

# Iris Blackwood and the Curse of Hemlock Island

IF / THEN BOOKS · IRIS BLACKWOOD MYSTERY ADVENTURES

*A discussion-and-reading guide for educators using Hemlock Island with middle school readers. Designed for whole-class read-alouds, small-group reading circles, or independent reading with reflection.*

## 01 About this book

*A 174-page interactive detective mystery for middle school and high school readers, with 45 decision points and 27 endings (plus one bonus) across four levels of detective achievement.*

**Premise.** Twelve-year-old detective Iris Blackwood has been cracking cases for over a year — until the moment she's blindfolded, stuffed in a crate, and thrown off a dock into the Nargansuckett River. From there, every choice the reader makes shapes Iris's path: which way to escape, who to trust, when to push for answers, when to retreat. Behind every fork is the central mystery of Hemlock Island and the strange figure of Mr. Lemoney.

**Format.** Written in second-person interactive structure — the reader makes Iris's decisions as they go. Endings are scored on a four-level Detective Achievement scale (Desk Agent → Junior Detective → Mystery-Solver → Sleuth). A fifth meta-level, Super Sleuth, is unlocked by reaching all three Sleuth-level endings across multiple readings.

**Target audience.** Middle school readers. Reading level approximately Lexile 700–850. Themes appropriate for middle school and high school.

## 02 Themes for discussion

### Agency & consequence

Iris's choices have real consequences within the story. Use this to discuss how

### Bravery vs. recklessness

When is taking a risk smart? When is it reckless? Iris's path repeatedly tests

decisions in life — and characters' decisions in stories — propagate forward.

whether boldness or caution serves her better, and the answer changes by context.

### **Trust & deduction**

Iris must constantly decide whom to trust. The book invites readers to slow down and reason from evidence — to think like a detective rather than react like a victim.

### **Justice & empathy**

Multiple endings explore what justice looks like — punishing the guilty, protecting the marginalized "Island People," weighing the cost of revealing truth.

## **03 Before reading**

*Activate the kind of thinking the book asks for, before students open the cover.*

1. Have you ever read a book where you got to make choices? What did it feel like to be in control of the story?
2. What makes someone a good detective? Brainstorm a list of qualities — then come back to the list after reading and check it against Iris.
3. The book begins with Iris in real danger: trapped in a crate floating on a river. What's the first thing you would do? How might you decide what to try?
4. Look at the cover and the table of contents. What do you predict will happen? What questions do you already have?

## **04 Choice-point discussion questions**

*Pause at these specific decision points in the book and use the questions for discussion or journaling.*

**PAGE 7**   **The crate breaks open**

Iris has three options: swim under the boat, surrender and beg for her life, or take the broken crate and float down the river.

1. Which option seems boldest? Which seems safest? Are those the same?
2. What does Iris know about the people on the boat that should affect her decision? What does she *not* know?
3. If you've read past this point, what happened next on the path you chose? Do you think Iris made the right call — or were you, the reader, the one making it?

**PAGE 17**   **The whirlpool**

Esmay offers to take Iris to a whirlpool — "one place that is a mystery to us all" — but only if she's brave enough. The other choice is to ask to be returned home.

1. Esmay says "If you are brave enough to test its powers." Is bravery always about saying yes? When might saying no be the brave choice?
2. What's the difference between curiosity and bravery? Is Iris being one or the other (or both)?
3. What does Iris give up if she goes home? What does she gain?

**PAGE 32**   **The blindfold**

Iris is told she must wear a blindfold like everyone else. She refuses. The man asks: "*Can't* you wear it, or *won't* you?"

1. What's the difference between "can't" and "won't"? Why does the man point it out?
2. When have you used "can't" when you really meant "won't"? Or the other way around?
3. Iris's refusal reveals something about her character. What does it reveal? Is it a strength, a weakness, or both?

## **05**   **Detective Glossary & vocabulary**

*Iris uses tools and terms drawn from a Detective Glossary referenced throughout the book. Capitalized words in the prose are glossary terms.*

---

**Stealth.** Moving without being seen or heard.

**Deduction.** Reaching a conclusion from evidence and reasoning.

**Magnifying Glass.** Tool for examining small clues up close.

**X-Ray Glasses.** Iris's signature gadget, useful for surfaces and identities.

**Convergence.** Where multiple paths meet at the same point in a story.

**Sleuth.** A detective; especially one who works carefully and methodically.

## 06 Classroom activities

### Activity 01

#### Branch your own ending

After students finish one path through the book, have them write a new ending for Iris that branches from a specific decision point. Constraints: must be 200–400 words, must end with a clear "THE END Level X" tag (1 through 4), must be plausible given the rest of the book.

Genres: creative writing, narrative structure · Time: 1 class + homework

### Activity 02

#### Map the choices

Give students a blank flowchart template. Have them retrace their reading path through the book and chart it: every decision page, every choice they made, every ending they reached. Compare maps in small groups — the differences are the discussion.

Genres: visual literacy, comprehension · Time: 1 class

### Activity 03

#### Detective trial

Stage a mock trial of Mr. Lemoney based on the evidence Iris gathers. Students take roles: prosecutor, defense, witness, judge, jury. They must work only from textual evidence — no inventing facts. The trial reveals what students learned about evidence vs. interpretation.

Genres: argumentation, civic literacy, public speaking · Time: 2–3 classes

Activity 04

### Author Q&A by mail

Have students write a letter to Chad Prevost (the author) with one specific question about a choice in the book — why did he include this option? what was he thinking when he wrote this ending? Send the best ones via email; some authors respond.

Genres: letter writing, authorial intent · Time: in-class drafting + revision

## 07 After reading: synthesis

*Help students step back from the choices and see the book as a whole.*

1. You experienced one path. The book has 27 endings. What do you think you missed? Which ending do you most want to reach next?
2. Of all the choices Iris faced, which one mattered most to her story? Was it the one you noticed at the time, or one you only see in hindsight?
3. The book's Levels (Desk Agent → Sleuth) suggest some endings are "better" than others. Do you agree with the rankings? What would *your* definition of a great ending for Iris be?
4. Compare interactive fiction (this book) with traditional fiction (a book where you don't make choices). What can interactive fiction do that traditional can't? What does it sacrifice?
5. Iris is twelve. Was her age right for this story? Would the choices feel different if she were eight, or sixteen?

## 08 Standards alignment (suggested)

*A starting list. Adjust to your district / state.*

STANDARD FAMILY	HOW THIS BOOK FITS
CCSS.RL.4.3 / 5.3	Describe in depth a character drawing on specific details — Iris's traits and how they evolve across her choices.

STANDARD FAMILY	HOW THIS BOOK FITS
CCSS.RL.4.6 / 5.6	Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described — second-person POV invites direct examination.
CCSS.RL.5.5	Explain how chapters/sections fit together — branching structure makes structural reasoning concrete.
CCSS.W.4.3 / 5.3	Write narratives — Activity 01 (branch your own ending) directly addresses this.
CCSS.SL.4.1 / 5.1	Engage in collaborative discussions — choice-point discussion questions are designed for small-group dialogue.

## 09 About the author

Chad Prevost is the founder of **Crossroads Press** and the IF/THEN Books interactive fiction line. He has published 40+ titles across two decades in indie publishing and brings to interactive fiction a literary sensibility honed across that work. *Iris Blackwood and the Curse of Hemlock Island* is the first in the Iris Blackwood Mystery Adventures series.

Get in touch: [cthomasprevost@gmail.com](mailto:cthomasprevost@gmail.com)