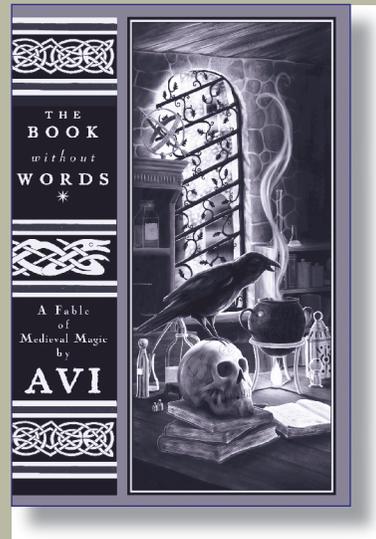


THE BOOK WITHOUT WORDS

by AVI

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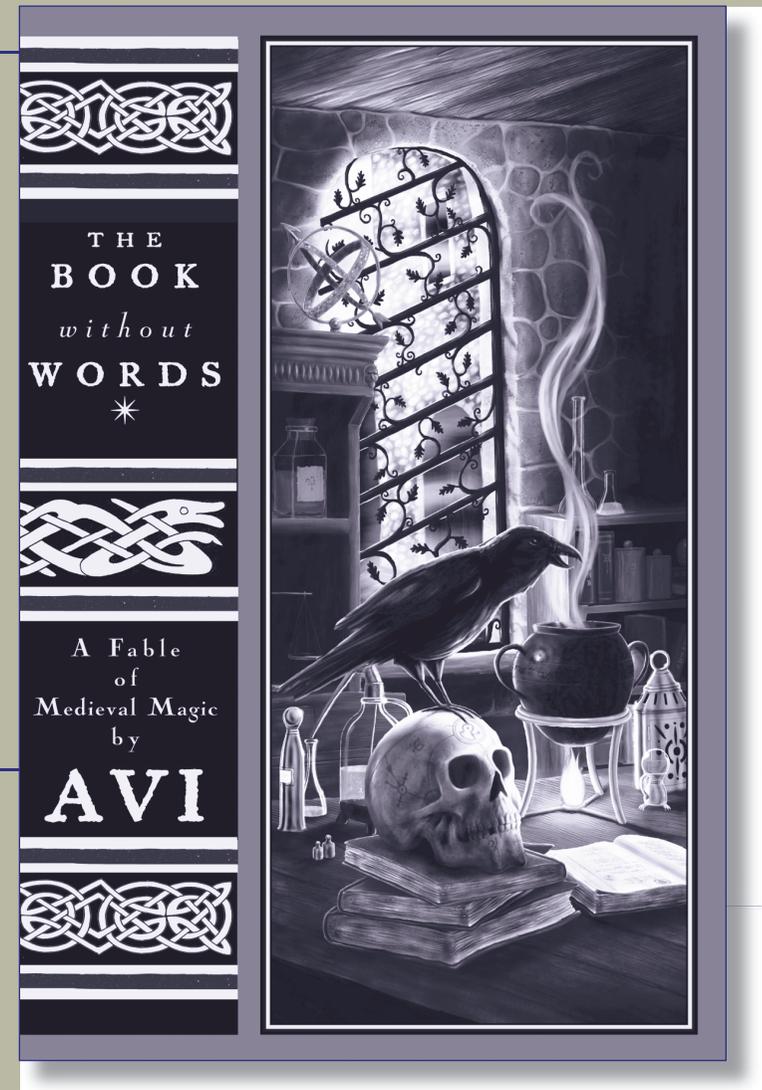
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DISCUSSION GUIDE

HYPERION BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

THORSTON: an aging, green-eyed alchemist who will do anything to gain immortality, also the keeper of *The Book Without Words*

ODO: a gold-hungry raven, transformed from a goat by Thorston

BROTHER WILFRID: the original keeper of the book, whose purpose in life is to retrieve it from Thorston

SAINT ELFLEDA: an eighth-century abbess, sister of King Oswy of Northumbria

SYBIL: a 13-year-old orphan who is Thorston's servant

MISTRESS WEEBLY: the apothecary and a spy for Master Bashcroft

MASTER AMBROSE BASHCROFT: the city reeve whose sole Latin phrase, *dura lex, sed lex*, "the law is hard but it is the law," is his motto and self-justification

ALFRIC: the orphan son of a scrivener, bought by Master Bashcroft for two pennies

DAMIAN WARBECK: the apothecary's apprentice, whose greed for gold is his doom

GLOSSARY

ALCHEMY: a medieval science devoted to the transformation of base materials into gold, the discovery of the cure for all disease and the discovery of a means for indefinitely prolonging life

APOTHECARY: one who prepares and sells medicines

BRAZIER: a pan for holding burning coals

FULWORTH: a fictional town in Northumbria

MANX CAT: a breed of cat most distinguished by its lack of a tail

MONASTERY: a house for members of a religious order

MONK: a man who is a member of a religious order

MORTAR AND PESTLE: tools of an apothecary for the preparation of medicines

NORTHUMBRIA: one of the ancient realms of Britain, much besieged by the Vikings. Northumbria lies in modern-day northern England

REEVE: a local administrative of an Anglo-Saxon king (the word "sheriff" derives from "shire reeve")

SPIKENARD: a fragrant ointment of the ancients

ACTIVITY ONE: PROVERBS

Proverbs are brief adages that speak truths. Odo in particular, is given to saying proverbs at both appropriate (and very inappropriate) times. Alfric offers the occasional well-timed proverb as he becomes more at home. Review the proverbs below, find more and then try to create your own proverbs. A proverb has these three elements: brevity, relevance, and cleverness.

"A fool is the first to think himself wise and the last to know it isn't so."
—Odo (Chapter 1:1)

"The lengthier the life, the more locked the lip." —Odo (2:9)

"Death is part of life." —Odo (3:11)

"Live long enough and all become orphans." —Odo (3:11)

"... the shorter the sermon, the longer the truth." —Alfric (3:11)

"... time is like an oxcart wheel—that it has no end or beginning but only rolls."
—Alfric (3:18)

"A sniff of gold makes all noses sneeze." —Odo (3:18)

"A life unlived is like a book without words." —Preamble

ACTIVITY TWO: FABLES

Fables have been a popular and powerful way to tell stories since ancient times. As Avi describes in his Notes, a fable is “a supernatural tale in which animals speak and act like human beings . . . meant to exemplify a useful truth.” The most famous fables of all were written by Aesop in Ancient Greece. Review one or two of Aesop’s fables and discuss how *The Book Without Words* fits the definition of a fable. Ask students to write a fable of their own by first coming up with the useful truth and then devising an appropriate story. Have the students either read them aloud or work in small groups to present their fables dramatically.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does the author establish a sense of time and place in this book? What are the images, the smells, the sounds that come into your mind as you think about Fulworth, Thorston’s workroom, the apothecary’s shop, and the churchyard?
2. “It is not death I fear, but life,” says Sybil in 3:9. What does she mean by this statement? Avi’s central theme is clearly stated in the proverb at the beginning: “A life unlived is like a book without words.” Describe how Sybil’s attitude toward life changes throughout the book.
3. Odo and Sybil learn that “magic takes what it gives.” What is another way of saying that in today’s terms? Why is this point so important to the story? How is this idea of magic different from magic you have encountered in other stories?
4. Re-read the monk’s tale in 16:3 about *The Book Without Words* and how the book came into Thorston’s possession. Where do you think Brother Wilfrid spent the intervening years? Imagine how he must have searched for Thorston, where he must have gone and what he must have had to endure.
5. Compare Alfric and Damian. Both have green eyes but they respond to the temptations in *The Book Without Words* very differently. What do they have in common? Why do their fates differ so much?

6. “The law is hard, it is the law.” Why is this phrase repeated so often by Master Bashcroft? How does he use its message in his interactions with the community and how he sees himself?
7. Language has a power all its own in *The Book Without Words*. Latin from the mouth of the reeve justifies his actions. Magic words from the beak of a talking raven cause skulls to rise and hard objects to turn into water. What are other examples of the power of words?
8. What were your first thoughts on seeing the name of the book? What expectations did it raise? How did the story meet, change, or dash those expectations?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An amazingly versatile writer, Avi is the author of over fifty books for young people ranging from mystery, adventure, and fantasy to ghost stories, animal tales, and easy readers—and, of course, historical fiction. *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* and *Nothing But the Truth* each garnered Avi a prestigious Newbery Honor Award from the American Library Association.

Crispin: The Cross of Lead won the 2003 Newbery Medal, the highest honor bestowed in children’s literature. Starr LaTronica, chair of the 2003 Newbery Award Selection Committee, says of this work, “Avi masterfully weaves meticulously researched period details into a story that will leave contemporary readers breathless. Vivid descriptions of the indignities of daily life and injustices of the 14th century immerse the reader immediately into feudal society and propel the characters through the politics that led to the Peasant Revolt of 1381. Crispin’s experiences and his relationship with Bear provide a credible, first-hand account of those turbulent times and offer an auspicious opportunity to discuss current social issues that parallel those of the plot.”

Even with all of his literary achievements, Avi remains well grounded and his love for writing is unwavering. He offers these words of encouragement to young writers: “Listen and watch the world around you. Try to understand why things happen. Don’t be satisfied with answers others give you. Don’t assume that because everyone believes a thing that it is right. Reason things

out for yourself. Work to get answers on your own. Understand why you believe things. Finally, write what you honestly feel, then learn from the criticism that will always come your way.”

AN INTERVIEW WITH AVI

What was most challenging about writing this book?

This was an extraordinarily difficult book to write due to a number of things. It had to do with, in part, one of my first thoughts on winning the Newbery; the next one must really be good! Then I showed my publisher the book too quickly—I do so many revisions and so many changes. For example, when I first wrote *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, there were no lead crosses in the story.



Since the re-writing is so important, what is the most vital thing you added late in the process?

It now opens with proverb—“A book without words is like a life unlived.” That was the last thing I wrote.

You describe the book as a fable. Why?

It is not a novel. It meets all the qualifications to be a fable: it is moral, fantastical, the animals speak.

How is this fable similar to historical fiction, like *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*?

Fantasy is very close to historical fiction. You have to create a physical reality and sensibility that is fairly complete. Fantastic realism, as a term, has always appealed to me. While I admire the fantasy, I find it more interesting to embed the fantasy within the context of reality. In terms of my readers, it’s a little easier

to absorb a notion that’s also domestic, rather than castles and flying beasts and that sort.

How did you come up with the character names in *The Book Without Words*?

Names are so powerful in a story, particularly when you write this kind of story that derives from a specific period. Sybil is such a pretty name and for the heroine, I wanted something slightly esoteric but not terribly difficult. I have books of names and I check them. Alfric has a hint of magic about him. And yes, the suggestion of Alfred the Great was deliberate. Saint Elflada is a real person, of course.

How did you come up with the title of the book?

The Book Without Words—it seemed fun. It’s a contradiction. It’s not my phrase—I found references to a *Book Without Words* when I was reading up on alchemy. That was deliberately fraudulent. It’s like someone saying ‘Since you can’t read it and I can, that’s proof it’s magic.’

Have you ever seen something like a book without words?

Years and years ago I came across a book that I’ve always regretted I never bought. It was by an Italian who created this incredibly illustrated book and invented an alphabet. Every page was covered with this invented alphabet but no real words.

Yes, it’s kind of like the emperor’s new clothes. And there’s plenty of humor in *The Book Without Words* as well.

The central part of the book is the first burial scene: it’s both funny and awful at the same point. And Odo [the talking raven] was especially fun to write about. His proverbs are so witty and Oscar Wilde-like. In fact, the book as a whole seems like it could easily be dramatized. It’s very theatrical—so much of it takes place in that one house. As I was writing it I saw it as a stage play.

And proverbs demonstrate an idea. Think about the first proverb: “A book without words is like a life unlived.” Thorston lived only to live, and Sybil is determined to live without the magic. She has seen that magic takes what it gives.

To learn more about Avi, check out his Website at

WWW.AVI-WRITER.COM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Ellen Everett Myrick received her degree in history and English from the University of Tennessee, a course of study that included a year studying medieval history at the University of Manchester in England. During her time abroad, she focused on the literature and social history of fourteenth-century England. She has spent more than a dozen years in the book industry, and is the Executive Editor of *Children's and Teen Librarian*, a newsletter for children and Young Adult librarians.

BOOKS BY AVI FROM HYPERION BOOKS FOR CHILDREN:

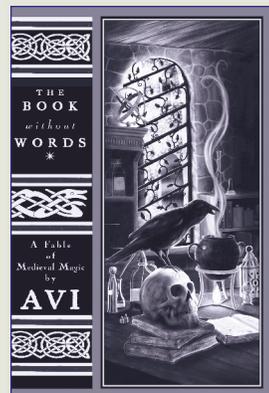
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