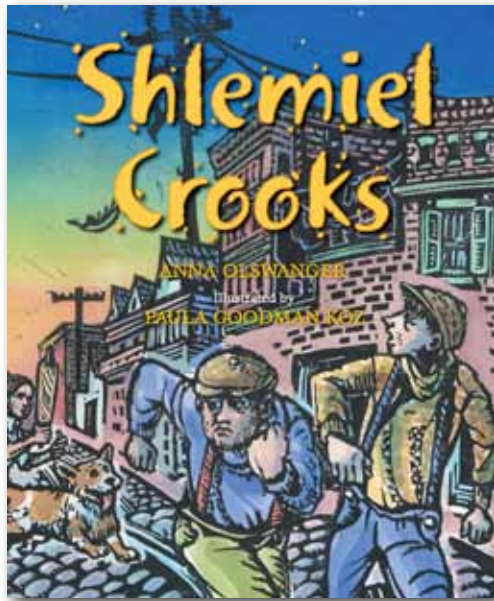


## Classroom Guide

# 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:**

Humor, Judaism, Biography, Family.

**CURRICULUM TIE-INS:**

Judaism, Passover, Holidays, Folktales, Humor, American History, Community Life.

This *Shlemiel Crooks* Classroom 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.

# Before Reading

Before reading the book, you may prepare students with questions that help provide background for the story and promote excitement about the themes and ideas.

1. What is a folktale and why do folktales last a long time?
2. Does your family prepare for Passover or other holidays? What do you do to prepare?
3. Do you know any Yiddish words or phrases?
4. What does it mean to be a good neighbor?
5. Does your family have interesting stories about things that happened long ago?
6. What do you know about the book of Exodus in the Bible?
7. How do pictures help tell a story in a picture book?
8. Do you believe that horses can sometimes talk?

# Exploring the Book

1. Have students take a quick look at the illustrations to get a sense of the characters and setting of the story.
2. Have them look at the front and back covers, and read the front and back flaps to find out what book is about.
3. Show students the Dedication and the Postscript to get to know the author.

# Setting a Purpose for Reading

Ask the students to read in order to learn about:

1. The story of Passover.
2. How neighbors look out for each other.
3. How family history can become a story in a book.

## After Reading

# Discussion Questions for Literal Comprehension

1. “Shlemiel” is a Yiddish word meaning a person who lacks common sense. Why do you think the author chose the title *Shlemiel Crooks*?
2. Where and when does the story take place? Why are the time and place important to the story?
3. What were the two crooks doing in the middle of the night? Who told them what to do?
4. “Reb” is a Yiddish title of respect traditionally used as an equivalent of “Mister.” Where did Reb Elias buy the Passover wine for his store? Why was he willing to pay more for it than usual?
5. Where was Reb Elias when the thieves were in his store? What was he doing? What were his friends arguing about?
6. What language was Reb Elias speaking? What was the story he was telling?
7. What did the Israelites take with them when Pharaoh told them to leave Egypt?
8. Do you think grape seeds can last 3,600 years?

9. What does the author mean when she says that Pharaoh was still “sneaking around” in 1919? What does she mean that Pharaoh was “sore?”
10. What did Pharaoh say to the crooks?
11. What does the author mean when she writes, “A lock is only for honest men?”
12. What tools did the crooks use to cut the chain on Reb Elias’s saloon door?
13. What did the horse say when it saw the crooks about to load the wine into the wagon?
14. What did Mankel see out his window? What did he do next?
15. What does this sentence mean: “Let me tell you, a voice like a canary, she didn’t have.”
16. What did the neighbors do to chase away the thieves?
17. What happened to the thieves’ horse and wagon?

# Discussion Questions for Higher Level Understanding

1. What do you think is the lesson of *Shlemiel Crooks*?
2. What emotions did you feel as you were reading the story?
3. Did the story remind you of something that happened to you or someone you know? How are the two stories similar?
4. What was the best part of the book? Why?
5. Which were your favorite characters? Why?
6. What did you think of the crooks? Were they bad people?
7. Pharaoh, who kept the Israelites in slavery, is a character in the story. Why has the author brought him back to life? What purpose does he serve in the story? Why should we care about what he does?
8. Why do you think the author chose to tell this particular story about her great grandfather? What makes it a good story?
9. Do you think what happened in *Shlemiel Crooks* was good or bad for Reb Elias's business? Why?
10. When you tell other people about the book, what will you say?
11. Will you recommend the book to your friends?

# Language Arts

1. *Shlemiel Crooks* is based on a story from the author's family history. Interview an older relative and write a story about an important or funny experience that happened to your relative.
2. The horse is a character in the story. Write a dialogue, using an animal as the character. How do you let the reader know it's an animal speaking and not a person?
3. What do you think is the funniest part of the story? What makes it funny? Write a funny story about something that happened to you.
4. The author dedicated this story to her great-grandparents. Write a letter to your oldest family member about why he or she is important to you.
5. Retell this story from the point of view of one of the crooks. What does he see and hear? What is going through his mind? Why does he decide to do what he does?
6. Cousin Shloime is mentioned several times. Use the clues to figure out his character traits. Write a paragraph about him.
7. *Shlemiel Crooks* reflects the history of the Passover holiday. What is your favorite holiday? Write a story that takes place during your favorite holiday.



# Vocabulary

*Shlemiel Crooks* includes words that refer to life in the early 20th century and to Judaism. Some may be unfamiliar. Read the story again, and look for the following words. Read the word in the sentence to figure out its meaning. Sometimes the art on the page will help you. Now write your own sentences using five of the words.

guzzle

kosher

Sabbath

swindler

rag man

chisel

manna

commotion

pharaoh

aggravation

Passover

synagogue

sauerkraut

twiddling

unleavened

levee

seder

Messiah

# Yiddish

The author uses both actual Yiddish words and English translations of Yiddish phrases in *Shlemiel Crooks*. Before World War II, Jews in Central and Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish as their first language. It is a colorful and colloquial language, and when translated into English, is often humorous. Today, many people are working to revive Yiddish. Here are a few examples of Yiddish in the book:

Gevalt (a cry for help)

Gonif (thief, crook)

Shlemiel (fool, clumsy person)

Find other examples of Yiddish words in the story. Read aloud the sentences with the Yiddish words. Can you figure out what the words mean? Why do you think the author chose to use Yiddish in the story? Here are a few examples of translations from Yiddish in the book:

Onions should grow in their navels.

Potatoes should sprout in their ears.

They should die of heartburn.

These are all humorous curses. Can you find other examples of Yiddish curses in the story? What do you think they mean? Yiddish curses often mix comedy and tragedy. Traditionally, Jews have used humor to cope with adversity. Why do you think laughter helps in times of difficulty?

# Social Studies

Between 1880 and 1920, about one-third of the entire Jewish population of Eastern Europe immigrated to the United States because of oppression and poverty. Resettlement agencies encouraged the immigrants to leave the crowded port cities of New York and Baltimore and relocate to cities in the Midwest, like St. Louis.

1. Do you know someone who immigrated from another country? Why did they come to America? Where did they live? What challenges did they face?
2. Ask family members about stories when they were young or when they had to move to a new location.
3. *Shlemiel Crooks* takes place in the year 1919. Look up 1919 and write a list of other events that happened that year.
4. The story takes place in St. Louis. Look up the history of St. Louis. What is this Missouri city famous for? Did you find information about the Jewish immigrants to St. Louis?
5. The author was inspired to write this story after reading the Yiddish newspaper article that is reproduced in the back of the book. Do you or your parents read newspapers today? Why or why not? What has taken the place of newspapers? Show samples to the class.

6. Find a newspaper article or article from the Web that tells a story. Create your own story, picture, or music inspired by the article.
7. The story is about the author's great grandfather. Research your family tree. Find a person whom you'd like to know more about. Try to find out everything you can about him or her. Where did the person live? What was his or her job? Write a paragraph comparing your relative's life to your own.
8. The story talks about Lord Balfour who promised to make a home for Jews in the land of Israel. Research Lord Balfour and find out what happened to his promise.
9. We learn in the story that Israelite slaves built two cities, Ramses and Pithom. Find out about those cities. Did they exist? Where were they? When were they built? Who lived in those cities?
10. In the story, people in the neighborhood helped stop the crooks. Draw a poster with pictures of people in your community, such as the postman, librarian, shopkeeper, neighbor.

# Fine Arts

1. The artist used woodblock printing to make the illustrations. Try a printing project using wood or linoleum blocks with your art teacher.
2. Which is your favorite picture in the story? Copy the picture using crayons, colored pencils or markers.
3. The illustrations in a picture book help tell the story. Draw a story with no words.
4. One of the illustrations is of a camel in the desert. What other animals live in the desert? Make your own drawing of the desert.
5. Make a drawing of your family gathered for a holiday meal, such as a Passover seder.
6. Look at the illustration on the first spread of the story. Notice all the people in the neighborhood. Make a drawing of people in your neighborhood.
7. Look at illustrations of the horse. Notice how the artist gives it “personality.” Draw your own picture of a horse. Think about your horse’s personality.
8. The artist draws day and night scenes in the story. Draw two pictures of your home, one at night and the other in the day. How are they the same and different?

9. Look at the illustrations of the two thieves. How does the artist make us understand their characters? Using pencil or charcoal, sketch a portrait of a person who is “up to no good.”
10. What music would you choose to go with this story? Would it be loud or soft, happy or sad?
11. Take one scene from the story and create a class skit based on the scene.

# Food and Cooking

1. Food and drink appear often in *Shlemiel Crooks*. Make a list of the different foods in the story, like plain tea or oats. Beside each food, write the name of the character who drinks or eats it. How do the different foods help us understand the characters and the setting?
2. Draw a food map. Sour pickles and rye bread were two traditional foods in a Jewish neighborhood in 1919. On a map of the world, draw pictures of the traditional food of each country.
3. Organize an International Food Tasting Celebration. Share your family's ethnic dishes with the class.
4. What food does your family eat every day? Make a menu for a meal for your family. Make a menu for a meal for the characters in the book.

# Matzo Recipe

During Passover, Jews eat only unleavened bread (matzo). Follow the simple recipe below for matzo and share with the class. Why do you think people might eat unleavened bread even when it's not Passover?

2 cups flour

1 cup water

Pinch of salt, if desired

Preheat oven to 475 degrees. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

Mix flour, water and salt until dough is soft enough to knead.

Sprinkle flour on a clean surface. Knead dough for about five minutes. Let dough rest for a few minutes.

Break dough into egg-sized pieces. Roll each piece into an oval shape, as thin as possible. Prick each oval all over with a fork.

Place ovals on baking sheets and bake until crisp, about 3 minutes. Cool and eat.



# Thematic Connections — Questions for Group Discussions

## **GOOD NEIGHBORS**

The author of *Shlemiel Crooks* describes a neighborhood where people look out for each other. What does it mean to be a good neighbor? Can you be nosy and also be a good neighbor? Would you like to live in a neighborhood where people look out the window to see what's happening?

## **HEROES**

Think about the heroes in *Shlemiel Crooks*. Is there more than one? What makes a hero? Who are famous heroes in history? What qualities do heroes share? Talk about the heroes in your life. How can we become heroes?

## **TRADITION AND HERITAGE**

Passover is a holiday that has many special traditions. What is a tradition? Why are they important to people? Share the different customs and traditions you have in your family with your classmates. Is there a religious holiday that you celebrate? Are there non-religious traditions in your family, such as watching a favorite show together or going out for ice cream? Talk with one of your older relatives and find out about an old family tradition. How did it start? How

has it changed? Why are traditions important?

### **SLAVERY**

Talk about how the story's Passover theme relates to other peoples who have struggled for freedom. 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. Even today, millions of people live in slavery. Some children in India, for example, are taken from their families and forced to work as carpet weavers for no pay. If you had to work instead of going to school, would you feel like a free person? What other ways might a person lack freedom? If you were not allowed to practice your religion, would you still be free? What if you were not allowed to vote? What are the basic rights that a person needs in order to be free? What does freedom mean to you? Would you risk your life to gain freedom?

# If You Don't Know About Passover

The holiday of Passover is celebrated in the spring. Jewish families gather for the seder, a special meal and ceremony. The holiday commemorates the Exodus, when the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt. Around the seder table, families read the Haggadah, a book that tells the story of the ten plagues that afflicted the Egyptians before the Israelites were finally able to escape to freedom.

1. *Shlemiel Crooks* introduces the story of Passover. Read the story of Exodus and compare it to *Shlemiel Crooks*. What is the same and different about the stories?
2. Pharaoh was the leader of Egypt who kept the Israelites in slavery. Look for Pharaoh in *Shlemiel Crooks*. Why does he want the thieves to take Reb Elias's Passover wine?
3. It is the tradition to drink wine at the Passover seder. Reb Elias's wine in *Shlemiel Crooks* was made from leftover grapes from the Exodus from Egypt. Why do you think wine is an important part of the Passover seder?
4. Why is only unleavened bread eaten during Passover?
5. The prophet Elijah is a hero in Judaism. Elijah stood up to King Ahab when his wife Jezebel introduced the worship of an idol

into the Jewish kingdom. Jewish legends say that Elijah the Prophet comes in times of trouble to bring relief and hope to the people. At the Passover seder, a special cup of wine is put on the seder table for Elijah. The door of the house is open and everyone stands to allow Elijah to enter and drink the wine. Read the story again, and look for mentions of the Prophet Elijah.

6. Why is the story of Exodus important to remember and talk about today?

## 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).

## More Books About Passover

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- Levine, Anna and Topaz, Ksenia. *Jodie's Passover Adventure*. (Kar-Ben, 2012).
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- Strauss, Linda Leopold and Natchev, Alexi. *The Elijah Door: A Passover Tale*. (Holiday House, 2012).
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# 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*