

Book Club Notes and Prompts for *Old Abe*

The Book in Brief

Old Abe is a historical novel that depicts Abraham Lincoln during the last five years of his life. It begins in May 1860, right before his nomination for president, and ends with his assassination in April 1865. We are at Lincoln's side on every page as he makes his way through the most cataclysmic years in American history. I wrote this book as fiction because I wanted to bring Lincoln to life for readers. I also wanted to remind them of what an extraordinary service he rendered. Although this book is fiction, I wanted to make sure my portrayal of Lincoln was accurate, so I spent years researching his life and have drawn on hundreds of primary and secondary sources. We understand the American story better if we understand Lincoln because, in many ways, he stands center stage in that great American story. – John Cribb

Central Themes

The Civil War. If Lincoln is the hero of *Old Abe*, then you could say that the Civil War itself is his main antagonist. As soon as he is elected, events quickly spin out of control, and death and destruction pile up around him. The war becomes a monster threatening to destroy everything he knows and loves. His struggle to end the war while preserving the Union and its founding principles is the main conflict of the book.

The End of Slavery. Lincoln was born at a time when slavery and other forms of bondage were common—not just in the United States, but the world over. Lincoln knew it was a moral wrong and a glaring contradiction in a nation founded on the idea the people should be free. He also knew that slavery was, at bottom, the cause of the Civil War. How could he rid the country of the terrible institution and still hold the Union together? This becomes the great challenge of his presidency.

Lincoln's Leadership. In some ways, Lincoln was one of the least prepared of American presidents. He had less than a year of formal education, and that took place in log cabin schoolhouses on the Kentucky and Indiana frontiers. He had served only one term in Congress. His executive experience was limited to running a failed general store as a young man and, later, acting as senior partner in a two-man law firm. He stepped into the presidency knowing practically nothing about conducting a war. Yet he became, in the estimate of many historians, our greatest president. How did he do it?

Mary's Struggles. Mary was very ambitious for Abraham. In their early years of marriage, she told friends that her husband would be president someday. But, as it turned out, she was not emotionally equipped for the fiery trial of the White House years. Mary and Abraham have no idea what they are getting into when he is elected. It is like stepping into a river of fire and blood that

keeps rushing at them. As Mary's mental health declines, particularly after the death of their son Willie, Abraham struggles to prop her up as best he can.

Lincoln's Faith. Lincoln became a man of deep faith during the presidential years. He may have known the Bible better than any president before or since, though he was never truly comfortable with organized religion. During the war, he concludes that God is taking a direct hand in dealing with slavery. "He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offence came," he tells the nation in his Second Inaugural Address in 1865. He also urges Americans to act "with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right" as they strive to bind up the nation's wounds.

Ideas for Discussion

In *Old Abe's* forward, William J. Bennett writes that "This book makes you love Lincoln" (page viii). Is that true for you? How do you feel about Lincoln after reading *Old Abe*? Did it change your opinion of him?

The forward describes the Lincoln of *Old Abe* as "a flesh-and-blood man but also a great man—the great American hero who embodies this country's finest ideals" (page xi). What ideals does Lincoln embody? Would you describe him as a great man?

The narrator uses the name "Abraham" rather than "Lincoln" to tell this story. What effect did that have on your reading experience?

This book is a third-person narrative, but the narrator rarely leaves Abraham's side and often conveys his thoughts. How did that vantage point affect your reading experience?

This is a work of fiction, but the author has stayed close to actual history. The line between fiction and history is very thin here. What advantages does that bring to the reading experience? What disadvantages does it bring? How does the interplay of fictional and historical events enrich your understanding of Lincoln and his times?

Abraham Lincoln is widely regarded as one of America's greatest presidents, if not the greatest. What made him such a great president? What personal traits or virtues did he possess that made him such an effective leader?

Going into his presidency, Lincoln was determined to hold the Union together no matter what, even if it meant war. Why was he so determined to preserve the Union? (Consider, for example, Chapter 20, pages 125-26.)

Discuss Abraham's writing and signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. What were his worries about issuing it? What did he think about the proclamation on the day he signed it? How did he come to view it afterwards? (Consider, for example, Chapter 27, pages 175-77; Chapter 32, pages 206-12; and Chapter 41, pages 272-74.)

Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address in November 1863. He began his speech with the words "Four score and seven years ago," which is another way of saying "eighty-seven years ago," referring to 1776, the year of the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was Lincoln's favorite founding document. Why do you think he loved it so much? What principles in the Declaration guided Lincoln during his presidency?

As *Old Abe* progresses, Mary changes. She begins with self-confidence and optimism, but gradually grows more fragile, volatile, and, at times, frightened. What causes her decline? Why is she not able to deal with the losses and stress of the war as well as Abraham? How did he feel about her deterioration, and how did he react?

During the war, Mary Lincoln often visited wounded soldiers at military hospitals. She also turned to spiritualism and seances as a way to deal with the tragedy that surrounded her, especially the loss of Willie. Compare her visit at the Patent Office hospital (Chapter 31, pages 202-05) to the séance held in the White House (Chapter 33, pages 215-21). What do you think about these two different attempts to cope with tragedy?

The Civil War and presidency put an incredible strain on Mary and Abraham's marriage. It sometimes caused arguments and confrontations. (See, for example, Chapter 22, pages 142-45 and Chapter 48, pages 317-24.) Do you think the years in the White House drove Abraham and Mary apart from each other, or closer? Could it have done both? Have there been times in your life when severe stress has driven you apart from loved ones, or closer to them?

Discuss the burning of the White House stables, which occurred on February 10, 1864 (Chapter 39, pages 258-262). In what ways does it encapsulate Abraham's struggles as a husband and father during the Civil War?

As the Civil War got worse, Lincoln's faith deepened. In what ways does *Old Abe* portray his faith? (Consider, for example, Chapter 24, page 152; Chapter 29, pages 188-89; Chapter 30, pages 190-93; Chapter 41, pages 272-74; and Chapter 46, page 307.)

In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln gave the nation his thoughts about God and the Civil War (Chapter 46, page 307). He believed that the war was God's will. In Lincoln's mind, why would God have willed such a war on America? Is the idea that God steers the destiny of the nation still prevalent today?

One Lincoln scholar summed up Lincoln's faith as "a singlehearted integrity in humbly seeking to understand God's will in the affairs of men and his own responsibility therein." How did Lincoln try to understand and do God's will? How do you seek to understand God's will?

Lincoln was famous for his "melancholy" nature, marked by spells of sadness and gloom. What might have been some of the causes of that melancholy? What were some ways he dealt with it? (Consider, for example, Chapter 20, pages 127-28; Chapter 25, page 157; and Chapter 34, page 222.) What ways have you found to deal with periods of sadness in your own life?

On the last morning of his life, Lincoln told his cabinet that he had had a recurring dream throughout the war (Chapter 52, page 351). In the dream, he is on a vessel moving toward an indefinite shore. (See, for example, Chapter 15, page 95 and Chapter 30, page 192.) What do you think the dream could have meant? Do you ever have the same dream more than once? Lincoln believed that dreams could be signs of some sort. Do you?

Because *Old Abe* sticks close to history, the reader knows the fate of the main character at the outset of the novel, while the main character himself does not. Do you like the way the author handled Abraham's death (Chapter 53, pages 358-63)? In the final scene, what do you think the distant shore of Abraham's dream turns out to be?

From your reading of *Old Abe*, what do you find to be most inspiring about Abraham Lincoln's life? Why?