David Stacton (1923–1968) was an American novelist, historian, and poet. He was best known for his historical novels, which were highly praised by Evan Connell and Larry McMurtry, but his early death cut short a major writing career. He was the recipient of a Literature Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts and two Guggenheim Fellowships.

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THE JUDGES OF THE SECRET COURT

By David Stacton

Introduction by John Crowley

$15.95 US / $17.95 CAN / £8.99 UK
978-1-59017-452-4 paperback

"John Wilkes Booth wanted to be a hero, but he became instead one of the most hated men in the country… David Stacton has taken all the aspects of his crime and woven them together into a brilliant, fascinating novel." —*The New York Times*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The story is familiar: on the evening of April 14, 1865, the actor John Wilkes Booth entered Abraham Lincoln's box at the Ford Theater's production of *Our American Cousin* and assassinated the president. For most, however, the fascinating details of the case aren't common knowledge: Booth's plans to become a hero, the most famous man in America; the troupe of conspirators he rounded up to help; his attempt to escape to the South after successfully carrying out the assassination; the relentless pursuit of Booth and his companions by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton; the military trials that followed.

In this intricately researched, dazzling historical novel, David Stacton introduces the reader to all these elements and more, exploring every facet of the assassination and its aftermath with a scientific precision and a poet's sense of emotion. Through the lenses of Booth, his co-conspirators, his family, and those he encounters on his journey, Stacton weaves a rich narrative tapestry that tells a story far exceeding the simple facts of the case.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Judges of the Secret Court* follows a number of characters at different times. It starts and ends with John Wilkes Booth's brother, Edwin, but there are large swaths in the middle in which he does not appear. Wilkes himself probably takes up the most space, but has died by the end of Part Two. Does the novel have a protagonist? Who did you find to be the book's most sympathetic character?
2. What are John Wilkes' goals when it comes to assassinating Lincoln? Why does he go through the preparatory ritual beforehand of "search[ing] out a costume for this event which was to make him so permanently famous" [p. 33]? Do you think he has a conception before the assassination of its magnitude and its consequences?
3. The author's description of the lead-up to the shooting is pretty lengthy, and its fallout takes up nearly the whole novel. Why, then, is the description of the act itself—"Opening the door, he slipped inside, took out his derringer, cocked it, and shot the President. The time was 10:15"—so short [p. 49]?
4. "He was loyal only to himself. He gave no thought to the repercussions of what he had done," Stacton writes [p. 81]. On many occasions elsewhere, Booth wonders to himself why he's suddenly become the villain, since the public opinion of Lincoln *before* his death was negative. Do you think Booth, as written by Stacton, is a sociopath? What other explanations might account for his feelings and behavior?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Classic Crimes, William Roughead (introduction by Luc Sante)

Conquered City, Victor Serge (translated by Richard Greeman)

The Moro Affair, Leonardo Sciascia (introduction by Peter Robb)

Rogue Male, Geoffrey Household (introduction by Victoria Household)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Gore Vidal, *Lincoln*

Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels*

John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*

Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*

James Ellroy, *American Tabloid*

Michael W. Kauffman, *American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies*

OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

The Conspirator, starring James McAvoy and directed by Robert Redford (film, USA, 2011)

Lincoln, starring Daniel Day-Lewis and directed by Steven Spielberg (film, USA, 2012)

The Civil War, featuring Morgan Freeman, Garrison Keillor and others, and directed by Kenneth Burns (film documentary, USA, 1990)

The Lincoln Conspiracy, starring Bradford Dillman and directed by James L. Conway (film, USA, 1977)

5. Spangler, the stage carpenter, is arrested for shushing someone after the shooting. "He had been drunk at the time, but it proved conspiracy, that statement. For that he would hang. Somebody had to hang. For that they would all hang" [p. 132]. Why? How is justice carried out in the novel? Is it fair?
6. Just before he dies, Booth seems to realize his own mortality: "He could not believe it. He wanted to cry out. Did they not realize it had all been a game?" [p. 170]. Why does it take this long? Does Booth get what he deserves?
7. Neither Booth's death [p. 173] nor Lincoln's [p. 73] is instantaneous: after receiving their fatal wounds, both men take at least a few hours to die. How are their death scenes different? Are there any aspects of the two deaths that are unexpectedly similar?
8. "Thank God," says John Wilkes' mother when she learns of his death. His sister, likewise, is "so relieved she was almost happy… she was so very glad for Johnny" [p. 175]. Why is relief the prevailing emotion? How, in the end, does the family come to feel about John Wilkes? Why doesn't Edwin ever take his picture down?
9. What was your impression of Secretary of War Stanton? Is he a tyrant filled with bloodlust, or just a man trying to do what's right?
10. On page 222, during the trial, the author points something out: "It was only four months since Lincoln had given his Second Inaugural Address, with its last sentence about 'malice towards none; charity for all; and firmness in the right.' But the Inaugural had been delivered on a rainy day and few people had listened to those last sentences. They had been more concerned about their dinners. And it was unlikely that anyone in the courtroom remembered them now." By quoting this, does Stacton mean to draw an analogy between the aftermath of the war and the aftermath of the assassination? What might he be suggesting about the relationship between the two?
11. As the trial goes on, it seems public opinion is very much against Mrs. Surratt being hanged; even the executioner is so convinced she'll get a last-minute reprieve that he only puts five knots in her noose. Why does the court decide to hang her? If the purpose of rounding up and trying the co-conspirators was to satisfy the public call to avenge Lincoln's death, but the public doesn't want Mrs. Surratt hanged, why go through with it anyway?
12. When Edwin returns to the stage as Hamlet, the response is unexpected: "The audience rose, almost in unison, and began to cheer. From gallery to pit the house was white with waving handkerchiefs" [p. 240]. Why does Edwin receive this reaction? Is it deserved?
13. At the end of the novel, we learn where its title has come from: the manuscript of a play Edwin Booth receives called *The Judges of the Secret Court*, by Miss Althea Lathrop Lee [p. 253-4]. What purpose does this manuscript, an invention of Stacton, serve in wrapping up the narrative? What is the significance of the novel's title?
14. Before reading this novel, how much did you know about John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln assassination? What do you feel you've learned?

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