with common historical threads, discerning how each was able to surmount difficulties and make his or her mark. Enriched by historical details of the Civil War and world wars, the Great Depression, and the rise of unions, and backed by extensive primary sources, Wolff's essays provide enlightening glimpses into the often-serendipitous process of education. This makes for a fascinating read.” ?*Huffington Post*

“A quirky collection of tales of the formative years of a dozen famous Americans... *How Lincoln Learned to Read* reinforces the notion that the nation's inherent rebellious streak has served it well. 'To believe your own thought,' as Emerson wrote in his famous essay 'Self-Reliance,' 'that is genius.' Poor, unconnected people such as Elvis, he writes, 'were supposed to harden into a category, to disappear.' That they sometimes don't - that they sometimes find hope - well, that's a story worth retelling.” ?*Boston Globe*

“A riveting, original examination of education inside and outside the classroom.... [These] stories attest that learning doesn't just happen in a schoolhouse, and life itself may well be the most effective teacher of the most important lessons. Well thought-out, well-argued and thoroughly engaging.” ?*Kirkus, starred review*

“This extended essay, in the form of a dozen entertaining profiles of great Americans--an unexpected cross-section, from Ben Franklin to Elvis Presley--provides an unusual look at the varieties of educational experience that shaped these groundbreakers.” ?*Publishers Weekly, starred review*

“Employing a lively narrative style and impressive research, Wolff presents... interlocking stories that together form a brief history of what it means to be successful in this country. These individuals range from having no formal education to attending the best schools in the land, from having a reverence for book learning to having a reverence for tinkering, from facing enormous challenges to having specialized interests. But what they all hold in common is that they managed to learn what they needed to know, often against tremendous odds. All were consistently true to themselves and to their deepest interests. And from that starting point they pursued the particular education that best suited their needs. This provocative book is not only an important addition to the history of education in America, but also a valuable contribution to the history and understanding of the country's ideas and culture.” ?*School Library Journal*

“Eclectic author and journalist Wolff looks at the training, formal or otherwise, of 12 unique Americans in an effort to identify aspects of a 'good education.' From Abe Lincoln's obsession with books and newspapers to Elvis' fascination with movies and their soundtracks, Wolff ties these varied biographies together with common historical threads, discerning how each was able to surmount difficulties and make his or her mark... Enriched by historical details of the Civil War and world wars, the Great Depression, and the rise of unions, and backed by extensive primary sources, Wolff's essays provide enlightening glimpses into the often-serendipitous process of education.” ?*Booklist*

“Though his formal education was scanty, the young George Washington was described by an admiring neighbor as a boy who would go to school all his life. In this remarkably original group portrait of similar strivers, Daniel Wolff redefines the phrase "education for life." His classrooms range from a printer's shop in colonial Boston to the Pentecostal church attended by Gladys Presley's boy Elvis. Looming above them all is the unschooled Lincoln, whose capacity for self-education will both shape and justify a brutal war for human possibility. *How Lincoln Learned to Read* might just as well be titled *How Lincoln Learned to Lead*.” ?*Richard Norton Smith, author of Patriarch*

“What a readable, powerful account of what education, as well as schooling, has meant to some of life's most

interesting people. Start anywhere; each of the dozen accounts captures the individual, his or her time and place, and the most critical thoughts about learning that apply to our current debates. This is a collection that everyone ought to read--including our school kids, and also every member of Congress--for the sake of trying to answer the same tough question for America's future: 'How do we learn what we need to know?'"

*?Deborah Meier, author of In Schools We Trust*

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Delores Nault:**

Information is provisions for anyone to get better life, information these days can get by anyone in everywhere. The information can be a know-how or any news even a huge concern. What people must be consider any time those information which is in the former life are challenging be find than now is taking seriously which one is suitable to believe or which one the resource are convinced. If you find the unstable resource then you understand it as your main information it will have huge disadvantage for you. All those possibilities will not happen inside you if you take How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the Educations That Made Them as the daily resource information.

#### **Delores Moretti:**

Reading can called head hangout, why? Because while you are reading a book particularly book entitled How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the Educations That Made Them your brain will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in every aspect that maybe mysterious for but surely might be your mind friends. Imaging just about every word written in a guide then become one type conclusion and explanation in which maybe you never get ahead of. The How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the Educations That Made Them giving you a different experience more than blown away your thoughts but also giving you useful information for your better life within this era. So now let us show you the relaxing pattern the following is your body and mind is going to be pleased when you are finished studying it, like winning a. Do you want to try this extraordinary wasting spare time activity?

#### **Reta Zimmer:**

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