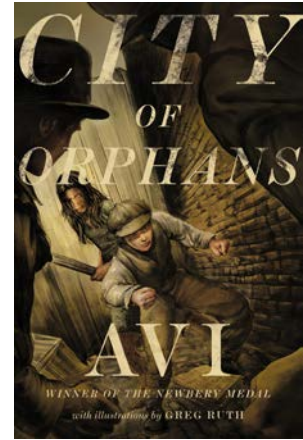


# City of Orphans Discussion Guide

Suggestions by Dan Darigan



1. The realistic dialogue in *City of Orphans* also provides us with a sense of how people talked back then. On page 104, for example, Maks and Willa are talking to some other newsies. What do you notice about the writing style? Why does this seem so real?
2. Setting is very strong in this book. Knowing what you do about how we live today, compare the times back then to now. How is it different? How is it the same? What did they not have back then that we may take for granted today? For instance, their only source of water was outdoor water. Their bathrooms were privies and they lived when electricity was just available.
3. How does Avi communicate the times through his story? Reread and find examples of how he is able to lace history into the story but never make it read like a social studies book. Read the first page of Chapter 23 on page 95, and discuss how much we learn about the New York street life, yet notice how he still maintains the forward movement of the story. Find other places where he does this and share it with the rest of the group.
4. On page 38, 43, and 93, Mama and Papa readily believe Emma's guilt. Why are they so quick to judge her? If the police came and took you away to jail for stealing how would your parents react? How have times changed?
5. In a good novel, characters need to change from the beginning of the book to the end. Focus on Willa. How does she feel about herself at the beginning of the book? At the end? How does this change take place? Note passages in the book that support your position before, during, and after.
6. Bullying is a huge concern in today's schools. Discuss the bullying that takes place in *City of Orphans*. What did Maks and Willa have to put up with throughout the novel? How does Bruno frighten them? How does he escalate the tension and make them fear him without doing what he promised, which was to "soak the street" with (their) blood?
7. Return to the chapter set in the saloon, The Bottoms, on page 166. Why is this scene so important to the mystery? What information does Avi drop into our laps that will help solve the overall mystery? How does Avi show the change that takes place in both Willa and Maks during this brief encounter?
8. The Tombs was an inhumane, unsanitary, and overcrowded prison said to be a "mausoleum for the living." What conditions described in *City of Orphans* about the Tombs surprised you? What would have made Emma's incarceration easier? How are jails of that time different from ours?

9. Though newspapers are in a sharp decline today due to the popularity of electronic media as news providers, how are newspapers still being delivered? How is this different than in *City of Orphans*? Describe Newspaper Row and tell how the process worked to get papers to the people back then. What were the living conditions of the newsies? Discuss “rope houses” and the life some newsies had to settle for, living in sewer pipes.
10. Investigate the last lines of each chapter. Notice that a great deal of them incorporate cliffhangers that are designed to make us want to read on. What are your favorites? Why? Share them with the group. Additionally, some chapter endings provide unexpected revelations, such as the one we see in the last sentence of Chapter 27 on page 124. Why did Avi choose to do this? How are these final lines in the chapters important to the story and how it reads? Consider both the cliffhangers and the revelations?
11. On pages 119-20, Willa remembers what life was like when she lived with her mother and how times were much happier. How was her former life better than the way Maks and his family live? Reading on through page 124, why did all that change? What do you suppose her mother meant, on page 121, when she made Willa promise never lie. Why would she bring that up?
12. In the italicized section on pages 119-124, we learn a great deal about Willa’s father. What conclusions can we draw about him up until this point? What do we learn later about him as the book reaches its conclusion?
13. In the paragraphs just before Chapter 28, Avi describes Willa’s decision and her return to Maks’s apartment where she will now live. Avi doesn’t simply tell us about this, he shows us by describing Willa’s inner thoughts, and then he provides us with a two-sentence exchange between Mama and Willa, who asks, “Can ... can I have a bath?” The dialogue makes this scene much more real. Where else in the book does Avi *show* us what is happening rather than telling us? Find other examples to share with the rest of the group.
14. Discuss why Maks isn’t in school. Do you think he would like to go to school? Why?
15. What is Maks’s technique for selling his papers? What are his tricks? What does this tell you about Maks?
16. Describe Bartleby Donck’s office and living space. What are Donck’s physical ailments? Why do you suppose Donck finally agrees to help Maks and Willa? What part do they play in this detective work? What is Donck’s connection to the Waldorf Hotel? Why is it important to the overall mystery?
17. Find all the references to the Breguet watch throughout the book. Notice how Avi sporadically refers to it throughout the book so that by the end, when it becomes the clue that identifies Willa’s father as the culprit, we are not surprised.

18. What does Donck mean on page 203 by “He who looks, sees. He who sees, knows”? Why is this important to the overall case? What does it mean to Maks and how does it foreshadow his own ability to put the pieces of the mystery’s puzzle together?
19. What kind of deduction does Bruno make toward the end of the book that turns the case toward its final and violent end?
20. Describe the opulence of the Waldorf Hotel. Compare how it is different from everything Maks and Willa know. What hotels have you stayed in and how are they different from the Waldorf? How is Maks’s new job strange and different for him? What does he have to learn to do his job?
21. What is your favorite part of the book? Why?
22. Analyze the conflict of person vs. person. What conflicts between characters are present in this book? You may want to list all the major characters and see what conflicts they are dealing with among one another. Divide the group into sub-groups and analyze each character separately. Share and compare what you come up with. Pay particular attention to Bruno, the antagonist. Do you feel sorry for him or do you dislike him?
23. Describe the factory where Maks’s father works. What are the dangers there? How is this factory different from those today? Why is the foreman so mean? Why doesn’t he care about the workers?
24. Mama is as slow to accept Willa as Willa is to accept Mama and the Geless family. Why are they initially so opposed to each other, and how do the barriers get broken down? Note passages that help us to see how this happens. Discuss how these same reasons can be used today as a lesson for us to love and understand each other.