***THE DARKEST PATH***

By Jeff Hirsch

**Louisiana Young Readers’ Choice 2016**

**Grades 6-8**

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**Title**: *The Darkest Path*

**Author**: Jeff Hirsch

**Publisher**: Scholastic

**Pages**: 320

**SUMMARY**

The United States of America are in the midst of a second Civil War. The faithful members of the Glorious Path, a militant religious cult started by the charismatic Nathan Hill, have successfully taken over the southern half of the country and are preventing any chance of international intervention through clear threats of nuclear warfare. While vacationing away from their parents and their New York home, ten-year-old Callum Roe and his younger brother James were captured by the Path and given The Choice, the same choice given to every non-member found in Path territory: join or die.

Now, after surviving for six years in an environment of violence and brainwashing, Cal finally seizes an opportunity to escape. Shocked and hurt to discover that James is committed to the Path and unwilling to leave what he now considers home, Cal sets out on the long and dangerous mission to travel from Arizona to New York alone except for the companionship of a stray dog named Bear. Cal witnesses and experiences incredible loss at every stage of his journey; only by clinging to the thought of the home he barely remembers is he able to persevere. This coming-of-age story prompts discussions of belief, loyalty, the ethics of war, and the shades of gray between good and evil.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Jeff Hirsch grew up in Richmond, Virginia and is a self-proclaimed nerd. He studied acting at North Carolina University and playwriting at UC San Diego before discovering his passion for teen writing. His first novel, a USA Today Bestseller, was *The Eleventh Plague*, and he has since authored three other books for teens. He currently lives in a small town in New York. He enjoys baking and can escape from a straitjacket while suspended from the ceiling by his ankles.

Biographical information taken from the author’s website at

<http://www.jeff-hirsch.com/new-page-1/>,

Accessed September 22, 2014.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Author website <http://www.jeff-hirsch.com/>

**OTHER TITLES BY AUTHOR**

*39 Clues: Breakaway* (2014)

*Black River* (2015)

*The Eleventh Plague* (2011)

*Magisterium* (2012)

**RELATED TITLES**

*The 5th Wave* by Rick Yancey

*Orleans* by Sherri L. Smith

*The Thief* by Megan Whalen Turner

*Unwind* by Neal Shusterman

*The Warrior Heir* by Cinda Williams Chima

**CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

**Language Arts:**

Hone your argumentative skills. Divide the class into two groups and stage a debate or mock campaign. Assign one group to represent the Glorious Path and one group to represent the Federal Government, and ask each to provide evidence to support and defend the mission of their side. Prompt students to consider the actions of individual characters, leaders, and the group as a whole as well as the values they uphold. Ask the groups to switch sides and repeat the activity from the opposite perspective.

**Science:**

Have students use the following resources to research salt flats like the one Cal encounters after his initial escape into the desert in chapter 12.

<http://www.nps.gov/deva/naturescience/salt-flats.htm>

<http://www.world-mysteries.com/sci_artryan5.htm>

In small groups, ask them to replicate the formation of a salt flat by carrying out the simple experiment described in the link below. Discuss sediments and evaporation, and compare the results to the effect of salt crystals formed on the body after exertion.

<http://www.education.com/science-fair/article/Miniature-Salt-Flats/>

**History and Social Studies:**

* The Glorious Path is separated into novices, companions, apprentices, beacons, etc. Introduce hierarchies or pyramid societies throughout history using the graphics in the following links as examples. Ask students to create their own diagrams to represent the structure of the Path as opposed to that of the communities living in the area controlled by the Federal Army.

-Ancient Egyptian social pyramid <http://6awchistory.weebly.com/social-pyramid.html>

-Historical hierarchies <http://www.hierarchystructure.com/category/ancient-hierarchy/>

-Consider a modern hierarchical structure <http://www.pbs.org/parents/education/going-to-school/social/cliques/>

* The war between the Feds and the Path is not America’s first civil war. Create a chart of comparisons and contrasts between the war in the book and the Civil War fought between the Union and the Confederacy. Be sure to consider the reasons each war began and specifics related to the differing time periods.
* Cal, James, Nat, and many of the other characters in the book are young, and yet they accomplish missions and goals that many adults could not. Ask students to research someone who reached a great achievement or made a difference in the world at a young age, and write a short essay about the person’s extraordinary accomplishments. Alternatively, ask students to write a journal entry from the perspective of one of these young people or one of the characters from the book. Students might also compose a reflective essay about the personal accomplishments about which they are most proud.

**Physical Education and Health:**

Cal’s journey strains his body significantly. He suffers exhaustion, physical injuries, emotional and mental stress, a shortage of food and water, and the effects of a harsh climate without shelter. Many of these conditions are beyond his control or could be overcome only with expert survival skills, but Bear’s presence is also a comfort that helps him to survive. Ask students to research the effects of relaxation, meditation, and animal companionship on relieving stress and helping the body to recover from strain. Practice the guided meditation from the link below with the class and discuss the benefits of taking time to manage stress in everyday life.

<http://www.nelrc.org/managingstress/pdfs/lessons/Guided%20Meditation%20Lesson%20Plan%20-%20Gimbel.pdf>

**Psychology:**

Brothers Cal and James were captured at a young age, and Cal, whose loyalty lies resolutely with the Feds and his family in New York, cannot understand why James is committed to the Path. Ask students to research Stockholm syndrome and write a short paragraph about a documented case. As a class discuss: Is this what has affected James? What textual evidence is there to support the answer?

**Vocabulary:**

Anticipation

Berm

Civilian

Flank

Inherently

Mucking

Novice

Succumb

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. *The Darkest Path* is set in 2026, just over a decade from today. What changes does the author predict for this near future setting, and what do they add to the story?
2. Examine the map at the front of the book. What seems to mark the dividing line between the Feds and the Path? Why do you think the country split this way?
3. Consider Cal’s quote from chapter 8, “…the truth was I lost my brother years ago” (p.64). How does Cal’s attitude towards James change throughout the book, and what actions show this?
4. If Cal were put on trial for murdering Quarles, breaking into Wade’s house, helping Nat attack the Path checkpoint, or any other act he commits in the book, what would your verdict be and why?
5. Alec and his friends seem mostly unaffected by the war. Why is that the case? Why does it upset Nat?
6. Why did the author choose James to kill Nathan Hill? What do you think was James’ motivation, and why is this significant?
7. Cal struggles with a broken wrist throughout the majority of the book but finally has his cast removed in the final chapter, just before James reveals that he no longer suffers with asthma attacks. What do these two forms of healing symbolize?

**RELATED WEBSITES**

**Civil War Trust: Student Resources**

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/students/>

Activities and information on America’s first Civil War, as it is called in the book

***The Darkest Path*: Sequel News**

<http://www.jeff-hirsch.com/the-darkest-path/>

Information from the author regarding the continuation of the story

**Pet Therapy: Man’s Best Friend as Healer**

<http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/consumer-health/in-depth/pet-therapy/art-20046342>

Discussion of the benefits provided by animals like Bear who are trained to help people in stressful or depressing situations, from the Mayo Clinic