

A background image showing several medieval soldiers in armor, including helmets and chainmail, in a crowded setting. The soldiers are looking in various directions, some towards the camera. The scene is set in what appears to be a medieval town or castle courtyard.

Crispin: The Cross of Lead Study Guide

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For the novel by Avi



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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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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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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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about to tell Crispin about his mother and father is connected, or perhaps he knew something about the meeting Crispin witnessed in the woods.

5. His mother has died, his house is pulled down and burned, he is declared a “wolveshead,” he is hunted as a criminal, he is betrayed, and he finds his only friend murdered in the road. Crispin feels that with so much bad happening to him, God must have abandoned him.

6. Crispin feels that if he was caught, his misery would at least end.

7. He realizes that he does *not* want to die and end up like the corpse.

Thinking About the Story:

8b. 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. Sentences will vary.

10. Answers may vary but should mention that Father Quinel is betrayed and murdered, probably by Aycliffe; and Crispin is betrayed by a boy in the village who leads him into a trap.

11. Father Quinel says, “God mends all.” Platitudes often don’t seem to offer comfort to people in distress; even if true, they usually simply state the obvious and are very general in nature. Additional platitudes may vary. Some may include, “It’s all for the best,” “You’re probably better off,” “Beauty is only skin deep,” “It’s the thought that counts,” etc.

Dig Deeper:

12. Answers may vary, but should be some versions of belief or faith, submission, and God’s grace or gift. The John passage says that those who believe shall have eternal life, but those who do not believe are already condemned. The Romans verses say that we are slaves to God—submission—but also that eternal life is God’s gift to us. The Ephesians verses tell us we are saved by God’s rich mercy and grace. Note that *every* passage mentions God’s love, mercy, and grace; eternal life comes from God, not ourselves (Ephesians 2:8).

13. This verse teaches us that God will *never* abandon us. Romans 8 reminds us that nothing can separate us from God and God’s love. In the Hebrews verse God promises never to leave or forsake us; and in the Matthew verse Jesus promises to be with us forever.

14. The Psalms verse tells us that fearing God is the beginning of wisdom. Personal answers will vary.

History Connections:

By church law and common law, a fugitive could flee to the nearest church to claim sanctuary, or protection, knowing that the law declared him safe there, free from interference by the law or pursuing people for 40 days. He or she had only to reach a church, or even a religious building such as an abbot’s house, to claim sanctuary. It was not always necessary to enter the actual building, the churchyard was usually sufficient. In some places, a wide area around the church was equally safe, the boundaries being marked by special “sanctuary posts.” The practice probably was based on God’s provision in Israel for cities of refuge, as mentioned in Numbers 35:9–12 and elsewhere. Of course, sanctuary was not always honored, but the Catholic Church took it very seriously, and violators of church sanctuary risked excommunication.

Chapters 16–24

Vocabulary:

1. evasively 2. garbed, 3. lamenting, 4. cur, 5. wily, 6. beguiled, 7. prudence, 8. putrid, 9. raucously,