



Assassination Vacation

Sarah Vowell

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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.

Assassination Vacation Details

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From Reader Review Assassination Vacation for online ebook

Jeff says

Sarah Vowell is definitely one of the top five humans I'd love to grab a beer with ~~then get so drunk I'd take the subway and end up in the Bronx or Rockaway Beach~~ because I have a slight crush on her and love how she thinks. Her mind can jump from subject to subject quicker than the electric current in your lamp travels from the "on" switch to the light bulb. Very few people can make the seemingly spurious links in subject matter that she manages to connect together with each book in her own unique snarkalicious way. My lone caveat here is her attempt to tie together the then current events (this book was published in 2005 -> President Bush -> the Middle East) with the political climate surrounding the assassinations. It's not that I disagree with her, it's just that due to the untimeliness of her observations, she comes across as a bit shrill and the narrative has a tendency to drag at these points.

Since the bulk of this book is about President Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth, let's approach this from a different perspective.

In a galaxy kind of far away, but close enough for dinner and drinks, President Lincoln appeals to the Starship Enterprise for help. "I'll wrestle Colonel Green, the dude who led a genocidal war in the 21st century, if you help save me from John Wilkes Booth."

Kirk agrees, Lincoln throat punches Green and then Scotty transports Lincoln into an alternative dimension where he encounters the Scooby Gang.

Lincoln was all out of Scooby snacks and Scooby is good pals with the Super Friends so they shipped his Lincoln-log ass off to Superman.

Batman was all set to help, but Mrs. Lincoln was wearing pearls and this brought back a sense memory from his mom and dad getting gunned down and this make Bats cry.

Meanwhile on Earth 616, Captain America is attacked by a HYDRA-animated (view spoiler) Lincoln Memorial...

...but survives to uncover a Nazi plot to re-write history...

...so with the help of Reed Richards, he subs out Lincoln for a robot.

Lincoln-bot goes sentient...

...and encounters Deadpool, who's crazier than Mary Todd Lincoln, and who uses Cable's body slide tech to create a bizarre time-loop and undoes everything anyway.

The takeaway: Lincoln was really a Life Model Decoy and should never have had his likeness on the penny. Put Franklin Pierce on there instead! *waves to karen*

This was a buddy read with The Trish.

Shannon says

Ugh! Sarah Vowell, you annoy the hell out of me, on This American Life and in this book. I always think, "that would be totally funny if that happened to me" but her writing is never sufficient enough to translate it to the page. She's just not a good storyteller--she wants to be David Sedaris but she can't seem to pull it off.

I also can't stand when people go on about how so-called nerdy they are when you know they secretly relish being weird and quirky.

I have a friend that confuses her with Starley Kine on This American Life because they both have funny voices but Starley Kine is a wonderful and moving storyteller.

I love the idea of fun, readable history--this was clunky, self-indulgent and boring.

Matt says

A reminiscence: Years ago, I persuaded/forced my then-girlfriend to take a trip with me to the Little Big Horn battlefield near Hardin, Montana. It was at the Little Big Horn that Lt. Col. George Custer came to grief, forever making his name a synonym for "bad decision." It was quite a trek to make in a single weekend: Omaha to Montana. So we got to the battlefield after 20 straight hours of driving; slept outside the Ranger station waiting for it to open; then took in the battlefield, unwashed and unshaven and without even a cup of coffee. I was giddy (with exhaustion? with historical glee?), she was...patient (later, after she broke my heart, she swore this wasn't the reason she left, though I'm not sure I believed her, then or now).

At one point, I drove up to Reno Hill. It was empty. As I was (and am) writing a novel about America's westward expansion from 1854 to 1890, I had certain items with me: two cameras, a couple books, a notebook and pen, binoculars. I got out of the car with my non-digital camera and took a walk along Reno's

line of defense. Since no one was around, I broke a rule or two and gingerly lowered myself into one of the rifle pits that had been dug 129 years earlier. I wrote down my impressions: what I could see; what the grass felt like against my skin; how hot it must have been. Then I went back to the car to get my digital camera.

I checked on my girlfriend, asking, as though she were a dog, if she had enough air in the car. Then I took my camera back to the old rifle pit to take a series of pictures forming a 360 degree view from the hill. It was then I noticed that I had dangerously few pictures remaining. This was odd, since I hadn't used the camera at all. I started going through my pictures. It was one self-portrait after another, each taken by my girlfriend as she sat waiting in the passenger seat of my car. I guess my passion wasn't as infectious as my [insert STD joke here:].

The point of this story? Sara Vowell is the woman I should have taken on this trip. *Assassination Vacation* is meant for those people (I include myself here) who do things like drive overnight from Omaha to Montana in order to look at a battlefield, or who call the National Park Service while driving the backroads of Wyoming looking for the Grattan Massacre monument, which is located in Farmer McDonald's corn field, or who can't pass by a historical marker without pulling the car over and hopping out with a camera.

The skeleton on which this book rests is the assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley. Really, though, it's sort of a romp, where history, pop culture, and current events elide. Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley, along with their respective assassins, Booth, Guiteau, and Czolgosz, are simply the starting point. She visits the places connected with their lives and deaths, which are often nothing more than a plaque or a roadside sign. Often, the places are only tenuously connected, but that's part of the fun.

The book is written with good-natured humor (and a little angry liberalism thrown in for good measure). I noticed in her acknowledgments that she thanks, among others, Dave Eggers and David Sedaris (I am envious of her life; I mean, look at all awesome people she must chill with on a daily basis. Ira Glass! Lucky!) Not to be whatever, but Vowell is not as great a writer as her buds. She doesn't have the stratospheric talent of Eggers, or the subtle craftsmanship of Sedaris (which is not really a knock, when you think about it). When I read this book, it was more like reading a great blog, in which she introduces the many varied characters in her own life while taking this pseudo-journey among the ghosts of dead presidents.

I didn't laugh out loud but once, but I really had a good reading experience. Vowell totally seems like an awesome traveling companion. A person who has facts and stories for every place you go. I've been accused of this, so it's nice to know there are others in the world who respect a good factoid (come to Omaha, and I'll tell you the trivia behind our street names, which are named after generals of the Frontier Army...Grenville Dodge, who surveyed for the railroad; William Harney, who beat a slave to death...etc.) Kerouac famously wrote that the only people for him were the mad ones; the only people for me are the curious ones. Vowell's curiosity is infectious. She wanders far and wide, read voraciously, and along the way meets people as impassioned as she is (I especially enjoy her section on Dr. Samuel Mudd, where her own intense dislike for the possibly-treacherous medicine man butts up against the Mudd family's centuries-long quest to rehabilitate their ancestor's good name...and make a quick buck on the side).

Vowell's style is breezy and digressive. Reading it was like listening to a chatty companion sitting next to you in a car or train. She comes across as mostly-genuine, though once in awhile, I found myself thinking she's a little too precious. I mean, does she really wear Bela Lugosi hair clips? Is anyone *that* awesome?

The only (minor) quibble I have is the lack of any footnotes or bibliography. Obviously, this is not a work of scholarship. Yet Vowell tosses off hundreds upon thousands of factual nuggets. It would be nice to know, before I start repeating them at cocktail parties, that she didn't get them off of Wikipedia. Heck, I don't even

care about the footnotes (P.S. I LOVE footnotes), just tell me what sources you consulted. At one point, she mentions Ackerman's *Dark Horse*, which I have on my Amazon wish list, but that's about it. For a book written by a historically curious person, which is sure to spark the curiosity of many others, it would've been a helpful service to list the authors and works that guided her.

The lasting thing from this book is its empathy. I love history. I think more than anything, good history teaches us what it means to be human. For instance, I was looking for a good Lincoln book and was struck by a reader comment saying, in effect, that the author was too easy on Mary Todd Lincoln, who the commenter believed was crazier than a port-o-potty rat. I couldn't believe what I'd read. Sometimes, I guess, the inundation of facts obscures something important: that these were people first, and trivia second. I mean, Mary Todd lost three of her four children; her husband was *shot* in the head while she held in his hand. If she went crazy after all this, well, buddy, that's craziness she earned. I think we view history too much in the abstract; as a bas relief in a museum. Imagine yourself in her place. Imagine your soul-mate murdered next to you while you're in the theater watching the latest low point in Seann William Scott's career. The folks in the history books, the ones staring at you from a distant netherworld called the Past, were - and this is verifiable - real people. From their trials, we can learn. As your mother might have said, in times like these, remember, there have always been times like these.

History is at its most powerful when it shows us how we are all connected by certain immutable traits: how we are born; how we laugh; how we hurt; how we fall in love; how we suffer; how we die. Even the greatest, the richest, the most powerful humans who have ever walked this earth are brought down to the level of the lowliest peasant by these things. (I call this the Everybody Poops School of History - it will eventually be worked in my PhD thesis).

That's sort of the evolving understanding Vowell came to, especially when tracing the deaths of Garfield and McKinley. These are men who, especially in Garfield's case, have been lost to history. Yet we know them, intimately, by sharing their final moments. They become, at the end, finally, human.

Becky says

I feel like Vowell and I would do great on a road trip together. We might never make it to our actual destination because we would be constantly pulling over to read the history signs that no one else I know will let me pull over to read, and I feel that we would be easily side tracked by historical detour, but man, we would learn a lot. Then again, her voice on the audiobook REALLY set me on edge, and if she sounds like that in person I might have to bail. Still, voice aside, I like the crazy, swirly way she tells history. History IS crazy, it's like reading this really long cross-over novel series, and sometimes characters from other stories you read wander into the scene, and you get all excited that you NOTICED that, and feel like you are giving a secret nod to the author being like, I see what you did there, I see who that character is.... Only it's all real, and you realize that history is super connected to everything, every single thing is interrelated. Sure, that's kind of a "duh" statement, but it's not how we teach history in schools where we parse it out in unconnected factoids labeled "American history, Pre-Reconstruction" and "Europe:1870-1935", and it's hard to convey in books because you have limited space, and you are trying to teach the history of the whole world, really, by writing about any one thing. It makes it complicated. But I LOVE that complication, its why almost all of my nonfiction books are history books, I revel in the intricacy that I will never be able to fathom, and I think Vowell is that type of person too. That love and passion is present in her somewhat erratic way of trying to tell the story of the Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley assassinations, and it made it interesting and easy to

devour.

Still, I am left at a three-star rating for this particular book, though I certainly intend to continue on with her other books later. Why? Mostly because she spent so much time on Lincoln, to the point that McKinley and Garfield nearly felt like an afterthought. Sure, it's *LINCORN* but the book is not really breaking any new ground there, except for maybe enthusiasm in history. Garfield and McKinley, though not as iconic, were still presidential assassinations, and that's huge, and combined I'm not sure their story quite takes up half of the book. I would have liked to see more of their stories, and a little bit more balance. The second reason is her comparison to the modern day Iraq War and Bush Administration. I am not saying that she doesn't have a point; it's that she doesn't form an argument with merit. Mostly she takes potshots, and I am disappointed because, if she hadn't spent so much time on Lincoln, SHE COULD HAVE DONE SO MUCH MORE. She could have really flushed out the comparison between American expansionism in the Pacific Islands to that Iraq, and it could have really added something to the book. Instead, she turns it into one-liners, that seem glib in the face of such dark, historical repetition.

So there ya have it. This book was fun and interesting, and I learned a bit. I will read her other works, but probably not listen to them on audio. It wet my appetite to know more about the underappreciated Garfield and McKinley, and rounded out my knowledge on the Lincoln assassination.

Jacob says

William Dean Howells once described seeing the [casts of Lincoln's] hands at a party in a New York home. One partygoer in particular seemed drawn to them. He picked them up, held the hands in his own, and asked the host to whom they belonged. And when he heard that they were the hands of Abraham Lincoln, the man, Edwin Booth [brother of John Wilkes], silently placed them back upon the shelf.

(*Assassination Vacation*, p. 116)

Abraham Lincoln's son Robert Todd was present at three separate Presidential assassinations--his father's, James Garfield's, and William McKinley's. John Wilkes Booth's brother Edwin once saved Robert Todd's life during the Civil War. Ford's Theatre partly collapsed in on June 9, 1893, during Edwin's funeral. Charles Guiteau, James Garfield's assassin, hounded the president for a job for several weeks before shooting him. There are a lot of weird and spooky coincidences surrounding the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations.

And more! Sarah Vowell is *incredibly fascinated* with all of the fascinating history behind the violent (and fascinating?) deaths of four assassinated US Presidents, and she wants you to be fascinated too. With her fascination, mostly. Because she is really, really fascinated. And so on.

But I'm a bit conflicted here. On one hand, Sarah Vowell's Sarah Vowell-y Road Trip Through Bits Of American History Sarah Vowell Finds Fascinating is, er, kind of annoying. On the other hand, John F. Kennedy was assassinated on my dad's birthday (he was two) and Robert F. Kennedy was shot on my *mom's* birthday (she was twelve), and if Sarah Vowell knew those two (fascinating!) facts, I bet she would totally want to be my friend. And I would probably want to be her friend too. So there's that.

Lena says

The only high school class I've ever fallen asleep in was American History. I've long suspected that this had a lot more to do with the quality of the teacher than the subject itself. My suspicions were confirmed by reading this book - if Sarah Vowell had been my teacher, I would have been WIDE awake.

Ms. Vowell is, to be sure, something of an unusual person. I don't know a lot of folks who have much of an interest the subject of presidential assassination, let alone in the assassinations of such unfamiliar dead presidents as Garfield and McKinley. But Ms. Vowell has, for whatever reason, something of an obsessive interest in the subject, and in this book she invites on a tour of her own explorations into the history, locations, and people surrounding the fatal moments of the above gentlemen and their more famous counterpart, Abraham Lincoln.

It seems odd to describe a book about such a disturbing subject as "delightful," but Sarah has just the right sense of macabre, intellectual humor to guide us through the museums of the icky (presidential bone fragments, anyone?) to settle on the fascinating. And there really is quite a bit to fascinate in each of these three murders, from the political climate of each event to investigations of the conspirators to modern-day similarities to those previous times. Not to mention the odd fact of Lincoln's son, Robert Todd Lincoln, eerily showing up on the periphery of all three of these major historical events.

My only real complaint with the book was that Ms. Vowell occasionally assumed I knew more American history than I actually did, sometimes failing to adequately introduce certain characters or themes enough for me to quite understand their roles in the story. But this is a minor quibble with an otherwise highly readable book that makes me feel slightly less guilty about those high school naps.

Trish says

This is my first book by this author but within the first few minutes of this cool audio version she has endeared herself to me. Her tone is light but she packs a lot of information into this book. The great thing about that is that she does it in a funny and geeky way, showcasing that she doesn't just recite something she's read somewhere herself but that she is passionate about what she's telling us.

What I learned from this book? Well, for starters that there have been more Presidential assassinations than I had thought. Four to be exact (I had only known about two).

And that there have been six more assassination attempts even!

But apart from that we also learn a lot about the historical background, a lot about the assassins and their motifs, the monuments and plaques erected in the Presidents honour (or not), how much or little people care and how history repeats itself without many people really paying attention to it. Nothing new but interesting as hell. We even get a few tidbits of information of only vaguely connected topics thrown in for good measure. Such as the fact that when (at least American) statues show a person on horseback (say, a general from the American Civil War for example), the horse is either presented merely standing or standing with one leg lifted and that the difference in the horse's posture has different meanings - in case the horse has one

leg lifted, it means the person commemorated was wounded in battle!

All of that is explained to us while the author basically chats with the reader, telling of different roadtrips she took over some time, sometimes accompanied by her sister and nephew. She talks about her lack of social skills as hilariously as about the quirkiness of New Englanders, and even throws in some pop-culture references (not in a tacky way but showing that history lessons don't have to be dusty and dry). Basically, as her friends and sister say, she can tie any conversational topic back to one Presidential assassination or another and I think it's hilarious (her enthusiasm is contagious). Even President Garfield, who apparently was very ... bland ... which is why scarcely anyone knows anything to say about him, is portrayed in an endearingly quirky way. That is because she highlights character traits one would otherwise probably not read about in a non-fiction book about American Presidents, making the people behind the names come to life.

How people dealt with the assassinations, how they immortalized (or didn't) the respective Presidents (places as well as the architecture itself), what spectacles they made out of the prosecutions of the assassins, how they saw themselves and America in each respective era, how the respective Presidents are remembered now (or not), ... it's all very weird and explained here in detail. Just like the family lives of the respective Presidents and their assassins (I was especially intrigued by the tragic fate of Robert Todd Lincoln and Booth's brother Edwin).

I don't always agree with the author's political assessments, not towards the administration in power when she wrote this book, not to current world events and the supposed parallels of them to certain historical events, let alone her apparent view on wars in general, but the way she presents her cases and the intelligence and dedication one feels while listening to her make me nonetheless respect her a great deal (despite her over the top and therefore unrealistic idealism) and I'd love to have a real-life conversation with her.

This has been a very short but cool buddy-read with the incomparable Jeff-fah-fah and certainly not my last book by this author. Especially since she narrates the audio version herself with the help of a few celebrities (Conan O'Brien voiced Robert Todd Lincoln, Stephen King voiced President Abraham Lincoln and Jon Stewart voiced President James A. Garfield to name just a few). And Vowell sounds as geeky as she is and (after googling her) looks exactly the way I imagined her.

One negative piece of criticism: It's too bad she spent so much time on Lincoln and Booth, far less on Garfield and Kinley and their respective assassins and none at all on Kennedy (except for some name-throwing-round supposed to show repetition in history in the last 10 minutes of the book). It makes for a less rounded experience.

Bryan says

I picked this book up as a recommendation from Strand in Manhattan. Not knowing what to expect, I was all at once pleasantly surprised and supremely disappointed. To me, the biggest thing that jumps out about this author's style is that she is the Chuck Klosterman of political history. The plot follows the author through road trips and vacations to various spots of historical significance and her stories are advanced through a combination of her interactions with the everyday people there and her own historical narrative. This is very similar to "Killing Yourself to Live", except rather than introspective tangents on the author's interpersonal relationships (which allow the reader to get closer to and relate to the author) she goes off on pointless political tangents that run completely counter to the overall tone of the book.

The author does her best writing when she stays primarily in the realm of tongue in cheek chasing of useless trivia. Being a history buff (and big Lincoln fan), it was very interesting to read about some of the circumstances surrounding these events. However, every couple dozen pages, she does a very poor job of relating these past events to current ones. The change from an irreverent writing style to a very serious political (and overtly far left-wing) rant is a jarring one for the reader. Overall, this book's biggest problem is its lack of identity. The author is never really sure if she wants to be a fun lark through the pages of history, or a cautionary tale of learning from our past mistakes. Holding witty banter with tour guides on the same page as trying to determine the groundwork of today's controversial (and in her opinion, evil) Republican Party is just a bit too much for me.

Kim says

Sarah Vowell has written a hilarious take on heritage tourism, visiting many of the sites related to our poor assassinated presidents. She manages to sneak in a lot of history alongside her wry, sly, sarcastic witticisms, as well as her biting commentary on our current administration, which was great fun to read. But she is also clearly very full of herself, and that gets in the way of the story. Several times in the book, she would stop the "action" to write something along the lines of, "I'm just so crazy/wacky/offbeat/curious that I will drag my unwitting friends to this off-the-wall/remote/disturbing/strange/arcane historic site." As in, aren't I unique? Aren't I cool? As someone who's gone through an academic program in historic preservation, I've met tons of people who are fascinated by all manner of historic places, sites, and objects--and they don't need to proclaim their coolness on a billboard or in a book. All in all, this is a fun read, but not one that will stick with you very long.

Shawn Mooney says

Some interesting historical detail here, but I found the book as a whole a rather uneven jumble, not nearly as interesting as I had expected. And the audiobook was simply dreadful. While I'd enjoyed Vowell's unique voice on NPR, etc., I now realize that such enjoyment is limited to small doses. And the inclusion of celebrity narrators for direct quotes didn't work at all, making this one of the clunkiest audio adaptations I've encountered.

Ashley says

There's something about the way Sarah Vowell writes about history that brings it to life for me. Probably because there's something about the way that Sarah Vowell writes about people, and history is made of people. It often doesn't feel that way. (Ironically, there's a section in here where she tells a story about a time where she ended up yelling at some guy in a supermarket about how the only time it would be interesting to live through history would be if you were there when they discovered the polio vaccine, otherwise it's all war and natural disasters and the time in between. She manages to be funny while writing this.)

I've actually wanted to read *Assassination Vacation* for about eleven years now, since it was published, when a friend of mine wrote a glowing review of it in our college newspaper, and then almost immediately *The Incredibles* came out (Sarah Vowell voices Violet in that movie). I was like, who is this Sarah Vowell person who goes on weird assassination vacations and then voices teenage superheroes?? But I kept getting

distracted, and the height of my desire to read it coincided with the two years I didn't have a car and lived on campus, and thus did not have easy access to the public library and very little money to spend on books. So wah wah long story, didn't read it for forever, but now I have.

The cheekily ingenious conceit behind this book is that Vowell embarks on a sort of historical tourism of the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley. This involves visiting their graves, the sites of their demises, important locations in their lives, and all of the same for their assassins, whom Vowell finds just as interesting in parts as their targets. She then writes about not only the experience of visiting those places (including the people she encounters there), but also the history and context of the events and the sites themselves.

If you've never read a Sarah Vowell book before, this turns out to be surprisingly fun. If you have, well, you pretty much know what to expect. Vowell gets REALLY enthusiastic about stuff that most people don't give two shits about, and her enthusiasm is catching. I'm not saying I'm suddenly all about dead presidents, but while I was reading the book, it was interesting and fun. Vowell goes deep in her love of history, like a true nerd of whatever you're nerdy about, and the book is all the better for it.

I was also surprised by the content of the book. I fully expected to love the Abraham Lincoln section the most, but since I already know so much about the guy, Vowell and her observations were really the main draw there. I knew almost nothing about Garfield or McKinley going in to this book, so I actually enjoyed those sections a little more. (And I now have actual opinions about several presidents and overlooked historical figures! Namely, Garfield was actually kind of a cool guy, McKinley was an asshole, and Teddy Roosevelt was a baller. Don't even get me started on John Wilkes Booth's brother, Edwin. That guy was awesome!)

Anyway, you guys should read this book if you like history, especially if you like your history focused on the more obscure human details, with a side of wry, humorous observations. Also if you want to read about how the Oneida tableware and cutlery company was founded by a sex cult from upstate New York.

Kim says

Okay, I'm totally going to ruin this book for you---*major* spoiler alert coming up, folks. pssst... All the Presidents mentioned in the book, **DIE**. I know, right? You're saying 'Aww, cheese and rice! Kim! What's the point in reading this book then?'

Well, lemme tell you....

This book has been quite an educational journey for me. In both that, I've learned all this great stuff about the assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley, but also in that I've learned that people think I'm a freak.

I've been carrying this around for the last few weeks, trying to read a page or two on the Shuttle between work campuses or while I scarf down my dressing free rabbit food... and of course people ask that dreadful question: 'What are you reading?' and of course I enthusiastically show them the cover and say 'OMG! (okay, I actually say 'Oh My God!') it's this great book about this woman who takes this pilgrimage to the sites of the assassinations of three presidents and the homes of their assassins!' and then I get **the look**. You

know the one, right? The ‘how come I know you?’ look or the ‘You are not what I thought you were’ look and I’m thinking, sometimes to myself and sometimes aloud ‘What did you expect of me? Am I really *that* soccer mom-ish that I wouldn’t be interested that Guiteau was involved in a sex cult in Upstate NY (that would later go on to design the gravy boat I inherited from my grandmother) but got so frustrated that none of the young girls would sleep with him that he later went and shot President Garfield? (okay, not really, but it’s out there). Am I so that boring that you wouldn’t think that I would find that absofuckinglutely fascinating?’ and then I hmpfh off and continue reading my book with a piece of sprout daintily sitting on my cleavage.

It’s all good.

Then I get depressed that this woman is my age (okay, it’s a little better that she’s 11 months and six days older than me, but not by much) and that she’s done so much and can still readily admit that she loves Peter Gallagher’s eyebrows (umm..who doesn’t?)and that the most violent thing that she’s done is shove a guy who spilled a beer on her at a Sleater-Kinney concert. I want to be her BFF. (But, I want her to take voice lessons first because I would seriously rip her voice box out if I had to actually listen to her speak)

Other things that I Love About This Book

--Her obsessions with all historical plaques. Because who doesn’t slow down when they see one of those signs on the side of the road and go ‘ooh! Was there some sort of carnage committed here? Did someone important die?’ One of my jobs in college was working at one of those souvenir-y type carts in Boston and for a summer, we were set up right by the Boston Massacre site. I loved watching tourists come and gawk at this. (they had a neat red line painted on the ground to lead them around to all things historical) I can see Sarah (yep, first name basis with her, so what?) reading from her copy of The Townshend Acts.

--Her description of Emma Goldman (Or should I say Emma Goldman’s description) losing her virginity and I quote: *”For Example, in one breathtaking paragraph she is (I think) losing her virginity to Berkman (she had been married but to an impotent husband); meanwhile, what’s going through her head is the question, “Can idealists be cruel?” It’s thrilling, even though I did want to reach into the page and pat her head, breaking it to her that, Oh my dear, idealists are the cruelest monsters of them all.”*

--Her admission that if she could, she would go back into history and rub out her great great grandfather who had joined up with Quantrill’s Bushwackers and was involved in the Lawrence Massacre of 1863 where at least 182 men and boys were killed. (read about it)

--The fact that I cried after reading her walk around the National Mall.

--And finally, that Sarah has made me drop everything to run to Google many, many times.

Then.. ahh.. my poor husband, who at first gave me the stink eye because I was ranting and raving about how great it is that an author can put this historical crap into a book that I would actually read and enjoy and learn from while he stares at the Dos Passos and Gore Vidal books that I’ve hidden so inconspicuously under the coffee table all the while saying ‘I’ll get to it, honest!’. And now that he’s also interested in reading it well, since I started talking about how she compares McKinley’s dealings with the Spanish American War and Bush’s dealings with Operation Iraqi Oil, I take every spotlight opportunity to tell him about the part that I just read involving how cute she and scientist who works at the Funeral Museum find John Wilkes Booth and the conversation that they have about him.

I'm sorry, honey. I'll shut up now, but let me just tell you this ONE more thing, okay?'

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Somehow I listened to this entire audiobook in two days. I felt burned by politics and somehow in my head this translated to - more politics! I thought reading about assassinations might be... refreshing.

Enter Sarah Vowell with her strange voice, and a host of stories of informational plaques that she visited around the country, and other monuments to assassination attempts. There is a lot on Lincoln, but I still learned some tidbits. Did you know it is likely President Lincoln was laughing when he was shot?

The last chapter had an interesting intersection with other books I've read, such as *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses*, because it focused in on Emma Goldman, the delightful anarchist who was greatly feared in her time. Not a president, but definitely political, and assassination attempts going both ways.

This is well researched, she makes obscurity interesting, and it was a nice diversion from the present day.

My only disappointment with the audiobook is that the cover makes it seem like the other voices will have prominent roles, but they are only very occasionally brought in to read a quotation. I would have loved to hear less Vowell and more Conan O'Brien, Stephen King, and Jon Stewart. That said her voice is definitely distinct.

Laura Gurrin says

Another one I didn't finish, and I'll try and save you the trouble of starting. The book was relatively entertaining when it was talking about the assassinations of the title (Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley), especially Lincoln - Vowell devotes the largest slice of the book to him and John Wilkes Booth. However, over time I got tired of the author taking every opportunity to take juvenile shots at the Bush administration, the Iraq war, and Republicans in general. It might have been interesting in an actual, serious book about politics, but this is not that - instead, Vowell's political criticism is just above the level of "Bush is the devil! All Republicans are stupid!" Honestly, it just got tiring. I was into the last chapter ("McKinley's behavior in the Philippines is just like Bush's in the Iraq war! Also, the Indians were oppressed!"), and I just didn't care enough to read the last 40 pages. A book actually comparing the Iraq war and the Bush administration, to historical administrations, could be quite interesting. And an actual lighthearted look at these assassinations, which is what I thought I was getting, could have been very enjoyable. Someone who's trying to do both, with the skill of a newly radicalized college freshman, is just....lame.

Debbie Zapata says

Abraham Lincoln. James Garfield. William McKinley. What do these three men have in common? They were all Presidents of The United States of America. And they were all assassinated.

Not everyone would think to create a road-trip out of the deaths of these men, but Sarah Vowell did. She visits museums commemorating these sad events, she searches out graves, historical plaques, and former homes.

I was not at all certain I would enjoy reading this book, to tell the truth. For one thing, my mother wanted me to read it. That is not always a good thing. But we had both read Vowell's *The Wordy Shipmates* a couple of years ago, and when she saw this title in her favorite bookseller's catalog, she ordered it, read it, and gave it to me.

I remembered Vowell as being a little too smart-alecky for my taste in *Shipmates*, even though I did learn a lot about the Puritans that I never imagined. In *Vacation*, her tone is much less stridently sassy, and for me much easier to get along with. And once again I learned a lot about the history I was supposed to have learned in school, but never heard about. Lincoln, yes. But Garfield and McKinley? Nary a word that I can recall.

Vowell covers a lot of information here, and presents it in a compelling way that kept me picking up the book and not wanting to put it down. I hope that someday she writes about the years 2017 to 2020. I would love to see what she does with that topic. While I'm waiting for that book to come along, I will look for other titles by Vowell and see what else my history teachers skipped.

Grace says

Sarah Vowell, will you marry me?

I liked *The Partly Cloud Patriot*, but I loved *Assassination Vacation*. Vowell's pilgrimage to sites associated with the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley struck so many cords with me it is hard to know where to begin. First, I learned a ton. I knew a lot of what she mentioned about the Lincoln assassination (though by no means all of it), but really, does anybody know much about Garfield or McKinley? I knew McKinley's assassin was somehow associated with Emma Goldman, but that was about it. So the book is worth reading (or, in my case, listening to, because Vowell's story-telling style lends itself so well to audio book) just for the information it contains.

But it's so much more than that. It's also funny, and it's funny in a dorky way that I just adore. Vowell's ability to embrace her inner civics geek is commendable, especially for someone who was once a rock journalist. The fact that she is giddily interested in presidential assassinations and all manner of morbid and grotesque history is impressive, but what is more impressive is that she relishes this interest and is unapologetic about it. The story she tells connecting her Oneida tea pot to the Oneida cult/"intentional community" in upstate New York and then to Garfield's assassin is not only fascinating, it also seriously makes me want to marry her. Or at least be her best friend forever. I mean, who wouldn't love someone who could come out with that while pouring you a cup of tea?

It's not Vowell's relentless and uber-cute dorkiness that gets me the most, though, it's her honest devotion to and nearly spiritual belief in U.S. history, government, and myth. More than anything, the book made me want to take a trip to Washington D.C., to see if I'm as mesmerized by the Lincoln monument as Vowell is,

to move through the Smithsonian at a snail's pace like I'm sure she does. As someone with a degree in American history and a lifelong interest in its minutiae, I'm hardly a tough audience, but Vowell got me more excited about it than I have been in years, and excited about a whole different aspect of it (i.e. presidential history, which I've never cared for at all). Like Utah Phillips, her words convince you that the past is important, that it means something, and that it ought to be considered, honored, respected, and made fun of. I'm into that.

Eric_W says

This is a book my wife and I listened to as we drive to doctor appointments, visited children, etc., so it took us a while to get through it completely. That is not to denigrate the book, which is wonderfully entertaining and educational. Ben (GR) and I have exchanged emails recently about whether listening to an audiobook can be considered "reading." This is a case where I think the book is actually better listened to since it's read by the author who has such a gravely and droll way of reading. It's delightful.

Vowell's description of staying in a bed and breakfast is priceless. It mirrors a stay my wife and I had where the other couple at breakfast bragged about the shooting club and contests at her son's school. Good liberals that we are, my wife asked who paid for all of that? "Why, the NRA, of course," was the reply. We couldn't wait to stuff down the sausages and get the hell out of there. Next bed and breakfast we go to I intend to get a certified letter attesting to the political affiliation of all the guests. Then, of course, there's always Super-8 as an alternative.

Lots of fascinating detail. I had no idea that the Virginia motto, *sic semper tyrannis* was yelled by John Wilkes Booth as he leaped on to the stage after shooting Lincoln and that motto was worn on T-shirts by supporters of Timothy McVeigh along with assorted Confederate flags and symbols.

One learns a great deal too. For example, Dr. Samuel Mudd (a distant relative of Roger Mudd, the broadcaster) was convicted of being one of the conspirators who assassinated Lincoln. Vowell delves deeply and fascinatingly into the sequence of events, remarks on his heroic behavior during the malaria epidemic at the Fort (one of the largest ever built, we learn, after a hysterical, stomach-heaving boat journey) on the Dry Tortugas including efforts by his grandson to completely clear his name. I cannot recommend this book enough - but listen to it.

Lisa Vegan says

I love the author's irreverence, wit, and humorous outlook. I find her hilarious when she's speaking, such as when I've seen her on Jon Stewart's The Daily Show. This book is funny, but her writing is not nearly as hilarious as she is when speaking. I think this book would be great as an audio book if read by the author. Even her voice and inflections are funny, and while I laugh out loud when listening to her, including when she talked about this book, reading this book elicited some smiles from me, but that's about it. Of course, it's only because of the author that I'd expected a book about Presidential assassinations would make me laugh.

I was disappointed that only 3 Presidents (Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley) were the focus here, and that they are all Republicans, although there are extremely brief mentions of JFK, RFK, and Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and a bit more than them about Teddy Roosevelt. And I loved that she revisited the Lincoln-Kennedy coincidence list; I hadn't thought about it for many years.

There were some very amusing and educational portions, and for me it got better and better as I went along. I went from being disappointed to really enjoying the reading experience.

I particularly enjoyed the more personal material, particularly the part about the author's young nephew. I can see why she likes as well as loves him.

I got a huge kick out of Garfield's love of reading; he's a president about which I'd known very little, and I'd known the most about Lincoln and very, very little about the other two, but from this book I learned a lot about all three. Now, I wasn't reading for school, but for pleasure, and there were so many juicy tidbits that I'm afraid in very short order I will forget most of the information. This is history spiced up, but I've always enjoyed history and don't need it to be made more palatable. However, I did really appreciate the information that isn't typically included in history books, and even in many biography books

So, I did end up enjoying this, but she's still much funnier in person.

3 ½ stars I rounded up because of this book's ingenuity.

Rebecca Foster says

U.S. history has never been so much fun! There's nothing Sarah Vowell loves more than a presidential plaque, monument, home or grave, and her enthusiasm is infectious. Over half of this book is about Abraham Lincoln's assassination; the rest goes to those of James Garfield and William McKinley (attempts on T. Roosevelt and Reagan get a brief mention, but she pretty much avoids JFK – presumably because that would fill a book of its own). If all you remember about these last two assassins is that one was a disgruntled civil servant and the other was an anarchist with a funny name, let Vowell enlighten you with her mixture of zany travel and trivia. She follows John Wilkes Booth's escape route from the nation's capital, traces Charles Guiteau back to upstate New York's Oneida community, and sympathizes with Leon Czolgosz's hard early life: one of eight children of Czech immigrants, he was sent to work in a glass factory when he was 12.

This is offbeat tourism for sure, but I'm game for hitting some of Vowell's destinations on my next trip to the States, including the National Museum of Health and Medicine outside Washington, D.C., the Surratt House Museum in Clinton, MD (I can't believe I've not been to these two yet!) and the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia. The book came out in 2005, and what with Vowell's outrage over the Dubya administration and her comparison of Iraq with McKinley's own interventionist war in the Philippines, it does feel a little dated. But that's history for you. Now go out there, find a plaque or a statue, and share your excitement with all your unsuspecting friends. If the rest of Vowell's books are this nerdy-cool, I'll be reading them all.

Favorite lines:

“Somewhere on the road between museum displays of Lincoln's skull fragments and the ceramic tiles on which Garfield was gunned down and McKinley's bloodstained pj's it occurred to me that there is a name for travel embarked upon with the agenda of venerating relics: pilgrimage.”

A friend says to her, “Assassinations are your Kevin Bacon. No matter what we’re talking about, you will always bring the conversation back to a president getting shot.”

“If there is a recurring theme in Garfield’s diaries it’s this: *I’d rather be reading.*”

“My fantasy is to one day become a docent.”

“To me, every plaque, no matter what words are inscribed on it, says the same magic informative thing: Something happened!”

Kristina says

Sarah Vowell, I think I love you. You’re everything I enjoy in a writer: witty, weird, well-written, honest, and (as a non-fiction writer) full of fun facts. Because I enjoyed *Assassination Vacation* so much, you get the coveted distinction of being an author whose books I will continue to *purchase* rather than hunt for at my local library. Hurrah!

This is the first Sarah Vowell book I’ve read. She’s been on my radar for a while. If you listen to NPR even only occasionally, she will find a way of sneaking into your ear. After years of being mildly interested, I decided, this is it! I’m going to investigate her quirky-titled books. I’m happy I did. *Assassination Vacation* (hereafter AV) explores the presidential assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley. Vowell travels to the locations central to her theme (usually by cajoling friends and her sister to take her as apparently she has a driving phobia) and along the way, she meanders into unexpected details about a national park that used to be a federal prison; Robert Todd Lincoln, the presidential jinx; and the Oneida company-that-now-sells-cookware-but-used-to-be-a-kinky-sex-cult. I love history and don’t think it’s possible to read too much of it. It’s even better if you read a variety of books about the same historical figures or time period—you can always discover a different perspective and new details. Because I recently read Doris Kearns Goodwin’s giant tome about Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft (*The Bully Pulpit*), Vowell’s discussion of McKinley’s assassination overlaps nicely and enhances the information I learned from Goodwin.

Vowell is very funny. I giggled quite often while reading this book and scribbled approving “ha ha!!!!” notes in the margins. I like the connection she makes between tourism and religious pilgrimages:

Somewhere on the road between museum displays of Lincoln’s skull fragments and the ceramic tiles on which Garfield was gunned down and McKinley’s bloodstained pj’s it occurred to me that there is a name for travel embarked upon with the agenda of venerating relics: pilgrimage. The medieval pilgrimage routes, in which Christians walked from church to church to commune with the innards of saints, are the beginnings of the modern tourism industry. Which is to say that you can draw a more or less straight line from a Dark Ages peasant blistering his feet trudging to a church displaying the Virgin Mary’s dried-up breast milk to me vomiting into a barf bag on a sightseeing boat headed toward the prison-island hell where some Lincoln assassination conspirators were locked up in 1865. (9)

Her humor is irreverent and often sly, hidden in sentences of historical facts.

AV was written during the reign of President George W. Bush. Vowell does not like him. In fact, she dislikes him so much that she can *almost* see how one could be driven to murder a president. She quotes Timothy Douglas, the director of the musical *Assassins* who feels the same way; he dislikes the current president so

much that he can understand the murderous impulses of assassins—and that kind of freaks him out. What is so interesting (scary) is that how Vowell feels about Bush pretty much describes how I feel about Trump, and she dislikes Bush so much that she must be absolutely horrified by Trump. I'm going to quote her thoughts on this because a) it's applicable to the current president and b) her discussion of egotism is fascinating and it relates to why she wrote this book:

Like director Tim Douglas, my simmering rage against the current president scares me. I am a more or less peaceful happy person whose lone act of violence as an adult was showing a guy who spilled beer on me at a Sleater-Kinney concert. So if I can summon this much bitterness toward a presidential human being, I can sort of, kind of see how this amount of bile or more, teaming up with disappointment, unemployment, delusions of grandeur and mental illness, could prompt a crazier narcissistic creep to buy one of this country's widely available handguns....I am only slightly less astonished by the egotism of the assassins, the inflated self-esteem it requires to kill a president, than I am astonished by the men who run for president. These are people who have the gall to believe they can fix us—us and our deficit, our fossil fuels, our racism, poverty, our potholes and public schools. The egomania required to be president or a presidential assassin makes the two types brothers of sorts....The assassins and the presidents invite the same basic question: Just who do you think you are? (7)

I really enjoyed *Assassination Vacation*. It's funny, informative, interesting and Vowell's prose is very personable and friendly. I feel like I could sit down next to her at the bar and discuss over cocktails how Trump deserves to be impeached, but if he's out, that leaves us with Religious Freak Whitest Man Ever President Pence. And frankly, he scares the shit out of me even more than Trump. Overall, even if you don't agree with Vowell's politics (or her bold declaration of atheism—hooray!), it's not necessary to enjoy her fun trip through historical assassinations. I look forward to reading more of her books.

Quick Addition to Review

In the second quoted passage above, Vowell says she is amazed at the egotism needed for a man (obviously written pre-Hillary) to run for president and think he can fix America's problems. When I read that quote again, it's funny at how innocent it seems now; she assumes that the men/women running for the office of president actually want to fix these things! My view is instead that many people run for political office not necessarily to "fix" anything, but to help themselves to money and power. If they want to "fix" anything, it's to turn back the progress we've managed to make: gay marriage, abortion rights, civil rights, etc. As a reader of history, I know this is nothing new, but it seems to me that more and more candidates conceal their power lust and greed and ideological intentions under the thinnest guise of wanting to help their fellow Americans. Or maybe, in the age of Trump—who is doing everything within in his power to make America Great Again for himself and wealthy people like him—I've just become incredibly cynical?
