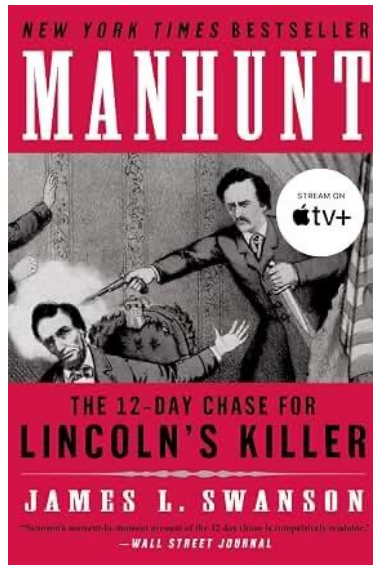




Book Review: *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer*

By James L. Swanson

Reviewed by Curtis Jerry Smothers

Praise Well Deserved

One of my favorite Lincoln biographers, Doris Kearns Goodwin, calls James L. Swanson's *Manhunt* a "terrific narrative" that will mesmerize readers just as the search for Lincoln's killers mesmerized the nation. Great praise from a distinguished historian—and, in my opinion, entirely deserved.

As a lifelong student of the Civil War, one of the most thoroughly chronicled events in American history, I was skeptical that another book about Lincoln's assassination could offer anything new. Swanson quickly overcame my skepticism.

First, his style resembles that of a first-rate investigative journalist. He informs while constantly piquing the reader's curiosity through probing insight, gripping chronology, and vivid character analysis. Second, he concentrates on the twelve extraordinary days during which "the most wanted man in America" eluded Union troops, detectives, and bounty hunters eager to claim the astonishing \$100,000 reward offered for John Wilkes Booth and his coconspirators.

A Nation Celebrates—and Booth Despairs

Everyone knows the basic story of Abraham Lincoln's murder at Ford's Theatre on Good Friday, 1865. John Wilkes Booth, a famous actor from an equally famous theatrical family, convinced

himself that Lincoln must die for the sake of the defeated Confederacy. Swanson enriches that familiar history with fascinating details drawn from meticulous research into the events preceding the assassination and the twelve-day pursuit that followed.

The author sets the stage by describing a joyous North celebrating the capture of Richmond and Robert E. Lee's surrender. After four years of bloody civil war, victory and peace finally appear to be at hand, and Lincoln shares the nation's jubilation and relief.

Booth, by contrast, is bitter and despondent. He and his associates had already devised a harebrained scheme to kidnap Lincoln and carry him south, presumably to bargain for Confederate prisoners or concessions. The collapse of the Confederacy renders that plot meaningless and drives Booth toward murder.

Lincoln and Booth Cross Paths

Swanson brings Lincoln and Booth together twice before the assassination. In a famous photograph of Lincoln's second inauguration, Booth can be seen standing among the spectators. He later attends Lincoln's speech from a White House balcony, where the president expresses support for limited Black suffrage in Louisiana. For the virulently racist Booth, Lincoln's suggestion is the last straw. He resolves that the president must die.

Murder at Ford's Theatre

Swanson gives us a dramatic, almost minute-by-minute account of the assassination. Booth enters the presidential box and times his point-blank gunshot to the back of Lincoln's head with a laugh line in the comedy *Our American Cousin*, hoping the audience's laughter will mask the sound.

Major Henry Rathbone, who is attending the play with his fiancée, Clara Harris, struggles with Booth and receives a severe knife wound. Rathbone and Harris had joined the Lincolns after General Ulysses S. Grant and his wife declined the invitation and left Washington to visit family.

Booth then leaps from the presidential box to the stage. Facing a stunned audience—some of whom initially believe his entrance is part of the performance—he delivers his final theatrical flourish: “Sic semper tyrannis!” or “Thus always to tyrants.”

Booth injures his left leg during his escape, leaving him in severe pain throughout the remainder of his flight. The celebrated actor has committed the most infamous performance of his life, but his dramatic exit has also helped turn him into a wounded fugitive.

A Motley Band of Conspirators

Between the deaths of Lincoln and Booth, Swanson introduces us to the other participants in the plot. They include boardinghouse owner Mary Surratt; the young and impressionable David Herold; Lewis Powell, a brutal former Confederate soldier; the hapless German immigrant George Atzerodt; and several others whose roles have largely faded from public memory.

On the same night Booth shoots Lincoln, Powell attacks Secretary of State William Seward in his home, savagely wounding him and several others. Atzerodt is assigned to murder Vice President Andrew Johnson but loses his nerve.

Booth and his motley collection of coconspirators carry out a tragedy of enormous historical consequence. What makes the story even more pathetic is their lack of sophistication, discipline, and foresight. They are capable of terrible violence but remarkably poor at anticipating what will happen afterward.

Twelve Days on the Run

Swanson follows Booth and Herold during their desperate flight through Maryland, across the Potomac River, and into Virginia. Their twelve-day journey ends near Port Royal at Garrett's farm, where Union cavalry finally corners them in a tobacco barn.

Along the way, several people help Booth despite knowing—or at least strongly suspecting—that he is Lincoln's assassin. They include Dr. Samuel Mudd, the Maryland physician who treats Booth's injured leg; Samuel Cox, a former Confederate intelligence operative; Elizabeth Quesenberry, another Confederate operative; and three returning Confederate soldiers, one of whom ultimately helps lead Booth's pursuers to Garrett's farm.

While Booth hides in woods, crosses rivers, and seeks assistance from Southern sympathizers, an enraged and fascinated nation asks the same question: How can the most hunted man in America still be at large?

The Pursuers Close In

We also meet detectives Luther and Lafayette Baker and the Union cavalrymen who finally surround the tobacco barn. The enormous reward provides a powerful incentive, but the pursuit also carries the urgency of restoring national honor after the murder of the president.

David Herold surrenders, but Booth refuses to come out. The soldiers set fire to the barn, illuminating Booth inside. Sergeant Boston Corbett, an eccentric cavalryman under orders to capture Booth alive, shoots him in the neck. Paralyzed and mortally wounded, Booth dies several hours later on the porch of the Garrett farmhouse. His body is returned to Washington by boat, where officials identify and secretly bury it. Only years later are Booth's remains released to his family for burial in their Maryland family plot.

The Fate of the Conspirators

Swanson closes his narrative by following the conspirators and their helpers to their final fates. Mary Surratt, David Herold, Lewis Powell, and George Atzerodt are tried by a military commission and hanged in July 1865. Dr. Mudd receives a life sentence but is later pardoned by President Andrew Johnson. Mary Surratt's son John, a major participant in the earlier kidnapping conspiracy, escapes abroad. He is eventually captured and returned to the United States, but his trial ends without a conviction.

The story's conclusion brings a measure of legal resolution, but no true emotional closure. Lincoln is dead, Booth has thrown away his own life, and the country emerges from civil war only to suffer another profound national trauma.

The Tragic Heart of the Story

Historian James McPherson aptly describes *Manhunt* as a riveting, hour-by-hour account of Lincoln's assassination, Booth's escape, and the pursuit that finally overtook him. Even readers who know the broad outlines of the story will discover fascinating details.

The most heartbreaking observation comes from Booth's sister Asia. She recognized that Booth had wildly sacrificed a life precious to his family, while Lincoln—the life most beloved by the North—was struck down at the moment of his greatest triumph. She hoped that the blood of both men might somehow help cement the restored Union.

Her words reach the visceral and tragic heart of America's Civil War. Lincoln survives four years of national bloodshed only to be murdered as peace arrives. Booth destroys the life he claims to be defending the South and inflicts one final wound upon an already devastated country.

James L. Swanson's *Manhunt* takes readers through another harrowing stage of that national tragedy. Read it, and I believe you will agree: This is history told with the pace and power of a first-rate thriller.

Buy *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer* [on Amazon](#).