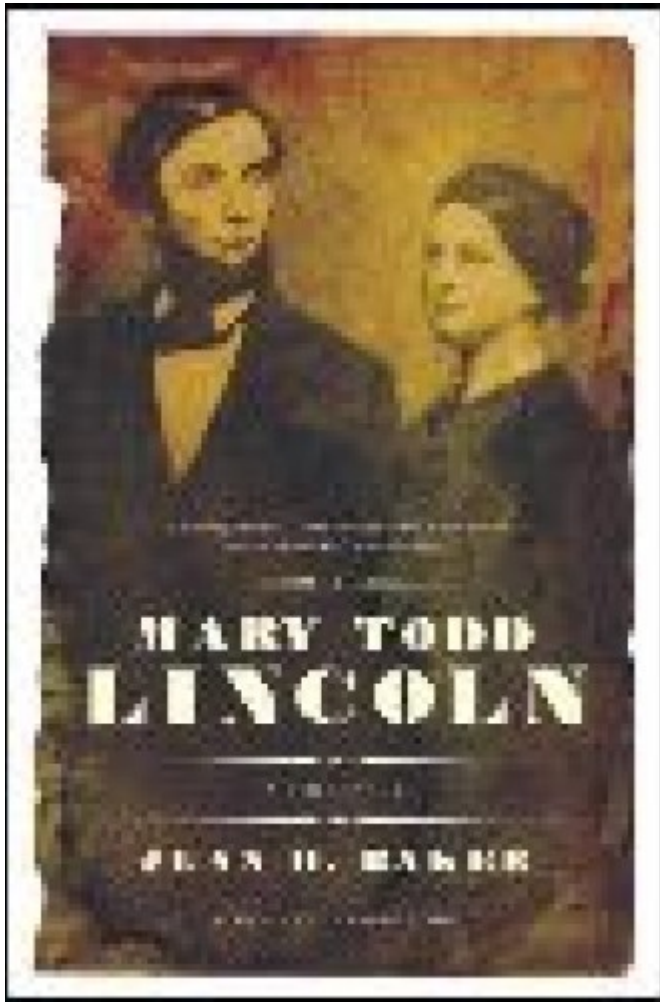


# BookMarks

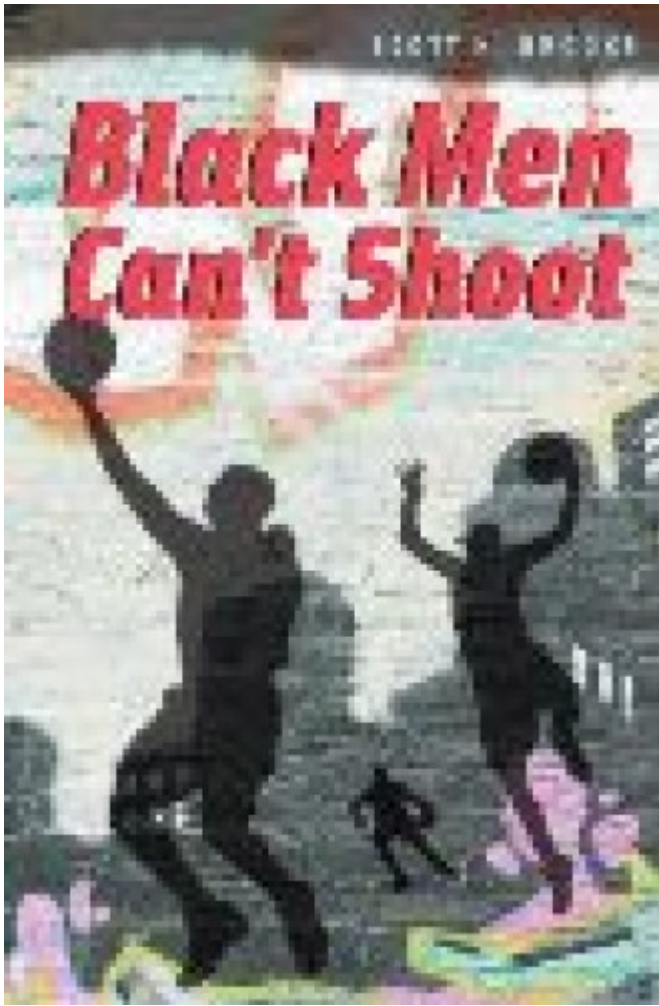
Books in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



### **Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography**

Jean H. Baker  
Norton



## **Black Men Can't Shoot**

Scott N. Brooks

University of Chicago Press

One of the most important books to read in the year of Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday may be Jean Baker's biography of Mary Todd Lincoln, originally published in 1987 and reissued last year. Mary lost her mother early and competed in vain for parental affection with 14 siblings and half-siblings. Her lifelong need for recognition, along with her ambition and keen interest in the male world of politics and her compulsive need for fashion and finery, set the first lady up for scorn. When she lost three sons and a husband, she found herself known mainly for her debts and her "excessive" grieving (a woman was expected to show a brave resignation in the face of loss). Her remaining son, perhaps ambitious and embarrassed, was eager to have her "put away." Her willfulness, feistiness and maladies are part of a larger picture of America before and during the Civil War. But in Baker's story, what seemed

aberrant behavior to Mary Todd Lincoln's peers makes sense in context. Baker leaves the reader humbled and admiring of this woman who made her way through a cataclysmic era and a most awful fate.

Brooks, an urban sociologist, disproves the assumption that athletics come naturally to young black sports stars. While a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, he became an assistant coach of a basketball city league in Philadelphia, and he followed the trajectory of two young men, Ray and Jermaine, who were trying to make it big time in the sport. For promising young athletes like them, hard work is necessary, Brooks discovered, and a whole social network exists—extended family members and men in the neighborhood who didn't make it themselves—to help them excel and stay out of trouble. A fine ethnography of an American subculture, *Black Men Can't Shoot* is a pleasure to read.