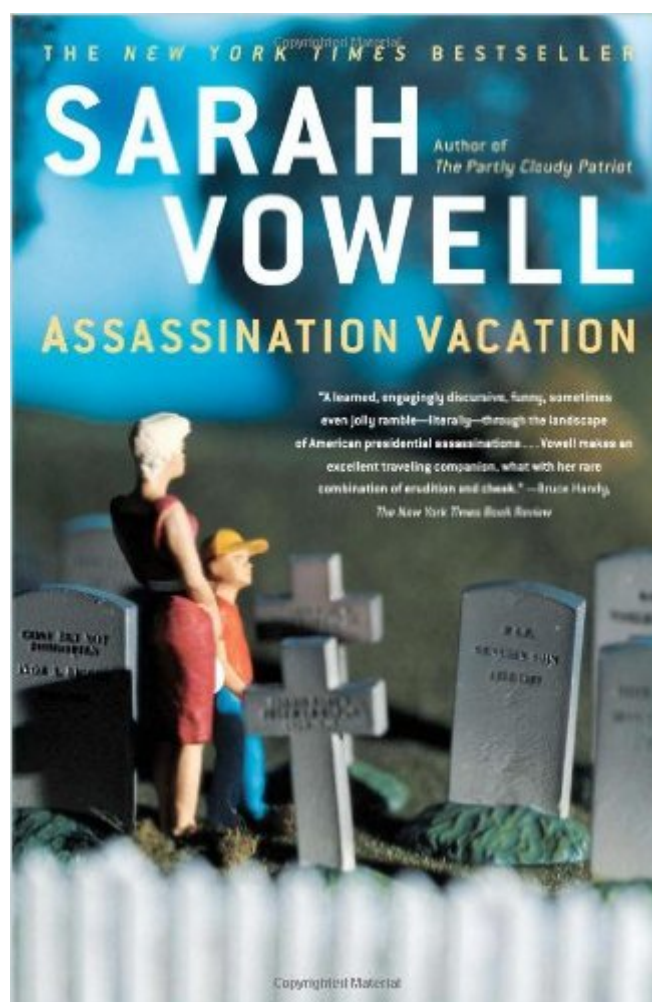


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Assassination Vacation



Synopsis

New York Times bestselling author of *The Wordy Shipmates* and contributor to NPR's "This American Life" Sarah Vowell embarks on a road trip to sites of political violence, from Washington DC to Alaska, to better understand our nation's ever-evolving political system and history. Sarah Vowell exposes the glorious conundrums of American history and culture with wit, probity, and an irreverent sense of humor. With *Assassination Vacation*, she takes us on a road trip like no other -- a journey to the pit stops of American political murder and through the myriad ways they have been used for fun and profit, for political and cultural advantage. From Buffalo to Alaska, Washington to the Dry Tortugas, Vowell visits locations immortalized and influenced by the spilling of politically important blood, reporting as she goes with her trademark blend of wisecracking humor, remarkable honesty, and thought-provoking criticism. We learn about the jinx that was Robert Todd Lincoln (present at the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley) and witness the politicking that went into the making of the Lincoln Memorial. The resulting narrative is much more than an entertaining and informative travelogue -- it is the disturbing and fascinating story of how American death has been manipulated by popular culture, including literature, architecture, sculpture, and -- the author's favorite -- historical tourism. Though the themes of loss and violence are explored and we make detours to see how the Republican Party became the Republican Party, there are all kinds of lighter diversions along the way into the lives of the three presidents and their assassins, including mummies, show tunes, mean-spirited totem poles, and a nineteenth-century biblical sex cult.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have read "Take the Cannoli" and am halfway through "The Partly Cloudy Patriot", I read these books because Assassination Vacation was the best book I've read by an uncelebrated author in my life. Sarah Vowell is witty and independent, she makes one feel a connection to her and a profound enlightened guilt at the loss of history. The assassinations of Lincoln, McKinley, and Garfield are the book's topic. But the true value of Vowell's Vacation is the wonderment of where we came from, and how men who shaped the world are remembered only by small bronze plaques that are at once unremarkable and intriguing. For any kid that was in AP or Honors US History this book will make you grin remembering the stories layed out on chalkboards that seemed so dull then, but Vowell gives them meaning and life. She is neurotic, patriotic, intelligent, witty, and alluring; in other words she is a perfect political writer. There is no paragraph that seems a waste of time. No story that isn't fascinating. You become a small child staring up at the Lincoln Memorial again, jaw on the floor, eyes wide staring at the man who saved the Union. And you feel a quiet drumming in your chest to do something about it, to make people remember what matters.

I've never really gotten the whole idea behind "American Studies" in universities. I really did not enjoy history as a student. If only Sarah Vowell had written the texts or been the teacher. She is a history nerd, geek, whatever--she is brilliant, laugh out loud funny, and earnest all at the same time. Her take is on three presidents who were assassinated (the majority of the book describing Lincoln's life, assassination, and the lives of his assassins). This book is something of a departure from her previous two collections of essays, which ranged over a wide variety of topics. This book is more focused, but Vowell's voice and wit are intact, even more entertaining than in previous volumes. I hope Vowell's next book tells us about Hollywood, animation, and her other passions on the heels of her performing a voice in The Incredibles. There has to be so much fodder for her droll observations there. Sedaris might be getting a little stale these days; Vowell certainly is not.

The book is fascinating not only for the historical trivia it provides, but the author's introspective look at herself. She knows she's weird, but she also can't understand why everyone is not as fascinated as she is with presidential assassinations. Her precocious and morbid nephew is fascinating as well. She has a fond affection for Garfield and McKinley. She worships Lincoln. She totally hates G. W. Bush. She humanizes the assassins without excusing them. She likes to tie the assassinations together by showing the historical thread. It is a very remarkable book. I disagree with her on several points, but I am fully entertained at all times. The depth of scholarship is amazing and her journey to

different historical sites provides a list of potential vacation sites for history buffs that will last for years.

Actually, two. Or maybe three. Or as many as I want! Sarah Vowell has produced a delightfully charming, witty, and introspective look at, of all topics, presidential assassination, in her new witty and evocative book "Assassination Vacation". Those of us who know Vowell from her numerous and witty appearances on the highly respected "This American Life" series know exactly what to expect when picking up a Vowell book: something interesting, funny, with pieces of introspection thrown in. She delivers her promise in her new tome. Vowell, a self-avowed history nut, decides to drag certain hapless acquaintances around the places associated with three presidential assassinations: Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley. Along the way, she shares information she has researched or learned, which makes this book one of her more scholarly, if that word could ever be applied here. She actually makes history more palpable, more real for people to digest in an entertaining way. How many of us would desire reading a book about the famed assassin Leon Cgolgosz? Put Vowell's name on the cover, slap a salty title on the book, and bang, we're lining up book-in-hand to purchase it. (Oh, and by the way, Vowell finally deciphers the mystery of pronouncing Cgolgosz, which is.... is... hmmm, I suddenly can't remember). Whenever you read a piece by Vowell, invariably, you never read it in your own voice, but her Sarah's voice ringing through, or was it Violet Parr from the Incredibles... oh wait, it's the SAME person). I guess that's the mark of a good writer, that she has developed her own style strong enough for us to hear her reading it to us. At any rate, this history nut who also goes ballistic whenever he comes across a plaque, gives this book five stars for a truly enjoyable read from a truly enjoyqable writer.

Well, now, it seems we have some rather distinct differences about Sarah Vowell's writing style. Though I have not read all of the reviews, those that I have read do not criticize the veracity of her factual statements. It is clear from her anecdotal descriptions of various events in her past that she has a passion for history and historic detail. I also think that some of her interpretations of historical events may get her into hot, but not scalding water. After all, this is the stuff of historians, who argue over interpretations of detail all the time. Most of these debates are never resolved, and it is understanding the differing viewpoints that reveals the history for what it really is--real life. In this sense, I find Vowell's descriptions of events to be incredibly refreshing. She does tend to bring the realities of events into a clearer focus by delving into the failures and even the dark sides of individuals who we know mostly through 2-dimensional mythologies. Her sense of irony is

impeccable. It seems to me that it is primarily her lively descriptions of these realities that captures the approval of the majority of those who have commented. Alas, Sarah is also incapable of leaving her political views out of the scenarios. The few criticisms she attracts seem to dwell upon this aspect of her writing. If you find this too distracting, especially if you have conservative leanings, then I fear you will be unable to look past it. While I do find these comments to mar her fundamentally sound approach to history, I am not so myopic as to let it avert my interest from a truly interesting and penetrating view of historical events. I think that the vast majority of readers will find they have the same (forgiving) reaction.

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