



PROJECT MUSE®

Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided (review)

Charles J. Holden

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies,
Volume 34.1 (2004), pp. 76-77 (Review)

Published by Center for the Study of Film and History

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/flm.2004.0019>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/170453>

male-headed, so are all the other families in this film. The three parents we meet dropping their kids at school are all dads; a sea turtle from whom Marlin gets sage parenting advice is a dad; even the one human parental figure we meet is male (an uncle). Nemo's mother is killed, hours before his birth, in the film's harrowing opening scene, along with the 400 eggs containing his would-be brothers and sisters. He and his father, Marlin, are the family's only survivors.

Thus, by the time we meet a now school-age Nemo in the next scene, Marlin is a loving but overprotective, neurotic father whose parting question to his son on his first day of school is, "What's the one thing we have to remember about the ocean?" to which his young son mechanically replies, "It's not safe." Though it is Nemo who is captured by a scuba diving dentist and placed in an aquarium, the film's adventure is really Marlin's. His unwavering search for his son among the tagline's 3.7 trillion fish seems almost an aside. The real point is learning to let his son experience life and therefore danger, to be happy despite all of the things that can and sadly sometimes do go horribly wrong. Trapped inside a whale and hanging onto its tongue for dear life, Marlin's new friend Dory prompts him to just let go. "How do you know that we won't get hurt?" Marlin asks, and Dory replies, "I don't," but realizes that the only way out is to "take a shot and hope for the best." Marlin is amazed that this approach to life works. His task, finding Nemo, seems so difficult that he figures his only chance is by carefully calculating every moment and detail. When, through the kindness of strangers and the loyalty of someone he has only just met, he does find his son, Marlin realizes the value of humor, risk, exploration. This knowledge saves Nemo—Marlin's film-end advice to Nemo when he drops him at school is, "Go have an adventure"—it brings them closer together so that at the end we find Nemo in a much happier, more functional family from which he is encouraged to enjoy learning, make friends, see the world.

In addition to a positive father-centric family, *Finding Nemo* offers an eminently recognizable female lead. She is a fish, so the fact that she lacks an hourglass figure is faint praise, but even better, she is...well, she is a little bit nuts. When we first meet Dory, she is suffering from a memory disorder. She cannot keep track of tasks or thoughts for more than a minute at a time. She is a highly flaky, easily distracted, difficult to understand, hard to talk to super-freak. Dory is all of us (male and female) in both our weakest and finest hours. She suffers from lack of love, friendship, trust, and understanding, and it makes her, not weepy-pretty-weak and in need of rescue, but unstable, unsure, and confused. Marlin deals with life's cruelties by trying to control every moment; Dory forgets because it is easier to let her mind go than to make it focus on what is hard and painful and scary. Her demons creep up on her, and they are scarier than any wicked stepmother or oversized octopus (interestingly, there is no real villain in this movie) because they come from inside. Dory embodies all of us

on our bad days when we lack self-confidence, when we let our fears get the better of us, when we secretly suspect we might be losing it. But Dory is our best days too. She remains absolutely loyal: even when snapped at; even when it means risking her own life; even without very much evidence that her loyalty is deserved or even desired. She is brave in the face of sharks, jellyfish, the belly of the whale, and the vastness of the ocean. The film grants her wish, her heart's desire—loyal friendship and control over her head—as the narrative reward for her goodness, bravery, and devotion and teaches young viewers that happily-ever-after lies in being and having a good friend.

Non-traditional family and non-traditional heroine combine, finally, to offer an alternative idea of home. Nemo and Marlin's little family has grown from just father and son to include Dory as well. Though there is no hint that Dory and Marlin have, say, fallen in love and gotten married, she does seem a permanent friend who helps take care of and love Nemo. As a dejected Marlin tries to leave her, Dory begs, "Please don't go away. Please. No one's ever stuck with me so long before...I remember things better with you because when I look at you, I can feel it. I look at you, and I'm home." Home becomes friendship, people who will always be there, faith, trust, constancy. For Nemo, home is easy: a father, a friend, some freedom, and a childhood. For Dory, home is more complicated as it centers on Marlin's trust in her, the chance to help someone, and her own mental stability. We see the effects of "home" in her improved memory, belonging, and state-of-mind. For Marlin, home is taking care of his son but also learning that doing so means not only protecting but also trusting, encouraging adventure, accepting danger.

Though we still want for some moms, *Finding Nemo's* happily-ever-after really is happy. We learn that good friends can be family, that a little bit of crazy is not such a bad thing, that one earns love, not through outer beauty, but through trust and loyalty. I came out of last summer's Disney blockbuster, *Lilo and Stitch*, similarly encouraged by its alternative family and by female characters who looked realistic in bikinis. If Disney's hold on kids' culture remains relentless, at least their messages are finally turning towards an alternative.

Laurie Frankel

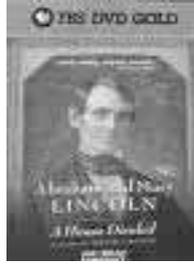
The Community College of Baltimore County

LFrankel@ccbcmd.edu

Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided

Taking its place among the growing number of documentaries dealing with Abraham Lincoln and the American Civil War, PBS's *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided* (a part of its popular American Experience series) appears to have two related goals. First, the film wants to further the effort to humanize

Abraham Lincoln, noting that “the man Mary Lincoln knew and loved and mourned has faded into myth.” The film’s second goal is to then argue that while the Lincolns “reached the White House as partners,” personal tragedy and the onset of the Civil War divided the couple (hence the subtitle of the film). The first goal works much better than the second.



While playing off of Lincoln’s 1858 “A House Divided” speech, made in reference to a nation being torn apart by slavery, the divisions claimed about the Lincolns’ relationship are overblown. The key moment for this interpretation comes in February 1862 when the Lincolns’ beloved little boy Willie died of typhoid. Mary Lincoln remained inconsolable for weeks, haunted by the little boy’s toys and even his favorite flowers. The ubiquitous David McCullough then narrates, “As the war went on, Mary would retreat more and more into herself, while Lincoln would somehow find the strength to merge his own grief with the grief of his countrymen.” But there is also plenty of evidence in the film to support a counterargument: that throughout all the heartbreak of the war years, the Lincolns clung to one another as best they could. If the Lincolns were divided after Willie’s death, it is hard to account for Mary’s rallying from her grief to support her husband and the war effort by spending long hours at soldiers’ hospitals tending to the wounded. She also donated time and money to charity efforts for fugitive slaves at a time when emancipation was still a very thorny political issue for Abraham Lincoln. When an old friend from Springfield paid a visit after Willie’s death, the discussion turned to Mary’s Confederate brothers, half-brothers, and cousins. The minister was shocked to hear Mary say she hoped they would all be killed. But Mary then very sensibly explained of her Confederate kin, “they would kill my husband if they could.” And she was right. Another component of the divided marriage theme rests on the fact that Mary Lincoln spent several weeks and months between 1861 and 1865 away from her husband and away from Washington, D. C. It was, however, not at all unusual for women of means in the 19th century to spend long periods of time away from their husbands and the documentary notes that Abraham and Mary wrote one another frequently. Moreover, Washington, D. C. in the early 1860s was an unhealthy, unpleasant place. Most men could not wait to leave the nation’s capital either. Finally, the poignant last few days of Abraham Lincoln’s life, right up to the couple holding hands and whispering affectionately early in that awful night in Ford’s Theater, also testify that the Lincolns’ relationship had in fact persevered through four hideously long years.

The documentary adds little new to the life of Abraham Lincoln, but it performs a much needed service by telling Mary Lincoln’s story more completely. Too often Mary Lincoln gets caricatured in the Abraham Lincoln literature as being crazy, an-

noying, or some combination of the two. There is no question that Mary Lincoln, like her husband, suffered from depression. Her depression was exacerbated by Willie’s death in 1862 and of course by Abraham Lincoln’s murder in 1865. After 1865, grief and delusion took over until she finally died a sad and lonely death in 1882. But by taking the viewer carefully through Mary Todd’s early years as the daughter of a wealthy Kentucky slave-owner, and then as the young wife of Abraham Lincoln, she emerges as a much more sympathetic and engaging figure. Mary Todd possessed a sharp, quick intellect and was well-versed in contemporary American politics. She could be extraordinarily charming, even during the war years when she suffered so much personal tragedy.

Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided was produced by David Grubin who also co-wrote the script with Geoffrey Ward. The structure of the documentary features alternating sections on the lives of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln. Much of the Ken Burns formula for historical documentaries is employed: talking head historians offer insight and further the narrative; serial close-ups of primary sources such as letters, newspapers, cartoons, old photographs, and drawings add touches of material culture; modern day footage of important locations such as rural Kentucky, the Lincoln house in Springfield, Illinois, and Washington, D.C. connect the present and past; and the steady sound of Americana music helps complete the mood of hopefulness and then tragedy. The historians selected are appropriate: they include David Herbert Donald, Jean Harvey Baker, Douglas L. Wilson, John Hope Franklin, James McPherson, Mark Neely, Margaret Washington, Charles B. Strozier, Linda Levitt Turner, Donald Miller and David Long. Presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin also makes an appearance among the Lincoln historians. Among the actors who read as the historical figures, Holly Hunter is perfect as the voice of Mary Todd Lincoln.

Charles J. Holden

St. Mary’s College of Maryland
cjholden@smcm.edu

No Dumb Questions

No Dumb Questions centers on a topic that necessarily interrogates “traditional family values.” The film follows a white middle-class family of five closely as mother, father and in turn, their three children, digest the challenging news: their loved one has decided to live as Aunt Barbara, instead of as Uncle Bill. While the film does not explicitly address “family values” rhetoric, Melissa Regan’s documentary shows its viewers one family’s values and the process by which they are cultivated.

As a family, they cultivate the values of love and acceptance throughout the film by employing the principles of openness, love, and humor in dealing with the new knowledge about Aunt Barbara/Uncle Bill. As the title of the film suggests, both