Blending his unique style of historical accuracy with unparalleled storytelling, New York Times bestselling author Andy Andrews offers a tale of war, faith, and forgiveness, illuminating the one principle that frees the human spirit, in *Island of Saints*.

The following questions are designed to help you integrate the lessons found in *Island of Saints*, and to facilitate group discussion. Please use them merely as a guide. Stay open to where your thoughts and a live discussion might take you.

The questions are divided into specific topics of interest, so feel free to start wherever you like.

? On the notion that “no man is an island”

1. Consider the significance of the title *Island of Saints*. The mention of an island refers not only to a physical location, but also, perhaps, to the poetic philosopher John Donne reference on page 156. Where is the actual Island of Saints? Is it a symbolic location?

2. Who are the saints that inhabit this island? Could the community of Foley, Alabama, be considered an island in this instance? How about your own community?

3. The John Donne quotation was written in 1623, when philosophers were beginning to note the interconnectedness of mankind, that is, that people are not isolated from one another but instead affect the lives of others in ways seen and unseen.

   “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less ... Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

   —Meditation XVII

   By using the island imagery, the author seems to want us to think of the power of individuals—to affect a situation, history, themselves, or others—yet the poem itself is about the power of community. What do you think is the true meaning of this paradoxical message?

4. The word saint is usually used to describe someone with divine qualities. Such not-of-this-world qualities are easy to project onto someone like Mother Teresa; it’s significantly more difficult to perceive those around us as saintly.

   Why do you think Andy used the word saints in this book? Who are the saints in Island of Saints? What saintly qualities do they possess? Where have you seen these qualities demonstrated in your own life?
1. Consider the symbolic use of names in this story, particularly Helen and Josef. The Greek name Helen means “torchlight,” or “bright one.” Just like Helen Mason in Island of Saints, Helen of Troy, known for her physical beauty, was loved by more than one man. Think also of Helen Keller, a woman both blind and deaf, as was our story’s Helen (though only figuratively).

The Greek meaning of Joseph is “God will increase.” In the Old Testament, though sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph later triumphed over this adversity. In the New Testament, another Joseph became an icon of mercy by standing by a woman when he need not have.

Can you think of other interesting uses of names in this story?

2. Authors often use irony to help readers understand the message they are trying to convey as characters “learn the lesson.” What ironies can you see in Island of Saints? Do you think they are effective?

3. Literature is full of tales that begin as something or someone washes ashore—literally a gift (or a curse) of the sea. As a literary symbol, the sea often signifies life; a sea journey might symbolize the journey from birth to death. Discuss the role the sea (and the shore) plays in this story.

4. What archetypal, or symbolic, role does Danny play in the narrative? How does Danny touch—and change—almost every character, from his parents to Ernst Schneider? How does his innocence impact each person?

5. What other lessons can we all learn from Danny? Does he have something to teach us? Could it be that the qualities of a Down syndrome person—persistence, for example, or lack of fear of failure (see page 118)—are qualities that we might want to emulate?

1. The story’s plot hinges on decisions made by characters at pivotal times: Helen chooses not to turn Josef in, for example. Can you think of other meaningful decisions in Island of Saints?

What do you think was the source of Helen’s initial hesitation, given the highly emotional state she was in?

2. Although Josef had contemplated suicide, when he found himself overboard, he chose to struggle to stay alive, even though he was wounded. Why?

3. Someone (perhaps the statesman-philosopher Edmund Burke, although not verifiable) once said, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” The author identifies several “good men” in this story; at times when each could have chosen to do nothing, what might have happened?
On democracy, war, and the course of civilization

1. Discuss the distinction the author makes between Germans and Nazis (pages 15, 31).

Is this something you’ve considered before, as regards World War II Germany? The author wants us to understand that the world isn’t drawn in black and white, but has shades of meaning that can be interpreted differently by each person who views it. On page 43, the German submarine commander says, “War is one thing. Murder is quite another.” How can this realization change the way we interpret current events?

2. Josef had this to say about the nature of democracy and civilization: “These nations progressed through the following sequence: from bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to great courage; from great courage to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependence; and finally from dependence back into bondage” (page 141).

Do you think there are parallels to be drawn (as Josef insists) to our own democracy? Where do you think the United States is on this timeline?

On the power of forgiveness

1. Andy Andrews makes a strong statement when he claims that forgiveness will “free the human spirit.” Do you agree? Can you think of other equally dynamic principles that have the power to exalt mankind?

2. The power of love is one alternate principle presented in the story: both Helen and Josef are willing to sacrifice their own lives to save the other. Can you think of other loving sacrifices depicted in the story?

3. How can you apply the power of love and forgiveness to your life right now? Think about it both internally, in your family and social circles, and in world affairs and politics at large.

4. Several characters in this story learned of the redemptive and healing power of true forgiveness. Discuss the principle of forgiveness (i.e., it’s not necessary that the object of forgiveness ask for it, deserve it, or even be aware that he’s been forgiven).

Have you ever given or received this kind of forgiveness?

5. Recall Helen’s realization toward the end of Island of Saints:

“It’s something we’ve discovered together . . . this secret.”

“What secret?” I asked.
“The special secret of true forgiveness—anger resolution. Here it is: For you to forgive another person, it is not required that he asks for your forgiveness. For you to forgive another person, it is not required that he deserves your forgiveness. For you to forgive another person, it is not even required that he is aware he has been forgiven. What I am saying is that there is not a shred of evidence from experts or books—including the Bible—that demands a person ask for, deserve, or be cognizant of the process before you can forgive him. Forgiveness it turns out is a gift that means more to the giver than it does to the receiver.” (Page 236-237)

Think about and discuss the nature of forgiveness in light of what Helen reveals above.