FRIEND

of

MR. LINCOLN

A NOVEL

STEPHEN HARRIGAN

offig. serious as the

The Gates of the Alamo

Abraham Lincoln will always be an enigmatic, fascinating figure for both historians and authors. Here Stephen Harrigan looks at Lincoln during his early days as a young lawyer, riding the circuit and discovering his passion for politics. Our way in is a fictional character, a poet-friend created by Harrigan, a young man with big ambitions we know from the start will be mostly unrealized...except for a poem dashed off in the blazing misery of Lincoln's assassination that captured the nation's despair. With that prologue, we know our hero's fate will always be inextricably linked with Lincoln's, not to mention that they would break when this poet and confidant tells Lincoln he absolutely should NOT wed Mary Todd, a slight she will never forgive. Harrigan gets much right or should I say much is convincing: Lincoln is boisterous and mercurial, always "on" for an audience but prone to the black dog of depression. He's a fascinating character, as are the others that make up Lincoln's circle, like Joshua Speed and William Herndon, not to mention the complex portrait of Lincoln's future wife. The main problem is that our poet hero is not ultimately that interesting on his own. When he breaks with Lincoln and drifts away from the rest, the novel loses steam almost completely. We care about Lincoln deeply and his struggles with slavery are bone-deep and compelling. But the frustrated poet whose career is dashed in part because he "betrayed" Mary Todd? His

worries pale in comparison. As the book rushes towards the end and the author tosses in the poet's membership in the Donner Party almost as an aside, it's hard not to feel Harrigan's heart is with Lincoln and that the failed poet caged him into a narrative that didn't interest him anymore than it interests us. -- Michael Giltz