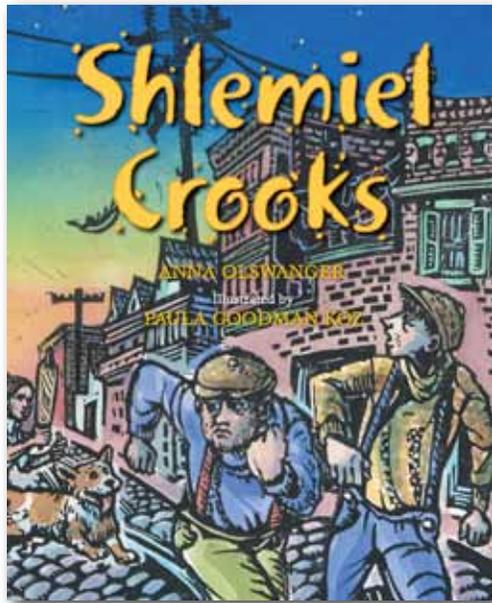


## Discussion Guide

# Shlemiel Crooks

by Anna Olswanger  
with illustrations by Paula Koz



Picture Book/Historical Fiction

32 pages

Hardcover and paperback

Reading Level: Grades 3–5

NewSouth Books, 2012

*A Sydney Taylor Honor Book and PJ Library Book*

# Synopsis

“In the middle of the night on a Thursday, two crooks—onions should grow in their navels—drove their horse and wagon to the saloon of Reb Elias Olschwanger, at the corner of 14th and Carr streets in St. Louis. This didn’t happen yesterday. It was 1919.” So begins this modern folktale set in the Yiddish community of the author’s great-grandparents in the early twentieth century. *Shlemiel Crooks* introduces young readers to the history of Passover, as Pharaoh and a town of Jewish immigrants play tug-of-war with wine made from grapes left over from the Exodus from Egypt.

**THEMES:**

Judaism, Passover, Holidays, Biography, Folktales, Humor, History, Family.

This *Shlemiel Crooks* Discussion Guide was created by Ann Malaspina ([www.annmalaspina.com](http://www.annmalaspina.com)). Some questions were provided by Carol Press Pristoop and Leora Pushett of The Pearlstone Institute for Living Judaism and the Center for Jewish Education of Baltimore.

# Discussion Questions

1. Can you guess the meaning of the Yiddish word “shlemiel?” Why did the author decide on the title *Shlemiel Crooks*? Do you think it’s a good title?
2. Find other Yiddish words and phrases in the story, and guess their meanings. Why do you think the author used Yiddish words? Would the story be different if she had used only English?
3. Why does Pharaoh want the thieves to steal Reb Elias’ wine? What does the wine represent to Reb Elias, and to Pharaoh? Why does Reb Elias pay more for it? Do you think grape seeds can last thousands of years?
4. Who are the villains in the story? Can villains be fun to read about?
5. Who are the heroes in the story? Why?
6. Humor is important in *Shlemiel Crooks*. What do you think is the funniest part of the story? What makes it funny?
7. *Shlemiel Crooks* is about the history of Passover. Did you learn something new about the Jews’ flight from slavery? Did the story help you understand the meaning of Passover?
8. Who is Prophet Elijah in the Passover story? How does he help Reb Elias?
9. The artist used wood block printing to make the illustrations. Which is your favorite illustration? Do the thieves look the way

you might imagine them? What about the other characters?

10. The story is based on an incident in the life of the author's great-grandfather in St. Louis in 1919. The author knew only a few facts about the story. How did she transform those facts into her own story? Can you think of an event in your family's history that you'd like to write about?
11. The story mixes realism and fantasy. What parts of the story seem realistic to you? What parts seem fantastic? Is it easy or hard to tell the difference? Why?
12. If you were to play a part in the story, which character would you choose to be? Why?
13. The neighbors help Reb Elias save his Passover wine. Why do you think they wanted to help him? Has your neighbor ever helped you? What makes a good neighbor?
14. Talk about how the story's Passover theme relates to other peoples who have struggled for freedom. For example, discuss the similarities between the flight of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and the journeys of fugitive slaves, such as Harriet Tubman, on the Underground Railroad.
15. What does freedom mean to you? Do you feel that you are free?
16. What other ways might a person lack freedom? If you had to work instead of going to school, would you feel like a free person? If you could not practice your religion, or were not allowed to vote, would you still be free? What basic rights are necessary in order for a person to be free?
17. Do you think the story has a lesson? What is the lesson?

# Activities

1. In the story, Reb Elias is the leader of the Talmud Society at the synagogue. As the crooks are stealing his wine, he is leading a discussion about the first Passover. Can you tell the story of Passover in your own words?
2. *Shlemiel Crooks* is a modern day folktale. What other folktales do you know? What makes a folktale different than other stories? Why do folktales last for many generations? Write your own folktale.
3. Yiddish was spoken by Jews in Eastern and Central Europe before World War II. Only a small number of people speak the language today. What do you think people can do to help keep Yiddish alive? Why is it important to save Yiddish for the future? Discover more about Yiddish at the website of the Yiddish Book Center, [www.yiddishbookcenter.org](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org). Write a few sentences using Yiddish words or phrases.
4. The story takes place in a neighborhood of Jewish immigrants in St. Louis. Many Jews left Europe for America in the 19th century because of poverty and oppression. Talk to your older family members. Find out why your family immigrated to America. What were their lives like in the “old country?” When they first immigrated, did they live in a neighborhood with immigrants like themselves? Do members of your family still speak the “old” language? Write a letter to your immigrant ancestor.

5. The author was inspired to write this story after reading the Yiddish newspaper article about her great grandfather, which is reproduced in the back of the book. Talk to members of your family about newsworthy or funny events in their lives. Write a family newsletter, and send it out to your friends and family.
6. *Shlemiel Crooks* uses a lot of humor. Think about how humor can help you get through stressful moments, the way it helped the characters in the story. Share your favorite jokes with your family.
7. As the crooks are about to load the stolen wine into their wagon, the horse shouts, "Crooks! Crooks!" Write your own story about a talking animal who saves the day.

# Additional Reading

- Black, Joe and Prater, Linda. *Afikomen Mambo*. (Kar-Ben, 2011).
- Kimmelman, Leslie and Meisel, Paul. *The Little Red Hen and the Passover Matzah*. (Holiday House, 2010).
- Levine, Anna and Topaz, Ksenia. *Jodie's Passover Adventure*. (Kar-Ben, 2012).
- Marshall, Linda Elovitz and Mai-Wyss, Tatjana. *The Passover Lamb*. (Random House, 2013).
- Newman, Leslea and Slonim, David. *A Sweet Passover*. (Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2012).
- Snyder, Laurel and Chien, Catia. *The Longest Night: A Passover Story*. (Schwartz & Wade, 2013).
- Strauss, Linda Leopold and Natchev, Alexi. *The Elijah Door: A Passover Tale*. (Holiday House, 2012).
- Weber, Elka and Gustavson, Adam. *Yankee at the Seder*. (Tricycle Press, 2009).

## About the Author

Anna Olswanger's *Shlemiel Crooks* is a Sydney Taylor Honor Book and PJ Library Book. In 2011, a family musical based on *Shlemiel Crooks* premiered at Merkin Concert Hall in New York. Anna is also the author of *Greenhorn* (NewSouth Books). She lives in the New York metropolitan area and is a literary agent with Liza Dawson Associates. Anna's website is [www.olswanger.com](http://www.olswanger.com).

## About the Illustrator

Paula Goodman Koz is a book illustrator and printmaker specializing in woodcuts and linocuts. Her subjects include Judaica (Jewish diaspora history and holidays), New York cityscapes, Shakespeareana, and handcut lettering. Since 1978, her work has appeared in a wide variety of books, magazines, newspapers, galleries, and juried shows. She lives in Williamsburg, Virginia, with her husband. Paula's website is [www.paulagoodmankoz.com](http://www.paulagoodmankoz.com).

# Ordering Information

*Shlemiel Crooks*

by Anna Olswanger

Illustrations by Paula Goodman Koz

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ALSO BY ANNA OLSWANGER, FROM NEWSOUTH BOOKS

## *Greenhorn*

Hardcover, \$17.95, ISBN 978-1-58838-235-1

eBook, \$9.99, ISBN 978-1-60306-159-9

Daniel, a young Holocaust survivor, arrives at a New York yeshiva in 1946 to study and live. He is carrying a small box, his only possession. Daniel rarely talks, but Aaron, the story's narrator and a stutterer taunted by the other boys, comes to consider Daniel his friend. Daniel never lets the box out of his sight and the boys at the yeshiva are impatient with his secret. Only Aaron reaches out to Daniel, and through their friendship, Daniel is able to let go of his box.

Based on a true story, *Greenhorn* gives human dimension to the Holocaust. It poignantly underscores our flawed humanity and speaks to the healing value of friendship.

## Praise for *Shlemiel Crooks*

“The boldly colored woodcuts give life to the city neighborhood, the foolish villains, and the lively arguments as well as to the daring Israelites, escaping across the desert three-thousand years ago. The best thing here, however, is Olswanger’s Yiddish storyteller’s voice, particularly the hilarious curses she weaves into the story. Great for reading aloud.” — *Booklist*

“This delightful story is based on a true incident ... in which Reb Elias Olchwanger’s liquor store was almost robbed of its Passover wine by a couple of inept thieves.

But that’s not the whole story because Reb Elias also recounts his own version of the exodus from Egypt, with the Hebrews absconding with linen and jewels and raisins—raisins? ... Turns out [Pharaoh’s] ghost is still wandering around St. Louis of all places, whispering in the ears of the crooks who go rob the store, only they get scared off by some noisy neighbors and a talking horse. This tale is a pleasure and a hoot; it rings so true with the voice of a Yiddish grandmother that it’s practically historic fiction. The boldly colored, expressive illustrations enhance the humor.” — *School Library Journal*

“You should be so lucky as to find a Passover story that combines a surprisingly droll exposition of the flight from Egypt with an account of the foolish crooks in St. Louis, who, in 1919, really did try to steal some of the special spirits Reb Elias Olchwanger had ordered for sale before the holiday. Well told and illustrated.”

— *New York Times Book Review*