



**THE PLAGUE**  
written by Clem Martini

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## ABOUT CLEM MARTINI

Born in Calgary, Alberta, where he lives with his wife and daughters, Clem Martini is a man of many talents and interests. He is an award-winning playwright, the president of the Playwrights Guild of Canada, a drama teacher who has worked with troubled youth, and now, a novelist. Martini's published works include *Illegal Entry*, which won the 2000 Gwen Pharis Ringwood Award for Drama, and *A Three Martini Lunch*, a collection of plays short-listed for the 2001 Governor General's Award for Drama. He is also a three-time winner of the Alberta Writers Guild Drama Prize. Even with so much on his plate, Martini still found time to wait with his daughter for her school bus, and fortunately her off-hand comment about crows set in motion the creation of *The Mob*.



Feather and Bone: The Crow Chronicles trilogy is told from the point of view of a proud family of crows with their own ancient customs and traditions. In the style of an ancient saga, the trilogy highlights the heroic efforts of crows chosen to lead the flock through internal strife, plague and war. The third book is *The Judgment*, available in Fall 2006.

## ABOUT THE MOB

Each spring in North America, millions of Crows leave their roosts and travel north on a journey that covers thousands of miles. *The Mob* chronicles the great migration of one Crow Family — the Kinaar. The high point of this migration is their annual reunion, or Gathering, which occurs at a location steeped in tradition: the Gathering Tree. This year during the Gathering, disastrous circumstances occur that threaten to change the Kinaar forever.

Kyp, an over-confident adolescent Crow, taunts a cat and in so doing accidentally causes the death of a Family member. A tribunal is convened and Kyp is sentenced to temporary exile. When spring rains turn to snow and the temperature suddenly plummets, the Kinaar are threatened by a deadly blizzard. Kyp breaks the prohibition placed upon him and, regardless of the consequences, returns to the Gathering in an attempt to persuade his Family to follow him to safety in an underground cavern he has discovered. Tragically, the Family is split over how to deal with Kyp's law breaking, and one Clan leaves the rest of the Kinaar to find its own way in the blizzard.

Those that follow Kyp labor through treacherous flying conditions to the cavern, where they huddle in the dark — wet, terrified and exhausted. Unknown to Kyp, however, a hidden danger waits in the side tunnels. The cat Kyp taunted, intent on revenge, follows the Kinaar underground and brings other cats with him.

The struggle that follows is bitter and requires all the collective strength and wisdom of the flock. When the light of day dawns, nothing is left unchanged. The leadership of the Kinaar adapts to reconcile ancient traditions and new ways of seeing things, old divisions are healed and Kyp grows to recognize something deeper about his place in the Family.

## ABOUT THE PLAGUE

It is Gathering time again and three Crows — Kyp, Kym and Kalum, the Chooser for their Family — are flying back to the Gathering Tree as Kalum attempts to instill in the younger crows the qualities needed in a Chooser, a role for which they are both being groomed. Suddenly, an eagle attacks, and the impulsive Kyp fights to protect the

others. The trio is safe, but the attack is a precursor of far more dangerous events to come — events that threaten to destroy the Family and the future of all Crows.

Kyp is shaken by news of a deadly illness that has infected his Clan. He is further shaken to learn that he can't turn to the two Crows he has turned to in past times of crisis: Kalum has been attacked and is mortally injured, and Kym has been infected by the Plague and abducted by humans. Still not believing he is ready to lead, Kyp embarks alone on a quest to find Kym, fulfilling the dying wish of his mentor and unaware of the dangers that lie ahead. But he will not be alone for long.

Kyp encounters Kuper, a Crow who was presumed dead in a fight with cats, but who had actually been taken by humans. Having escaped from the humans, Kuper is angry that he was left to die and vows revenge on humans and those Crows who abandoned him. Kuper, the stronger of the two, attacks Kyp. Kyp manages to escape, but finds himself injured and lost. While Kyp is recovering, a Thief steals a trout from him, and Kyp gives chase! He catches the Thief, a crow named Katakata, and the two Crows become friends. Katakata has been affected by both the Plague and humans and agrees to join Kyp on his quest.

The two unlikely companions continue to fly eastward, without a destination and no guide other than a vague clue from a chance encounter Katakata had before he met Kyp. Along the way, Kyp and Katakata become allies with other Crows whose Families have been affected by the Plague and humans: Kwaku, who has visions of the future, Kyf and Kaf — three siblings orphaned by the Plague; a mysterious Crow, named Erkala, with white markings who is from across the ocean; and a young band of orphaned Crows led by an indecisive Chooser named Kyr. Together, Kyp and his new friends press on to find Kym despite worsening weather, lack of food and sleep, and their own dysfunction. But their greatest threats lie ahead: humans and the return of Kuper, who, along with a band of thousands, attempts to stand in the way of Kyp's ragtag band of Crows.

Finally, led by Kyp's determination, Katakata's cunning, Kwaku's visions and Erkala's self-confidence, the band reaches their destination: a massive collection of human roosts made of stone. In this daunting and unfamiliar urban setting, Kyp and his friends find Kym and other Crows caged in a large roost, along with other species of birds. It takes months for the group to find a way to enter the structure and rescue Kym. Kyp reunites with Kym, and the other Crows decide to stick together, following Kyp, the reluctant leader and Chooser for his new family, back to the land of his Clan.



## CAST OF MAIN CHARACTERS

### IN *THE MOB*

KYP RU KUREA RU KINAAR: An intelligent and impulsive adolescent male Crow with a flying ability that is unrivaled among the Kinaar.

KYM RU KEMNA RU KINAAR: A thoughtful, outspoken adolescent female Crow with a fascination for everything that has to do with humans.

KALUM RU KUREA RU KINAAR: The Chooser for the entire Kinaar Family; wise, very old and a great lover of food and conversation.

KUPER RU KITAKA: A large and rather silent outsider to the Kinaar. A distant relation through the Kemna Clan, his entire nest Family died tragically, and since that time, he has flown solo.

KYRK RU KUREA RU KINAAR: A stern, sometimes impatient elder of the Kurea Clan.

KORK RU KEMNA RU KINAAR: The religious and conservative leader of the Kemna Clan.

## ADDITIONAL MAIN CHARACTERS

### IN *THE PLAGUE*

KATAKATA RU KAMU: The narrator, a talkative thief and scavenger, who was Banished by his Clan for not avoiding humans, then returned to his Clan only to find them ravaged by the Plague.

KWAKU: A young, shy Crow who claims to hear and see events before they happen.

KYF: Kwaku's older sister; evicted from her Clan along with her siblings for using Kwaku's premonitions to warn about the coming Plague.

KAF: Kwaku's quiet older brother.

ERKALA RU ERKATA RU ERU: A mysterious crow with white markings who has lived alone since a storm forced her to cross the ocean.

KYRT RU KENYK RU NOTHING: The young, reluctant Chooser of a band of Crows brought together after their Clans were decimated by the Plague.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

The following discussion questions and activities are suitable for classes in language and literature, media and visual arts. Please note that some of the activities in this learning resource require students to visit their local library or use the Internet for research.

### Before Reading Questions and Activities

**1.** Using features of the book such as the title, the cover and the description on the flap, ask students to predict what they think will happen in the story and write down three to five predictions in point form. Then, either while they are reading or after they have finished reading the novel, they should refer back to their predictions to see how accurate they were.

**2.** The characters in the novel are crows. Ask students to make a list of three to five things they know about crows and write at least a paragraph. Students may use the Internet or reference materials to find more information.

### During Reading Questions and Activities

**1.** While reading *The Plague*, ask students to refer back to the list of things they made predictions about, which they created before they started reading the book. When they find something that teaches them more about what they predicted, ask them to mark the page with a sticky note or write it down in their notebook and include a note that says "I predicted this!"

**2.** Explain to students that rereading is an important tool to help them understand what they are reading. Whenever they come across a passage that they don't understand or have a question about the story, ask them to stop and place a sticky note on the page or pages that seem unclear and mark the note(s) with a question mark. Next, ask students to reread the passage. If the passage still seems unclear, encourage them to introduce the passage or their question about the story in class. Explain that other students may have the same question, or may be able to provide an answer to their question. Once the passage or question seems clear, ask students to place the letter A on the sticky note.

### Character Traits

**3.** For this activity, ask students to refer to the character trait activity page at the end of this guide and list as many character traits as they can think of per chapter for at least three major characters in the story. At the end of each chapter, or every few chapters, students should read and compare their trait charts with other classmates. Are there any similarities or differences?



## Developing Vocabulary

**4.** While students are reading the novel, ask them to write down a minimum of two to three unfamiliar words per chapter on the vocabulary chart located at the end of this guide.

Students will be responsible for filling in the following information on the vocabulary chart: the word, the page number, the chapter, the student's own definition and a definition from a dictionary. Remind students to first create their own definition of the word using only the context of the novel, then look up the word in the dictionary and write down the dictionary meaning. For each word, students should compare their meaning to the meaning found in the dictionary to see how accurate their definition was.

For example:

Word	Page #	Chapter	Student's Definition	Dictionary Definition
Crescents	10	1		
Hesitantly	13	1		
Gully	15	2		
Fastidiously	20	2		

## After Reading Questions and Activities

### Thematic Connections in *The Plague*

#### Leadership

**1.** Kyp is being groomed to be a Chooser, a position of great honor in a Crow Family. Early on, it is evident that Kyp lacks the confidence a Chooser needs. While he has strength and speed, he lacks concentration and decisiveness. Through his journey to find Kym, Kyp encounters new people and situations that force him to make decisions he would not otherwise have to make. In small groups, have students discuss Kyp's development throughout his journey, focusing on his readiness for leadership. Before they reread passages from the novel, have students discuss whether or not they think Kyp has become a good leader. Once they agree or disagree, they should look for at least three specific references or events from the novel to support their argument. Have each group make a short presentation supporting their arguments, and encourage the rest of the class to ask the presenting groups questions. The presenters should be ready to defend their position.

#### Role of the Narrator

**2.** On page 59, the narrator reveals he is Katakata, the Thief who befriends Kyp and aids him on his journey to find Kym. In groups of four to six, have students discuss Katakata's role as narrator. They should think about the following:

- Katakata's suitability as the narrator
- the advantages or disadvantages of the narrator being part of the story rather than an uninvolved, omnipotent narrator
- how different the story would be if another character was the narrator

Each student in the group will choose a character from the novel. Then, as a group, they will select a short excerpt from the novel to retell, in written or oral form, from the point of view of the character they chose. Students will then compare the original excerpt to their retelling and discuss how they differ.

### Curricular Connections in *The Plague*

#### Literature, Media and Visual Arts (Express Your Opinion)

**1.** Crows don't trust humans. They think humans are wasteful brutes. They have seen humans take their friends and family members away. Some crows have a better understanding of humans than others do, but through their observations, an unflattering picture of humans is painted. What is the author saying with this depiction of humans through the crows' eyes?

Ask students to work individually or in pairs to prepare an opinion piece about the portrayal of humans. Their opinion piece can be in the form of one of the following:

- an editorial for a newspaper
- a debate (2 students needed)
- a videotaped opinion piece for the evening news (if a video camera is not available, students can perform the piece in front of the class)
- a narrative written and/or read from the point of view of either a crow explaining his or her view of humans or a human defending his or her actions

Students should use at least three concrete references from the novel to defend their position.



## Arts: Drama (Create a Script)

**2.** Each character in *The Plague* has unique character traits, and each contributes in their own way during the journey to find Kym. Divide students into groups of five or six. Each student in the group will take on the persona of one of these main characters from the book:

Kyp • Katakata • Kwaku • Kyf • Erkala • Kuper • Kyrnt

Put the students playing the same character in the same group. Have them refer to specific references and events from the novel, as well as their character trait chart, to develop a list of character traits for their character. Then, have students reform their original groups to work on a Reader's Theater script based on the list of traits they have developed. The script should include the following:

- each character's interpretation of the journey's events
- how each character views the other characters and their contribution to the journey
- how each character views their own contribution
- each character's reason for going on the journey

The script can be presented in one of the following forms:

- in the round, with each character speaking in turn
- a specific scene from the novel
- an abbreviated version of the events of the whole novel
- a format of the students' choosing

Students need not memorize their lines, but they should immerse themselves fully in their characters.

## Media and Visual Arts (Create an Advertisement)

**3.** Crows face two imminent threats: the Plague and humans. Ask students to think about which is the greater threat, using references from the novel. Depending on which threat they determine is the greatest, students will create a full-color print advertisement for a newspaper or a magazine warning crows of the dangers posed by the threat. The advertisement can take any form students like, but it must include the following:

- evidence of the threat taken from the novel
- consequences of the threat
- how crows can protect themselves from the threat
- where crows can get more information
- the source of the advertisement, or who has taken out the ad. For example, the Organization of Concerned Crows (OCC)
- visuals such as illustrations or photos

The advertisement can be done by hand in a medium students choose. If technology is available, students can use a word processing or painting/drawing computer program to create their ad. Have students post their ads around the classroom and invite their classmates to view and discuss them.



## Q&A WITH CLEM MARTINI

**Q. When did you first become interested in crows?**

**A.** I've always been interested in crows. To me they seem to be the underdogs of the animal world. People have praise for all kinds of other animals — noble eagles, brave lions and that sort of thing — but crows are just viewed as pests. But I've always thought they were intelligent, and they seem to have a sense of humor, too.

One day I was sitting with my youngest daughter, waiting for her school bus to arrive. She saw some birds returning north after their annual migration and said, "That's just like a family reunion." I thought to myself, "Yeah, it is." That got me thinking, and one thing led to another.

**Q. Did you have trouble coming up with all their names? And why do all their names start with K?**

**A.** I started thinking about how Crows would talk. The human mouth is built to express a great number of sounds, and we're aided in this endeavor by lips and a very flexible tongue. These allow us to make all those lovely m's and p's.

Now, crows can express many, many sounds and are terrific mimics (they can and will imitate fire engines, owls and humans), but because of the way their beaks are constructed, the sound you're most likely to hear from them would be that familiar "Kaw" call. I thought, let's use that as the base sound for their vocabulary and for their names.

**Q. I've heard "a murder of crows" used to describe a flock. Do you know the origin of that term? Also, where does the term "mob" come from? These are very violent words. Do crows really behave that way?**

**A.** The term "a murder of crows" is, I think, more of a commentary on humans than it is on crows.

Humans have always been very inventive about how they chose to kill one another. Historically, humans fought one another in wars and left their dead lying on the battlefields. After public executions, humans left the dead swinging from gallows.

Crows are omnivores and will eat almost anything, including dead mice, dead sheep ... or dead humans. People became accustomed to seeing crows gather to scavenge following executions or battles and associated crows with those deaths. As a result of this association, flocks of crows were given the rather unsavory term "a murder." It's worth noting, though, that crows never did the killing — humans handled that on their own.

"Mobbing" is a term developed by those who study birds to describe when crows use superior numbers to drive off, or attack, animals they find threatening: hawks, owls, foxes, weasels.

**Q. You are a professor of drama. Did you do any acting when you were younger? If you did, do you remember your first role?**

**A.** Yes, I have acted, and I enjoy it. Although it's difficult to find time to devote to it now. I believe the first role I had was of a black cat in a Halloween play way back in grade two. The most notable thing about that particular performance was my tail, which I could wag rather impressively. The first role I had that involved dialogue was in Harold Pinter's small playlet *Trouble in the Works*, and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

**Q. Do you prefer writing plays or novels?**

**A.** I don't like one or the other "better," but there are aspects of each discipline that I relish. I enjoy very much the solitude and self-sufficiency of writing a novel. You don't require anything but the paper, pen and the world and characters you have created. I find the process very freeing.

Writing plays is a much more communal and friendly experience — a play doesn't really exist until actors read it. So you often meet with the artistic director as you work on the play. You may meet with the actors and hear them read a rough draft of the play. It's a less lonely way to work, and it can be great fun.

There are elements that are shared by both writing disciplines. And I think the thing I enjoy most that is common to both forms is creating the characters and finding the voices for those characters.



**Q. When you started writing *The Mob*, did you know it would be three books? And did you know how the third book would end?**

**A.** I had a rough idea. I had been thinking about crows for some time, so I knew what the crows in my stories wanted. As well, I lay out a general outline before I begin to write a novel or a play.

Nevertheless, there are all kinds of surprises that can — and I think probably should — occur as you write. There were times as I was writing *The Mob* when something I hadn't planned to happen, would. Likewise, as I was writing book two, *The Plague*, there were a number of crows who suddenly started talking ... and I didn't know who they were. I realized very quickly that they would just have to become part of the story. So I made room for them.

**Q. Do you like to read children's books? Did you have favorites when you were a kid?**

**A.** I loved books when I was a kid! I used to go on trips with at least three books — the one I was reading, the one I was interested in reading next and the one I was considering reading. When I was in elementary school, I was part of a very small, but I like to believe very select, book club at the Calgary Central Library. The membership had highs and lows and sometimes, I believe, I was the club's only member. Because I was a member of that club, the librarian would ply me with books that I would never otherwise have read. *The Hobbit* was one of them, and I remember thinking, after I'd finished the book, "Who is this guy Tolkien? I'm going to have to find more of his stuff."

My parents read to me, of course, and that's certainly one of my fondest memories of childhood. And when my own kids were younger, I read to them — which was always great fun. So much fun, actually, that even now that they are much older, we still read to one another on occasion.

**Q. You seem to know a lot about how birds fly and the way they use the air currents to help them. How did you discover this? Have you ever been up in a small plane or glider?**

**A.** I spent a lot of time outdoors when I was a child, hiking, camping and the like. That was a great education for me. I watched animals of all sorts and was always pestering naturalists in national parks with questions about why birds or bears did this or that. In fact, one of the very first books I purchased with my very own money — earned by delivering flyers from home to home at a quarter of a penny per flyer — was a Peterson Field Guide to animal tracks.

I have been in some small planes. Back in my university days, when I briefly held a summer job gathering rock samples for a geological company, I buzzed about in the mountains in a teeny weeny helicopter. It was in that helicopter that I became acquainted with some of the very strong winds that can suddenly blow up off of cliff faces.

**Q. Humans and crows have many things in common. Could you tell us about a few of them?**

**A.** Crows and humans do have many things in common. They're both omnivores and adapt quickly to changing environments. Both are intelligent. Crows have a complicated vocabulary of sounds and signals that they use to communicate with one another. They're both highly social. Crows seem to hang out with one another, not just for utilitarian reasons like chasing predators away, but because they seem to like the company of other crows. Crows, like humans, tend to mate for life. Crow youngsters don't just fly off as soon as they are capable, but linger near their parents to visit, and will often assist the parents in building the next season's nest. Like humans, crows enjoy playing and there have been many sightings of crows playing tag or snatch the twig.

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# CHARACTER TRAIT CHART

While reading the book, choose three major characters and list, in point form, as many character traits as you can think of for each character. Make sure to fill in each of the headings with the appropriate information. At the end of each chapter, or every few chapters, compare your trait charts with other classmates who chose the same characters as you. Discuss the similarities and differences between your trait chart and others. Include any traits that you may have missed on your own charts.

**Character's Name**

**Chapter and Page Reference**

**CHARACTER TRAITS**

**Character's Name**

**Chapter and Page Reference**

**CHARACTER TRAITS**

**Character's Name**

**Chapter and Page Reference**

**CHARACTER TRAITS**

# VOCABULARY CHART

While reading the novel, write down a minimum of two to three unfamiliar words per chapter on the vocabulary chart below. Fill in each column with the appropriate information.

If you find that you are running out of space before you reach the end of the book, extend the vocabulary list onto another page using the same headings.

Here are a few examples already listed for you:

Word	Page #	Chapter	Student's Definition	Dictionary Definition
Crescents	10	1		
Hesitantly	13	1		
Gully	15	2		
Fastidiously	20	2		

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