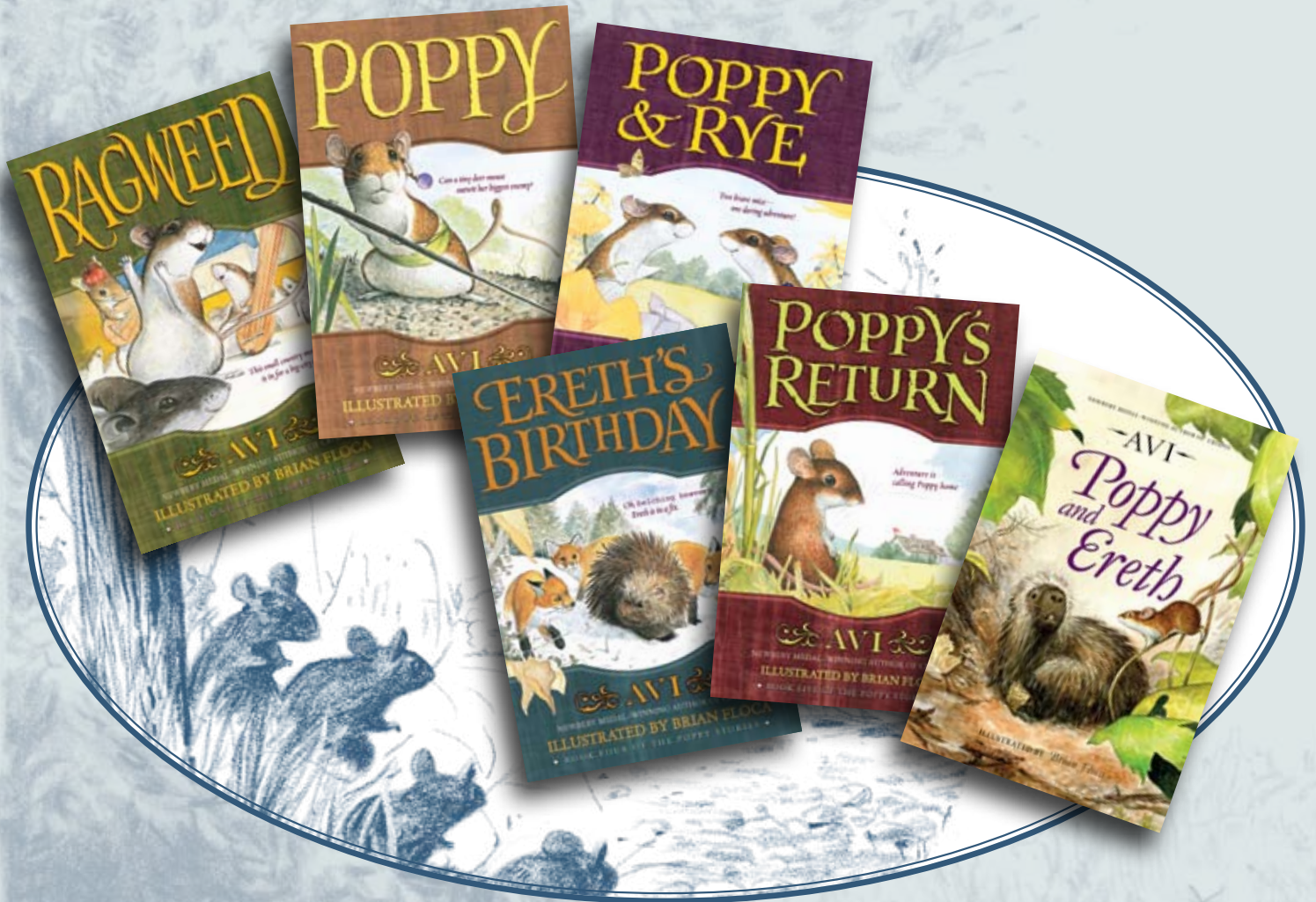




# The Poppy Stories, by Avi

— A Teaching Guide —



## INTRODUCING POPPY AND FRIENDS

NEWBERY MEDAL WINNER AVI demonstrates his mastery of the animal fantasy genre with his critically acclaimed Poppy stories. Enjoyed both in classrooms and by families reading together, the sweet adventures of Poppy, Ragweed, Rye, Ereth, and Junior resonate with readers of many ages. The universal hopes, dreams, and troubles of these characters invite discussion and further exploration, as the books provide a meaningful and fun reading experience—an experience that is meant to be shared. Follow Ragweed as he leaves his home looking for adventure, Poppy as she risks her life for others, and Rye as he finds his true value. Grow to love Ereth, despite his cantankerous irritability, and laugh at Ragweed Junior for his rebellious teenage talk. Savor each of the six books in the series as you travel the paths through Dimwood Forest.



## – A Guide to Teaching Avi’s Poppy Stories –

### BEFORE READING

Dimwood Forest is home to golden mice, deer mice, porcupines, horned owls, red foxes, beavers, deer, fishers, voles, badgers, skunks, bats, and a cinnamon brown bear and her cub. While the Poppy stories lead us into the hearts and minds of these characters, they also let us learn about the animals’ real lives as forest dwellers. Ask students to research one of the animals from the Poppy stories. Responses should include a description of the animal’s habitat, diet, life span, reproduction, predators, and any other fascinating facts.

### THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

#### THE WORLD OF FANTASY

Fantasy stories enthrall us when they are rich and believable. Why do you care about the animals in the Poppy stories? What are your favorite fantasy stories? What makes them believable? What have you learned about yourself and about being human from fantasy stories?

#### WHAT MAKES A HERO?

Why do we have heroes? Are heroes relevant today? Lloyd Alexander’s fantasy character, Taran, says that “every man is a hero if he strives more for others than for himself alone.” Do you agree? How do you define a hero? Which characters from the Poppy stories fit your definition? Which other characters from literature are heroes?

#### BEING TRUE TO YOURSELF

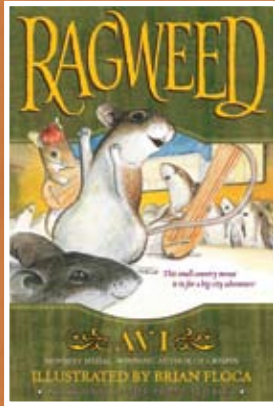
Even at a young age, the characters in the Poppy stories must discover their passions and find out about the world on their own. They question authority, follow their hearts, stand up for what they believe in, and face overwhelming challenges. Discuss what it means to be true to yourself. What are your passions? What dreams do you hope to follow?

#### LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

Throughout the Poppy stories, characters face challenges—but not without the love and encouragement of their family and friends. Can one person alone accomplish great things, or do even heroes need a network of support? Write down an accomplishment that gives you great pride. Was it reached alone or with the help of others? Identify how love and/or friendship played a part in this accomplishment.



# — A Guide to Teaching Avi's Poppy Stories —



## RAGWEED — Book One of the Poppy Stories

★ *“A crackerjack tale that’s pure delight from start to finish.”*

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (STARRED REVIEW)

### ABOUT THE BOOK

Ragweed, a golden mouse, says good-bye to his family and the quiet of the Brook, to strike out and see the world. With the motto “A mouse has to do what a mouse has to do” (p. 1), Ragweed hops a train and finds himself in Amperville—a city both loud and dangerous, where his life definitely speeds up. First he is attacked by Silversides, an angry white cat who is president of F.E.A.R. (Felines Enraged About Rodents). Then he is saved by Clutch, a skateboard-riding gray mouse with green hair and a purple earring. Ragweed will have to decide if he is a country mouse or a city mouse, and he may just find that “Being a mouse ain’t easy anywhere” (p. 125).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

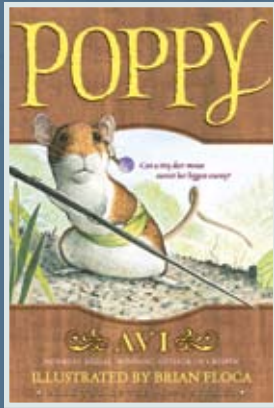
1. Ragweed, Clutch, Blinker, and even Silversides each long for something. Identify what these characters want and whether they accomplish their goals. Are their longings similar to any of your own hopes and wishes?
2. What caused Silversides to become “a very angry cat” (p. 14)? Do you ever have sympathy for him and Graybar? Why did Silversides create F.E.A.R.? Does the organization have noble goals? Explain.
3. Clutch’s band, the Be-Flat Tires, uses a language foreign to Ragweed. Find examples of the band members’ use of slang and translate the meanings. How does this new language affect Ragweed? Specialized activities often have their own vocabularies. Make a list of special terms that are used by a specific group of people, such as skateboarders (like Clutch).
4. Blinker has book learning, while Clutch has experience. Which one do you think is more important? What types of knowledge were necessary to create Café Independent and to overcome F.E.A.R.? What do you think the future holds for the mice in Amperville?
5. How does Ragweed change over the course of the novel? How are leaving home, seeking independence, and making one’s own decisions part of every person’s development? Why doesn’t Ragweed stay with his new friends? What does their gift of the purple earring signify?



## — EXTENSION ACTIVITY —

Café Independent is the center of the mouse music scene. What do Clutch and Ragweed sing about? How does their music reflect their world? What does current popular music say about young people today? Does it have its own language? Choose a popular song and explain what it means to you personally. As an alternative, write a song that reflects your ideas about the world.

# — A Guide to Teaching Avi's Poppy Stories —



## POPPY — Book Two of the Poppy Stories

*Boston Globe—Horn Book Award*

★ *“Richly visual, subtly humorous, skillfully laden with natural history. A thoroughly enjoyable book.”*

—ALA BOOKLIST (STARRED REVIEW)

### ABOUT THE BOOK

Poppy, a deer mouse, is the last one you would suspect of doing anything forbidden or dangerous. Yet she and Ragweed steal away one evening to dance on Bannock Hill under the moonlight, even though Mr. Ocax, the owl, forbids such things without his permission. Disaster strikes and Poppy must begin a heroic journey to discover the truth, save her family, and clear her good name—as well as Ragweed's. The adventure changes Poppy's life forever.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

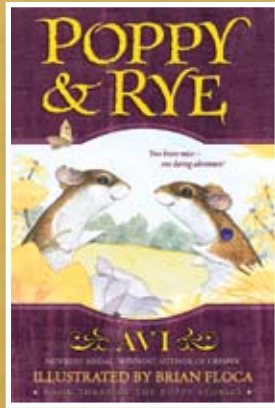
1. Tragedy strikes early when Mr. Ocax kills Ragweed. Were you shocked by Ragweed's murder? Did it frighten you? Why do you think Avi started his story in this way? Is this an unusual event in the animal world?
2. What kind of leader is Lungwort? How does he remain in control of the family? Does Ragweed have the right to question him and challenge his authority? How does Mr. Ocax control the mice? Do the mice have the right to challenge his authority? Explain.
3. Avi's characters each have a dominant personality characteristic: Lungwort is fatherly, Ragweed is cocky, Mr. Ocax is threatening, Poppy is thoughtful, and Ereth is prickly in his quills and in his speech. Find examples of things each character says that reflects his or her personality. What are your favorite Ereth sayings?
4. Ereth says that Poppy is “pretty small to be a heroine” (p. 113). Poppy herself says that it is “so hard to be courageous” (p. 87). How would you explain Poppy's success? What do you consider her greatest obstacle? What qualities does she have that allow her to triumph?
5. A traditional hero story involves a pattern that oral storytellers once used to remember how the story unfolds. In this pattern, the hero is called to adventure by a problem requiring him or her to leave home and travel to another world. The hero is tested by many trials and enemies, meets friends and helpers along the way, and has a talisman (lucky charm). He or she will reach a low point and nearly give up but will ultimately triumph and return home a changed person. Create a chart illustrating these steps and identify each of these elements in Poppy's journey.



## — EXTENSION ACTIVITY —

Now that you have followed Poppy's hero journey, apply the steps from question 5 to another story you have read, identifying the markers of the main character's journey. Instead of creating a new chart, try adding a column to your Poppy chart for this second hero. Looking at the two heroes side by side, compare and contrast their adventures and personal development.

# — A Guide to Teaching Avi's Poppy Stories —



## POPPY AND RYE — Book Three of the Poppy Stories

*"A sequel worthy of its predecessor."* —THE HORN BOOK

### ABOUT THE BOOK

When Poppy and Ereth travel to Ragweed's family home at the Brook, they get involved in fighting the construction plans of the beavers, who dam the stream and flood the area, thereby forcing the mice to leave. How can mice fight animals that are more powerful than they are? Together Poppy and Ragweed's brother, Rye, brave kidnapping, imprisonment, and a daring rescue to fight the beavers.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

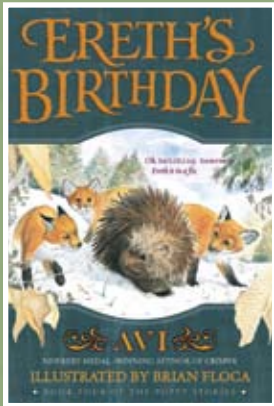
1. Even though Ragweed is dead, many characters in this story express strong feelings about him. How do Poppy, Rye, Ereth, Curleydock, Thistle, Clover, and Valerian feel about Ragweed? How are Ragweed and his brother, Rye, different? How are they alike?
2. Castor P. Canad, the beaver construction head, says that there is nothing he admires more than originality, but his speech would tell us otherwise—it's filled with overworked clichés and idioms! Find examples of Cas's so-called originality. What message is Avi conveying here?
3. If you were a judge and had the power to settle disputes in Dimwood Forest, how would you bring the mice and the beavers together and make everyone happy? Is there a solution that would keep the peace? Explain.
4. The motto of the beaver construction company is "Progress Without Pain" (p. 6). Is progress possible without pain, or does progress always come at a cost?
5. How is the story's ending not the work of one hero, but of many? What lessons can be learned from this adventure? Describe the many different types of courage that characters display throughout the book.



## — EXTENSION ACTIVITY —

Avi uses various characters' unique language to add spark and wit to each tale. In *Ragweed*, it's Clutch's jive and his parents' artsy style. In *Poppy*, it's Ereth, whose silly sputtering makes us laugh. In *Poppy and Rye*, Castor P. Canad piles clichés into pompous pronouncements. Practice Avi's art as an author. Choose one of these characters and have some fun writing dialogue in his style of speaking.

# — A Guide to Teaching Avi's Poppy Stories —



## ERETH'S BIRTHDAY — Book Four of the Poppy Stories

*"A must-read for fans of the series."* —ALA BOOKLIST

### ABOUT THE BOOK

It is Ereth's birthday, but he's in a foul mood because he thinks his best friend, Poppy, has forgotten. Feeling unloved, he runs away to find his own present—the salt in the hunter's cabin at Long Lake. Along the way, Ereth makes a promise to a dying mother fox that he will care for her kits. But Ereth is a cranky loner who can't handle noise or change—or children! Readers who are familiar with Ereth's moods from the previous Poppy stories know that he has a tender side, but on his birthday, his love is truly put to the test.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

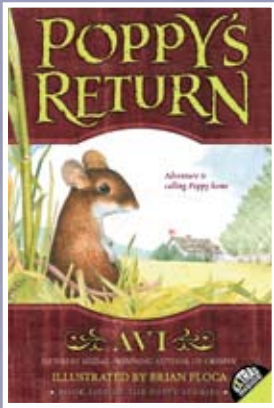
1. Ereth has strong opinions on nearly everything, including babies, kids, the seasons, salt, and even snowmobiles. As you read, keep track of these opinions. Do you agree or disagree with them? Why or why not?
2. Ereth regrets his promise to Leaper, saying, "The truth is, I don't want to do what I promised to do" (p. 49). Why does he follow through on his pledge? Have you ever had similar regrets about a promise? What did you do?
3. What problems does Ereth face as the kits' new mother? How does he handle each of these problems? How are Flip, Nimble, and Tumble similar to human children? How is Ereth similar to an adult human?
4. Bounder has an interesting history with Ereth. Describe their first meeting. How would you describe their latest meeting? What kind of father is Bounder?
5. As Marty struggles inside the hunter's box trap, he begs for Ereth and the foxes to let him out. He tries to reason with them: "The weak always have an obligation to help the strong. We're the important ones. Besides, I've suffered a great deal . . . my family is almost extinct. You have an obligation to help me" (p. 181). How do you feel about these statements? Does Marty's plea ring true to you? Explain.



## — EXTENSION ACTIVITY —

Make a list of all the qualities that you think make a good parent. Looking back through the Poppy stories, which characters would qualify as good parents according to your list? Which characters would not qualify? Include evidence from each story to support your answer.

# — A Guide to Teaching Avi's Poppy Stories —



## POPPY'S RETURN — Book Five of the Poppy Stories

*"A heartwarming tale of friends, family, and home."*

—CHICAGO TRIBUNE

### ABOUT THE BOOK

While Poppy and Rye worry about their son, Ragweed Junior, and his bad attitude, Poppy's sister, Lilly, visits with a family problem of her own. A gigantic bulldozer is parked near Gray House, the family home, ready to topple it. Lungwort, Poppy and Lilly's father, is ill and expects Poppy to return home to save the day. So Poppy and Junior set off through Dimwood Forest, along with Ereth and Junior's skunk pal, Mephitis, on an unexpected adventure.



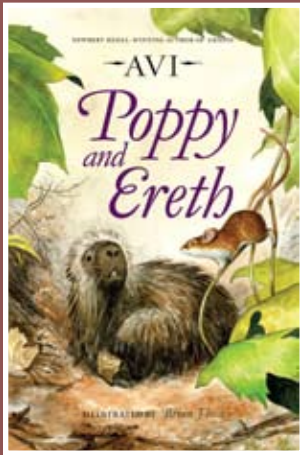
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ragweed Junior has become a teenager! What are his symptoms? What is the cure? What would you do if you were Junior's parents? Do you believe, as Poppy does, that children owe something to their parents? Should parents respect their children's choices? Is it normal not to get along with your parents? Discuss.
2. Lilly accuses Poppy of taking unnecessary risks and putting others in danger. Looking back on the other Poppy stories, do you agree with Lilly? Poppy herself says she likes taking risks. What do you view as the greatest risk Poppy ever took? Are you a risk taker, or are you more like Lilly?
3. Describe Junior and Mephitis's sense of humor. What makes them laugh? What does "Doing the stinky red" (p. 174) mean?
4. Family is an important subject in this story, causing both joy and pain, as three generations of mice try to work out their differences. Consider each of the main characters and discuss their varied feelings about family. Poppy asks Basil, "Why do you think our families are so hard?" (p. 158). How might you answer this question? Are human families equally hard? Explain.
5. Junior decides early in their trip that "he and Mephitis would do outrageous stuff, stuff so big and so bad, that family would never forget" (p. 33). Does he accomplish his goal? What things does Junior teach his family? What do Junior and Mephitis learn?

## — EXTENSION ACTIVITY —

The mice have a new hero now that Junior and his friends have saved the day. Perhaps one day Junior will become a legend like his mother, Poppy. Write and perform a ballad (a song or poem that tells a story) about Junior and his visit to Gray House, imagining that the cousins he leaves behind are the ones singing it. Don't forget to include the part Ereth and Mephitis play in this tale.

# — A Guide to Teaching Avi's Poppy Stories —



## POPPY AND ERETH — Book Six of the Poppy Stories

### ABOUT THE BOOK

In this final volume of the Poppy stories, tragedy strikes when Poppy's husband, Rye, dies, leaving his widow heartbroken. When Poppy mysteriously disappears, Ereth fears the worst and mistakenly concludes that his best friend has died. Meanwhile, Poppy is on the other side of the forest, making new friends and coming face-to-face with an old nemesis, while all the time missing her home, her family, and her best friend. As fire threatens the forest, the animals come together to carry out a miraculous escape.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. One of the principal themes of this story is change. How does Poppy change over the course of Avi's series? How does she remain the same? What about Ereth? How can change be both good and bad? Why do Poppy and Ereth dread the thought of being old?
2. What role does Ragweed's earring play in this story and in the series as a whole? What does the earring symbolize? What meaning does it have for Poppy?
3. How is the new generation of mice (Spruce, Lodgepole, Dogbane, and Clover) reminiscent of the young mice from the earlier Poppy stories? How does Spruce's youthful exuberance put him in danger? How does this same quality help him save Poppy and the rest of the mice?
4. Poppy and Ereth make an unlikely pair of best friends. Why does their friendship work? Though not exactly friends, Poppy and Bounder become an unlikely pair of allies. What brings them together? How does a crisis force people to set aside their differences and reconsider their priorities?
5. The mantra "A mouse has to do what a mouse has to do," which Ragweed says in the first of the Poppy stories, acts as a refrain throughout the series and in this book especially. What does the saying mean? How does it sum up the Poppy stories? How does it apply to life in general?



### — EXTENSION ACTIVITY —

Rye may have passed away, but his poetry lives on. Celebrate the characters, the adventures, and the vivid world of Dimwood Forest by writing a poem about your favorite moment from the series. Which character, scene, or event means the most to you? Why? Take inspiration from Rye's poignant final poem, the haiku "Ice Leaf."

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