



Crispin: The Cross of Lead Study Guide

**by Robert and
Janice DeLong**

For the novel by Avi

CD Version



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Crispin: The Cross of Lead Study Guide

A Progeny Press Study Guide

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Synopsis

Peasants in medieval England had few rights. They were dependent on the lord of the manor and any kindness he may choose to show for all their earthly needs. John Aycliffe, steward of Lord Furnival's manor in Stromford Village, is unusually harsh to one such vassal, Asta, and her son. At her death, not even a wooden casket is provided for the lonely woman. Swiftly, John Aycliffe makes the impossible demand of claiming the family ox, to pay the "death tax" from the orphan, known only as "Asta's son."

Father Quinel, priest, confessor, and only friend to the boy, performs the burial service and invites Asta's son to meet him at church to pray. However, out of grief for his lost mother and fear of the steward, Asta's son chooses to run. Divine Providence places him deep in the woods late at night, where he overhears a strange conversation between the steward and a stranger. When the steward sees Asta's son, he pulls his sword and gives chase. When he returns to the village the next day he finds himself accused of theft and with a sentence of death upon him—making him a "wolf's head," to be killed on sight by any who desire the reward. The frightened boy seeks out Father Quinel and in a midnight conversation discovers his true name—Crispin. He is given a cross of lead, the only valued possession of his mother. Father Quinel also reveals that Crispin's mother, Asta, could read and write—accomplishments unheard of among lowly serfs. Armed with only these scant bits of knowledge, Crispin hurries out into the night and the world, alone, defenseless, and pursued.

Hunted by all who know him, Crispin flees through the forest. While hiding in a deserted village, Crispin stumbles upon a huge man in a strange costume who tricks Crispin into becoming his bond servant. Having little choice but to comply, Crispin joins Bear, a travelling juggler and entertainer. Though hard and exacting, Bear is also fair and kind. As they travel from village to village, Bear and Crispin learn more about each other as Crispin learns to play the flute and juggle. Together, the pair attempts to keep Crispin alive as they make their way to the capital of Great Wexly, where each has his life changed by unexpected events and the currents of history.

Crispin's curiosity and Bear's daring make for edge-of-the-seat suspense while transporting contemporary readers back to times that are even more precarious than the 21st century.

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Crispin: The Cross of Lead, Avi's first Newbery Award Winner, is a story of shunning, isolation, danger, bravery, and survival. It is an adventure story that demonstrates the values of patience, loyalty, and sacrifice. Readers witness the hardship of life in medieval times and the friendship between a caring adult and a courageous child, characters that they will remember long after the last page of the book is turned.

Chapters 8–15

Vocabulary:

A word is in *context* if we read it in the sentence in which it was written. It is *out of context* when it is by itself. The following underlined words are shown in the context of the sentences in which they appear in the book. Read the sentences and try to define the underlined words from their context. Then look up the dictionary definition and compare.

1. Near the altar the priest genuflected. I did the same.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

2. He seemed distraught, as if the pain of the whole world had settled in his soul.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

3. Concerned that I had been observed, I stood still and scrutinized the place where I'd seen movement.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

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4. Closer to the truth, I was in such a state of wretched disorder, I did not *want* to think.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

5. But what I kept pondering endlessly were the priest's revelations about my mother.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

6. Stifling a shriek, I knelt down, my whole body shaking.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

7. I'd have to forage as I went.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

8. Yet my fear of the open road was just as dire.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

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9. In the middle of the hamlet I came upon a well whose surface water lay thick with clotted scum.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

10. My skin crawled with trepidation.

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

Questions:

1. Asta's son says that he thinks of Saint Giles as the kin he never had. What are *kin*?
2. Father Quinel advises Crispin that he could live by his own choices. Is that true in the 21st century? How can you live by your choices?
3. What has destroyed the empty village Crispin enters?
4. Why was Father Quinel killed?

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5. Why does Crispin feel that God has abandoned him?

6. Why does Crispin wish he'd get caught?

7. In what way does seeing the hanging corpse actually revive and give determination back to Crispin?

Thinking About the Story:

8. *Alliteration* is a literary device that repeats the beginning letter/sound of words for affect. In some cases, the author will also repeat this sound in or at the end of others words for even more emphasis. In each of the examples below, underline the words that repeat sounds, noting how the sentence structure helps paint an image in the readers mind. The first is done for you.
 - a. On the third morning of my escape I woke to the woollike world of misty gray.
 - b. Sounds were stifled.
 - c. Solid shapes were soft as rotten hay.
 - d. As I pressed on through the boundless mist, my damp feet sucking soggy soil, the road went up an incline.

9. Write a sentence of your own using alliteration. Try to create a mood of gloom, joy, anticipation, fear, or some other specific feeling.

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10. *Foreshadowing* is a technique authors use to prepare us for changes coming in the book or lives of the main characters. When Father Quinel warns Crispin, “Speak low, there’s always a Judas lurking,” what does this foreshadow for Father Quinel and Crispin?

11. *Platitudes* are commonplace remarks that seem to be said over and over as if they are important. One example of this is “better late than never.” At the end of Chapter 8, Father Quinel tells Crispin that he’ll explain tomorrow, and then he states a platitude. What platitude does he say? Do platitudes seem to actually comfort people in distress? Can you think of another platitude you’ve heard?

Dig Deeper:

12. Near the end of Chapter 12, Crispin says he knows that if he is killed without the benefit of sacred rites, he will drop into hell. Read John 3:16–18, Romans 6:22–23, and Ephesians 2:4–9. What do these verses say lead to heaven or eternal life?

13. Throughout these chapters, Crispin feels abandoned by all who knew him, everything he has ever trusted. He even fears God may abandon him. Reread Romans 8:35, 38, 39, and read Hebrews 13:5 and the end of Matthew 28:20. What do these verses tell us about God abandoning us?

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14. Crispin clearly feared God and God's anger and judgment, but he also recognized that God was merciful and loving. Read Psalms 111:10. What does this verse tell us about fearing God? Just as Crispin feared the Lord and followed him to the best of his abilities, what are two practical ways you can follow the Lord's precepts (his teachings)?

History Connections:

What does it mean to "claim sanctuary" in a church at the time this story is set in England?

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Chapters 16–24

Vocabulary:

1. evasively 2. garbed, 3. lamenting, 4. cur, 5. wily, 6. beguiled, 7. prudence, 8. putrid, 9. raucously, 10. jest, 11. wend, 12. shrewd, 13. servile, 14. tyranny, 15. loathing

Questions:

1. a. Just as wheat has to go through planting, sprouting, and growing to grow to a strong plant, so trust for a new friend takes time and experience to develop. Both take time and cultivation. (Note: At the time they lived, a reference to farming and harvest was easily understood because many people grew their own food.) b. Bear had been speaking of Lord Furnival's cruel and self-serving behavior in war. In this sentence he is saying that during hard times, or perhaps times when we can do almost anything we want, true character comes through and good men will still be good.

2. Bear's father enrolled him in a Benedictine abbey at age 12 and abandoned him. Bear lived there for seven years and then, just before he was to take his final vows, he met and joined a group of mummers (actors/entertainers). He was attracted by their laughter.

3. Bear could be speaking of physical or emotional freedom. If Crispin loses his sad face and become a part of Bear's juggling act, he will have a better chance of moving from town to town unnoticed and thus escape his pursuers. More likely, however, Bear is referring to having a free spirit or mind. If Crispin deals with his grief and fear and no longer allows it to control him, he can be free of depression, loneliness, and sadness.

4. Bear cannot be hung because he is able to read. The law states that if you can read, you are treated as a priest, and priests cannot be hung.

Thinking About the Story:

5. Bear seemed to feel that much of the ritual required by the church of his day was unnecessary. He was not saying that repentance was not needed, but rather that the most important "cross" or true belief is what takes place in your heart. Though Bear tells Crispin his prayers are also useless, it appears he is referring to rote, memorized prayers, not personal, heart-felt prayers.

6. Answers will vary. Accept reasonable ideas. Bear's "treasonous" statements and sentiments about tyranny are a clue.

7. Bear compares mirth, or laughter, to a coin, saying that being happy and bringing joy causes a person to be accepted wherever he goes, just as surely as if he was paying his fee or the price of entrance.

8. Answers will vary but may mention: Crispin is uneducated, fearful, poor, unsure of himself, and dirty, yet he prays constantly, is kind to others, and loved his mother. He does not seem to be bad, but instead has a poor self-image after years of being poorly treated and told he is worthless, without even a name.

Dig Deeper:

9. Answers will vary. When Crispin was captured by Bear, Bear seemed very brusque and maybe even cruel. The fact that he tricked Crispin and forced Crispin to become his servant makes him seem devious and untrustworthy. In the following chapters, however, Bear begins to appear less threatening than at first, even teaching Crispin to sing and juggle, and he begins to give Crispin choices, something no one else has ever done. Accept reasonable answers.

10. In Romans, God promises to work for the good of those who love him. [Note that God does not promise all things will *be* good, but that they will work *for* the good.] Joseph was sold as a slave and put into prison, but God used those things to put him into position to speak to Pharaoh, save Egypt, and eventually save his own family. God worked in Joseph's life for his good and the good of his family, even though parts of it seemed as if things were terrible. Crispin was alone, hunted, starving, and praying for help when Bear caught him, and Bear is now feeding, guiding, and teaching Crispin. God could be using Bear to protect Crispin and even get him where Crispin wants to go.

11. Romans 8:35, 38, 39; Hebrews 13:5; and the end of Matthew 28:20, from question #13 of the last section. These verses assure us that nothing can separate us from God, he will never forsake us, and Jesus will be with us to the end.

12. In Philippians we are told to rejoice in the Lord always, and 1 Thessalonians teaches us to be joyful always. Note that both verses tell us to always be joyful. The scriptures describe what seems to be Bear's ideas about life, although he can get angry, too. Personal answers will vary, but the 1 Thessalonians passage tells us to pray and give thanks, as do the verses immediately after Philippians 4:4. It seems prayer and being thankful are part of, and lead to, rejoicing or joy.

Optional Activities:

1. Saint Crispin was a Roman noble who evangelized in Gaul in the middle of the third century with his twin brother, Crispian, preaching by day and making shoes at night. He was martyred under emperor Maximian Hercules, and is the patron saint of cobblers, glove makers, lace makers, saddlers, weavers, and others.