Challenger Deep

 By Neil Shusterman : <http://www.storyman.com/about/>

 A book talk by Andrew Williams

 

Caden Bosh 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 behavior

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 by the thoughts in his head.

Caden Bosch is split between his allegiance to the captain and the allure of mutiny.

 **Caden Bosch is torn.**

 **Author Biography:**



 [(https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-fathers-book-on-mental-illness-wins-national-book-award/)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-fathers-book-on-mental-illness-wins-national-book-award/%29)

 Neil Shusterman is an American born writer that focuses on creating stories that delve into the deepest parts of the human psyche. Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1962, Shusterman took up writing at a young age. Like me, his ninth grade english teacher was the one that inspired him to become a writer, and he credits that teacher to this day on his website. He currently lives in California with his four children.

Shusterman is credited for writing over 30 novels targeting primarily teens, however he has written some for children and adults as well. Some of his most popular works include *Scythe*, *The Toll* and *Challenger Deep*. I chose this specific picture above to show his son, Brendan Shusterman as well, because the book *Challenger Deep* is largely based on his son’s real experiences dealing with a mental illness known as Schizophrenia. His son has been dealing with that illness for the majority of his life, and *Challenger Deep* proves just how difficult it has been for the both of them. Brendan Shusterman also illustrated the book!

 Summary:

I felt it necessary to include what is written on the back of the book somewhere in this book talk, hence the initial few lines under the picture on the first page. The back of the book is a great representation of just how vague and ambiguous the story is, and it also highlights the two different paths our narrator Caden takes us down.

A fifteen year old Caden Bosch makes his way through his high school life in the opening few chapters, and he also begins to describe the ship he is setting sail on and the crew that inhabits it. The perspective then shifts abruptly to Caden on a massive galleon ship in the middle of the ocean, headed for the Marianas Trench. As the book progresses, the two stories appear to move closer and closer together, and their plotlines start to mirror each other. At some point past the middle of the book, Caden is committed into a mental hospital by his parents. Caden’s psyche starts to deteriorate as the chapters progress, and the two stories begin to fuse into one. He plunges deeper and deeper into his Schizophrenia. As he gets closer and closer to the trench, he begins to realize what truly lies at the bottom.

 Quotes:

65 **The Darkness Beyond**

“What do I see when I close my eyes? Sometimes there is a darkness that goes beyond anything I can describe. Sometimes it is glorious, and sometimes it is terrifying, and I rarely know what it’s going to be. When it’s glorious, I want to live in that place, where the stars are just marking a vast unreachable shell, like they used to believe in the days of old. The inside surface of a giant eyelid- and when I peel back the lid, there’s a darkness that truly goes on forever- but it’s not darkness at all. It’s just that our eyes have no way to see that kind of light. If we could, it would blind us, so that eyelid, it protects us. Instead we see the stars- the only hint of the light we can never reach.

And yet I go there.

I push past the stars into that dark light, and you can’t imagine how it feels. Velvet and licorice caressing every sense; it melts into a liquid you can plunge through; it evaporates into air that you breathe. And you soar! You don’t need wings because it supports you of its own accord - of its own will resonating with yours - and you feel not only that you can do anything but that you *are* anything. Everything.”

95 **Windmills of My Mind**

How do you explain being *there* and being *here* at the same time? It’s sort of like those moments when you’re thinking about something that burned itself a powerful memory. Maybe it’s the time you scored the winning goal in the play-offs. Or maybe it’s the time you got hit by a car on your bike. Good or bad, you’re bound to relieve it in your head now and then--and sometimes after you’ve gone there, it’s a shock to come back. You have to remind yourself that you’re not there anymore.

Now imagine being like that all the time--never knowing for sure when you’re going to be here, or there, or somewhere in between. The only thing you have for measuring what’s real in your mind. . . so what happens when your mind becomes a pathological liar?

There are the voices, and visual hallucinations when it’s really bad--but ‘being there’ isn’t about voices or seeing things. It’s about believing things. Seeing one reality, and believing it’s something else entirely.

Don Quixote--the famous literary madman-- fought wind-mills. People think he saw giants when he looked at them, but those of us who’ve been there know the truth. He saw windmills, just like everyone else--but he *believed* they were giants. The scariest thing of all is never knowing what you’re suddenly going to believe.”

129 **Against Us**

“The sea rolls with regular relentless surges. My bedroll is wet beneath me. The pale green tarnished copper ceiling drips with condensation.

The captain stands above me, looking down. Assessing with his good eye. ‘Welcome back, lad’ he says.’We thought we had lost you.”

“What happened,”I croak.

“You were keelhauled,” he tells me. “Taken in the middle of your night from your quarters, brought on deck, turned inside out, then tied to a rope, and hurled overboard.”

I don’t remember any of this until the moment he speaks of it--as if his words themselves are my memory.

“Someone got tired of hearing you moan about your gut, so they cleaned it out by exposing your innards to the sea, and dragging you over the barnacle-covered keel of the ship, then back up the other side. Whatever was causing your distress has surely been scraped off.”

 Quote analysis:

I chose these three quotes in order to highlight the journey that Caden embarks on in this story. The first two are from the perspective of Caden while he is institutionalized at the Seaview Memorial Hospital in the Juvenile Psychiatric Unit. The first quote is from the beginning of his stay, while the second one is taken from weeks after his initial commitment. These particular quotes were so emotionally impactful for me, and they brought me right up to the infinite chasm that is Schizophrenia. Shusterman does a fantastic job translating his son’s personal experiences into those of Caden, and that’s evident in these intimate quotes. It truly sounds like the recantation of a person with Schizophrenia, and for some reason that haunts me. This book has taught me how much respect those suffering from this illness deserve, and just how truly misunderstood they are. I chose the third quote to highlight the perspective change that the narrator switches to. This particular passage was Caden’s psychoactive interpretation of getting his bowls pumped because of rotten food. In his pirate ship world, which represents the mental ward, he is constantly turning his real experiences into what seems to be fictional ones. The second quote listed ties into the third, because in that moment, he truly believed he was keelhauled under a massive galleon ship. His illness took away his ability to discern reality from imagination, and so he had to relive getting his bowls pumped, but in a different way. The fact that Neil Shusterman took direct inspiration from many of his son’s personal experiences with Schizophrenia make these quotes all the more real and emotionally impactful.

 Text Complexity:

 This book is vastly complex, containing two separate plotlines that twist and turn through each other throughout the story. It is a very polarizing book due to the fact that the initial separation of the plotlines between the two perspectives is very easy to misread and misunderstand. Even as the book progresses, the two stories weave together as Caden delves deeper and deeper into his Schizophrenic episodes. These concepts might prove difficult for younger readers that do not suffer from a mental disability. Even though the concepts are extremely complicated, they highlight very important aspects of what it means to live with Schizophrenia. It becomes evident at points that the story is being written by a father, and shows how deep Shusterman’s connection is to his son based on their experiences together. This book has earned a Lexile Range of 800L, recommended for readers aged fourteen to seventeen. This book contains very real imagery of what it is like to experience a psychotic episode, and the feelings that someone feels after it ends. It also speaks on mental illness, and how parents and friends can be oblivious to the encroaching void that consumes many.

 **Why Should This Be Taught To Teens?**

This is an important piece regarding the mental illness, Schizophrenia. It should be canonized because of that. It is a good starting point for a young adult or teen who is not familiar with Schizophrenia and wants to know more. I do not believe it would be as effective as an introductory piece for a younger student based on the complexity of the themes and plotlines, however I think if they were to familiarize themselves with the illness beforehand, that could make it easier for a seventh or eighth grader to understand. There are a few specific reasons why this should be taught to teens in a school setting.

* This novel follows a fifteen year old boy in highschool who experiences things many of the readers will likely have experienced, though one thing sets him apart. Learning about this illness and the fantastical ways it affects your brain is important for students, so that they can understand why people react the way they do when affected by it.
* This novel highlights how a split perspective story can be effectively used in order to create an overarching metaphor. It is a masterfully written piece of literature, and the many literary techniques Shusterman uses can be almost infinitely analyzed.
* This novel shows the reader what it is like to be a parent observing your child fall deeper and deeper into a mental illness. I think students could possibly use this book in order to break through to their parents about an illness they are concerned they might have.
* There is a page at the back of the book in which Shusterman has given seventeen of his own discussion questions for the book. This is a fantastic resource for teachers, and it's almost as if he expected it to be taught!

 Exeter Qualities in *Challenger Deep:*

1. Imaginative and well-structured plots going beyond simple chronologies to include time shifts and different perspectives.

2. Exciting plots that include secrecy, surprise, and tension brought about through narrative hooks and a fast pace.

7. Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues.

8. Varied levels of sophistication that will lead to the continual development of reading skills.