

# [***'Manhunt' struggles to find the drama in Apple's Lincoln-assassination thriller***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJM-9VS1-JBSS-S3J4-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; What sounds like an enticing historical thriller mostly falls flat in "Manhunt," an Apple TV+ series about the frantic search for [*John Wilkes Booth*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/29/us/john-wilkes-booth-wanted-poster-trnd/index.html) after he [*assassinated Abraham Lincoln*](https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/feat-abraham-lincoln-assassination-150-anniversary/index.html). Using flashbacks to flesh out the seven episodes, the show lacks the narrative momentum the title would suggest, feeling a little too much like homework by landing in a no-man's land that doesn't find the sweet spot between ***politics*** and true crime.

Adapted from James L. Swanson's bestselling book, "Manhunt" largely oscillates between two principal characters: Edwin Stanton (Tobias Menzies of [*"The Crown"*](https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/16/entertainment/the-crown-season-3-review/index.html) and "Outlander" renown), Lincoln's Secretary of War - who filled the leadership vacuum created by his boss' death while being wracked with guilt for not having been at his side - and Booth (Anthony Boyle, also featured in Apple's [*"Masters of the Air"*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/25/entertainment/masters-of-the-air-review/index.html)), who managed to stay ahead of the authorities for days despite an injured leg thanks to a network of like-minded confederates.

Stanton's arc includes cutting back to the prosecution of the Civil War and his relationship with Lincoln (Hamish Linklater, mostly unrecognizable while nailing the reedy voice), as on-air graphics grimly count down to the president's fateful trip to Ford's Theatre.

As for Booth, his odyssey takes him to various stops, including the home of friendly doctor Samuel Mudd (Matt Walsh), while his fame as an actor, even in this pre-screen era, serves as both a help and occasional hindrance to his efforts to escape.

Despite seeking to flesh out the story with detours into the actions of peripheral players - a conceit that tends to work better in literary form - the structure undercuts the dramatic tension. And while Menzies brings considerable gravitas to Stanton's impressive juggling of tasks, turning him into a sort-of detective spearheading the hunt for Booth feels a trifle strained.

Perhaps foremost, what should represent a chance to zoom in on one aspect of a fascinating chapter in history, one that has echoed across decades, suffers because none of the characters really hold your attention. That's especially true of Booth, through no fault of Boyle's, who as written possesses less depth than his flamboyantly villainous mustache.

"Manhunt" starts a bit better than it finishes, faring best in capturing the chaos throughout Washington immediately following the assassination, and the political fallout as Stanton seizes and steadies the reins of government. That challenge is magnified by his lack of faith in or respect for Vice President Andrew Johnson ("24" alum Glenn Morshower), whose initial response to the horrifying news is to get drunk.

"Manhunt" sounds promising on paper, only to mirror Apple's even-splashier World War II series "Masters of the Air" by offering a meticulously produced window into the past that only fitfully gets off the ground.

To paraphrase a very old line: other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the show? While it would be nice to enthusiastically endorse an ambitious project with classy credentials, doing so would hardly honor the example set forth by Honest Abe.

"Manhunt" premieres March 15 on Apple TV+. (Disclosure: Lowry's wife works for a division of Apple.)

Review by Brian Lowry, CNN

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