

## Topics & Questions for Discussion: FORGED IN CRISIS

1. In her introduction, Nancy Koehn quotes David Foster Wallace, who wrote, “Deep down, you almost always like how a real leader makes you feel, how you find yourself working harder and pushing yourself and thinking in ways you wouldn’t be able to if there weren’t this person you respected and believed in and wanted to please.” Does this statement apply to the five leaders described in this book? How did Shackleton, Lincoln, Douglass, Bonhoeffer, and Carson work to inspire loyalty?
2. What role did Shackleton’s December 1914 decision to sail for Antarctica, against the advice of local whalers, play in the ultimate fate of his vessel? How much responsibility do you think Shackleton felt for that decision?
3. When the *Endurance* was finally crushed by pack ice, stranding Shackleton and his men thousands of miles from civilization, he immediately altered his mission from crossing the southern continent to bringing his crew safely home. What lessons does this decision have for modern leaders?
4. In Lincoln’s first inaugural address, he reminded the nation that “we are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies.” Despite his solemn plea, the United States was soon to be at war. How did Lincoln’s resolve to keep the Union together change and develop over his presidency?
5. How was Lincoln, over the course of his life, made into an effective leader? What were the factors that contributed to his successes?
6. In an 1847 speech to a British audience, Douglass said that he planned to go back to America “for the sake of [his] brethren.” Dedication to a higher cause, at great personal risk, is one of the attributes that tie all five leaders together. What was at stake for Douglass in returning to America? What was at stake for the other four leaders in their commitment to their missions?
7. Douglass and Lincoln are the only two leaders in the book who lived at the same time, met each other, and whose struggles coalesced around the same larger battle. How did each come to his commitment to the abolitionist cause? How did their different personal histories shape their commitment?
8. Bonhoeffer wrote, during his brief time in New York, of his despair and certainty that he had made the wrong decision in leaving Germany. How did this “dark night of the

soul” influence his later work?

9. Despite his years-long commitment to fighting Nazism, Bonhoeffer himself was only responsible for saving the lives of fourteen people; all plots to assassinate Hitler ultimately failed. Is Bonhoeffer a failure? What is the significance of his life’s work?

10. Carson faced particularly female burdens, especially in the earlier part of her life, related to the care of her family. How did these burdens impact her ability to do meaningful work? What are the other limitations that women in leadership positions often face, historically and in the present day?

11. Carson, unlike the other four leaders, struggled with her health at the time of her greatest triumph. Consider the relationship between Carson’s physical well-being and the subject of her work—and how Shackleton, Lincoln, Douglass, and Bonhoeffer’s physical strength or weakness influenced their performance.

12. The leaders in this book were driven by willingness to improve themselves, desire to serve the greater good, drive for success, and strength in the face of crisis. What other threads tie these leaders together?

### ***\*Enhance Your Book Club***

*In tribute to Carson’s and Shackleton’s deep love of nature, move your book club outdoors.*

## **NANCY KOEHN**

Nancy Koehn is an historian at the Harvard Business School where she holds the James E. Robison chair of Business Administration. She has coached leaders from many organizations and speaks frequently at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Aspen Ideas Festival, and the World Business Forum. An accomplished author and scholar (she earned her MA and PhD degrees in history from Harvard), she spent ten years writing *Forged in Crisis*, her first book aimed at a popular audience. She lives in Concord, Massachusetts, and is a dedicated equestrian.