

Book Club Notes and Prompts for *The Rail Splitter*

The Book in Brief

The Rail Splitter is a historical novel that depicts Abraham Lincoln from the summer of 1826, when he was a teenager on the Indiana frontier, to late 1859, just before his run for the presidency. I chose to write the book as fiction because I wanted to bring Lincoln to life for readers. But I also wanted to make it historically accurate, so I spent years researching Lincoln and his times. By walking with Lincoln through more than three decades of his life, I hope we come to know him better and begin to understand what made him such a beloved figure—and a great man. And because Lincoln was, in many ways, a product and reflection of his country, I also hope *The Rail Splitter* helps readers better understand America itself. – John Cribb

Central Themes

The American Dream. For generations, Lincoln has been a symbol and personification of the American Dream. The boy who was born in a log cabin and grew up to be President of the United States has inspired millions. How did he do it? That question is a main theme of *The Rail Splitter*. Lincoln's life is, in part, a rags-to-riches story. He became not only a successful politician but also a prosperous attorney. But Lincoln's story is, of course, much more than that. It's also the story of using one's talents and opportunities to the fullest potential, both for self and for others.

The American character and spirit. Generations of Americans have also see Lincoln as an embodiment of the frontier spirit and traits often associated with the American character, traits such as self-reliance, perseverance, and love of freedom. Lincoln seemed to absorb these traits and ideals as he grew to manhood. His wisdom came not just from the books he famously walked miles to lay his hands on as a youth, but from the land and the people he came across on his way to the White House. In rafting down the Mississippi River and riding across the Illinois prairies, Lincoln came to know the American character in all its facets. Seeing it through his eyes prompts us to wonder if the country's character is essentially the same today or if it is now much different.

The tension between freedom and slavery. Lincoln once wrote that “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.” He came to hate it because it was morally depraved and because it was the opposite of everything America was supposed to be. He also hated it because it robbed people of the chance to better their conditions, as Lincoln himself had done. As he grew older, the tensions between the tyranny of slavery and the liberty promised by the Declaration of Independence slowly reached the breaking point. By the end of the book, we find Lincoln stepping into the arena to help save freedom.

Lincoln's inner life. As he grew, Lincoln faced the same questions everyone else does. How am I going to make my way through life? What sort of work can I do best? What will make me happy? Will I find true love? Will marriage make me happy? How can I help others? All too often, our image of Lincoln is that stiff profile on the penny or five-dollar bill. But like everyone else, Lincoln had his struggles, his worries, his dreams, and his triumphs. Coming to know him not simply as an icon but rather as a fellow human being is a major aim of *The Rail Splitter*.

Ideas for Discussion

The author's note at the beginning of *The Rail Splitter* states that "if you wish to understand the man, you must first know the boy." Do you think that is true? Does knowing more about Lincoln's youth help you understand who he was? In what ways?

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?

What personal characteristics or virtues help young Lincoln make his way from a frontier log cabin to the threshold of the White House? In what ways does growing up on the frontier help Abraham prepare to be President of the United States?

Lincoln's law partner, Billy Herndon, once said that Lincoln's ambition was "a little engine that knew no rest." What drove Abraham to make something of himself?

How much of Abraham's success in life is due to self-reliance? How much is due to help from others? From whom have you had help finding success, and in what form did that help come to you?

How would you describe Abraham's relationship with his father, Tom Lincoln? Was he a good father? In what ways did Tom help or hinder Abraham's growth? In what ways did your parents help or hinder your personal growth?

How would you describe Abraham's relationship with this stepmother, Sally Lincoln? In what ways did she influence his growth and the course of his life?

People who knew him observed that there were two sides to Lincoln: the laughing, joking, story-telling fellow who loved to be around people, and the melancholy loner who would slip into gloom. How does Abraham's encounter with the two travelers on the Ohio River (Chapter 7, pages 39-43), which is based on an actual incident in his life, foreshadow that famous split in his personality?

Do you think Abraham's thoughts about slavery changed as he got older? You might consider scenes such as his encounter with the slave hunter at Huffman's Mill (Chapter 8, pages 46-49); his encounter with slaves on his rafting trip to New Orleans (Chapter 10, pages 63-65 and Chapter 11, pages 69-71); his encounter with the slave traders at Mrs. Sprigg's boarding house in Washington (Chapter 39, pages 264-267); and the plight of Polly Shelby and her son (Chapter 50, pages 338-341).

What effect did Anne Rutledge's death have on Abraham? How might his life have been different if she had lived?

How would you describe Abraham's courtship of Mary Todd? In what ways were they different? In what ways similar?

Why do you think Abraham was attracted to Mary? Why was Mary attracted to him?

In what ways did Mary help advance Abraham's career? What impact can spouses have on each other's careers?

Mary and Abraham's marriage was often tumultuous. (See, for example, Chapter 49, pages 328-335.) Do you think it was a loving marriage?

Abraham faced much loss in his life, including the death of his mother (Chapter 5, page 26); his sister, Sarah (Chapter 10, pages 57-58); Anne Rutledge (Chapter 25, pages 165-69); and his son Eddie (Chapter 42, pages 282-88). What effects might those losses have had on his outlook and life?

In Lincoln's day, politics was a rough-and-tumble sport. Consider, for example, John Todd Stuart's 1838 campaign for Congress against Stephen Douglas (Chapter 30, page 196); Abraham's defense of his friend Ned Baker (Chapter 30, pages 197-98); and Abraham's near-duel with James Shields (Chapter 35, pages 230-37). All these scenes are based on actual events. How do you think the partisanship of twenty-first century politics compares to partisanship in the years leading to the Civil War?

In his final debate with Stephen Douglas in 1858, as Lincoln argued against allowing slavery to spread into western territories, he told his audience that the issue was part of an "eternal struggle" between right and wrong, between tyranny and freedom. He said that the two principles "have

stood face to face from the beginning of time and will ever continue to struggle” (Chapter 53, page 359). In what ways does that struggle continue today, both in our country and abroad?

Part Four of *The Rail Splitter* is titled “The Path.” How would you describe Abraham’s path? In what ways is it like your own path in life?