

Literature Circle Guide to CRISPIN: THE CROSS OF LEAD by Avi

Book Summary

The mother of Crispin — Asta's son, as he is known, just a poor peasant — has died, and the boy flees the town of Stromford after being falsely accused of a crime. During his escape, he meets Bear, the strange and fascinating juggler who fills Crispin's head with new ideas about freedom, about God, about human beings' purpose on earth. Together, they come to Great Wexley, a large town where Crispin confronts Aycliffe, the servant of Lord Furnival who has ordered his death. In the process, Crispin learns about his history while at the same time breaking free from that history to become a truly free man.

Author Information

Honored with the Newbery Medal for *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* and a Newbery Honor for *Nothing but the Truth*, Avi is the acclaimed author of several works of historical fiction, including, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* and *The Man Who Was Poe*. Avi faced and overcame many difficulties in his effort to become a writer. He suffers from dysgraphia, a dysfunction in his writing abilities that causes him to reverse letters or misspell words. "In a school environment," Avi recalls, "I was perceived as being sloppy and erratic, and not paying attention." Still, in the face of unending criticism, Avi persevered. "I became immune to it," Avi says. "I liked what I wrote."

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

Use these questions and the activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* by Avi.

1. What does Asta's son see and hear in the forest the night his mother dies? What happens when Aycliffe sees him?

Asta's son watches as a stranger passes Aycliffe a mysterious document, which seems to bear surprising news to Aycliffe. When Aycliffe realizes he's being watched, he chases the boy.

2. What was the daily life of a serf like? What did they receive from Lord Furnival in return?

In spring, summer, and fall, the serfs, like Asta and Asta's son, worked in the fields, where food was grown, "from dawn until dusk." Every day was the same routine. As payment, Asta received a penny a day, and Asta's son received a farthing, about one-fourth of a penny, enough to buy a single loaf of bread.

3. Father Quinel reveals three things in chapter 8. What are they? What does he promise to reveal later?

Father Quinel reveals that Lord Furnival has returned from the wars and is ill and expected to die; that Asta's son's real name is Crispin; and that Crispin's mother, Asta, could read and write. In fact, she wrote the very words on the Cross of Lead that Father Quinel gives to Crispin, although Crispin, who is illiterate, cannot read them. He promises to tell Crispin more about his father's life when the time is right.

4. What advice does Cerdic give Crispin about which direction to go? What are Cerdic's real reasons for suggesting Crispin go west?

Cerdic tries to confuse Crispin by telling him to travel west, where Cerdic says the steward might be looking, even though the steward said he was going to look north. The real reason, however, for Cerdic telling Crispin to go west is to lure him into a trap, where Aycliffe is waiting for him.

5. Crispin encounters two dead men shortly after fleeing the village. How does each affect him?

Finding Father Quinel killed, Crispin feels responsible, saying that his death "had something to do with my mother and me, I didn't doubt." He wonders if it was because Father Quinel had helped him escape or because of the information about his mother and father he had given Crispin.

When Crispin finds the body of a stranger killed and left in the forest, he first considers it a warning about his own death. Then he wonders if, in fact, he is already dead, and this body is a sign that he is at the gates of Hell. Finally, seeing the body reminds him how much he really wants to continue living.

6. After Crispin gives his sacred oath to Bear, he regrets it, thinking it "far better to have died on the road." What causes him to think his fate is so bleak? Why does he believe he must keep his oath? What does that tell you about his character?

Crispin feels it is better to have died because he feels he is bound by his oath to be Bear's servant. Crispin cannot imagine a free life; because he has sworn to God to be a servant to Bear, perhaps, he feels it would be treasonous to break that oath. What this tells us about Crispin's character is that he knows no other life than being a servant to someone else, but also that he is extremely loyal and keeps his word, even if it means spending the rest of his life with someone he doesn't necessarily want to be with.

7. Why does Crispin believe that Bear is mad? List three things that Bear does or says that would lead Crispin to believe that Bear is crazy. Would you think the same thing if you were in Crispin's shoes? Why or why not?

Bear confuses Crispin with the things he says, such as, “If I’ve learned one thing, it’s that he who knows a bit of everything, knows nothing. But he who knows a little bit well, knows much at all,” and, “...churches, priests – they are all unneeded. The only cross you need is the one in your heart.” Bear also tells him that it is better to live by questions than by answers.

Most confusing of all, Bear says that every man should be master of himself. Perhaps the reason Crispin finds this something a madman would say is because it seems contradictory: Bear, on one hand, forces Crispin to be his servant, but then tells him that people do not deserve to have masters. Crispin finds many of the things Bear says confusing, but other things, such as his idea that people should not have masters, seem to go against everything that Crispin has been taught.

Teachers may want to discuss with their students how many of the things Bear says seem to be confusing pieces of philosophy, ideas that are difficult to “wrap your head around.” Though we might find them strange pieces of wisdom, however, they are not crazy ideas. Perhaps the reason Crispin finds them mad is because they are so new to him – he has never considered such ideas; nor has he read books or heard fables or stories that would seem to illustrate such thoughts. Lastly, perhaps, would not find Bear’s idea about servitude mad because we have grown up in a time and environment where people do not serve as slaves or masters to other people. In his time, Bear’s ideas were strange, revolutionary.

8. Crispin is confused by Bear claiming it is best to “live by questions,” not by answers. What do you think he means by that? Do you think Crispin is living by answers before this scene? Explain.

Perhaps Bear is suggesting that to live “by questions” allows us to *question* the world around us, the beliefs that other people around us hold to be true, but may not be right. For instance, people in Crispin’s time lived as serfs, servants to the powerful lords who owned the land. Bear encourages Crispin to question whether people should be servants to others or to themselves.

Teachers can discuss with their students how, in our own history, many black men and women were held as slaves to white masters. To live by answers, would be, perhaps, to believe that slavery is right and cannot be changed. To live by questions, however, would be to wonder whether something like slavery is right or wrong, and work toward changing that reality.

Crispin also wonders what it would be like to live by questions rather than answers. He wonders what kind of questions he would have about his own father, and whether the things Father Quinel said about his mother were true. Finally, he believes that if he were to live by questions, he could wonder what his

fate in life were to be, rather than accepting the fate that has been handed to him as a serf and as a wolf's head.

9. How does Bear challenge Crispin's ideas about God? Find two examples of how Bear shows Crispin to think differently or to reconsider his opinion about God's place in his life. Are there any passages when Bear is unable to influence Crispin's religious beliefs?

Bear suggests that the cross of lead that Crispin prays upon may not help him, that it is just an ordinary object with no special powers, that even Crispin's own prayers are not necessary. God "needs no special words or objects to approach Him," Bear says. In addition, he also says that churches and priests are unimportant, and that the only cross Crispin needs is the one in his heart. He realizes, however, how controversial his ideas are and that he could be killed for saying such things.

Bear also encourages Crispin to see his own fate as something that can be changed, rather than accepting it as the way God wants it to be. Bear introduces Crispin to the idea that perhaps God wants him to "better" himself, to help change and improve his situation, rather than wait for God to change it.

Finally, Bear is unable to convince Crispin that people are put on earth to serve no masters. Crispin is convinced that people must serve someone, if not a lord or another man, than surely man is meant to serve God.

10. Why does Crispin disobey Bear and leave the Green Man Tavern? Would you have done the same? Why or why not? Was Bear's reaction when he sees Crispin what you expected?

Crispin leaves the tavern because he is too excited by the life of the city around him and has to see it on his own. Indeed, it seems dangerous to leave the safety of the tavern, where people are able to protect him, into the unknown world of the city. However, this is an entirely new world for Crispin and he wants to be able to experience it on his own.

Bear is a bit angry at Crispin and extremely worried about his safety. Perhaps jokingly, Bear suggests that this is no way to repay Bear for all the ways he helped Crispin out.

11. If you could give Crispin one piece of advice, what would it be and when would you tell him? Why? How would it change the course of the novel?

Possible pieces of advice:

Not to leave the Green Man Tavern, to trust Bear from the beginning, to have someone read the cross's words to him.

Perhaps if he had not left the Green Man Tavern Bear would never have been captured. If Crispin had known what the cross of lead said, he could have sought help and protection from Aycliffe earlier, and negotiated his freedom sooner.

12. Compare and contrast Crispin's attitude towards God, treason, village life, and royalty at the beginning and end of the book. How has his view of himself changed? Discuss how his sense of self is related to his changed perception of the world.

Ideas for teachers to discuss with students:

At the beginning of the book, Crispin lives in fear of God and the fate that God might have in store for him. His life within his village of Stromford is miserable; he works day after day in the fields for a meager wage and a life never changes. Crispin accepts this as his role in life. As for royalty, Crispin accepts that Lord Furnival, whom he has never met, can do no wrong because he is meant to be a lord, to rule, by God.

By giving up the cross of lead at the end, however, Crispin seems to be following Bear's advice, that the only cross Crispin needs is the one in his own heart. He has taken charge of his own fate by negotiating with Aycliffe for his freedom. Instead of following the words of the priests chanting in the Great Wexley Cathedral — "In the midst of life there is death" — Crispin seems to believe the opposite, as Bear says: "In the midst of death there is life."

Asta's son has also discovered his own identity — he is Crispin, son of Lord Furnival, royalty in blood but not in status. However, he doesn't need to make a claim to the throne; it is enough that he is a free man, servant to no one. Perhaps from now on, being a free man will make up the most important part of Crispin's new identity and how he continues to live his life.

13. The book constantly explores the notion of what it means to be "free." Are there different kinds of freedom presented in the book? Find passages where characters discuss the concepts of freedom and how Crispin reacts to hearing them. How do you think he finally comes to define "freedom?"

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Bear lives the life of a free man. Instead of taking up his fated profession as a priest, he uses his own talents and abilities to make a living as a juggler. With this kind of life, he is free to move from town to town, performing tricks and music for the townspeople. He is not bound to family, to a job that would keep him in one place, to anyone like Aycliffe or Lord Furnival.

As Bear discusses the idea that man is master of himself, Crispin is skeptical. Crispin thinks that perhaps God has put us all in our places, and all of us must serve some kind of master.

Though Great Wexley is a crowded, dirty city, the people seem to be free. Unlike Stromford, where everyone knows everyone else, along with their business and personal history, in Great Wexley people are free to be themselves, without other people knowing too much about them. People are also more free to take jobs and livelihoods they choose, such as selling fruit at a market or operating a tavern like the Green Man. Crispin is, at first, shocked by what goes on in Great Wexley, but later finds freedom in being able to wander the streets without being recognized.

The type of freedom Crispin seeks, overall, is the kind in which he serves God in his own way, not serving Lord Furnival. Crispin is also seeking freedom from his past, his history: The townspeople in Stromford think badly of him and his mother for her relationship to Lord Furnival. Crispin seeks a freedom where his identity is not controlled by any lord or even his past, but by his own actions.

14. Why do you think Avi chose to write about a nameless boy instead of a lord or prince? What aspects of medieval life would a peasant experience that a prince would not?

Perhaps Avi wanted to write a story about someone who struggles with what it means to be free, and how to achieve that freedom. A prince does not have to struggle with what it means to be free in the same way Crispin has to, as a prince's life is full of wealth, privilege, and opportunity. But a boy like Crispin has been given no freedom at all. We see him travel from not even having a name to achieving total freedom. The path is dangerous — he almost dies in the process — but in the danger is an interesting story about struggle.

Teachers should discuss the life of a person like Crispin: A peasant has little money, no education, is fated to be a peasant for the rest of his life. He must not challenge his lord or his own position in life as a peasant. If he gets sick, he perhaps cannot afford food or medicine or a doctor to get better.

A prince has everything a peasant does not — a comfortable home, plenty of food and money, and he doesn't have to work. He can also inherit the kingdom and become a powerful king someday, passing laws that protect his wealth and his wishes.

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-9; Synthesis: 10-11; Evaluation: 12-14.

Activities

1. Create an illustrated map that follows Crispin's travels, including Stromford, the abandoned town, Lodgecot, and Great Wexley.

Teachers can create a group map on the chalkboard or with a large sheet of butcher paper. It might be fun to create the map while you're reading the book with your students.

2. Write a story about what happens to Bear and Crispin after they leave Great Wexley.

Encourage students to write the next chapter in the life of Bear and Crispin. Now that Crispin has proclaimed his freedom, where would the two of them go? What kind of new adventures might they have? Would Crispin run into Aycliffe again or would he have new struggles as a free man?

Do Bear and Crispin keep traveling or settle down in a town? Perhaps Crispin settles somewhere to start a family. Might Bear be too old to keep up his adventures? Are there any more meetings with the Green Tavern gang?

3. The novel takes place during 1377 in England. Research and find out more about the medieval life, the rulers of that time, and any wars or battles that happened within 20 years of the book. Present your findings to the class.

Students can choose one detail about English history from this time that interests them, something not necessarily from the book: how the people dress, the kind of language they spoke, what they ate or drank, and so on. Ask students to make a creative poster board presenting their findings.