James Swanson is a talented writer, although his prose sometimes borders (and many times completely somersaults into) the purple. There is no doubt that *Manhunt* will sell several thousand copies. As to whether it should, there is great doubt..

Vocational and avocational historians have waged war for years as to who is the most qualified to write history. When Herbert Baxter Adams introduced the seminar at Johns Hopkins University at the end of the 1870s, professional historians sought to displace popularizers like Edward Gibbons and Francis Parkman in the public mind. Adams and those university-trained historians who followed have consistently railed against popular histories that flout rigorous scholarship rules.

While there is certainly nothing wrong with popular history—indeed, its creation should be cultivated and nourished—academics are correct to point out that popular history, which mocks the rules of scholarship, *always* results in bad history. The story is told based on the available evidence, of which the greater part must be primary and not secondary. Where direct primary evidence is unavailable, generalizations can be made with ancillary material, but it is done with caution, not recklessness. Nothing is invented! Scenes are not contrived, and, to rework an old newspaper saw, the facts *do* get in the way of a good story. Finally, and most critically, all sources are cited in notes, allowing readers to read those sources for themselves.

When Swanson sticks to what is known, even if the details can be debated, his writing style breathes life into those findings in a way other writers can only envy. Unfortunately, when his eye for the dramatic gets the best of him, as it often does in *Manhunt*, Swanson provides academic critics with more ammunition.

While Swanson's book is the first to focus solely on the hunt for John Wilkes Booth and his conspirators, he breaks no new ground here. Most of his sources have been deeply mined by previous scholars who focused on the broad picture of Lincoln's assassination, many of whom Swanson relies heavily on (and gives credit to). While Swanson uses Thomas Jones' account of Booth's escape effectively, his obvious admiration for the Confederate courier and "river ghost" is misplaced. Not wanting to go to the point of making Booth the anti-hero that any riveting drama needs, Jones serves Swanson well as Booth's stand-in. While Jones' account of how he helped Booth raises the dramatic level evident throughout the book, Swanson ignores that, but for Jones, Booth could have been captured before he crossed the Potomac. In Swanson's hands, Jones is a dashing and dramatic rogue, but in the real world, Jones was first and foremost a criminal who should have been executed with Lewis Paine, Mary Surratt, David Herold and George Atzerodt.

Swanson's decision not to cite sources for every fact in the book[1] is also troubling. His excuse is that it would have resulted in an exceedingly voluminous section of notes that would overburden most readers.[2] This begs an obvious question. How have other writers of popular history produced solid works with detailed citations yet not overburden their intended audience? In *John Adams*, David McCullough has over 1,760 notes in 44 single-spaced pages. His sources were, in the main, primary, which he lists in his exhaustive bibliography. McCullough also cites 23 pages of secondary material he consulted. In *Team of Rivals*, which recently won the Lincoln Prize for

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[1]James Swanson, *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln=s Killer* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), pg. 418.

[2]Ibid, pg. 418.

2006, Doris Kearns Goodwin had over 4,000 footnotes in 121 pages and again relied mainly on primary sources to tell her story. To be sure, part of Goodwin's motive was to overcome the negative image many had of her due to charges of plagiarism, but there is no indication that the copious citations she included hurt sales of her book, which as of this writing remains on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Swanson lists 14 pages of secondary material, but his 23 pages of source notes provide only 140 meager citations, many of which are unhelpful and refer readers to secondary sources containing primary materials instead of the primary materials themselves. While it is true those primary materials aren't readily available at the corner bookstore, neither are those used by McCullough or Goodwin. Swanson hasn't overburdened his supposedly harried readers—he has done them a disservice.

Swanson's tome isn't overburdened with endnotes because the book isn't to be confused with scholarship. *Manhunt* is meant to become the movie tie-in edition for the upcoming Harrison Ford film of the same name, set for release in 2007. With no Hollywood connection, Swanson's book would be yet another account of Lincoln's assassination that would weave in and out of bookstores quickly and with little fanfare. The movie has its own credibility problem in casting the 63-year-old Ford as 31-year-old Everton J. Conger, who commanded the troops that eventually captured Booth. While manipulation of historical fact is commonplace in Hollywood, those hungry to read and understand the truth of the capture of Booth deserve better.

The biggest problem in Swanson's book is the same thing he discusses in relation to Dion Haco's 1865 fictional account of the murder, *The Assassinator*. Swanson calls that book "a clever blending of facts drawn from newspaper accounts, invented dialogue and fantasy scenes."[3] That's something Swanson should know very well, given that several passages of Manhunt involve invented mental dialogue and fantasy scenes. Throughout the book, thanks to Swanson's amazing ability to channel the thoughts of people long dead, we're told what was on their minds when the thought entered their brains. Therefore, when Mary Surratt is face to face with Lewis Paine, who has come to her Washington boardinghouse after he attacked Secretary of State William Seward, we're told that "Mary must have shuddered at the sight of him. No, not him she likely cried silently." When Samuel Mudd once again discusses with military investigators the man he claimed was a stranger when he knocked on Mudd's door early on the morning of April 15, Swanson knows that "Mudd dismounted his horse, greeted the inquisitors, and quickly rehearsed his cover story one last time. He had three days to concoct it. If he stuck to the story, behaved naturally, and did nothing to arouse suspicion, all would be well." These are just two of several examples of this mental legerdemain. While Swanson sometimes uses qualifiers such as "likely" and "must have" many of those will be lost to readers engrossed in his riveting tale.[4]

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[3]Ibid, pg. 383.

[4]Surratt's "thoughts" can be found in Ibid, pg. 192 while Mudd's are on pg. 211.

Even more amazing is how Swanson knew what Booth was thinking while Richard Garrett's tobacco barn was engulfed in flames. Booth, he says, decided it was better to die than to go back in irons to Washington, explaining that Booth must have had a mental picture of John Brown, whose hanging he had witnessed. "No, Booth vowed. . .[h]e must not be captured and hanged. The spectacle of a trial would put him on public display for the amusement of the gentlemen of the press and the idle curiosity seekers sure to flock to the proceedings." In Booth's mind, he knew he would be forced to relinquish the stage on the cusp of his greatest performance, Swanson reports. "Lincoln's assassin would be a silent star, seen, but never heard. It would be hard for the voluble, loquacious thespian to bear," Booth told Swanson. "It was far better, Booth decided, to perish here—if he must die tonight."[5] Few people believe that Booth would have surrendered peacefully, but there are more historically accurate ways to say this without resorting to hyperbole. "Well my brave boys, you had better prepare a stretcher for me." Simple. What's more? Booth didn't just think it. He said it.

The most egregious of these fantasy scenes comes in Ford's Theater. Just as Harry Hawk delivered the line "you sockdologizing old mantrap" Lincoln moved forward in his rocker. Booth then fired his derringer. Swanson, asking if it was possible because of Lincoln's movement that Booth had missed and, if so, what could have happened, begins his greatest venture into the absurd.

> If only that had happened, then Lincoln, even at fifty-six years old, would have been a formidable opponent. The idea of venerable Father Abraham fighting back against the gymnastic, leaping, and sword-fighting stage star is not as farfetched as it sounds.

While we picture Lincoln as a man in broken health in 1865, evidenced by his visage in the last photograph taken of him by Alexander Gardner, Swanson wants us to think of Lincoln, the young man sweating on Thomas Lincoln's farm, or guiding a flatboat down the Mississippi River. Admitting that the war had caused Lincoln to lose at least 20 pounds since his inauguration in 1861, Swanson reports, "beneath that ever-present baggy frock coat and ill-fitting trousers, there remained a lean and formidable physique. Too soon doctors would discover and marvel at the age difference between his face and his body."

Although he never says that it *would* happen, only that it *could*, Swanson seriously expects us to believe that.

> Lincoln could have risen from his chair to confront his assassin. At that moment, the president, cornered, with not only his own life in danger but also Mary's, would *almost certainly* have fought back (emphasis added). If he did, Booth would have found himself outmatched, facing not kindly Father Abraham, but the aroused fury of the Mississippi River flatboatman who fought off a gang of murderous river pirates in the dead of night, the champion wrestler who, years before, humbled the Clary's Grove boys in New Salem in a still legendary match, or even the fifty-six-year old president who could still pick up a long, splitting-axe by his fingertips, raise it, extend his arm out parallel with the ground, and suspend the axe in midair. Lincoln could have choked the life out of the five-foot-eight-inch, 150-pound thespian, or wrestled him over the side of the box, launching Booth on a crippling dive to the stage almost twelve feet below.[6]

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[5]Ibid, ppgs. 332-3

[6]Ibid, ppgs. 43-4.

Bypassing for the moment that such a scenario is nonsense, Swanson ignores that Booth escaped the presidential box by manhandling Major Henry Rathbone, seriously injuring the Civil War veteran with his seven-inch knife. Booth might have been small, but he was in superior physical condition and was less than half the age of his intended victim. Indeed, his physical condition was so great he survived 12 days wandering through Maryland and Virginia with a broken leg that hadn't been set properly. To play many of his greatest stage roles, Booth had to be in excellent health.

John T. Ford told the *Washington Weekly Chronicle* that he had seen Booth make leaps "extraordinary and outrageous" of at least 11 feet made with, Ford recalled, "apparent ease" that would indicate a man in the best of health.[7] Even if his gun had missed Lincoln, Booth's passion for his cause (and the adrenalin it generated) would have compelled him to rush Lincoln with the knife. All that was necessary was to plunge the knife once into Lincoln's heart to accomplish what the derringer could not. Such a scenario reminds me of the opening of the old "Police Squad" television show. While the stars are introduced, each firing a pistol at an unseen assailant, the final introduction is an actor playing Abraham Lincoln. When his stovepipe hat is shot off, Lincoln stands up, turns around, and fires several shots at his assassin. Swanson's account is about as likely.

One question Swanson asks that deserves an answer is why didn't the Garrett's Farm Patrol rush the tobacco barn where Booth and Herold were hidden? Swanson goes so far as to call Conger, his fellow detective Luther Baker and Lt. Edward P. Doherty, commander of the detachment of the 16th New York Cavalry, "too incompetent to consummate the peaceful willing surrender" of Herold because of their determination that Herold bring out the weapons that he and Booth had.[8]

Saying that the situation "demanded decisive action" Swanson adds "at the critical moment, Conger and the others hesitated. Instead of ordering their men to rush the barn and take Booth, they decided to talk him out, and then they delegated the job to a solitary, unarmed man, a civilian—and an ex-rebel soldier, no less—to negotiate Booth's surrender. It was a clear abdication of command responsibility."[9] It might seem wrong to Swanson forcing John Garrett into the barn where Booth certainly could have shot him, but at the time Conger et al did not know that the Garrett's wanted nothing to do with Booth and Herold. All they knew was the fugitives had been secreted there due to the actions of that "ex-rebel soldier" and his family. Why put themselves in immediate danger when the life of a traitor—one who had given aid and comfort to the man who killed the leader they had served—was worth nothing to them? Indeed when they first arrived at Richard Garrett's farm, the old man lied to them that Booth and Herold weren't even there.

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[7]Ford is quoted in George Bryan, *The Great American Myth*, (New York: Carrick and Evans, Inc., 1940) pg. 215.

[8]Swanson, pg. 325.

[9]Ibid, pg. 327.

While Swanson's view that the three were incompetent and unfair to John Garrett could be debated, he slanders them unconscionably when he questions their bravery. "If brave Union men could charge Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg in December 1862 and suffer several thousand casualties, and if the valiant regiments of the Army of Northern Virginia could make the disastrous, suicidal Pickett's charge on the third day at Gettysburg, why couldn't twenty-six soldiers, under the cloak of darkness, charge two civilians hiding in a barn? Surely, the honor of capturing Lincoln's assassin was worth the risk of a few casualties?"[10]

A few casualties? Swanson answers part of his own question by describing the condition at the time he hungers for this dramatic conclusion. It was dark. The soldiers could not see Booth, but he could see them. They had no idea what obstacles might lay on the barn floor, causing them to trip with loaded weapons in hand. And for all the soldiers knew, others might be in the woods waiting for such an event to occur before charging the unit and opening fire. Plus, Swanson is wrong in saying 26 men were surrounding the barn. Some patrol members were watching the Garretts while others were taking care of the group's horses.

In the confusion and bloodbath that would have followed, those men might have captured Booth and Herold *dead or alive*, but several would have been shot either by the fugitives or by their own comrades. The honor of capturing Lincoln's assassin would be little comfort to those who would have died for no reason. It might even have given the pair yet another chance to escape. As long as the sun was down, the best thing that Conger, Baker and Doherty could have done was what they did—wait Booth out. And it should be noted that not one patrol member lost his life thanks to the trio's patience.

As for their bravery, nowhere does Swanson mention that Conger had been wounded twice during the Civil War, the first time being left for dead on the battlefield. The second time, he was involved in another suicidal charge, this time during the Wilson-Kautz Raid in 1864, when he led his troops toward the Roanoke Bridge over the Staunton River. Doherty had distinguished himself several times on the battlefield, and indeed, a pair of captain's bars were awaiting his return from Virginia as he had been promoted for his meritorious service at the Battle of Elk Run, where his action saved the regiment. While not distinguishing himself in battle, Baker stood unguarded (and a little foolishly) at the door to Garrett's barn, where even Booth said he had several clear shots at him. As long as the soldiers and the detectives took no rash actions, Booth was going nowhere. Most importantly, even as Swanson mentions, they all wanted to take Booth alive. Their chances of doing that were greater as long as they didn't foolishly try to do something that would have little purpose other than to satiate Swanson's (or Booth's) own desire for bloodlust.

Swanson also sullies the soldier's memory when he declares that even while on the road to Bowling Green, Va., Conger, Baker and Doherty, and the cavalry unit were greedily rubbing their hands together, anxious to spend the blood money they knew was coming their way because of the capture. "Thousands and thousands of dollars were exactly what Conger, Baker, Doherty, and the men of the Sixteenth New York had in mind," he writes.[11] Twaddle! While it is certainly true that many people involved in an *unofficial* capacity joined in the search because they hungered for the money, to say that those in government service, especially those in the military, were only interested in lining their pockets and were not seeking to avenge Lincoln's death is insulting. The main purpose of a reward is to cause someone to betray a fugitive's location. That never happened. No one knew for sure that the awards would even be made.

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[10]Ibid, pg. 322.

[11]Ibid, pg. 348.

In the field there were disputes and hard feelings between the team of Conger/Baker and Doherty. But this came not from any dreams of a windfall but from a clash of egos. Conger had been a lieutenant colonel during the war and didn't suffer junior officers gladly, which Doherty (and, in the war, Baker) certainly were. He once told his own men they were a "damned sight worse than stragglers." With his military career ending involuntarily, Conger saw this as one last opportunity to serve his country, lead troops into battle yet again, and capture the most hated man in America. The other patrol members certainly shared that last yearning.

The battle for the rewards that erupted afterward came about undoubtedly because of a desire for money, but while greed might have played a role for some (and even that's hard to prove conclusively), a more likely explanation is that money confirmed how each saw his own role in the field, as a man who had served his fallen president best, and as a man who possessed the intelligence and cunning necessary to lead those troops to Booth. Did any ever say that? No. But in the articles written and speeches given throughout the remainder of their lives, they rarely (if ever) mention money. Especially as they aged, the money was less important than impressing upon the public the significant contributions of their actions in capturing Booth. They did what various generals did throughout the remainder of their lives—re-fight each battle in the public arena to justify a controversial action or outcome. That Swanson chooses to believe what was started in 1909 by Clara Laughlin and David Miller Dewitt and further enhanced by Otto Eisenschiml is certainly his right, but it's wrong, and it's bad history. And I daresay he can provide no proof because Laughlin, Dewitt or Eisenschiml never could.

As I searched the book, I found one blatant error in fact. It wasn't Gore Vidal who said that the worst thing to happen to Lincoln since the assassination was to be written about by Carl Sandburg. It was the literary critic Edmund Wilson, in his masterwork *Patriotic Gore*. While there may have been other minor factual mistakes, those pale compared to what Swanson failed to do. With his poetic writing ability and love for the subject, Swanson could have taken the study of the Lincoln assassination to a higher level and produced a book that would have helped to counter the accusations made against popular history writers by the academic crowd. He could have brought a little more respect to those who toil in the archives without the benefit of a doctorate. Instead, what he has done is to produce a highly readable but flawed piece of work that one hopes will soon be forgotten. But given William Hanchett's prescient statement that a kind of Gresham's law has operated in the books about Lincoln's murder—those that are sensationalistic and bad stick in the public mind and drive out those that are good[12] it's doubtful that will happen.

[12]William Hanchett, *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pg. 3.