

Study Guides for the Three Crispin Books

The Cross of Lead, At the Edge of the World, and The End of Time

by Avi

Study guides created by Jan McDonald, Rocky Mountain Readers

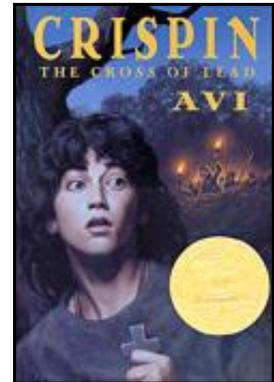
Jan McDonald, the author of this guide, has over 25 years of experience in the middle school classroom working with students and teachers. She also writes guides for HarperCollins, Breakfast Serials, Inc and the Newspaper Association of America.

Crispin: The Cross of Lead

Plot Summary

His mother's grave still new, Asta's son becomes engulfed in the mystery of his birth and the fact that the steward of the manor wants him dead. Crispin's only choice is to leave Stromford, the only town he knows, and run for his life. The mystery continues as his home is destroyed, the priest who aided him is murdered, and he is declared "a wolf's head" to be hunted with a bounty paid upon his death. None of this makes any sense to Crispin.

On his way out of town he meets Bear, a bear of a man who juggles for his daily bread and has a mysterious mission in Great Wexley on June 23rd, the feast of St. John the Baptist. Upon arriving in Great Wexley, Crispin finds he is still being hunted and Bear, from whom he has learned so much, has been imprisoned and beaten. Drawing upon an inner strength and divine support, Crispin attempts to save the man who has changed his life and discovers the truth of his noble birth.



Key Ideas and Issues

1. Feudalism 1377 AD England

Feudalism was the system of government in which all lands belonged to the King who in turn awarded land grants or "fiefs" to his most important nobles, barons, and bishops. They in turn would support the king by supplying soldiers for the king's armies. At the bottom rung of this system were the peasants, also called "serfs" or "villeins," who worked the manor in the hope of being protected by invaders and eventually going to heaven. A peasant's life was one of cruelty and bondage. Their own lives were not their own, heavily taxed, relinquishing all the land produced, and burdened with little hope for the future. The lords were the law; they wrote law, judged fault, and delivered harsh punishment.

In Crispin "everything belonged to Lord Furnival who held it in the King's name." Furnival was a fierce fighter on the battlefield and totally devoid of compassion for his people. With his death, the lands of the manor revert to his wife's control. Lady Furnival will stop at nothing to protect her claim to this inheritance.

- #### 2. The Great Plague also called the Great Mortality. The people believed that God had sent this punishment for their sins. The town in which Crispin first meets Bear had been decimated by the plague. Scholars believe that by 1370 over one third of Europe's population was dead -totaling between 50-70 million people.

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3. Freedom

In chapter 22, Bear says “to feed us both I have put our lives in jeopardy. That is the kind of freedom that exists in this kingdom”. There are many injustices in this world of 1377 AD England and Bear yearns for freedom not only for himself but his fellow countrymen. He is led to become part of the brotherhood that would lead to The Peasant’s Revolt in 1381. Battered at the close of the story, Bear and Crispin still dance in celebration of their newfound and hard earned freedom.

4. John Ball and the Peasant’s Revolt

In English history peasants revolted in 1381 and were led by John Ball, a priest who was their spokesman. At this site is a copy of a speech he made in 1377. Read the speech to get an idea of what he stood for. <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/YALDballJ2.htm>

5. Religion

The Catholic Church was the official church of medieval England. Church leaders played important roles in government. Bishops were often wealthy and of noble birth. Priests had lesser educations and served with little reward.

St. Giles, a Roman Catholic abbot, was said to have been born of noble Athenian parents. He was revered for his piety and admired for his help to the poor and his own impoverished lifestyle. A stone church in his name was built in Stromford and Crispin, having been born on his feast day, claims Giles as his patron.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Asta’s son change and grow to become the Crispin he is at the end of the story? Use one event from the beginning of the story to illustrate what kind of boy he is and one event towards the story’s end to show the change – an event that Crispin could not have handled at the story’s beginning.
2. Crispin is shocked to learn that his mother was able to read and write. Why didn’t Asta give her son these tools? How could they have made a difference in his life? Crispin said that he thought he “was the cause of her misery.” Do you think this was true?
3. Explain what the feudal system is and how it oppresses people and controls everything that is done on the manor. How does feudalism affect the lives, taxes, and work of its people? What was Asta’s place in this system and her son’s?
4. How does Bear first come into Crispin’s life? Why are his looks important? What does Bear add to Crispin’s life? What makes him in Crispin’s words “unlike any man I had ever known?” Bear relates to his animal namesake because a bear has two natures: one sweet and gentle, the other a vicious brute. Are both sides evident in this story?
5. How large of a part does religion play in Crispin’s life? In Bear’s life? In the life of the people of the Middle Ages? Cite specific examples to prove your point.
6. Until Crispin arrives in Great Wexley, he feels that all towns he and Bear have seen are very much like Stromford Village. What do you learn about living in the Middle Ages through Avi’s descriptions? Give examples of how this astonishing city comes alive through the author’s writing about its sights, sounds, and smells?

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7. What is the importance of The Feast of John the Baptist on June 23rd? What is Bear's "other business"? What is the brotherhood? Who is John Ball and what is Bear's connection to him? What does freedom mean to this group?
8. Widow Daventry warns Crispin to "keep him (Bear) close to his true calling...because if you don't help him, things could go much the worse for you both." How does Crispin heed her words? What else does Crispin learn from the Widow?
9. What part does John Aycliffe, the steward play in this story? As Lady Furnival's kin, why does he search so hard for Crispin? Did Crispin do the right thing in making a pact with Aycliffe? Whom do you think is responsible for what happened to John Aycliffe at the climax of the story?
10. Bear is a man of little means but great integrity. How important is "keeping your word" for both Bear and Crispin? How did it affect Crispin and his cross of lead?

Writing Activities

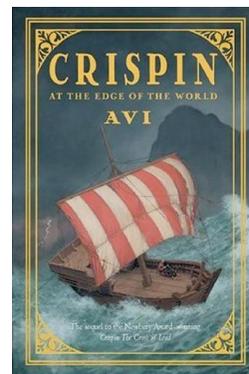
1. Make a list of all the injustices found in the world of this story that could be used as part of the Peasant's Revolt. Create a proclamation that could have been nailed to the church door in Great Wexley and signed by John Ball.
2. Bear was full of song. Choose one of Bear's adventures that he spoke of to Crispin in Chapter 21 and create a song telling of his great escapade. Create accompaniments with a recorder.
3. Prayer is a large part of Crispin's life. Write the prayer he might have sent heavenwards at the end of this story.

Crispin: At the Edge of the World

Plot Summary

Renouncing his noble birthright to free Bear from certain death, Crispin and Bear leave Great Wexley with high hopes that are soon dashed. Hunted again because of Bear's connections to John Ball, Bear is wounded and then nursed by an old midwife-healer and a disfigured waif of a girl named Troth. When Aude, the old woman, is killed, Bear becomes protector to Troth and Crispin both.

Fearing their pursuers will never give up, these three board a ship bound for Flanders in the hopes of that illusive freedom they so long for. A storm of endless proportions kills all shipmen aboard and lands our characters on a shore they do not recognize. They are quickly used by a "free army" to gain access to a church's treasure in France. The bloody battle ends whatever innocence Crispin had maintained and leaves him and Troth orphans. With great sadness, Bear is laid to rest.



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Key Issues and Ideas

- 1. War: The Hundred Years War between England and France (1337 – 1453)**
This conflict began when Edward III laid claim to the French crown and continued over England's right to territory. The war destroyed much of France and caused enormous suffering in both countries. Though a truce was to have been in effect during the time of our story, French and Castillians attacked and laid waste to Rye. Likewise, English soldiers had been abandoned in France and still fought on as brigands.
- 2. Freedom In Chapter 12 Crispin says "...if I'm ever truly to be free, I must act for myself."**
He feels he must make decisions to consider himself a man and sometimes this means disobeying Bear...and accepting the consequences.
- 3. John Ball's brotherhood** The taint of being part of this rebellious group follows Bear and Crispin as they try to live their lives as free men.
- 4. Becoming a man: "being, doing, becoming"** (Chapter 8) Crispin is aware of how his life has changed and evolved. He ruminates over that process of growing up and being accountable.
- 5. Edward, The Black Prince (1330-1376)**, was the eldest son of King Edward III of England. Known for his military leadership and popularity with the people, he died one year before his father and so never became King of England. When Edward III died, the throne passed to his grandson, Richard. Bear fought with The Black Prince in France and was haunted by what he saw and was part of there.

Discussion Questions

1. Though Crispin rejoices at the liberty he feels that he and Bear have won, Bear remarks "The most lethal of all sleep potions is success." What does he mean? Who are their enemies? How do their enemies become visible at the alestake? Do you think they will ever live as free men?
2. With Bear seriously wounded by the arrow, Crispin declares "I must think and act like a man." (Chapter 8) What does that mean in 1377 AD England? By the end of this story, how close has Crispin come to his goal?
3. How do Aude and Troth make their appearance? Describe them. What is the Devil's Mark? How do they make their living? What does Crispin, in his ignorance, fear about these two and "the old religion" they believe in?
4. As Bear is close to death from his wounds, he feels he must unburden himself of his sins. What are Bear's sins? On Judgment Day do you believe that Bear's new life will cleanse his old? Do you agree with Bear when he says, "To love a man you must know his failings."
5. In Chapter 10 Aude says "Ignorance makes fear." What does this mean? How does this prove true when Aude goes to the village to aid a pregnant woman in distress? How are Aude and Troth repaid for their kindness in Chaunton?
6. Crispin calls Bear, Troth and himself his "wondrous family." How has this family come to be? Was there one incident that brought them together? How was Rye a fulfilling place for Bear, Troth and Crispin...as individuals and as a family?

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7. Though Crispin had no knowledge of the sea, when he arrived in Rye he found the boundless water exciting. How does this compare and contrast to his experiences on the cog? What saved him?
8. What is the message about war that can be taken from this story? Explain the irony as Crispin, Bear, and Troth are captured by the English in Brittany, France and used by Richard Dudley. Can they be safe anywhere?
9. What quality does Crispin have that helped him face the challenges of the climax of the story? Did he always have this quality or did he acquire it? Explain.
10. What does the edge of the world symbolize throughout this story?

Writing Activities

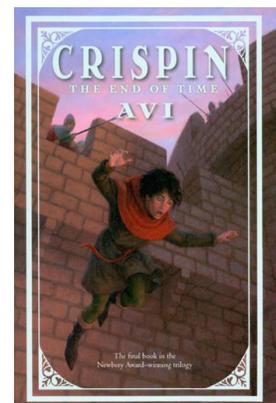
1. A eulogy is a speech or writing in praise of a deceased person or thing. Crispin ends this story with a heartfelt prayer to honor Bear. Write Troth's eulogy for Bear. What would have been in her heart?
2. This second book, a sequel to *Crispin: Cross of Lead*, continues the story of Crispin and Bear. Now with only Crispin and Troth surviving, outline how a third book could continue the story. What adventures would you imagine for what is left of their family?
3. On Avi's website, www.avi-writer.com, he has written reader's theater versions of some of his stories. Choose a short scene from *Crispin at the Edge of the World* and turn it into a reader's theater script. Use the examples Avi has written to guide you in this process.
4. Make a list of Bear's sayings or teachings as you read the book. Can you make connections between Bear's wisdom and your own life? How do they apply to you?

Crispin: The End of Time

Plot Summary

Alone and wandering through France towards Iceland, Bear's vision of freedom, Crispin and Troth are weary, worn, and starving. They find bread and shelter in a convent where sick nuns draw Troth's attention. Using the knowledge she gained with Aude, Troth is able to cure them and decides to stay as their healer. Broken hearted Crispin is on his own until he is drawn to the music and the whiff of food created by a band of five travelers deep in the woods. Crispin joins this band led by their mother, Elena, who is headed to Calais to play at a wedding. Once more he hopes he has found the comfort and security he felt with Bear.

Unfortunately the family quickly shows its true colors as a band of thieves and Crispin is drawn into their devious plot to plunder at the wedding. Getting free from the clutches of these robbers and murderers will call upon every ounce of strength and cunning Crispin has and nearly break him. He will wonder again if he will ever experience the freedom he and Bear longed for and become the man he hoped he could be.



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Key Ideas and Issues

1. **Freedom** Crispin and Troth must decide if freedom is a place or something else entirely. They face the fact that the illusive search for freedom involves pain and may separate them.
2. **Family** Elena and her family of thieving musicians are a sharp contrast to the family that Bear, Crispin, and Troth created by their love and commitment to each other. How can a family show love for each other and plot murder against others in order to survive?
3. **Calais** One of the few French possessions still in English hands in 1377, this seaport becomes the destination of Elena and her family and also Crispin. The first hopes to plunder wealthy guests at a wedding. Crispin hopes to escape the family and find a ship bound for Iceland. The additional danger is that the French control to the east and the south.
4. **Sin and Redemption** Both Bear and Crispin have been involved in situations that called for them to do things for which they suffer deep regret. Bear suffered with these regrets till his death and Crispin must find a way to atone for his in order to find salvation.

Discussion Questions

1. Looking at a map, is Iceland a realistic land for Crispin and Troth to reach? Compare and contrast Crispin and Troth's ideas of freedom. What is each of them looking for? How does Troth find her purpose first?
2. Bear once said, "Hard looks can mask soft hearts." Is this true of Elena and her clan? Compare and contrast Crispin meeting this musical group to Crispin meeting Bear so long ago. As you read, what warning signs were there for Crispin?
3. What is Owen's and Schim's story and how much does Crispin believe? Are there any connections between Owen and Crispin? What inferences can you make between Owen and how children were treated in the Middle Ages?
4. What did the clash between Elena's family and the innocent merchant and his son tell you about the family? Why did they force Crispin to take the man's purse? What did it mean when Rauf said "Crispin has been baptized."?(Chapter 12)
5. As Bear was once burdened, Crispin also is weighed down by his sins and hopes he can redeem himself somehow. What are Crispin's sins? How can he atone for them? Do you agree with Rauf that "fate forced you to act?" (Chapter 13)
6. In an interview Avi once said in giving advice to young writers "Listen, and watch the world around you. Don't be satisfied with answers others give you. Don't assume that because everyone believes a thing, that it is right *or* wrong. Reason things out for yourself. Work to get answers on your own. Understand why you believe things." How did Crispin use this advice in finding an escape from the family?
7. After talking to Thorvard, Crispin feels anger and betrayal. Did Bear lie to Crispin about Iceland?
8. What can be learned about the middle ages from the young bride to be? What does she share with Owen and Crispin? What is freedom to her?

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9. Schim is murdered in a gruesome way. How did you feel after reading this development? Should readers be protected from such things?
10. How does Crispin act like Bear to save himself and Owen? What does Thorvard mean when he tells Crispin to “follow your Bear?”

Writing Activities

1. Choose the member of Elena’s family that you feel is most responsible for their crimes. Create a wanted poster. Include descriptions and list the charges that could be placed against him/her.
2. Write a letter that Owen might have sent to his father in England. Write a letter that Crispin might have written to Troth. What would each decide to tell or not tell about their experiences?
3. Write a book review of this final story in the trilogy. The book review template found on this site can help you: <http://www.makeliterature.com/blog/how-write-book-review>