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ART STUDENT BRINGS PAGES OF CHILDREN'S BOOK TO LIFE

SUMMER SCHOLAR ILLUSTRATES PROFESSOR'S WORK ABOUT LINCOLN

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | January 2, 2024

Read time: about 3 min

What would Abraham Lincoln have looked like as a child?

Madeline Renaux admits she had never given that question much thought. But all that changed when she was invited to work on a book project that challenged her to bring young Abe to life.

Professor Jonathan White, award-winning author and Lincoln expert, is writing a series of three early reader books about Lincoln's life, and asked Renaux to illustrate them. Renaux was tasked with determining how to draw a young Lincoln, since no pictures exist of him as a child, as photography was not invented until 30 years after his birth.

"I needed to figure out how to portray Lincoln. I knew he was a playful, funny boy, and that he had big old ears and a prominent nose. He was also super tall," she said. "I only had an early photo of him in his 30s, so I reverse engineered it to what he might look like as a kid."

Renaux, who draws freehand, sketched the black and white illustrations with pencil on pages of a sketchbook.

Her sketches will be showcased in all three of the books. The first book in the series, "[My Day with Abe Lincoln](#)," features a young girl named Lucy who travels back in time and befriends a boy who unbeknownst to her would eventually become president. It is scheduled to be released on February 1.

"I was excited when the opportunity came up," said Renaux, '24 [Studio Art, 2D and 3D Media Concentration](#). "I am definitely proud of it."

Renaux undertook the project as a [Summer Scholar](#), a program unique to Christopher Newport that connects students with faculty to embark on an academic endeavor.

As Dr. White, an American Studies professor, was writing the first book of the series, he went in search of a student who could illustrate it. He was directed by the [Office of Research and Creative Activity](#) to Renaux, who had transferred to CNU from Virginia Peninsula Community College and is passionate about drawing. It turned out to be the perfect pairing.

"It has been such a cool experience," Renaux said. "He knows so much about history and I brought the art perspective. We have learned each other's languages."

Working together, White and Renaux came up with a plan for how Lucy and Abe should look on the pages.

"Maddy and I talked about what the characters were like and she then created Lucy, the main character, from her imagination. I think she captured Lucy perfectly," said White, father of two young daughters. "Some of the characters are based on friends of my kids, and my daughters also make a cameo in the book."

There are a total of 60 illustrations in the book, one on most every page. Renaux also created the artwork for the book's cover.

An avid reader as a child, Renaux used the memory of art in her favorite books to help render her images for White's book.

"I put myself back in the headspace of what I liked as a kid," said Renaux, who also did research in the children's section of Tribble Library.

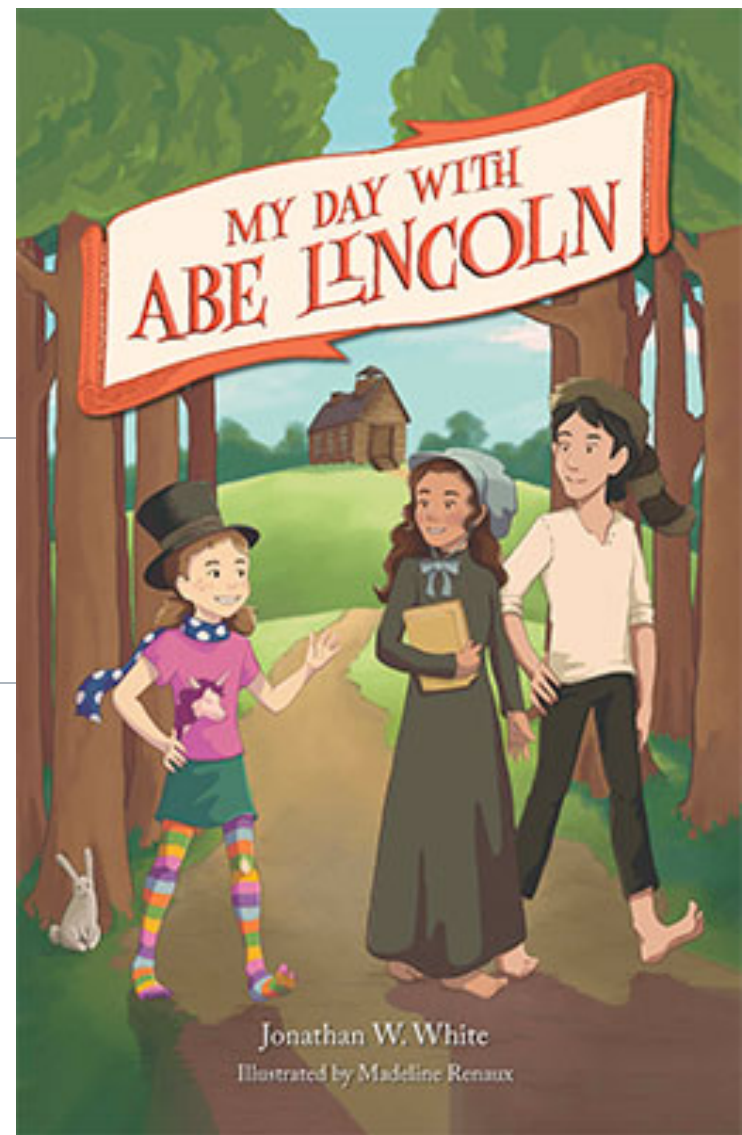
When she created Lucy, she decided to portray her as a youngster with pigtails and freckles. In the story, Lucy wears a silly costume.

The story is about Lucy not wanting to go to school one day. Instead, she journeys back in time courtesy of the power of a magic black top hat. She meets the young Lincoln in rural Indiana. The book tells true stories of Lincoln's childhood and Lucy bears witness to them. Before she is jettisoned back into modern times, Lucy leaves the magic black hat for Lincoln. A black stovepipe hat later became one of President Lincoln's trademarks.

The book is White's first attempt at writing for young readers.

"I've written a lot of adult non-fiction books, but a few years ago I decided to try my hand at writing a children's book of my own. Originally, I planned to do a picture book for very young children about Lincoln's youth, but as the idea evolved, it turned into an early reader chapter book," White said. "In the story, Lucy goes to school with a young Abe Lincoln, and she learns a lot about his life - like that he was a terrible speller for his entire life, and that he almost died several times when he was a kid. The book is based on years of research and is very historically accurate, other than the time travel part! My hope is that it will be a fun and engaging way to make history exciting for young readers."

Renaux said she learned a lot about Lincoln from the story, and is excited for it to reach young readers.



"It has cute stories about his childhood," she said. "I think kids are really going to like it."

The experience of working on the book has been enlightening for Renaux, as it introduced her to new possibilities of using her art skills to help power her future career.

"It showed me that it's possible for me to do this," she said. "I would like to continue doing it."

Renaux's illustrations were a huge hit with the book's publisher, Reedy Press, White said.

"They love the story and Maddy's artwork so much that they want us to turn it into a three-part series," he said.

"My hope is that having her artwork appear in a book produced by a real publisher will open up opportunities in the future. She is very talented, and this book will let people see that."

Having her name on a book that will be sold all over the world is both gratifying and amazing, Renaux said.

"I feel very fortunate that it happened to me," she said.
