

The Mob by Clem Martini

The Crow Chronicles start with this book, "The Mob", the first in a trilogy. In "The Mob", Martini uses the wise narrator, Kalum ru Kurea ru Kinaar, who is 'Old': thirty eight Springs old: thirty eight migrations old. Martini writes metaphorically about unity, loyalty, individualism; about meeting personal challenges and about sacrifice. The enemies are clear and visible; weather, mankind, treacherous animals; especially cats. There is evidence of absorbed observation of bird flocks by the author, with comparisons made between species. The Crow 'mob' is anthropomorphised as the characters become real, individual; characters for the reader to care about; with motive, intelligence, memory, beliefs and group traditions very like those of humans. We as readers are even moved to agree when cats are compared with humans, as the long-lived crows have had ample opportunity to observe men killing for no apparent reason, other than sport or pleasure; like cats, they kill more than they can expect to eat.

Kalum begins the story by addressing The Mob, as the crows are Gathering, and we quickly understand that we are about to undergo a 'retelling' of 'troubles' that have recently occurred: a telling which will help to maintain the unity and validity of The Mob. Issues of succession, authority, power plays emerge early in the telling, as does an awareness that this is a celebration of 'crownness'; that these birds are to be presented as creatures to love and admire.

Martini very successfully creates a world which is detailed, fully realised, and quite mesmerising. I have always admired crows, their plumage, their call, their independence. I have also read that black birds, and black and white birds, are extremely intelligent; so that the behaviours described by Martini are credible, and his ascribing of emotion and motive to the members of The Mob is quite believable within the world of the book. One of the crows is blessed with insight and curiosity about humans, and it is the 'mavericks' of the Mob who are instrumental in ensuring that there are survivors of the hard and difficult gathering, survivors who, like us, are present to hear the tale that is told by Kalum ru Kurea ru Kinaar, as he invokes the blessing of the Maker. Suitable for senior readers; even Senior Secondary. Could make an interesting pairing with something like "Animal Farm" for intertextual study.

I look forward to more from this writer, especially the remainder of the trilogy. Well written; like all Allen & Unwin texts, beautifully presented, with solid binding, lovely textured cover, and very clear print.

Helen Wilde, SA

As Kalum calls everyone to move closer so that he can tell his story, the reader, too, is drawn in to a compelling yarn. To the average adult reader 38 years is not old. But to a teenager Kalum is as old as Methuselah.

Gradually the reader realises that this riveting first person narration is actually being told by a crow. Not just any crow, but the one named the Chooser, the one who leads the Family.

Kalum unravels the history of his Crow Family as he relates the trouble that struck the Family in the winter of his thirty-eighth year.

This anthropomorphised story has touches of humour, tragedy and poignancy.

The Crows fly up the western seacoast, through the great midlands and meet each winter between the great northern plains that the forest at the Gathering Tree. Here important family decisions are made, marriages formed, babies born and educated; it is indeed a time to rejoice.

But not this year. The ancient laws and customs are tested, not only by the young crows, Kyp and Kym, but also by many of the older crows, too. The battle with the Red, Kyp's Eviction for six days, the storm and their efforts to seek shelter all provide very tense moments.

Throughout the story Kalum incidentally explains many old Crow customs; he explains their origin and the role the Maker played, and still does play, in their lives.

The Rule of Three, their avoidance of humans wherever possible, Banishment, The Long Chase...all these add to our sense of involvement with the Crows whilst also suggesting just how closely Clem Martini has observed these birds.

The conflict between old and young, between obeying old laws and traditions and ignoring them in the name of safety that is at the centre of the novel is tense and dramatic. There is death and there is celebration of life.

This is a brilliant novel for both teenagers and adults. I look forward to using it with my year 8 boys when we complete our unit on Anthropomorphism and Allegory as there are so many issues to discuss...obeying rules; youth versus old age; responsibility for others; exploring forbidden areas; relationships with others, male and female, to name a few.

However, it is not just a boys' novel - it is a story that can be enjoyed by girls and boys throughout high school and beyond. I can't wait for "The Plague" and "The Judgment".

As I read the novel I began to think of ways I could use it in class, largely because I found it such a compelling read and I think the students I teach will also enjoy it.

Class discussion - obvious, all the topics I mentioned above.

Drama - role playing the Gathering as they meet to decide Kyp's punishment.

There are many other elements in the story that lead to dramatic representation, especially if your class is into film making. I plan to ask the class to produce four separate scripts of sections of the novel so that they can produce a three-five minute film which illustrates the various film techniques they need to know.

Working with newspapers - many of the events lend themselves to writing either a news item, a feature article (The Search for a New Home; The Dangers of Roosting near Humans; Human Talk, to name a few), an obituary for Klea or Kyrk, an Editorial (The Flightiness of the Young, for instance). In fact, an entire newspaper for the Gathering could be produced. The Sports pages would rival Harry Potter.

The Journal - Any one of the characters could be writing a journal about his/her activities over the Gathering time. I like the idea of a reflective journal where events are recounted and then different actions are reflected upon so that the writer obviously learns from an activity. This involves first, person past tense, recount writing and then a switch to first person, present tense reflective writing. The switch in style is a difficult concept for year 8 students to grasp but the style of narrative of "The Mob" certainly lends itself to reflective writing.

Debating - a step above the discussion - a formal debate on the rightness of Kyp's actions.

Another topic could be centred on the rights and wrongs of breaking traditional law. Or "Is God female?" (The Crow's Maker is!)

Visuals - there are so many vivid descriptions throughout the novel that any number of visual tasks spring to mind, e.g.

Visual impressions of the characters of Kym, Kyp, Kyrk, to name three.

An overview of the path of the birds as they head to the Gathering

There are many "Bird's Eye views" which lend themselves to visual interpretation, through maps and abstract visuals.

Emotions - expressing emotions visually

Taking a sentence from the novel and interpreting it visually - the Rule of Three; If the wind had proved a hindrance to our flight, now the deep snow proved an equal problem for the Striped, for example.

Obviously, 'normal' novel lessons - theme, plot, characterisation, setting, tone, language levels - are very appropriate because of the structure of the novel - generally a conventional forward flow, but with flash backs and recounts of the history and legends of the Crow.

What is Language and how do we learn it? Kym likes to observe humans - she even feels that some are beginning to talk Crow.

Robyne P Ridge, Kinross Wolaroi School, NSW

Book 1 in the Crow Chronicles trilogy "The Mob" by Clem Martini is a thought-provoking and well written novel for young adults.

"The Mob" details an anthropomorphic saga of a flock of crows comprised of several clans. When the families of crows come together at the Gathering Tree for their annual joyful meeting they are faced with unexpected complications.

The Gathering is usually a time of celebration, initiation, reminiscence and finding a mate. It is a time when laws and traditions are discussed and the effect of the encroachment of humans on their habitat is debated. This time tragedy strikes. A young crow is taken by a cat. This results in a revenge attack by a small band of young crows.

The tone of the Gathering changes from celebration to uncertainty. Traditional laws have been challenged and broken by the young group who attacked the cat without consultation with the elders. A tribunal of elders passes judgement on the leader Kyp who is sentenced to a temporary banishment from the flock.

The drama intensifies when a blizzard threatens the survival of the whole flock and their Chooser must make difficult and wise decisions. The ramifications of these decisions are far-reaching and dramatic.

In "The Mob" Martini combines the skill of storytelling with well-researched information about crows which fits seamlessly into the narrative. It is thought-provoking, absorbing and informative with emotional depth.

Through this anthropomorphic flock the issues of family, relationships, growing up, taking risks and making choices are explored.

Decision-making and the responsibility that goes with it underpin the action.

Environmental issues connected with humans' interaction with birds/animals, their encroachment on the birds' habitat and the issue of cats as a threat to birdlife are at the heart of the novel. The view of humans from the crows' viewpoint is interesting and at times humorous.

"The Mob" is an insightful and absorbing read. Animal and bird lovers will enjoy the drama and action combined with information about the life of crows.

It is a bit disconcerting that all the characters' names start with K. The main characters Kyp and Kym are joined by a number of crows whose names also start with K - Kork, Kyrk, Kuper, Klara, Kalum, Klea, Kek, Kymble and more. This might be confusing for some readers. At the same time though it is inventive and the characters' names continually draw the reader back to the word 'crow' starting with that c/k sound so that they 'sound right'.

In the Crow Chronicles, "The Mob" is followed by the "The Plague" and "The Judgement". I look forward to reading the next book in the saga.

Margaret Warner, Casual teacher / writer, NSW

Every day we consciously or sub-consciously observe flocks of birds. They may be flying, roosting or foraging in paddocks, we rarely pay much attention. Clem Martini changes all that, taking us into the heart of the flock, the crow community, revealing intricacies that must exist for their survival.

Like our own social rules so do the flocks have rules which govern their daily lives. More importantly there are rules in place which ensure the flocks general safety and ultimately survival. Any breakdown of these rules result in consequences and punishment, this is meted out by the governing council. The Chooser has ultimate voice in the decision making process, however voice is given to the elders of the flock.

Annually The Mob meet at the Gathering Tree for festivities and reflection. We travel with The Mob during the migration process learning as we go of the trial and tribulations that such a journey evokes. We learn about the intricacies of the wind and how the more experienced take advantage of the natural thrusts and thermals to enhance flying. We feel the aches of the elderly especially in their breast bones, as age takes its toll. For the newlings of the flock we know the stamina necessary for such a long journey will be exacting.

We meet the six different clans that make up The Mob, The Kinaar Family, Kemna, Kelk, Koorda, Kark, Kurea and Kush. The offspring all have names beginning with 'K' which initially makes the reading of the book a challenge. Each family has its mixture of rascals and responsible members. Kyp, Kym and Kuper are three risk takers that rise to the occasion and save the Mob in their hour of desperate need.

This is book one of The Crow Chronicles; "The Plague" and "The Judgment" will complete the trilogy. I am looking forward to continuing the journey with the Kinaar Family and will forevermore be aware of flocks of birds.

Rachel Froude, Galen Catholic College, VIC

In *The Mob*, which is part one of The Crow Chronicles trilogy, Clem Martini creates a believable world in which crows are the main players. The story is centred around their annual migration to the Gathering Tree. Through their "Chooser", Kalum, we learn of their customs, laws and everyday life as he relates the story of one eventful gathering in which tradition was challenged and many crows perished.

As the story unfolds we establish that crow society is governed by strict laws just as is human society, and that there are those who interpret the rules liberally and those who are sticklers for the letter of the law. Kyrk, an old crow who feels that he should have been Chooser, fills the latter role in the story. A group of young crows who stage an unsanctioned revenge attack on a cat who has killed one of their number begin a chain of events that threatens the very survival of the crows as a group. A huge storm brings the events of the story to a climax.

Many issues are explored in the story such as unity versus individualism, the role of youth challenging the establishment or the purpose of unorthodox individuals in society. These could be the basis of discussion or debate. *The Mob* has enough interest to be studied as a class novel for Yrs 6 – 8 and would make an excellent inclusion in any library. Being part of a trilogy should also increase its popularity as many students seem to love a series.

Alison Bradney