

The Lincoln Letter An Interview with William Martin

JANET MENDELSON **writer**

ever wonder how accurate historical novels and movies like *Lincoln* really are? Weston resident and *New York Times* bestselling author William Martin has written ten novels set in America's past. He has spent years in pursuit of historical details that enable readers to see through the eyes of our forefathers as events unfold. Research has taken him to Civil War battlefields and the Massachusetts Historical Society archives; to Washington, DC; Ireland; Manhattan; Maryland; Cape Cod and beyond. He scours 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century newspapers for their reporting on war and politics, early photographs that reveal a city's growth or human suffering, first-hand opinions in letters penned by people living in those times, and advertisements addressing mundane concerns of early American life.

"My novels are certain parts history and imagination," says Martin. "It's a marriage of both. But I've always found that the facts make great stories." He quotes author Gore Vidal who said, "Those who get their history from historical fiction get the history they deserve."

In the comfortable colonial home in Weston where he and his wife, Chris, raised their three children—*Back Bay*, his first novel, bought the house 30 years ago, he says—we sat at the kitchen counter and talked about his approach to writing and his newest book, *The Lincoln Letter*, which comes out in paperback July 3. For Bill Martin, the past and present often con-



GRETJE FERGUSON

William Martin

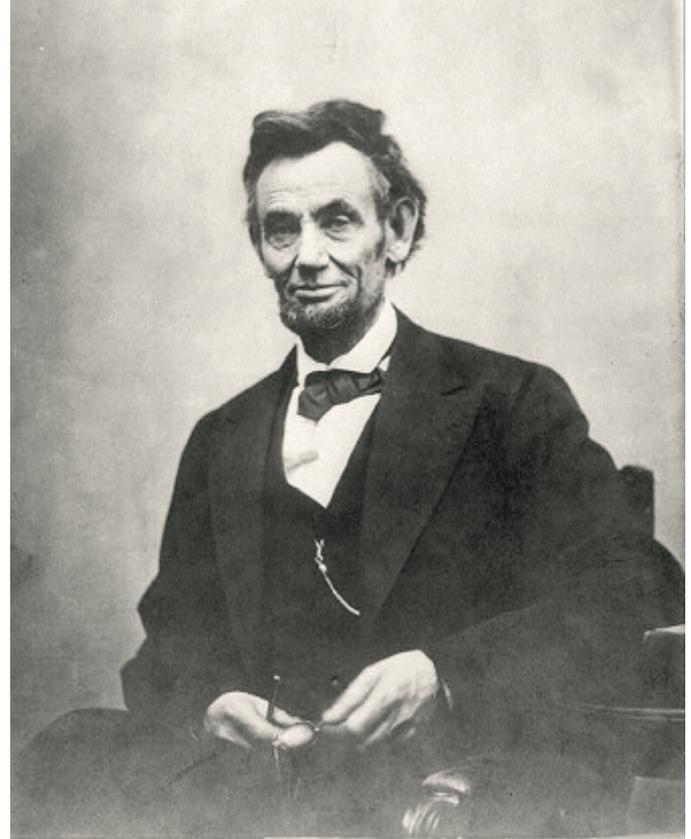
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nect. He mentions July 3 happens to be the 150th anniversary of Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s Pickett Charge across Gettysburg.

The Lincoln Letter is set in the nation’s capital, alternating between now and 1862. Martin’s many fans know Peter Fallon, our guide on the journey through time. Fallon is his fictional Boston-based dealer of antiquarian books (might he be the author’s alter ego?), the original “smart guy looking for stuff,” says Martin. He created Fallon for *Back Bay*, introducing a genre that has become hugely popular (think Indiana Jones movies and *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown). His sleuth will return in the next thriller, due in 2014.

Martin thinks Fallon’s appeal is that, in addition to brains, he has the guts to do what we wish we could do in similar circumstances. For example, in *The Lincoln Letter* he manages to foil an abduction attempt by upending speeding bicyclists who hog the road. And he outsmarts ruthless collectors of rare books whose wealth and greed threaten to deprive the public of rare presidential artifacts. Fallon’s 21st-century sensibilities and intelligent observations convince us that history matters, a belief the author and his protagonist share.

Story ideas come from anywhere but Martin’s often start with an object. *City of Dreams* began when Martin heard about lost 1780

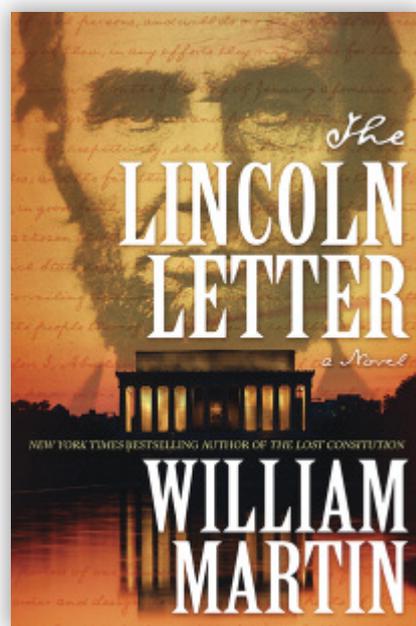


LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

President Abraham Lincoln, 1861

bonds that represent the unretired debt of the American Revolution. That true story tied nicely into his longstanding desire to write about the history of New York. In the latest case, Fallon encounters a recently discovered letter written by Abraham Lincoln that hints he kept a wartime diary that was lost. Both the letter and diary are imaginary, says Martin, but plausible.

“Lincoln was a man of contradictions,” says Martin. “He was a folksy lawyer who was the smartest politician in the room, the jokester who carried sadness wrapped around him like a shawl...the basic 19th-century racist who didn’t believe in the equality of blacks to whites yet he was the Great Emancipator. His contradictory character



COURTESY OF FORGE BOOKS

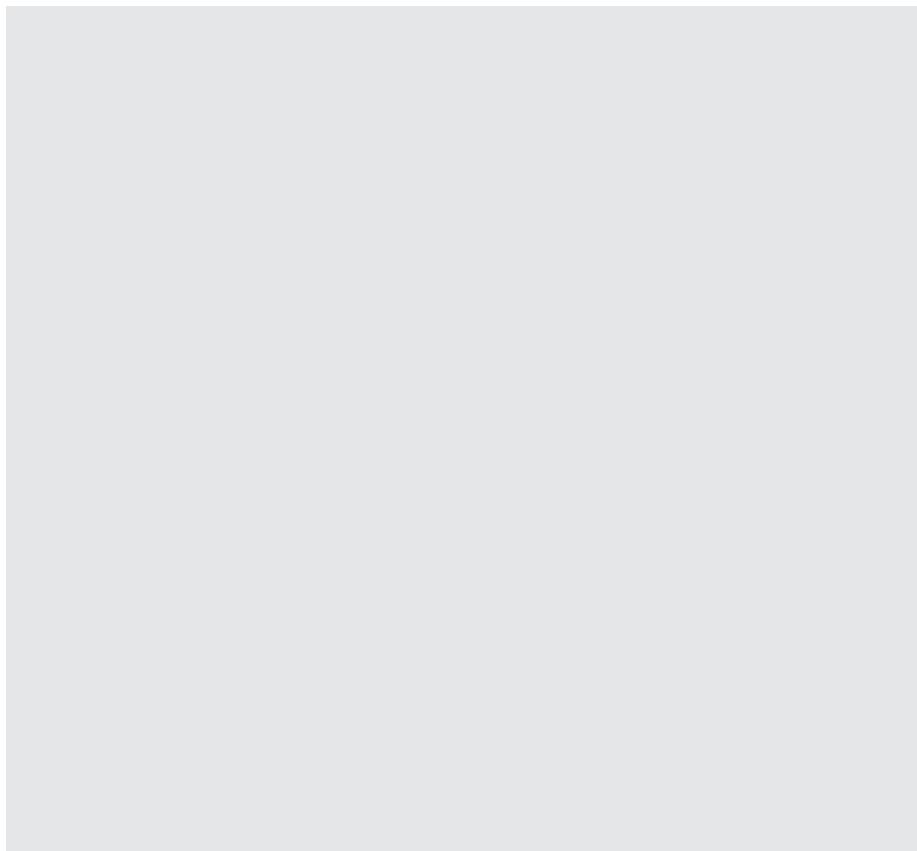
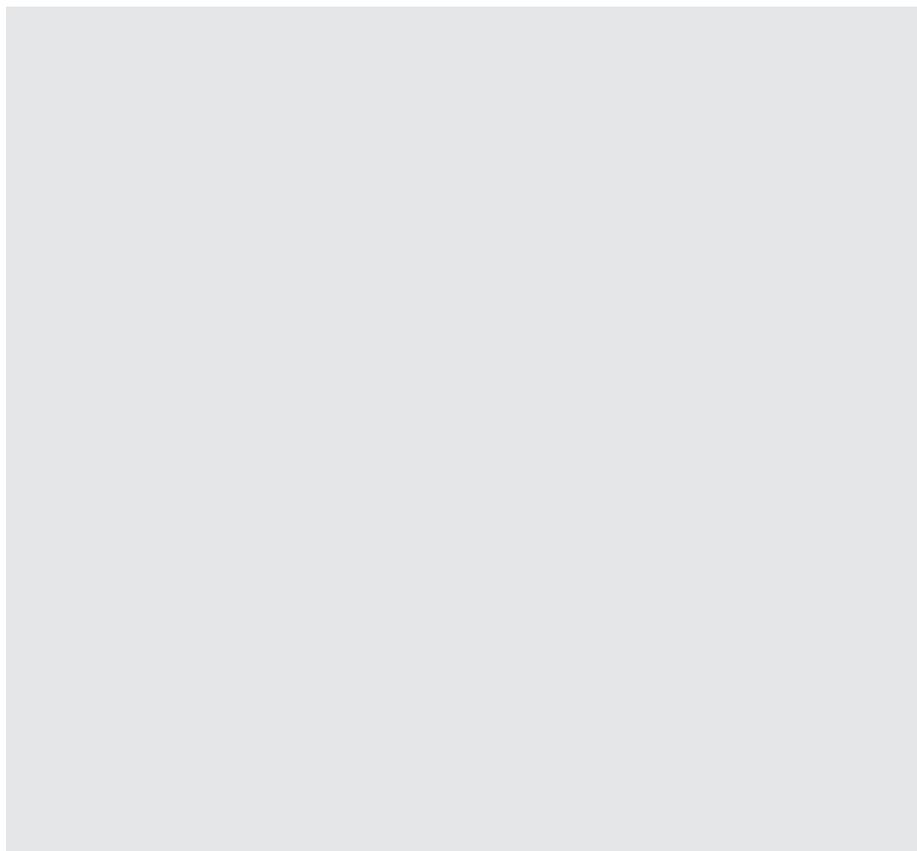
“Many presidents show up in my novels. One of my goals is to humanize them. They all had foibles, human weaknesses, tragedies they had to endure, and you need to appreciate that before we made them into gods, they were men.”

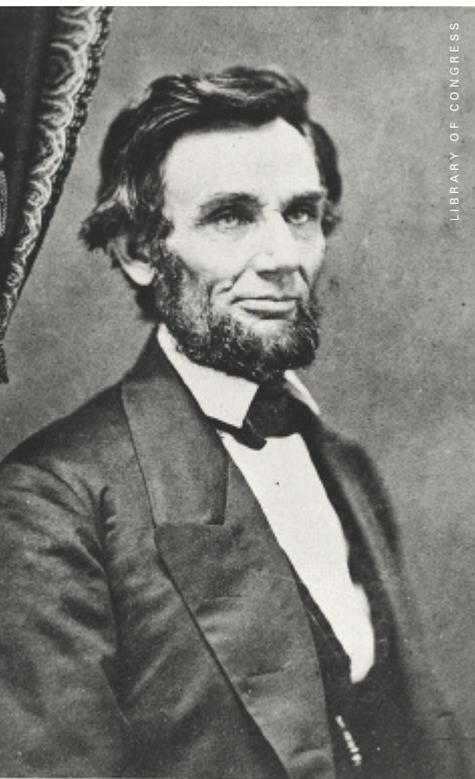
– William Martin

is what interests us so much about Lincoln.” It is well known that the president had a habit of writing notes to himself. A personal diary would be logical, he reasoned, and might have contained Lincoln’s evolving private thoughts about slavery, abolition, and current political realities prior to writing and signing the Emancipation Proclamation. “[Revealing] such truths might have altered the depth and breadth of how race was viewed in 19th-century America and what followed for the next 100 years,” he says.

Martin writes scenes worthy of the big screen. President Lincoln goes skinny-dipping in the Potomac, washing away sweat and overwhelming fatigue after visiting his beleaguered army in the heat of Washington summer. Lobbyists and politicians, then and now, ply their trade in the capital city’s legendary Willard Hotel bar. Young soldiers, many with amputated limbs, lie dying near battlefields and in rudimentary hospitals where infection and illness killed more men than did the fighting. He visualized them from reading such sources as Louisa May Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches* and Walt Whitman’s *Memoranda During the War*.

Martin received a degree in English from Harvard and an MFA in Motion Picture Production from the University of Southern California. He has written both a PBS documentary on George Washington (which he narrated) as well as Roger Corman’s cult classic horror film, *Humanoids from the Deep*.





President Abraham Lincoln, 1865

“My sense of how to write a big scene, a big movie-style scene with lots of cuts and action unfolding comes from the ability to see the whole story through the eyes of one character (in the Lincoln book, the fictional Lt. Halsey Hutchinson). That emerged from my training as a screenwriter. I want this to be like a movie running in your head.”

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and you need to appreciate that before we made them into gods, they were men.”

“We know that as a young man Lincoln experienced periods of clinical depression,” he continued. “I wanted to show you another Lincoln, the one who would say to a friend during the Civil War, ‘If not for these funny stories, I would go crazy.’ He used those stories to fend off the dark shadows that were always around him.”

Martin used Lincoln’s own tales to get readers close to the real man. Many were recounted in *Lincoln in the Telegraph Office: Recollections of the United States Military Corps During the Civil War* (1907) by David Homer Bates, an actual cipher operator in the army telegraph office where Lincoln came nightly to pick up decoded telegrams from his generals at the front. Elsewhere, Martin discovered that, during their White House years, Lincoln told his wife when he left the presidency he wanted to see California.

The Library of Congress has made available online nearly every edition of the *Washington Daily Republican* published during the Civil

War. Bates’ book is online free through Project Gutenberg. Years ago he would have had to go to Washington to read them but now he can read them online from home while working eight hours a day in his spacious, somewhat cluttered yet cozy third-floor study. He doesn’t use a research assistant, although he did in the

past and worked as one himself while in college. He has learned where to find “the good stuff,” he says. It works better because he never knows what will emerge. One example was his discovering that in the 1860s, black men in Washington were required to tip their hats to white men in the street, it being, of course, a southern city. That fact became pivotal in *The Lincoln Letter* narrative.

His books have what he considers the essentials—“narrative velocity,” or forward momentum, characters whose moral evolution is “the heart of all storytelling,” and a vivid sense of place—that which brings a city to life.

“I want you to feel the mud beneath your boots and hear the floors creak,” he says. “Narrative for me emerges from the setting. It comes from my growing up in Boston where everywhere you turned you heard about such-and-such happening in that spot. Settings carry the ghosts of history for me. I’m respectful of the facts but the story comes first. My rule is that historical characters don’t do or say what wouldn’t have been said at the time and actual historical events don’t change.”

So what’s best about being a novelist? I wanted to know. Is it the moment you’ve hit on a great story idea? The research? The writing itself? Press interviews and marketing?

“Actually,” said Martin, “it’s after the book is completed, the give-and-take with an audience about ideas. And what I learn while working on the book. In this case, it was better understanding the true breadth and depth of issues around race in America.” **WW**

William Martin

www.williammartinbooks.com

His books:

City of Dreams

The Lost Constitution

Harvard Yard

Citizen Washington

Annapolis

Cape Cod

The Rising of the Moon

Nerve Endings

Back Bay