



EERDMANS BOOKS  
for Young Readers  
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## DISCUSSION GUIDE

# NILE CROSSING

Written by **KATY BEEBE** Illustrated by **SALLY WERN COMPORT**

*A unique twist on the first day of school*

Khepri lives in ancient Egypt, happily fishing alongside his father in the waters of the Nile. But today, Khepri will have to replace his fishing pole with the reed pens of a scribe: it's his first day of school. As he and his father travel to Thebes, Khepri faces his anxieties about starting school and eventually finds a sense of peace.

### ABOUT the Author

**KATY BEEBE** teaches history at the University of Texas at Arlington and has a doctorate in medieval history from the University of Oxford. While studying in Oxford, she heard an unusual story about a manuscript-munching bear that became the inspiration for her first children's book, *Brother Hugo and the Bear* (Eerdmans). Visit her website at [www.katybeebe.com](http://www.katybeebe.com).

### ABOUT the Illustrator

**SALLY WERN COMPORT** has been an illustrator for over twenty years. Her previous children's books include *Ada's Violin: The Story of the Recycled Orchestra of Paraguay* and *Brave Margaret: An Irish Adventure* (both Simon and Schuster). She lives in Maryland.

### PRAISE FOR *Nile Crossing*

★ "Quiet but beautifully written, this is a great informational read-aloud about starting school, ancient Egypt, and hieroglyphics."

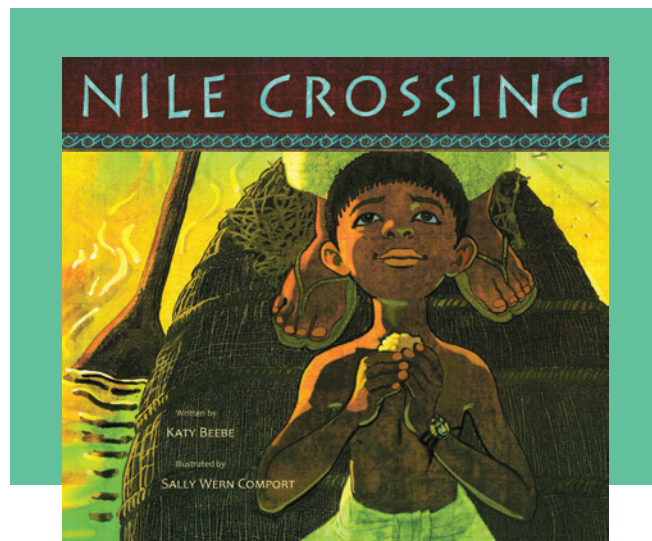
— *School Library Journal* (starred review)

"The first-person point of view is perfect for conveying, in vivid, sensual prose, Khepri's feelings and descriptions of the town, river, and bustling city of Thebes."

— *Kirkus Reviews*

"The intricate folk art style illustrations transport young readers back in time. Moreover, the similes, alliteration, and imagery woven throughout the text paint a beautiful picture of life in Ancient Egypt."

— *School Library Connection*



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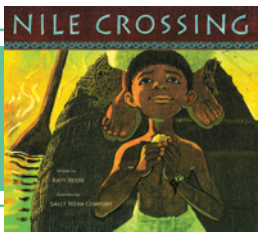
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If you have any suggestions for using *Nile Crossing* with young readers, we would be happy to hear from you.

Discussion guide written by Katy Beebe



## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

- How is this particular day different for the main character, Khepri?
- Why do you think Khepri's sisters stay at home, instead of going to school with him?
- How does Khepri feel on his journey across the Nile River? Why?
- Do you think Khepri is excited about going to school? Nervous? Why might he be both?
- Describe what Khepri's father gives him to take into school. What "school supplies" does he need, and why? How are these different than the school supplies you use?
- Khepri is nervous at the beginning of the story; how does he feel at the end? What has made him feel differently by the time he stands in front of the gate to the school?
- What are some of the main themes of *Nile Crossing*?

### SPEAKING AND LISTENING, WRITING

Khepri realizes on his journey that he feels many different emotions about starting school. Discuss with your students about how they felt on their very first day of school, on their second day, and then the second year they started school. Had their feelings changed? Did anyone ever start at a school that was completely new to them? What emotions did they feel? If they were nervous, what helped them to be less nervous? If they have a new student in their class, what could they do to help that classmate feel more at home?

Encourage your students to begin their own Egyptian education as scribes by copying the hieroglyphs for the name of the god "Thoth" included in the historical notes at the end of *Nile Crossing*. Using print and electronic resources from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, and your local museum, present a few more examples of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Have your students copy a few of these signs for themselves and compare them. What do the images remind them of? What might the signs mean? Then, introduce a few basic signs and phrases to them from *Write Your Own Egyptian Hieroglyphs* by Angela McDonald. Encourage them to write their own names and greetings in hieroglyphs. A basic "alphabet" of hieroglyphs and the sounds they are thought to represent can be found at [www.katybeebe.com](http://www.katybeebe.com).

A few "schoolbooks" still exist from ancient Egypt, and they can give us an idea of what life was like for students in that era. Read your students the following passage from "Advice to the Youthful Scribe," which is a text that an Egyptian schoolmaster might have required his students to copy. Then have your students imagine that they are at school in ancient Egypt. How would they describe what school is like to their family at home? How is the school described in this passage different from their school (and teacher!) today?

"O scribe, do not be idle, do not be idle, or you shall be curbed straightway. Do not give your heart to pleasures, or you shall fail. Write with your hand, recite with your mouth, and converse with those more knowledgeable than you. Exercise the office of magistrate, and then you will find it [advantageous] in old age. Fortunate is a scribe skilled in his office, the possessor of (a good) upbringing. Persevere in action daily, and you will gain mastery over them. Do not spend a day of idleness or you shall be beaten. The youth has a back and he hearkens to the beating of him. Pay attention. Harken to what I have said. You will find it advantageous. One teaches apes [to] dance, and one tames horses. One can place a kite in a nest, and a falcon can be caught by the wings. Persevere in conversation. Do not be idle. Write. Do not feel distaste."

From Papyrus Anastasi V, 8, 1–9,1, as published in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, edited by William K. Simpson, et al. (3rd edition, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 439.



## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### VOCABULARY USE AND ACQUISITION



Encourage your students to use the glossary provided at the end of *Nile Crossing* to focus on the following words: *reed*, *amulet*, *scarab*, *scribe*, *Sobek*. Can they find these words in the main text of the story? Have students identify other words they may be unfamiliar to them, then look those words up in a dictionary to discover their meaning.

How is Khepri's name related to the word for scarab, and to the word for sun?

Many words often have more than one meaning at a time. How is the word papyrus like that? Can students think of any other words that have multiple meanings, even though they may be written in exactly the same way?

### CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

As Khepri and his father approach the river, the following phrases are used to describe the sounds that they hear: “the whisper of reeds, the lap of water at the riverbank, the muttering of geese as they mumble in their sleep.” How do those words paint a “sound picture” of the feeling and the mood at this point in the story? What words would your students use to paint a “sound picture” of their journey to school each morning?

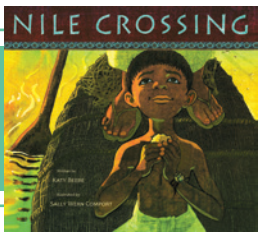
In the middle of the story, the text reads, “Our crossing is too long and too short, and when we step into the cool mud on the other side, I want to stay and to go . . .” How does the illustration of Khepri, along with the text, reveal how he is feeling inside? How is this a “turning point” in the book?

Khepri and his father communicate during the story, but they don't actually ever say any words. How do they express their feelings? How do the illustrations by the artist and the words chosen by the writer help us to know what they are thinking and feeling?

The story ends on a bit of a “cliffhanger”—we don't follow Khepri through the gate of the school. What will Khepri do after the end of the story? What will it be like for him inside the school gate? Ask students these questions before guiding them through the information in the historical notes in the back of the book. Then, ask them to compare their ideas of what Khepri's school day would have been like with the new information they receive. Have their ideas changed?







## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

Ask your students to examine the page in the story where Khepri's father gives him a pen case. The two characters are standing in the middle of a busy street in Thebes. Why has the illustrator chosen to depict fish swimming behind Khepri? What is Khepri looking at in this page, and what might he be thinking?

In the historical note at the end of *Nile Crossing* titled "School in Ancient Egypt," we learn that girls usually didn't learn to read and write in ancient Egypt, nor (usually) did boys from families who were not wealthy, like Khepri. Yet we also learn that there were exceptions. In a village near Thebes, close to the time that Khepri would have lived, workmen—and women—wrote letters to each other. You can read about these letters (and find excerpts from them) in Andrea McDowell's book, *Village Life in Ancient Egypt: Laundry Lists and Love Songs*. Ask students: how would Khepri's life have been different if he had chosen to go back to the river with his father that morning? What will getting an education mean for him in the future? How will his life be different from his sisters' lives?

Ask students to "read" the story of *Nile Crossing* by looking at the endpapers of the book (the pages pasted down to the inside front and back covers of the book). Can they understand the whole story through these images? How can they read if there are no words? Ask students to compare this type of "reading" with reading hieroglyphs and with reading letters.



### RECOMMENDED FURTHER RESOURCES

Janssen, Rosalind M. and Jac. J. Janssen. *Growing up and Getting Old in Ancient Egypt, 2nd Edition*. London: Golden House Publications, 2007.

McDonald, Angela. *Write Your Own Egyptian Hieroglyphs*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007.

McDowell, A. G. *Village Life in Ancient Egypt: Laundry Lists and Love Songs, New Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Parkinson, Richard. *Pocket Guide to Egyptian Hieroglyphs*. London: British Museum Press, 2004.

Wilkinson, Richard H. *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture, New Edition*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994.

"An ancient Egyptian scribe's in the Book of the Dead exhibition at the British Museum," YouTube video, 1:42, posted by the British Museum, October 10, 2010, <https://youtu.be/rh-bWfSCmyc>.

"Ptolemaic: Rosetta Stone," YouTube video, 3:55, posted by Smarthistory, July 21, 2011, <https://youtu.be/OFXY9-pec1I>

"Young explorers: a brief history of writing," YouTube video, 5:59, posted by the British Museum, January 20, 2011, <https://youtu.be/j7nM3YOwu00>