

● Book Reviews

A fictional Lincoln

Would Abe have recycled?

By Phil Angelo

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As we near the Feb. 12, 2009 bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth, expect Lincolnania to pour forth like a fountain.

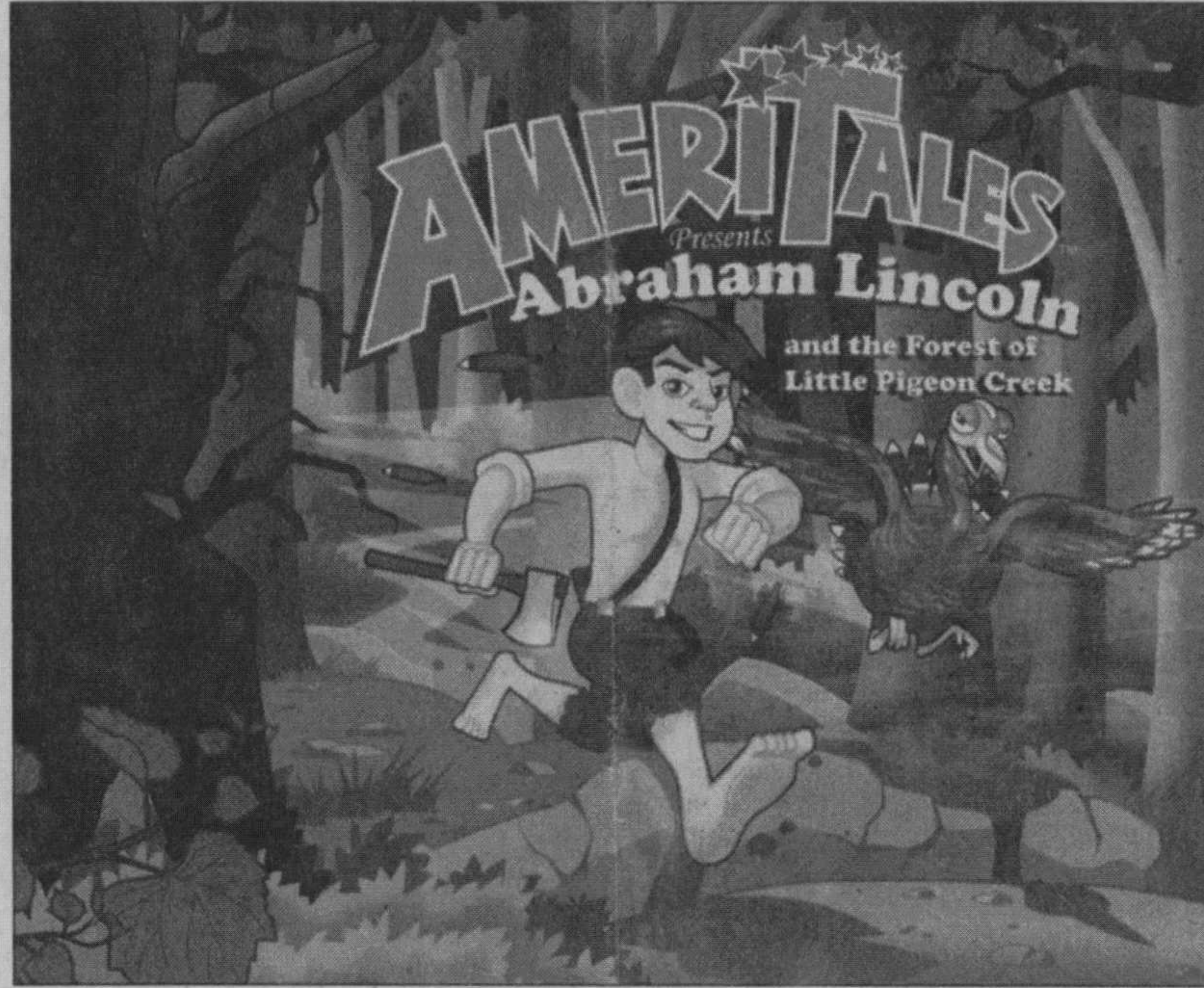
Illinois is planning commemorative medallions for the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Lincoln remains our most written-about president. T. Harry Williams, award-winning historian and author of "Lincoln and his Generals" and "Lincoln and the Radicals," sold so many Lincoln books he whimsically named his home "Lincoln and."

One can expect children's entries, too.

AmeriTales, a youth-oriented publisher, has come out with "Abraham Lincoln and the Forest of Little Pigeon Creek."

Beautifully illustrated, the full-color 56-page book (2007), is \$19.95. T. D. Carter of Cincinnati is the author. Randy Jennings is the illustrator.

The book, the first in the series, is designed around a theme of taking a real-life hero and depicting him or her as a child. Then, as in almost all children's books, the idea is to tell a



A new children's book presents a fictionalized account of a boyhood Lincoln in Indiana.

sort of moral lesson aimed at self-improvement.

This is not the first time anyone has tried this in American history. Campaign biographies, a fond method of informing the public before journalism, were often bunk. Parson Weems sought to elevate George Washington in the public mind by either making up or heavily exaggerating (take your pick) the story of the boy who could not tell a

lie after cutting down the cherry tree.

So I tried to approach the idea of a fictionalized Abraham Lincoln with an open mind.

The story sets Abe in Indiana in 1818. Indiana was still the frontier in those days, so at least they got that part right. But it's the theme that comes across as strange. Our politically correct Abe is pictured as an environmentalist.

There are, I think, dozens of life

lessons that could be applied from the true Lincoln to today's life. Tolerance for different races would be one. A love of education would be another. The importance of obeying the law would be a third. He probably had those virtues, especially the first two, to a greater extent than all but a handful of presidents. On education, the self-taught Lincoln signed the Morrill Land Grant Act in 1862, establishing the great state universities. The book alludes, correctly, to Lincoln's great love of reading. He finds the answers in a book. Imagine that.

But environmentalism seems a stretch. The book gives Lincoln a pet turkey. While his son Tad really did have a pet turkey in the White House, my guess is that a turkey on the Indiana frontier would be more likely to be viewed as dinner.

While the book weeps for the demise of the passenger pigeon, I have never seen any evidence that its preservation was a Lincoln goal. I'm afraid what has been done is to graft today's views onto the characters of the past.

Otherwise, the book is first-rate. Colorfully illustrated with a glossary of words, it's a solid children's book.

But I can't help thinking of the missed opportunity to say something about slavery and tolerance, about the values and dignity of man. That might have been a better lesson — one that still needs to be told and to be absorbed.