



# CHALLENGER DEEP

NEAL SHUSTERMAN

## ABOUT THE BOOK

At the age of fifteen, Caden Bosch's universe starts to tilt off balance, and he has no idea how to center it. The "thought-voices" in his head have him compulsively walking, drawing, and obeying signage and fearing one of his schoolmates wants to kill him. Eventually diagnosed with schizophrenia, Caden spends nine weeks in a psychiatric unit at Seaview Hospital. Struggling to make sense of his mental chaos, Caden sinks deeper into his mind on a quest to find Challenger Deep, the deepest place on earth. His delusions, which cause him to imagine a journey at sea with a captain, a parrot, a navigator, a ship's figurehead he names Calliope, an Abyssal Serpent, and others, closely resemble many of his real-life companions and experiences during treatment. Will Caden survive the depths and surface more informed to meet the life-long challenges of his mental illness?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain Caden Bosch's feelings of isolation, when at the age of fifteen, he senses his anxiety and paranoia are the beginnings of something deeper and darker.
2. How did Caden's parents respond to the "red flags" in his behavior? Were there clues that they missed? And, if so, why do you think they missed them?
3. When Caden confides to his friend Max that he is "not entirely *in* myself," Max says, "Shut up with the freaky crap, okay?" Why does Max respond this way?
4. By the time Caden is admitted to the hospital, he says, "There is no difference anymore between thought and reality." What does he mean?
5. When Caden's friend Shelby visits him in the hospital to apologize for thinking he was using drugs, Caden says that "God was my drug dealer" and that he was "tripping on my own brain chemicals." What does Caden mean when he says that the journey he is on was "destined from the moment I was born"?
6. Caden draws pictures, Hal draws maps, Skye does puzzles, and Callie stares out of a window. Why do you think they are driven to these behaviors? How are their behaviors similar?
7. The Captain tells Caden that the ship is "alive" and "feels pain" but can also "heal" its "hurt." What does the ship symbolize? What does the Captain mean when he says Caden is "the soul of our mission" and in the future he will find himself to be "a captain"?
8. In Caden's hallucinations the Captain and the parrot are enemies. What role do they each play in the real-life treatment of his mental illness? Why does Caden have such a difficult time trusting them? What does this mistrust represent in his real life?
9. Caden says his medication is "both toxic and healing at the same time." What does he mean? Why does he go off his medication? What epiphany does he have, as a result?
10. What does "Challenger Deep" signify? Why does Caden feel he needs to be "baptized by the deep"? What is the "overwhelming never" that he needs to face?
11. What is the "White Plastic Kitchen" in Caden's mind? What does he mean when he says it is "a gateway to all the places you don't want to be"?
12. Callie's family expects her to be "fixed" when she returns home. Explain why this is not realistic. Why do you think Callie describes herself as "the girl on the pedestal"? Why do Callie and Caden promise they will both "free each other," if one of them gets released from the hospital before the other?
13. Why does Skye, the girl who does puzzles, give Caden a blue puzzle piece to "borrow"? What does this puzzle piece come to symbolize for Caden when he is at his lowest point?
14. Why does Caden feel guilty about Hal's suicide attempt? Why does Caden call his sister his "fail-safe" whenever thoughts of suicide creep into his head? Caden can't decide if taking one's own life is "bravery" or "cowardice." Explain these contradictory feelings.
15. Carlyle, Caden's group therapy leader, reveals his own journey of coping with mental illness to Caden. How does this help Caden?
16. The novel ends with Caden accepting the very real possibility of recurring delusional episodes in his future, but he says "nothing is inevitable." Explain his outlook on his mental illness.
17. The drawings and sketches in the novel were done by Brendan Shusterman, the author's son, who has experienced mental illness. Which of these abstract drawings do you think best depicts Caden's innermost fears and insights? Explain.

Book Club Pick!

