



Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave

By Jennifer Fleischner



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A vibrant social history set against the backdrop of the Antebellum south and the Civil War that recreates the lives and friendship of two exceptional women: First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln and her mulatto dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckly.

“I consider you my best living friend,” Mary Lincoln wrote to Elizabeth Keckly in 1867, and indeed theirs was a close, if tumultuous, relationship. Born into slavery, mulatto Elizabeth Keckly was Mary Lincoln’s dressmaker, confidante, and mainstay during the difficult years that the Lincolns occupied the White House and the early years of Mary’s widowhood. But she was a fascinating woman in her own right, independent and already well-established as the dressmaker to the Washington elite when she was first hired by Mary Lincoln upon her arrival in the nation’s capital. Lizzy had bought her freedom in 1855 and come to Washington determined to make a life for herself as a free black, and she soon had Washington correspondents reporting that “stately carriages stand before her door, whose haughty owners sit before Lizzy docile as lambs while she tells them what to wear.” Mary Lincoln had hired Lizzy in part because she was considered a “high society” seamstress and Mary, an outsider in Washington’s social circles, was desperate for social cachet. With her husband struggling to keep the nation together, Mary turned increasingly to her seamstress for companionship, support, and advice—and over the course of those trying years, Lizzy Keckly became her confidante and closest friend.

With *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, pioneering historian Jennifer Fleischner allows us to glimpse the intimate dynamics of this unusual friendship for the first time, and traces the pivotal events that enabled these two women—one born to be a mistress, the other to be a slave—to forge such an unlikely bond at a time when relations between blacks and whites were tearing the nation apart. Beginning with their respective childhoods in the slaveholding states of Virginia and Kentucky, their story takes us through the years of tragic Civil War, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the early Reconstruction period. An author in her own right, Keckly wrote one of the most detailed biographies of Mary Lincoln ever published, and though it led to a bitter feud between the friends, it is one of the many rich resources that have enhanced Fleischner’s trove

of original findings.

A remarkable, riveting work of scholarship that reveals the legacy of slavery and sheds new light on the Lincoln White House, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly* brings to life a mesmerizing, intimate aspect of Civil War history, and underscores the inseparability of black and white in our nation's heritage.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This double biography opens with an arresting image: two middle-aged women, one white, one black, are seated on a park bench in New York's Union Square in 1867. The white woman is Mary Todd Lincoln, widow of the president and desperately in need of money. The black woman is her dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckly, who is trying to help Mrs. Lincoln realize some profit out of the sale of the clothes that Mrs. Keckly made for her in happier times. Neither woman has been treated well by history. Mrs. Lincoln has gone down as a compulsive shopper whose own son tried to have her declared a lunatic; Mrs. Keckly was at one time thought to be a figment of the abolitionist imagination. Although Fleischner (*Mastering Slavery*), a former Mellon Faculty Fellow in Afro-American Studies at Harvard, is sympathetic to Mrs. Lincoln, the first lady's portrait here will not enhance her reputation significantly. But Fleischner's rehabilitation of Mrs. Keckly, portrayed as a strong-minded and talented woman who bought her freedom from slavery, lost her son on a Civil War battlefield and wrote a detailed biography of her former employer, is a revelation. Of particular interest is the glimpse provided into the vexed and ambiguous nature of the relations between the races both before and after abolition, a terrain the author negotiates with tact and sensitivity.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-A fascinating look at the lives and friendship of two women-one about whom historians have told us much, the other, a person who deserves far more recognition than she has received. But before it is possible to understand how two seemingly unlikely people could become friends, it is important to know the circumstances that brought a president's wife and a former slave and dressmaker to the moment of their fateful meeting. To take readers to that point, the author uses alternating chapters to discuss the circumstances and people who molded each woman. Lincoln was used to others stepping in and taking care of her when life got too tough and Keckly took on that role. As their friendship progressed, they shared difficult and heart-wrenching situations. When the president was assassinated, Mary sent for Lizzy. The book gives an in-depth look at a time, a friendship, and two very different women. The author's almost conversational writing style will keep readers engrossed.

Peggy Bercher, Fairfax County Public Library, VA

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From Library Journal

Mrs. Lincoln was the wife of a President. Mrs. Keckly, a slave who bought her freedom, became a celebrated dressmaker in Washington, DC, and eventually the confidante of the First Lady.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Samara Reed:

Your reading 6th sense will not betray you actually, why because this Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave publication written by well-known writer who really knows well how to make book which can be understand by anyone who have read

the book. Written inside good manner for you, still dripping wet every ideas and producing skill only for eliminate your personal hunger then you still uncertainty Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave as good book not just by the cover but also by content. This is one book that can break don't determine book by its deal with, so do you still needing an additional sixth sense to pick this kind of!/? Oh come on your reading through sixth sense already told you so why you have to listening to an additional sixth sense.

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