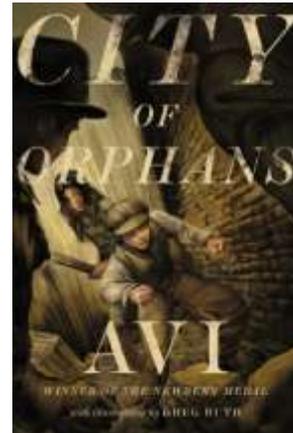


A Reading Group Guide to:

City of Orphans

by Avi

To aid the teacher and subsequently the readers, this guide has been broken down into three sections that align themselves with typical reading instruction. You will find ideas and suggestions to use for **Before** reading the book, **During** the reading of the book, and **After** reading the book. It might be a good idea to have a Wiki in place before the students begin reading. As noted below, they can record and present much of their reactions and research via this medium.



BEFORE

1. Log on to www.pbs.org and search for "Big Apple History." Then click on NEW YORK LIVING on the left side. Under the heading at the lower part of the page labeled "What Was Life Like?" click "Tenement Life" from the pull-down menu. Show this page to your class. NOTE: You can enlarge the picture of the tenement alley. Proceed to read aloud the four paragraph selection to the children about what it was like to live back then. This provides a wonderful example of how Maks and his family lived.
2. You may want to read (and show on your Smart Board) the poem "Christmas Eve on 129th Street," (provided at the end of this guide) written by J. Patrick Lewis, the current Children's Poet Laureate. This poem offers a very understated yet tremendously evocative view of poverty in the tenement slums of New York.
3. Borrow the Public Broadcasting Service's video (cited in the back of Avi's book) "Sunshine and Shadow," a PBS Home Video produced in 1999. This is available in most public libraries as part of the New York series. From the DVD menu, go to Episode 3 and play selection number 5, "Al Smith: New York's Native Son." This five-minute clip provides further information of the living conditions in New York at the time this novel takes place.
4. Log on to www.avi-writer.com and listen to Avi introduce the book and read the first chapter of *City of Orphans*. Click on the "Teachers" tab, then select "Teaching Materials."
5. Have the students look at the cover illustration of the book *City of Orphans*. Discuss what their initial reactions are about what will happen in this book.
6. After listening to Avi read Chapter 1, discuss how the narrator's voice sounds. Note that this is written in the first person, but ask how it is different from most books written from this perspective. You may want to read the first page of Avi's book *The Traitor's Gate* to demonstrate how Avi has adopted the vernacular of the times and place.

7. Have the readers guess who is telling this story. Allow them to make guesses as they read through the book.

DURING

1. Encourage readers to keep an ongoing “Story Map” either using pictures or short sentences to log the flow of the various plot points and the unfolding of the entire novel. It would be easiest to have an entry made for each chapter. Double arrows can be used to show how chapters progress in numerical order while single arrows can demonstrate how Avi jumps from one setting or subplotline to another.
2. Ask the students why Avi questions the reader throughout the book in his narrative? For example, he writes, “Now listen hard, ‘cause this is important.” (p. 2) or “You’re asking: How come Maks don’t cry for a cop?” (p. 8) or “Now you need to know about this Birmingham Street, where Maks lives.” Have them discuss why he did it and why it is so effective.
3. Keep track of your favorite colloquialisms in this book – for example, “yous,” “spose,” or “stupid mugs” – and list them in a separate file on your class Wiki.
4. On page 18 in the first paragraph, the narrator allows us an insight into Willa by using the word “pretty.” Ask the students what he means by the italicized sentence that closes this paragraph? What does this infer about Willa? Notice Avi doesn’t tell us what she looks like but is able to help us see her more clearly through dialogue and inference.
5. Keep a listing of your favorite similes, metaphors, and comparisons that Avi uses. For example, he writes, “news like that got more legs than a centipede” (p. 22). You could post these in a file on your class Wiki.
6. Stylistically, Avi uses rather clipped sentences. On page 35 he writes, “Once he gave me an egg. Mama cooked it. Not bad ...” Why do you suppose he does this? Why is it effective? Notice how, in the first paragraph of Chapter 22 on page 77, he uses these clipped sentences and fragments to summarize all that has happened thus far in the book.
7. Read the last paragraph on page 28. See how seamlessly Avi works in this dead horse on the street into the story. He learned this during his own detailed and exhaustive research of New York in 1893. Notice how he drops this fact into the story and how it doesn’t intrude on the storyline. Keep an eye out for this throughout the book. Avi is very clever at lacing fact with fiction. It certainly adds to the authenticity of the book and the feeling that we are there.
8. Encourage readers to choose one of the characters to whom they feel most attached. Have them keep a Wiki that can be added to as they learn more about who this person is and what makes them tick.

9. You could invite readers to start a Character Relationship Map that shows how Maks, Willa, Donck, and Bruno are related. Arrows can be drawn and notations attached to show how they interact, collaborate, deceive, and behave among one another.
10. On page 80, Avi mentions the song “Oh, Dem Golden Slippers,” which was a popular tune of the day. Go to YouTube.com and you can find a number of old recordings with the banjo accompaniment just as he mentions it in the book.
11. Another writing technique Avi uses is alliteration. For instance, on page 7 he mentions the Lower East Side of New York as if it were “like the cheapest boardinghouse in Babel.” On page 112, he writes, “Everything smells and looks sour, sick, and sad.” Further, he notes on page 207, “the squally weather turning its tinkling bell to taffy.” Find other alliterative passages and record them on your class Wiki.
12. Cliffhangers. Avi worked very hard on these so that we, as readers, would be compelled to continue on from chapter to chapter. What are some of your favorite cliffhangers? Discuss why they worked.

AFTER

1. Have the students research one of the following topics, or have them choose an area they are interested in and do a report that can be presented and posted on a class Wiki. Avi’s recommendations for “Further Reading and Viewing” are all available and accessible at your local library. Use these, as well as Internet sources, to find more out about your topic. Topics can include but are not limited to the following:
 - ❖ Fashion and clothing of the late 1800s (for both rich and poor)
 - ❖ New York City politics, graft, and corruption
 - ❖ Tenement living
 - ❖ Food and apartment furnishings in 1893
 - ❖ The Waldorf Hotel of 1893
 - ❖ Jewelry of the rich in 1893, particularly the Breguet watch
 - ❖ The Tombs and prison life
 - ❖ Dumbbell apartments
 - ❖ Schools
2. Put yourself in the place of a New York City reporter for *The World* and write an article on one of the following:
 - ❖ “Murder at the Waldorf”
 - ❖ “Fire Breaks Out in Abandoned Tenement”

- ❖ “Bartleby Donck, Lawyer, Private Detective, and Author, Dies”
 - ❖ “Inhuman Conditions in The Tombs”
3. Do some price comparisons. Go back to the book and find references to what common things cost in 1893. Go to the Internet and translate that amount to what it would cost in today’s dollars. For example, each newspaper *Maks* sold was two cents. What would two cents be worth today? How does that compare to what papers cost now?
 4. On page 154 we see the sentence that prompted the title of this book, “this city of orphans.” What title would you give this book if they didn’t call it this?
 5. Avi is masterful at understatement. On page 170 he writes, “‘Home,’ Willa repeats with a shy smile. As if she’s remembering a word.’” Have readers find other instances where Avi uses small inferences just like this that speak volumes in meaning.
 6. Mama is as slow to accept Willa as Willa is to accept Mama and the Geless family. Why are they initially so opposed to each other and how do the barriers get broken down? Note passages that help us to see how this happens. Discuss how these same reasons can be used today as a lesson for us to love and understand each other.
 7. Avi is a master at weaving historical fact into his text. Look on pages 172 and 280 and notice how he uses facts from his research to unveil two of the most important clues to this mystery.
 8. When do we definitively know that Donck is the author of the serialized story *The Bradys and the Missing Diamonds*? Find the page where it becomes more clear.
 9. On page 208, Willa speaks of “Mama” as if she were her own. Why is this important to this story?
 10. Chapters 53 through 56 alternate in setting. Why do you suppose Avi did this? Why is it effective?

Christmas Eve on East 129th Street

J. Patrick Lewis

Let midnight fasten to a field
fall's last phantasm from the trees.
Inside the house, a hound uncurls
between pajamaed honeybees,
no match for sleep. Let midnight blow
winds indifferent to a wasting year
past 813-D's presents, their
provisions lavishly austere.
A cat with unexpected gift—
frayed sweater brandishing a string—
behaves as if her bleak surround
surpassed the trappings of a king.
The children, wiser than the cat,
know well what holidays impart,
and yet they cobble dreams to swell
wry fabulations of the heart.

[Note: This poem appeared in *Third Wednesday*, 2011. All rights are reserved. JPL]