

An Interview with Avi, 2003 Newbery Medal Winner for *Crispin, The Cross of Lead*

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One of the most moving and memorable events at the 2002 NCTE Convention in Atlanta was Avi's heartfelt talk about his life, his work, and the condition of education in America. As he spoke, most of us were hastily attempting to write down particularly insightful or profound thoughts of his, thoughts we no doubt shared but had never heard articulated so succinctly or expressed so poetically. No one at that Middle Level Luncheon on Saturday was left sitting down when he came to the conclusion. The finale of his talk was a reading from his 50th book, the 2003 Newbery Medal winning work of historical fiction, *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, from Hyperion. Although most people at the luncheon had not yet read the book, it was apparent as Avi read from it that this was a remarkable creation.

Crispin is a fictional account of events surrounding England's Peasant Revolt of 1381. The novel's main character, a fatherless boy of 13, finds himself cut adrift from society, albeit a society of oppression, when his mother dies and the death tax leaves him with no possessions and no means to support himself. In the beginning he doesn't even know his given name until the local priest tells him that he was baptized as Crispin. When the local authority, a manor steward named Aycliffe, falsely accuses Crispin of thievery and then murder, the boy must run for his life. The search for Crispin's true identity takes the reader through an accurate and suspenseful portrayal of life in medieval England. Scholars and students of that time period will recognize the basis in fact for many of the names, events and even conversations.

Avi is not only highly experienced in this genre (his first work of historical fiction, *Captain Grey*, was published in 1977), but also highly qualified; he holds a degree in history from the University of Wisconsin and won the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction in 1985 for *The Fighting Ground*. *Crispin* is surely the realization of Scott O'Dell's hope that Avi would continue in this genre and also his prediction that Avi would one day become the very best at it (Bloom and Mercier 50).

Avi graciously consented to a few questions about his 2003 Newbery Medal winner:

JB: Good historical fiction reveals details of life in a given

time period without beating the reader over the head with it. Without even noticing it, the reader comes away from *Crispin* with a new understanding of what life in 1377 must have been like for a peasant. How hard was it to weave in history without diminishing the story?

Avi: The problem inherent in all historical fiction is the fusion of fact and incident. One tries to root the action in historical reality. Thus *Crispin* is proclaimed "a wolf's head,"

It was during this rebellion that the idea, "All men are created equal," was first expressed in English.

which means, under the law of the time, that he is placed beyond the pale of law—and anyone may kill him. It is this that propels the boy into flight.

Consider the problem of time. This story takes places before the

existence of clocks—time thus is measured by the church, its canonical hours, its feast days. To use them is to help understand the totality of the church in people's lives.

JB: From the beginning of the book, *Crispin's* wonderfully poetic language contributes to the setting. How did you so successfully create a verbal tone to suggest the time period?

Avi: The English language of the day was Middle English—not usable as such. In any case I don't know it. But in the course of my research, I read the poetry of the period, mostly Chaucer and William Langland. I then used their poetic forms and wrote about a third of the book in that style of verse. Once I got the rhythm, I restructured the lines: Thus:

Time was the great millstone
Which ground us to dust
Like kernelled wheat.
The Holy Church told us where we were
In the alterations of the day,
The year,
And in our daily toil.
Birth and death
Alone
Gave distinction
To our lives . . .

JB: Starr LaTronica, chair of the 2003 Newbery Award Selection Committee, says, "Readers experience *Crispin's* surroundings through Avi's sensory descriptions; they see, hear, smell, taste and feel his world." You include a wealth of gritty details about how life operated back then, both in the villages and in the cities. Which details did you especially want read-

ers to know? Were there any details of life at that time that especially shocked, surprised or otherwise affected you?

Avi: The historian Barbara Tuchman wrote a history of this period called *A Distant Mirror*. Her thesis was that the European 14th century, in all its violence and cruelty, was like a mirror to our own 20th Century. To be aware of the horrors of the past hundred years primes you all too well to what life was like then.

JB: The details of the plot are remarkably historically accurate. John Ball is surely based on a rebellious priest in the County of Kent by the same name who preached rebellion after mass, and the language of the peasants' charge (pp. 200-201) echoes the language of the charter which Walter Tighler presented to King Richard in 1381. How much research did this project require, and was it done beforehand or as you went along?

Avi: I read or used more than 200 books about the period. John Ball, of course is real, and his speech is a paraphrase of one he gave during the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381—which was extraordinarily violent—both the uprising and the suppression. It was during this rebellion that the idea, "All men

are created equal," was first expressed in English.

JB: How did the Peasants' Revolt actually end, and was it a conscious choice not to write that into the novel?

Avi: The Peasants' Revolt was brutally suppressed, but it helped pave the way for the end of English Feudal Society.

JB: Any advice to aspiring young writers?

Avi: The art of fiction writing is the art of transforming ideas (which we all have) into written words that build a narrative design. To become a novelist, the most crucial thing one must do is read, read and read again — Gradually you begin to *think* like a writer. Ideas are not found — they are shaped.

Crispin, The Cross of Lead is available from Hyperion Books.

Works Cited

Bloom, Susan P. & Mercier, Cathryn M. *Presenting Avi*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.

