Emily Booth, "Entry on: Challenger Deep by Brendan Shusterman , Neal Shusterman ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/618. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Brendan Shusterman , Neal Shusterman

Challenger Deep

United States (2015)

TAGS: Calypso Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Penelope Polyphemus





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Challenger Deep
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2015
First Edition Details	Neal Shusterman, *Challenger Deep*. New York: HarperTeen, 2015, 308 pp.
ISBN	9780061134111
Awards	2015 – National Book Award for Young People's Literature, 2016 – Golden Kite Award for Fiction.
Genre	Fiction
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Emily Booth, University of Technology, Sydney, Emily.Booth@student.uts.edu.au
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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Creators



Brendan Shusterman (Illustrator)

Brendan Shusterman is Neal Shusterman's son, and the illustrator of *Challenger Deep*. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia at 16, and his experiences provided some inspiration to the story. Neal states that when Brendan was experiencing a particularly rough time, he once described his circumstances by saying, "Sometimes it feels like I'm at the bottom of the ocean screaming at the top of my lungs and no one can hear me." This gave Neal the idea for *Challenger Deep*, however he waited for 6 years until his son's health had improved before starting the project. Brendan's poetry was also incorporated into the dialogue of the character Hal.

Sources:

hbook.com (accessed: August 20, 2018).

Bio prepared by Emily Booth, University of Technology, Sydney, Emily.Booth@student.uts.edu.au



Neal Shusterman by Hillel Steinberg. Retrieved from flickr.com, licensed

Neal Shusterman , b. 1962

Neal Shusterman was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1962 to a working class family. He began writing in ninth grade, on the encouragement of a teacher. He studied at the University of California, Irvine, before working as an editor. He lives in California, and has four children. His first novel was published soon after his graduation, and he has written numerous novels, film and television scripts. Shusterman's work can broadly be described as

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philosophically-inclined magic realism, fantasy, or science fiction for young readers, often with an interest in morality, individuality, socialization at school or in families.

Sources:

successstory.com (accessed: June 24, 2018);

Author website (accessed: July 6, 2018);

Author Tumblr (accessed: July 6, 2018);

Author Goodreads (accessed: July 6, 2018).

Bio prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au and Emily Booth, University of Technology, Sydney, Emily.Booth@student.uts.edu.au

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Additional information

Adaptations

Audiobook

HarperCollins

21/4/2015

ISBN: 9780062368041

Audio CD

HarperCollins

21/4/2015

9781481534727

Translation

Estonian: *Challengeri sügavik*, trans. Ragne Kepler, Tänapäev, 2016.

Georgian: *ჩელენჯერის უფსკრული*, trans. ანა აბულაშვილი, პალიტრა L, 2016.

Turkish: *Zihin Girdabı*, trans. Ezgi Kızmaz Ürgen, Pegasus Yayınları, 2016.

Hungarian: *Az óceán mélyén*, trans. Illés Róbert, Tilos az Á Könyvek, 2017.

Italian: *Il viaggio di Caden*, trans. M. Pace, Hot Spot, 2017.

Japanese: □□□□□□□□□□□, trans. □□ □□ and □□ □□, □□□, 2017.

Polish: *Głębia Challengera*, trans. Rafał Lisowski, YA!, 2017.

Romanian: *Challenger Deep*, trans. Diana Soare, Editura Gama, 2017.

Spanish: *El abismo*, trans. Adolfo Muñoz, Anaya, 2017.

German: *Kompass ohne Norden*, trans. Ingo Herzke, Hanser Verlag, 2018.

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Portuguese: *O Fundo é Apenas o Começo*, trans. Heloísa Leal, Valentina, 2018.

Summary

Challenger Deep is an episodic, non-linear contemporary novel that retells *the Odyssey*, and that draws on aspects of fabulism to inform 15-year-old Caden's delusions as he is treated for schizophrenia in a juvenile psychiatric hospital. The novel alternates between events that occurred before his hospitalisation and during his stay. While these moments can initially be distinguished by the difference in the setting (the real-world setting and the sea voyage), these settings are increasingly blurred together as the novel progresses. Shusterman's son Brendan (who has schizophrenia) is credited in the novel's acknowledgements as contributing to the book with his illustrations and his poetry, which inspired aspects of Hal's character.

Then: Caden feels unsafe among his family and friends, who have noticed his strange behaviour ('spacing out', creating abstract drawings, imagining conspiracy theories). Now: 15-year-old Caden has no recollection of how long he has been on-board the ship, but he knows his 11-year-old sister Mackenzie is at home waiting for him. His shipmates are hostile, and the Captain and the Parrot are untrustworthy. His roommate, the Navigator, says Caden is the 'doorway' to their destination, and the Captain says they will know they are nearing the Mariana's Trench by the appearance of 'dark portents'. Caden believes the red-headed swabby named Carlyle is an 'insider' who knows the Captain and the Parrot hate each other. Caden visits the crow's nest, a high-rise bar on the ship, but doesn't jump off like other attendees. The Captain tells Caden to polish the bowsprit of the ship, and he is knocked off by a wave. He is caught by the beautiful figurehead on the ship, who saves Caden on the condition that he return to tell her about the happenings on the ship.

Then: Caden vandalises a science exam during a delusional episode, and is sent to the school counsellor, but he bluffs his way out of it. Now: The Captain has chosen the members for the special mission team to go to the bottom of Challenger Deep in the Mariana's Trench: Caden, the Navigator, the "scream-faced girl" (a negative girl in charge of morale), a blue-haired girl (Mistress of the Treasury), a fat boy (The Lore-Master), and a boy with a "hard-luck" face (the Prophet). Caden is made the artist-in-residence, responsible for documenting their journey in illustrations. The Captain tells Caden

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that the figurehead sees what nobody else can, and that her visions strengthen the ship. Caden visits the figurehead at night, who says she is named Calliope. Overnight, the ship turns from wood to copper, and the Captain attributes the "modernisation" to Caden. Then: Caden recalls provoking a disabled child into hurting himself when they were younger, and realises his own recent behaviour has made him just as isolated as that child was. Caden becomes increasingly erratic with suicidal thoughts and his parents take him to a psychiatric hospital. Now: Calliope says she can see all potential futures at once, without being able to discern the true future. The Captain and the Parrot each ask Caden to kill the other one when the time comes.

Now: Caden adjusts to life in the hospital. The Captain tells Caden that Captain Nemo and Captain Ahab's beasts (the giant squid and the white whale, respectively) are each other's nemesis, the 'dark portents' that will indicate when they approached Challenger Deep. Caden meets Callie, who stands all day every day to look out the window, and Skye, the girl with the blue hair, who gives him a blue piece from the puzzle she is working on. Caden begins to have more "clear" days, and he learns that Callie is in a therapy group for people who aren't "first-timers". Caden visits the crow's nest again, where he meets the Master-at-Arms (the hospital orderly). Callie sneaks into Caden's room at night to sleep in his bed, and during therapy the next day, Caden paints abstract portraits of the emotions of everyone in attendance – except for the Navigator, who is becoming silent and withdrawn. Caden has an adverse reaction to a new medication from Dr Poirot. He thinks he sees a creature outside, identified by the Captain as The Abyssal Serpent.

Caden talks with Callie away from the window for the first time, and she makes him promise that "when the time comes", they will free each other from the hospital. His sister, Mackenzie, visits and he learns he has been in the hospital for weeks. Caden learns that Carlyle is schizoaffective and had his first episode at 15, but now has a Masters in Psychology and volunteers at the hospital. A storm hits the ship, and Caden takes the opportunity to disarm the Captain and steal the key from behind his glass eye. He opens the door to the ship's forecastle, sees Calliope's legs, and uses a wrench from Carlyle to remove the bolt in her lower back that pins her to the ship. Calliope tears herself from the ship and escapes, and the storm dies down. The Captain promotes Caden to Master of the Helm, to guide the ship's course. Callie is discharged from the hospital, and Caden also wants to go home.

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The Navigator stops taking his medications, and the Captain gives Caden a gun to kill the Parrot with. The ship arrives in the territory where the giant squid and the white whale battle, and the Parrot summons the beasts (the 'dark portents') to them. The Navigator arrives, and though Caden begs the Parrot to save him, the Navigator throws himself from the crow's nest to satisfy the beasts. In his fury, Caden shoots the Parrot, who tells Caden to remember where he has seen the Captain before. Hal has made a suicide attempt, but nobody will confirm whether he is alive or dead, and Caden is furious at Dr Poirot for not saving him. The Captain chooses Caden to make the dive into Challenger Deep, and he continues to sense the Abyssal Serpent following him. Carlyle is fired because somebody had to take the blame for what happened to Hal. Caden stops taking his medication, and he arrives at Challenger Deep with the Captain.

Caden takes a rowboat to talk to the scarecrow that sits at the entrance, but it doesn't say anything helpful. The Abyssal Serpent creates a whirlpool around the entrance, and Caden jumps through it. At the bottom, he meets the ghost of the Parrot, who reveals that the treasure at the bottom is just chocolate and lollies in shiny wrappers. Then: Caden and his family were on a holiday in New York, where Caden met a homeless man wearing the box for the Cap'n Crunch cereal on his head. When asked for money, Caden had only chocolate coins to give. Caden recognises him as the Captain, the manifestation of his psychosis. Now: The Parrot's ghost leaves. As the ocean is about to collapse on him, Caden finds the puzzle piece Skye gave him in his pocket, and rises out of Challenger Deep towards the sky. Caden wakes in the hospital, aware of what happened, and Dr Poirot is pleased. Caden recovers and is eventually discharged. Caden dreams that he meets the Captain who urges him to sail somewhere else, but Caden refuses. He knows he will likely make another journey again someday, but it won't be today.

Analysis

Caden's delusions take the form of a sea voyage headed for Challenger Deep, the deepest part of the ocean in the Marinara's Trench. The journey represents both his impending suicide attempt, and Odysseus' fraught journey home after the Battle of Troy. However, during his more lucid moments at the hospital, Caden is on another journey, seeking to rehabilitate himself, and it is here that *The Odyssey* parallels are more obvious. At multiple instances during

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the novel, Caden cites his younger sister Mackenzie as the person he must recover for, stating that she is at home "waiting for him", referencing Penelope. As Mackenzie is still a child, and as Caden is in the midst of a serious bout of mental illness, he believes the threat to her is the seven samurai dolphins he painted on her walls, in lieu of prospective husbands vying for her affections. By changing the waiting figure of Penelope to Caden's younger sister, the novel is able to balance the central topics of mental illness and family with the mythological components.

On the sea voyage, Caden befriends the figurehead of the ship, Calliope; while in the hospital, he befriends a patient named Callie. Calliope/Callie is one of the most direct references to *The Odyssey*, embodying the nymph Calypso, who trapped and held Odysseus on her island for seven years until the gods set him free. Calliope is constantly staring away from the ship towards the horizon, and possesses the ability to see all potential futures at once without ever knowing the true future. She is carved out of wood, but is later upgraded to copper. In contrast, Callie is a South-East Asian girl with an obsession with staring outside windows, and experiences hallucinations that she believes are metaphors for her life. Callie has been admitted to the hospital and released before, which may explain why she appears to 'know the future' regarding hospital protocols. Every night aboard the ship, Caden crawls into Calliope's arms to keep her warm and report back on the events of the ship; and at least once in the hospital, Callie sneaks into Caden's bed to sleep because she is cold. However, unlike the myth, it is up to Caden to release Calliope/Callie at her request, "when the time comes". Caden frees her from the ship and the hospital. The name Calliope may also be a reference to the Calliope of Greek mythology, one of the Nine Muses who inspired poetry.

The character of Dr Poirot (known as The Parrot in Caden's delusion) may be a reference to the one-eyed cyclops Polyphemus. Dr Poirot and the Parrot are both described as possessing one flesh eye and one glass eye, and during a conversation with his visiting parents and sister, Caden blurts out the word "Cyclops" during a brief disassociation. He smooths over the incident by saying he was referring to Dr Poirot, and his family accept the excuse. Additionally, Poirot is repeatedly framed as the individual responsible for Caden's prolonged stay at the hospital, in the same way as Polyphemus kept Odysseus trapped in his cave.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Calypso Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Penelope Polyphemus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Coming of age Family Friendship Mental health*
Addenda	Edition used for entry: Neal Shusterman, Challenger Deep, New York: HarperTeen, 2015, 309 pp. E-Book, Australian publisher's website:Harpercollins(accessed July 6, 2018). E-Book, American publisher's website: Harpercollins (accessed: July 6, 2018).

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