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The primary arguments in favor of McPhearson are his scholarship, his ability to use the facts and his prose in the aid of the narrative rather than in opposition to it, and his ability to set the entire narrative in proper context. I have cheated a bit and so I already have some idea about his prose which I do find to be succinct and compelling. I think I agree with the New York Times reviewer who makes a point of discussing how little time is devoted to the assassination of Lincoln. Remaining focused on the true subject and only diverting when that subject would be served by it is the better writing.

McPhearson is lauded for his scholarship, including all but one the harshest of criticisms written on the Amazon reviews, and this speaks well of the book. I would be remiss to throw out a source for missing a year one way or another, but accuracy allows us to focus on the point at hand. It is very difficult indeed to make a successful argument if your listener/reader is forever quibbling over this detail or that.

A case in point. What is exhoriate? I dont know. I dont thing the internet knows. Websters.com doesnt know. Could be excoriate, could be some version of exhortation, maybe a combination of both? Regardless i couldnt focus at all on the Amazon reviewer's message after the second iteration of that.

It bears mentioning that primary argument by the Amazon reviews is one of bias. McPhearson is accused repeatedly of having a nothern, often liberal, bias. Since all of the people saying this seem to be southerners it is difficult to judge if this might be so. It may be impossible to judge anyways. If I state that the North won that predetermines a human bias to want to side with the victor, is it possible to discuss the Civil War without either internally being relieved or angered at the outcome? The Amazon reviewers smell a bit like the sort of people who think the 1st amendment allows them to say whatever they want on a message board when they start talking about some sort of pure ideal of the impartial historian. If such a thing is possible, I would like to see it. Until then I classify it as a relative of the impartial Journalist and take a pass on anyone's opinion who mentions it much as I would someone who talks about unicorns and faeries.

The notable exception to this is the review titled " Does This Pulitzer Make Me Look Fat?" The reviewer sounds like he may know what he's talking about, but there are no citations. No place to check his facts against McPhearsons. Some of it is quibbling, but it sounds like there may be more nuance to the story than McPhearson covers. I wish we knew more.

I look forward to the McPhearson book. I take the point that we should be sceptical of what we read, viewing it with full awareness that it may need to be fact checked and an eye for opinion and editorial comment. Similarly though, The Amazon reviews probably aren't particularly useful.

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