



Crispin: The Cross of Lead by Avi

Subjects: Orphans—Juvenile fiction; Middle Ages—Juvenile fiction

Awards: Newbery Medal Winner, Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People

Book Lists: Europe, Middle School, Reluctant Readers

Props: Lead cross



No one had ever accused John Aycliffe of any kindness. Lord Furnival had been off to the Crusades and in his absence, Aycliffe was in charge of the manor, the laws and us, the peasants. He punished us for many things—like for missing a day's work, for speaking against him, for not going to church. John, the ale-maker's son, killed a deer in the forest and he was put to death for it. Mostly, though, we were whipped, or had our ear clipped, or thrown in jail or had a hand cut-off. My mother, Asta, and I, Asta's son, were outcasts in the village. In exchange for food, I plowed the manor fields, walking behind our ox. But I would get no more food. John Aycliffe had taken it because my mother was dead. Father Quinel helped me bury her. We had no money. There was no casket. The priest and I dug a hole in the ground and put her in it. She was wearing the dress she died in and around her neck was her lead cross.

Nobody else was there. I had no one and nowhere to go and I ran into the forest, tripping, falling, getting up again—just running until I was exhausted. In the middle of the night I woke, finally remembering where I was and saw a light through the trees. I crept through the woods toward the light. It was John Aycliffe and a stranger, a gentleman in a long flowing cape. He handed Aycliffe a parchment with red seals and ribbons dangling from the bottom edge. It had writing on it but I can't read so even if I could have gotten closer, it wouldn't have mattered. Aycliffe folded the document and turned. That's when his eyes met mine.

He drew his sword and started after me. But I ran, losing him in the forest. I hid the next day but at night I went to Father Quinel. John Aycliffe had been to see him and told him I had stolen money from the manor house, I had been declared a Wolf's Head. That meant that anyone who saw me could kill me and get a reward. I did not steal anything. Why would they make that up? I must leave or be killed. Father Quinel pulled my mother's lead cross from his pocket and gave it to me. *(Pull out cross)* He had taken it when we buried her. It had writing on it and he read it but he wouldn't tell me what it said. He told me that my mother could read and write but I don't think that's possible. He said he would tell me what the words on the cross said the following night when he would have some food for my journey. *(Put cross around neck)*

But when I went the next night I found him on the ground near the church, murdered. So, I started out across the fields going, well, I didn't know where. I couldn't use roads because John Aycliffe and his men were trying to kill me. I had my lead cross around my neck with the writing I couldn't read. I didn't understand any of it—why were they after me? What was going to become of me? *(Hold up book)* *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* by Avi.