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The Dreamcatcher Trilogy · Volume Two

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G u i d e b o o k f o r

*The*  
Squirrel  
Behind  
the Tree

S H A R O N K A Y E

with contributions from Jennifer Ault

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# INTRODUCTION

*The Squirrel Behind the Tree* is a work of philosophical fiction. It is meant to trace the intellectual development of John Dewey, the greatest American philosopher of the twentieth century.

The novel is about Dewey in two important respects: (1) it is based on some significant facts about his life and times, and (2) it brings together the thinkers who most influenced him. However, the plot is fictional, invented in order to dramatize the unfolding of Dewey's extraordinary mind.

Dewey led a long and productive life, writing hundreds of articles and many books on a wide variety of topics, from psychology to politics to aesthetics. Unlike many philosophers, he was active in the public sphere, striving to change the world in accordance with his vision.

The fundamental theme of Dewey's vision is democracy. Dewey did not see democracy only as a form of government; he saw it as a way of life. Democracy is rule by the people. As a lifestyle, this means that everyone should participate in making informed decisions about matters that concern them. It's easy to see how this democratic lifestyle would support a strong commitment to social justice—equal rights for women, the poor, and people of color. But Dewey reached beyond gender, class, and race to the realm of *children*.

The great ancient philosopher Aristotle once said, "The future of empires depends on the education of the youth." No one understood that truth more clearly than John Dewey. Social justice will never be secure until we establish an education system that promotes creative cooperation.

Dewey grew up during the second half of the nineteenth century. School during that time was dreadful. The teachers drilled and commanded. The students sat still, obeyed, and memorized. Everyone was bored to tears. Dewey realized that true learning occurs only when you experience a real problem that needs to be solved. He famously established an experimental school where children cooked their own meals, sewed their own clothes, and built their own furniture. While few schools today are able to reach this ideal, the entire American school system is much more hands-on, interesting, and therefore effective than it ever would have been without Dewey's influence.

Though raised by a strict, puritanical mother, Dewey boldly transformed himself into a new kind of progressive thinker. How did he do it? The novel attempts to portray the philosophical mindset that propelled him toward his influential ideal. It illustrates the idea that Dewey's determination to come to terms with God was the key factor in his mindset.

While the novel can be enjoyed and learned from on its own, this guidebook presents selections from ten authors who prepared the way for Dewey's philosophical journey, along with three key selections from Dewey himself. It contains thirteen chapters, each focused on two or three successive chapters of the novel. Each guidebook chapter has three components:

1. A summary of the plot developments for those two or three chapters of the novel
2. A primary reading (or two) relevant to the storyline
3. Discussion questions concerning both the reading(s) and the novel

These components will provide a rich backdrop for thinking about the deeper dimensions of the story as it unfolds.

Needless to say, it took Dewey many years to absorb and reconfigure the ideas of his predecessors in his own way. Nevertheless, by studying them closely, we can follow in his footsteps and experience a transformation much like his own. Democracy is still just a faraway government system to many people. What might we accomplish if we all looked for more opportunities for creative cooperation in our lives?

**A Note about the Readings:** The readings in this book are the authors' original words. Some of them are challenging to read. Students may need to read passages more than once to understand the points that these writers are making. Readings that are too challenging can be skipped; however, the discussion questions at the end of each chapter will allow even students who do not read the selection to engage in thoughtful debates, prompting them to think about points that they may not otherwise have considered. Note, too, that the majority of the questions concern the events in the novel. As such, even if a student does not complete the guidebook reading or does not fully understand the guidebook reading, he or she can still take an active part in the discussions.

# I. THE SQUIRREL BEHIND THE TREE

## CHAPTERS 1-2

### Plot Summary

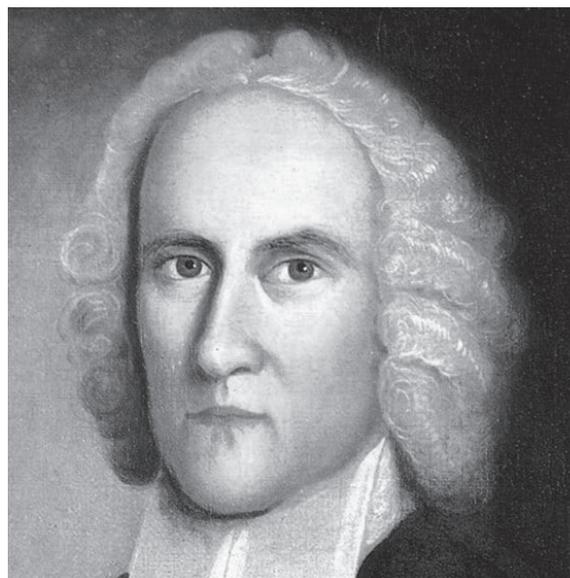
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We meet John Dewey at the age of twenty. It is nearing the end of the nineteenth century. John has just graduated from the University of Vermont in Burlington, and he is unsure what to do with his life. We learn that he was given the same name as his older brother, who died under mysterious circumstances. John's puritanical mother believes that John is his brother reincarnated and that he is destined to become a great Christian minister. John isn't so sure about either of those beliefs. He does know that he wants to do something with his life, however, and he tries to kill a cat that has befriended him in an effort to "tie up loose ends" before heading out to meet his destiny. He immediately regrets his actions and saves the cat, who seems to have no hard feelings about the encounter.

## JONATHAN EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was an early American philosopher and preacher. He was trained in the Puritan tradition, a radical wing of Protestant Christianity.

During the Middle Ages, Roman Catholicism became the dominant form of Christianity in Europe. In the sixteenth century, however, Protestant Christians broke away from Roman Catholicism in protest against the Papacy, a form of church government in which the Bishop of Rome is granted supreme authority, much like a king. Protestants objected to the royal pageantry of Catholicism; they also rejected many of the doctrines that various popes had adopted over the years. In particular, Protestant leader Martin Luther argued against the Roman Catholic doctrine that human beings can earn their way into heaven. He maintained instead that salvation is a free gift of divine grace.



Puritan Christians in turn broke away from Protestant Christianity, aiming to purify the church further. They advocated for plain clothing, undecorated churches, and strict morality. Their primary leader, John Calvin, took Luther's emphasis on divine grace to a new level, arguing that God arbitrarily elects a small number of human beings for salvation and condemns the rest to hell.

Jonathan Edwards developed a "revivalist" form of Puritanism, which involved preaching powerful sermons in order to convert people who are Christian in name only into enthusiastic church members.

The question arises: Why convert? After all, the Puritans agreed with Luther that conversion cannot earn your election to heaven. The answer is a tricky bit of psychology. Presumably, many people took their ability to convert and serve the church as a hopeful sign that they may be one of God's elect. Because God's grace made no discernible mark, no one knew for sure who was saved and who was condemned. They had to wait until they died to find out. Meanwhile, living in a devoted church community was better than living in chaos.

Edwards studied the psychology of emotion, defending the use of fear to motivate conversion and enthusiastic church service. He played a major role in the "First Great Awakening," a series of Christian revivals that shaped a distinctively evangelical conception of religion that is still popular in America today.

In the following selections from Edwards's sermons, he demonstrates his technique for converting people to Christianity and explains why he thinks that knowledge of God is necessary but not sufficient for salvation

## "SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD," 1741

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you were suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender

thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder....

And you, young men, and young women, will you neglect this precious season which you now enjoy, when so many others of your age are renouncing all youthful vanities, and flocking to Christ? You especially have now an extraordinary opportunity; but if you neglect it, it will soon be with you as with those persons who spent all the precious days of youth in sin, and are now come to such a dreadful pass in blindness and hardness. —And you, children, who are unconverted, do not you know that you are going down to hell, to bear the dreadful wrath of that God, who is now angry with you every day and every night? Will you be content to be the children of the devil, when so many other children in the land are converted, and are become the holy and happy children of the King of kings?...

From [www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html)

## “HOW TO KNOW IF YOU ARE A REAL CHRISTIAN,” 1752

“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” (James 2:19)

How do you know if you belong to God? We see in these words what some people depend on as an evidence of their acceptance with God. Some people think that they are all right before God if they are not as bad as some evil person. Other people point to their family history or church membership to show that God approves of them. There is an evangelical programme in common use that asks people certain questions. One of the questions is, “Suppose you were to die today. Why should God let you into his heaven?” A very common response is, “I believe in God.” Apparently the apostle James knew people who said the same thing: I know I am in God’s favor, because I know these religious doctrines.

Of course James admits that this knowledge is good. Not only is it good, but it is also necessary. Nobody can be a Christian who doesn’t believe in God; and more than that, the One True God. This is particularly true for those who had the great advantage of actually knowing the apostle, someone who could tell them of his first-hand experience with Jesus, the Son of God. Imagine the great sin of a person, who knew James, and then refused to believe in God! Certainly this would make their damnation greater. Of course, all Christians know that this belief in the One God is only the start of good things because “anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Heb. 11:6.)

However, James is clear that although this belief is a good thing, it is definitely not proof that a person is saved. What he means is this: “You say you are a Christian and you are in God’s favor.

You think God will let you into heaven, and the proof of it is, you believe in God. But that is no evidence at all, because the demons also believe, and they are sure to be punished in hell.”

The demons believe in God, you can be sure of that! They not only believe that He exists, but they believe that God is a holy God, a sin-hating God, a God of truth, who has promised judgments, and who will carry out his vengeance upon them. This is the reason the demons “shudder” or tremble—they know God more clearly than most human beings do, and they are afraid. Nevertheless, nothing in the mind of man, that devils may experience as well, is any sure sign of God’s grace in our hearts.

This reasoning may be easily turned around. Suppose demons could have, or find within themselves, something of God’s saving grace—proof they would go to heaven. This would prove James wrong. But how absurd! The Bible makes it clear that demons have no hope of salvation, and their believing in God does not take away their future punishment. Therefore believing in God is not proof of salvation for demons, and it is safe to say, not for people, either....

Notice this, that it does not matter how genuine, sincere, and powerful these thoughts and feelings are. Demons, being spiritual creatures, know God in a way that men on earth cannot. Their knowledge of God’s existence is more concrete than any man’s knowledge could be. Because they are locked in battle with the forces of good, they have a sincerity of knowledge as well. On one occasion Jesus cast out some demons. “What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?” (Mat. 8:29) What could possibly be a more clear-cut experience than this? However, while their thoughts and feelings are genuine and powerful, they are not holy.

Also we can see that the holy objects of their thoughts doesn’t make their thoughts and feelings holy. The demons know God exists! Matthew 8:29 shows they know more about Jesus than many people do! They are thoroughly convinced that Jesus will judge them some day, because He is holy. But it is clear that genuine, sincere, and powerful thoughts and feelings about holy, spiritual things, is no proof of God’s grace in the heart. Demons have these things, and look forward to eternal punishment in hell. If men have no more than what the demons have, they will suffer in the same way.

We may make several conclusions based on these truths. First, that no matter how much people may know about God and the Bible, it is no sure sign of salvation. The devil before his fall, was one of the bright and morning stars, a flame of fire, one excelling in strength and wisdom. (Isa. 14:12, Ezek. 28:12-19) Apparently, as one of the chief angels, Satan knew much about God. Now that he is fallen, his sin has not destroyed his memories from before. Sin does destroy the spiritual nature, but not the natural abilities, such as memory. That the fallen angels do have many natural abilities may be seen from many Bible verses, for example Eph. 6:12: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this

dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” In the same way, the Bible says that Satan is “more crafty” than other created beings. (Gen. 3:1, also 2 Cor. 11:3, Acts 13:10)

Therefore we can see that the Devil has always had great mental ability and is able to know much about God, the visible and invisible world, and many other things....

Wicked people, including those alive today, will on the day of judgment see all there is to see of Jesus Christ, except His beauty and loveliness. There is not one thing about Christ that we can think of, that will not be set before them in the strongest light on that brilliant day. The wicked will see Jesus “coming in clouds with great power and glory.” (Mark 13:26) They will see his outward glory, which is far, far greater than we can possibly imagine now. You know the wicked will be thoroughly convinced of all who Christ is. They will be convinced about His omniscience, as they see all their sins replayed and evaluated. They will know first-hand Christ’s justice, as their sentences are announced. His authority will be made utterly convincing when every knee will bow, and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord. (Phil. 2:10, 11) The divine majesty will be impressed upon them in quite an effective way, as the wicked are poured into hell itself, and enter into their final state of suffering and death. (Rev. 20:14, 15) When that happens, all their knowledge of God, as true and as powerful as it may be, will be worth nothing, and less than nothing, because they will not see Christ’s beauty.

Therefore, it is this seeing the loveliness of Christ that makes the difference between the saving grace of the Holy Spirit, and the experiences of demons. This sight or sense is what makes true Christian experience different from everything else. The faith of God’s elect people is based on this. When a person sees the excellence of the gospel, he senses the beauty and loveliness of the divine scheme of salvation. His mind is convinced that it is of God, and he believes it with all his heart. As the apostle Paul says in 2 Cor. 4:34, “even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” That is to say, as was explained before, unbelievers can see that there is a gospel, and understand the facts about it, but they do not see its light. The light of the gospel is the glory of Christ, his holiness and beauty. Right after this we read, 2 Cor. 4:6: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Clearly, it is this divine light, shining into our hearts, that enables us to see the beauty of the gospel and have a saving belief in Christ. This supernatural light shows us the superlative beauty and loveliness of Jesus, and convinces us of His sufficiency as our Saviour. Only such a glorious, majestic Saviour can be our Mediator, standing between guilty, hell-deserving sinners such as ourselves, and an infinitely holy God. This supernatural light gives us a sense of Christ that convinces us in a way nothing else ever could....

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Edwards uses fear of spending an eternity in hell to try to persuade readers to turn away from sin and to convert to Christianity, if they have not already. Do you think that fear is an effective tactic for Edwards to have used? Consider the anti-smoking ads that run on television. Many of them show people who have been horribly disfigured as a result of smoking cigarettes. The point is to frighten people into not smoking or into quitting, if they already smoke. And research has shown that these ads are at least somewhat effective. That’s in part because people can see exactly what can happen to them if they smoke. Note, however, that what they’re seeing is not guaranteed. Most of us know at least one person who smoked all his or her life and never suffered the adverse effects displayed in the anti-smoking ads; we know that smoking does not ensure that terrible things will happen to smokers. But we do know for a fact that they *can* happen. In contrast, the danger that Edwards was warning people of must be taken on faith. There are no facts that can prove that not turning away from sin or not converting to Christianity will damn someone to an eternity in hell; it is a supposition that must be believed in the absence of evidence. Do you think it’s more effective to get people to act to prevent something that is a known possibility based on facts or something that is an unknown possibility based on beliefs? Why might one be more terrifying—and therefore more motivating—than the other? What makes you think so?
2. In “How to Know if You Are a Real Christian,” Edwards makes a methodical case for the power of belief. Knowledge and understanding are not enough to attain salvation: “it is this seeing the loveliness of Christ that makes the difference between the saving grace of the Holy Spirit, and the experiences of demons.... The faith of God’s elect people is based on this.... When a person sees the excellence of the gospel, he senses the beauty and loveliness of the divine scheme of salvation. His mind is convinced that it is of God, and he believes it with all his heart.” Thus, Edwards is saying that in order even to be eligible for salvation, we have to be convinced in mind and heart of the truth of the gospel. But what if we are not naturally inclined to feel that way? Can we *choose* to be convinced of something? Can we *choose* to believe something? Certainly, we know that we can *want* to believe something, but do you think that can actually translate to believing it “with all your heart,” as Edwards requires? Why or why not? And would that change with time? Can you start out not believing something but tell yourself that it’s true long enough that you eventually believe it? Can you actually bring yourself to believe in something that you naturally rejected, or is that just a form of brainwashing? Even if it is brainwashing, do you think that counts as belief? Explain your views.
3. In the novel, John is confronted by the pastor at his church, Jonah Edwards (a descendant of Jonathan Edwards), who accuses him of being “all squinty-eyed skeptical with too much schooling.” John’s education at the University of Vermont, according to Edwards, has led to the young man feeling skeptical of his “true calling” to serve Christ—and Edwards might

not be wrong about that. John has explained his desire to seek objective truths using such procedures as the scientific method, a logical, proof-based approach to finding answers that involves observation and a healthy dose of skepticism—an approach that he learned at the university and that is generally at odds with pure faith, such as that needed to believe in most religious doctrines. But do you think there’s such a thing as “too much schooling”? Do you believe that learning more and becoming more educated can be harmful to a person? Or does that depend on what the person is learning? Explain your answers.

4. John’s mother believes that he is the reincarnated version of his brother, the result of which, she tells him, is that “God has a special destiny for you.” That destiny feels burdensome to John, but he thinks that “it would be worse to feel purposeless—like I were some random flash in the pan, an accidental, inessential lump of flesh that moves around pointlessly for a few years and then rots in the ground. That would be much worse.” That said, John doesn’t know what his destiny is, and the story opens with him struggling to figure it out. But is that struggle any different than a person who has not supposedly been reincarnated struggling to figure out his or her purpose in life? John seems to be assuming that, without the idea of his own reincarnation, he would not have a special destiny. However, if he really isn’t reincarnated, can he still have a purpose that he is destined to fulfill—and would he even be able to tell one way or the other if he has a purpose, since he doesn’t know what it is? Or, more importantly, could he *create* a purpose for himself? Does a special purpose have to be something a person is born with, or can a person create one? Explain your views.
5. John decides that Morgianna would perish without his care, thus prompting him to try to kill her in what he originally thinks will be a quicker, more humane way than her slowly starving to death. Given, however, that he has called her a “*killer* killer” and a “woodland huntress,” it is likely that this cat would have eaten just fine without John’s help. But let’s assume that John was right: that the cat would have died of starvation if not for his hand-outs of food. Do you agree that killing her quickly would be a humane alternative? Is killing a healthy animal before she suffers a better option than letting her suffer a natural death? Why or why not? Does your answer change if she is already suffering when she is humanely killed? Many people would say that relieving suffering is indeed humane, but is it really better to wait until the animal begins to suffer instead of ending things before she experiences any suffering at all? Why or why not? Does your point of view change if you consider the same questions but for a human? Explain your views.