

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

>> This is Cheryl Kennedy at the Library of Congress. Late September will mark the 12th year that booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, DC, to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will be two days this year, Saturday, September 22, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and Sunday, September 23, from noon to 5:30 p.m. The festival will take place between 9th and 14th Streets, on the National Mall, rain or shine. For more details, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now it is my pleasure to introduce Stephen L. Carter, who is a professor of law at Yale University, where he has taught for more than 30 years, and the author of five novels and seven acclaimed works of nonfiction. His latest novel is "The Impeachment of Abraham Lincoln." Thank you so much for joining us.

>> It's my pleasure. I appreciate it.

>> Now in your latest novel, you tackle the world of alternate or revisionist history. Your premise is certainly fascinating. President Lincoln survives the assassination attempt but is facing impeachment for overstepping his constitutional authority during the Civil War. Now I understand you're a Lincoln buff and I gather you've read nearly everything that's been written about the 16th president of the United States. As an author of fiction and nonfiction, why did you take this approach?

>> I should start by saying I'm an amateur Lincoln buff and I don't think I've read everything written about Lincoln. In fact, I saw recently there are about 15,000 books about Lincoln. I've probably only read 100 or so, so I'm a little bit behind but I'm a great Lincoln fan and I have wondered about what would've happened if Lincoln had survived, the way a lot of people have for a long time. I think the idea first came to me when I was in college. And once I became a novelist, probably from the time I wrote my first novel, there's been an itch in the back of my mind, what if I treated that in fiction. Wouldn't that be a great premise for what amounts to, I suppose, a courtroom thriller. And that's really how I came up with the idea.

>> Now your story is populated with real-life figures but your central character is a fictional young black woman who finds herself immersed in intrigue and conspiracy on a national stage. Considering the racial climate of that time period, how did you make your character and the actions believable? How did you stay true to the times?

>> Because the title of my book is "The Impeachment of Abraham Lincoln," I suppose most readers expect Lincoln to be the main character, he actually only shows up in about six or seven scenes in the whole novel. There's a lot of Lincoln fiction over the years and most fiction about Lincoln is told from the point of view of people very close to the seat of power. I wanted to tell the story from the point of view of an outsider and I chose Abigail, who's a young black woman from the middle class, because she's about as far outside as you could get in Washington of the 1860s. She's black, as you say. She is a woman. She's a college

graduate, which was very unusual for both a woman or a black woman in those days but was possible, and she has ambitions to be a lawyer that at a time when there were no female lawyers in America and probably half a dozen or so black lawyers in America. But she's ambitious. She's upwardly mobile. She wants to make something of herself and she faces a lot of obstacles, as might be predictable, but in solving a mystery and helping the president, whom she so admires, she has to find ways to overcome the obstacles, obstacles posed by her race, as you say, by her gender, and other sorts of problems as well.

>> Now you write about an influential and affluent black community. Why is that such a central theme in your books?

>> I've always thought that one of the problems with both popular literature in America and popular culture generally is we tend to present a very one-dimensional view of the experience of African-Americans in America. When I wrote some of my earlier novels about well-to-do black families of today and in recent history, already I had readers who simply thought that had to be fiction; it couldn't possibly be true. Now I'm inviting readers into the world of 1867, where I'm setting a thriller to be sure in the world of presidential politics but also largely in a [inaudible] populated by black families who are middle class. Middle class in those days probably didn't mean what it means now. It basically meant you owned your own business or something like that. Of course, there were literally hundreds of thousands of free black people at the time of the Civil War. In fact, it's easily forgotten and Abigail was simply from one of those families. Illustrating the lives of those families, trying to capture them, trying to honor them for their achievements in that era was part of what I was trying to do, although I have to say the book is mainly there to be fun to read.

>> What are the writing challenges of merging fact with fiction, real-life figures with imaginary characters?

>> In all of my novels, I tend to do an awful lot of research. I think that because I'm trained mainly as a scholar, I want to get as many facts right as possible. That's always challenging but in this novel, it was a much greater challenge. I had to bring to life real historical figures. I had to put words in their mouths that were plausible words they could've said or they found themselves in those situations, and in addition to that, I had to bring to life Washington, DC, of that time, which was the hardest challenge. I wanted to paint the City of Washington of 1867 the way the city really would've looked. Abigail in the story lives on 10th Street in a section of Washington in those days known as the island, now Southwest Washington and I wanted the view from her porch to be the view someone who lived on 10th Street would really have. I wanted the sounds of the city to be right. I wanted the smells of the city to be right by working enormously hard on the research for the background of the story. In fact, that's probably why it took me four or five years to write the novel because of the amount, not because of constructing the story so much as because of doing the research, the amount of background that went into it, trying to capture what 1867 was like in Washington.

>> What were your historical sources? The Library of Congress has Lincoln's papers. How much research did you do and what were your sources?

>> I can't possibly list all the sources that I used. I did use heavily the Library of Congress' resources on Lincoln, not only his papers but also photographs and various other things and various remembrances of other people as well. I used a lot of biographies. I used a lot of histories. In fact, the source that I found that was most fascinating is that I found a report from the Provost Marshal General of the Union Army issued during the Civil War on the quality of different brothels in Washington, DC. And since I needed a scene in a brothel, or really outside a brothel in Washington, I used that source to get it as accurate as possible. The thing is that there are more Lincoln sources and more Civil War sources than probably sources for any era in our history. It's not hard to find the sources. It's important when writing historical fiction to have the patience to listen to what the sources are teaching; that's the key.

>> Now as I mentioned, the Library of Congress has Lincoln's papers, his life mass and the actual items that were in his pocket at the time of his assassination. Did you know that Lincoln had a \$5 Confederate note in his pocket at the time of his death?

>> I've read something about that. I didn't worry too much about the contents of his pocket at the time. There are wonderful little details about Lincoln's assassination and about the times around them, wonderful little bits and pieces of things, not only in the Library of Congress, in the Museum of American History, and also in the Lincoln Museum out in Springfield, which I've also visited. And the marvelous thing about Lincoln is how excited we are to be able touch and feel those little pieces of his life in a way that we don't seem to feel about any other president. His iconic presence in our history is probably the reason there are 15,000 books about Lincoln.

>> Now you noted an upsurge of interest in Lincoln over the last few years and with the marking of the 150th anniversary, obviously that will increase interest in his presidency as well as the Civil War. What is it about Lincoln's legacy and the nation's greatest military and political upheaval that so intrigues filmmakers, writers, and readers?

>> I think one of the things that happens is people look around the nation today and they see a nation that's divided, that's constantly yelling and screaming across the aisles. No one seems to be able to calm things down or bring people together, so they look back in history to a time when we were more divided and naturally by comparison, the people of that era look like giants. They look almost God like, I think, in our imagination. Nations tend to look back when they're fractured, when they're under stress. That's a very common historical phenomenon and we're no different from anyone else in that way, but the truth is, Lincoln is a fascinating individual and he certainly deserves our admiration and I'm happy to have written a novel about him, at the same time the solution to our problems lies in the present and not in the past.

>> As a sort of student of history, what observations have you made about the nation's contemporary politics?

>> It's too early to tell. That's what I'm always telling people that it's very difficult to judge historical significance of events when you're going through them. You have to have the advantage of looking back many, many years later. I often tease my students because of today's emphasis on quick answers to problems. The Pearl Harbor attack took place in 1941. The definitive report of what went wrong was published 20 years later. It didn't take 20 years because anyone was dawdling. I didn't take 20 years because there was no investigation. It didn't take 20 years because there was a cover-up. It took 20 years because events that go wrong on that scale are so enormously complex that tracking down exactly who should've and could've done what takes lots and lots of time. We live in an era today when people want instant answers. When there's a financial collapse, they want to know the next day who's to blame. This is silly. It's bad for politics. The media has done us a great deal of damage by encouraging us to look for quick and easy answers when the real answers to these problems are going to be enormously complex.

>> You teach courses on law and religion, the ethics of war, professional responsibility, et cetera, which obviously has influenced your nonfiction works, but how has your career prepared you for writing fiction?

>> I'm often asked, not so much why I write fiction because I don't know the answer to that, but so many lawyers do. A lot of lawyers and law professors end up writing fiction, especially end up writing thrillers, like I do, and I think there's a reason for that, that if you think about it, the things that really bothers people about lawyers when you go to a lawyer for advice, you want do something simple like write a will, and the lawyer immediately starts asking have you thought about this, have you thought about that, have you thought about this, have you thought about that. It's annoying. Lawyers are constantly thinking about, asking about, planning for contingencies that to everyone else seem horribly unlikely ever to take place. That's what lawyers do. That's what lawyers are trained from the first day of law school to do. Well, isn't that what a novel is and especially isn't that what a thriller is? You get to the end of one chapter and the next chapter is what if this happened, something highly unlikely that the reader couldn't necessarily have guessed. That's what keeps people turning the pages, so I think that's why so many lawyers and law professors end up writing fiction. I think it's natural to us because of the focus on what if this happened, what if this happened, what if this happened.

>> Very interesting. Now in developing your characters and plots, do you use real people in situations? Can we find Stephen L. Carter somewhere in your storylines?

>> I certainly believe that every author's views and experiences influence the story, but I really try hard not to model my characters closely on people I really know. Whenever my friends read my novels, they're always pointing out themselves. They're always saying oh there I am, oh I see which character you modeled on me and so on, but it's really

not what I try to do. What I try to do is simply come up with characters who are interesting. In fact, when I write fiction, in almost every case, I have the characters before I have the story. You asked a few minutes about how I got the idea for the Lincoln novel, I should explain that the character became Abigail Canner. This women of the 1860s who wanted to be a lawyer had been drifting around in my mind for a long time [inaudible] when I write a novel about before I hit on the idea of combining her with my interest in Lincoln. I get very involved in the lives of my characters in a sense. I worry about them. When they're hurt, I feel the pain. My wife could tell you that, although I write both fiction and nonfiction and I write much more nonfiction than fiction, nevertheless, when I write fiction, the experience is emotionally draining for me in a way that other sorts of writing are not.

>> Well I think your readers feel that, which is why they love your works.

>> Well that's very kind of you to say. I have to tell you that I think I had more fun writing the Lincoln novel than any of my other novels. I should explain that I often have fun when I'm writing fiction. I really enjoy it a lot. It's a break and a change from what I spent most of my working time doing, but this one, although it was a lot of work, was really fun. Every page was a joy to write and I think that's largely because of the work I had done to re-create the era in which the story is set.

>> Now the Library's multiyear celebration of the book includes an exhibition examining books that shaped America. What book do you think most shaped the country?

>> Most shaped America? Clearly the Bible is the book that most shaped the country. It's a book that often used, often abused, but certainly in terms of the influence it's had on America's history, there's really nothing else that's even close, but there are other books that have been enormously influential. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" comes to mind, for example, "Huckleberry Finn" certainly. I'm here speaking of fiction. There's certainly nonfiction as well but there are a lot of books that have really worked revolutions in people's thinking but I think it's fair to say none of them have been as influential as the Bible has been in American history and culture.

>> Is there a book that most influenced you as a child or as an adult?

>> I can't tell you what influenced me most as a child. I can tell you that my interest in Lincoln began because my father had Lincoln books on his bookshelf at home, and when I was a little boy, I used to take them down and it would be false to say I read them. I was a kid. But I read at them, as my father said. I used to pick pages and just look at them in fascination and my interest in Lincoln, I remember very clearly beginning then. The truth is that I was influenced heavily by the entire shelf. Well one wall of their home in Washington was books and just the experience of living with that wall everyday probably did more than anything else to create my love, my enormous love of books themselves, the physical actual books.

>> We've been hearing from law professor and author, Stephen L. Carter, who will appear on Saturday, September 22nd, in the Fiction and Mystery Pavilion at the 2012 National Book Festival on the National Mall. Mr. Carter, thank you for an enlightening conversation.

>> The pleasure is really mine. Thank you so much. I look forward to seeing you.

>> Same here. Thank you.

>> Okay. Bye, bye.

>> Good bye.

>> This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.