



CHALLENGER DEEP

by NEAL SHUSTERMAN DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

CADEN BOSCH is on a ship that's headed for the deepest point on Earth: Challenger Deep, the southern part of the Marianas Trench.

CADEN BOSCH is a brilliant high school student whose friends are starting to notice his odd behaviour.

CADEN BOSCH is designated the ship's artist in residence, to document the journey with images.

CADEN BOSCH pretends to join the school track team but spends his days walking for miles, absorbed in the thoughts in his head.

CADEN BOSCH is split between his allegiance to the captain and the allure of mutiny.

CADEN BOSCH is torn.

A captivating and powerful novel that lingers long beyond the last page, *Challenger Deep* is a heartfelt tour de force by one of today's most admired writers for teens.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the narrator reveal about the Marianas Trench and Challenger Deep? Why is the ship headed there, and what does it hope to find? What does Caden know about Challenger Deep?
2. Describe Caden's relationship with the captain and the parrot. Are the captain and the parrot allies? Why or why not? What fears does the captain have about the crew members? How does he elicit Caden's assistance?
3. Discuss the changes that Caden's family and friends notice in his behaviour. What steps do they take to try helping him? In what ways do school officials try to help him?
4. What parallels can you draw between Caden's visions about the ship and the captain's and Caden's lives? For example, what role does Caden's lack of preparation for a science test play in the vision in which he is branded? Identify and discuss the meanings of other parallels.
5. How does Caden feel about being in the psychiatric hospital? Describe his time there. Does group therapy work for him? Why or why not? In what way does Caden feel betrayed while in the hospital? Trace the development of one central idea in Caden's real world and in the world in his mind.
6. The story has a number of pivotal characters. Who is the parrot, and what role does he play? Does the parrot have control over Caden? Why or why not? What does his death symbolize in the story? Hal is another key character in the story. What happens to Hal, and how does his character move the story forward?
7. Compare and contrast Calliope and Callie. Discuss the ways in which they are connected in the story. In what ways do they provide "safe" places for Caden? How would the story be different if Caden's experiences were told through either Calliope's or Callie's eyes?
8. Describe Caden's relationship with his parents. What events occur in the story that suggest his parents are concerned about him?

Discussion Questions continued on the next page . . .

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

9. Caden is an artist. Discuss how his artwork changes throughout the story and how it is representative of his mental health.



10. Caden says, “I am trapped in a conspiracy of conspiracies” (p. 138). Discuss possible interpretations of this passage and evidence that supports your viewpoints.

11. At what point in the story do you realize that Caden is suffering from mental illness? What clues in the story support your predictions? At what point does he spiral into his deepest abyss? How do you know? How does the author use events to illustrate the character’s journey through mental illness? Discuss the shift from first-person perspective to second-person (and then back again) as an indication of Caden’s slipping deeper into his illness. Use evidence from the text to support your discussion.
12. After Caden leaves the hospital, he has a dream in which he is walking on a boardwalk and engages in a conversation with someone on a yacht. How does the yacht contrast with Caden’s visions of the ship and its captain? Discuss the symbolism in this scene.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. **ANALYZING TEXT STRUCTURE.** Have students compare and contrast chapters that represent the two parallel worlds in which Caden lives. For example, they might compare Chapters 63 and 64. In Chapter 63, Calliope talks about what she feels, and in Chapter 64, the doctor is asking Caden to discuss what he feels. Which chapters (the ones depicting the captain and the ship or the “real world” chapters) are easier to understand? Why? In what way is this writing style representative of schizophrenia? After class discussion, have students choose two scenes and compare and contrast these scenes in a short essay.
2. **MAKING TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS.** Have students read an excerpt from either *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* or *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and compare and contrast the author’s style and use of imagery with Neal Shusterman’s in *Challenger Deep*. Have them consider mood and syntax in their discussions. Students may wish to draw images to support their discussion and/or create a media presentation showing parallels. They may also write an essay comparing and contrasting the authors’ writing styles.
3. **INTERPRETING CHARACTER.** Ask students to choose one of the following characters and trace that character’s development through the story: the captain, the parrot, Hal, Callie, Calliope, or the navigator. What events happen in the story that aid in the character’s development? How does this character interact with and influence Caden? What impact does this character’s role have on the outcome of the story? Students should divide into pairs, and each pair should write a dialogue in which one partner assumes the role of Caden and one plays another character. They can then revise and edit their dialogues and read their pieces in small groups.
4. **ENGAGING IN MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH.** Mental health care is arguably one of the most under-resourced fields in our country. Have each student identify an area about which he/she would like to know more and develop a research project around this topic. Their research can take a variety of forms, from a traditional research presentation to the development of an online blog and/or a media presentation. They may focus on topics such as recent research and/or treatments in the areas of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, and their projects should include exploring support options for families in need. They can use the list of resources on the following page as a starting point.

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MENTAL ILLNESS RESOURCES

If you need help dealing with mental illness, or you know someone who needs help, here are some resources for you:

- YoungMinds (www.youngminds.org.uk)
 - Talklife (www.talklife.co)
 - Mind (www.mind.org.uk)
- Time to Change (www.time-to-change.org.uk/get-involved/get-involved-schools/school-resources)
- CALM (www.thecalmzone.net)



Photo courtesy of Neal Shusterman

Neal Shusterman and his son, Brendan

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neal Shusterman is the *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author of *Bruiser*, which was a Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) choice, a YALSA Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults pick, and on twelve state lists; *The Schwa Was Here*; and the Unwind dystology, among many other books. He lives in California with his four children. His son Brendan's art is featured in *Challenger Deep*.

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