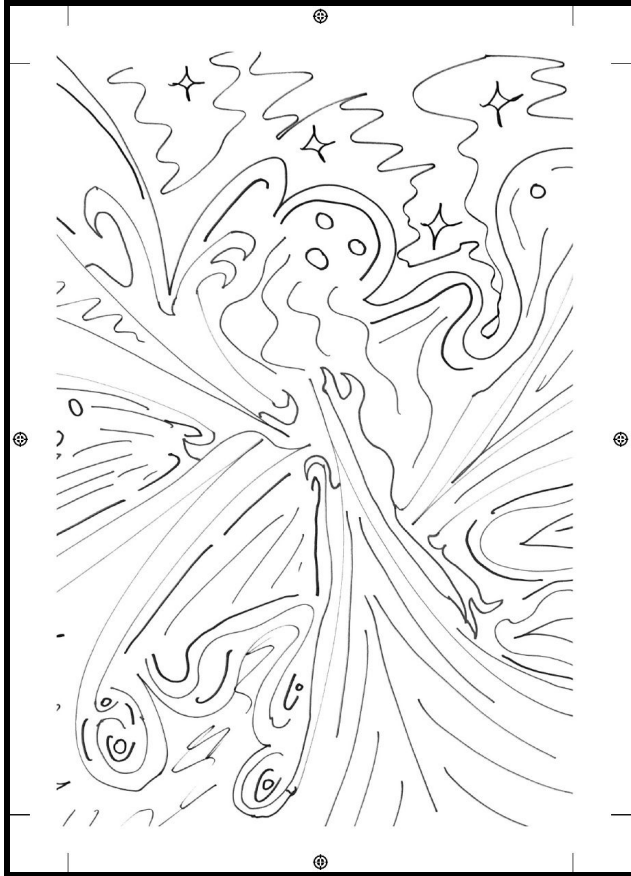


# Oil, Vinegar, and Ocean Water:

## A review of *Challenger Deep*

by Ingrid Johansen



**Caden Bosch** seems like a stereotypical high school kid: he doodles on his homework, ditches track practice to wander around town, and is as ornery and anxious as everyone his age. His parents don't start to worry until Caden comes home convinced that a student at his school, with whom he's never spoken, is trying to kill him.

**Caden's paranoia** only grows after this incident. His restless energy causes him to pace and bounce his knees uncontrollably, and he withdraws further and further into the deepening abyss of his own mind. An artist, Caden finds himself drawing more frequently as he struggles to verbally express his thoughts.

**The narrative** of Caden's daily life is broken up with excerpts about a ship (on which Caden is a crewman) journeying for the

Marianas Trench. At first, these excerpts appear to be dreams or daydreams - separate from the main plot - but as the both storylines develop, the parallels between them reveal Caden's individual reality.

**The structure** of the story is meaningfully crafted to mirror Caden's lucidity and delusions. The story immediately feels awesome and fantastical, though it's based in truth. Neal Shusterman wrote *Challenger Deep* after his son struggled with a mental illness. His goal was "*to capture what that descent was like.*"

**An eccentric crew** made up of a one-eyed captain, a one-eyed parrot, a navigator, and a janitor, maintain the ship. As Caden communicates through art, each crew member utilizes a unique dialect, emphasizing a different aspect of language.

**The navigator** speaks in fragments that emphasize the associative nature of language, both in sound and meaning. Caden and the navigator have the following exchange in their quarters on the ship:

*Caden: "Why am I here? If everything has a purpose, what is my purpose on this ship?"*

*Navigator: "Purpose, porpoise, dolphin, doorframe, doorway. You are the doorway to the salvation of the world."*

*Caden: "Me? Are you sure?"*

*Navigator: "Just as sure as we're on this train."*

**The captain** of the ship also utilizes a unique language. He references common adages, but addresses the tensions they create.

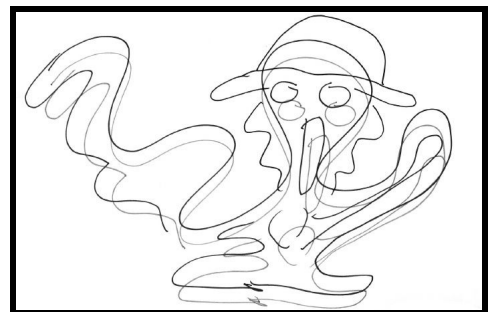
*Caden: Like a preacher, [the captain] pontificates his own peculiar brand of wisdom.*

*Captain: "Count your blessings. And if you count less than ten, cut off the remaining fingers. Burn all your bridges, preferably before you cross them."*

**Author Neal Shusterman** fits each puzzle-piece of the story into precisely the right place to provide adequate understanding and the utmost emotional resonance throughout *Challenger Deep*. The reader is made privy to Caden's condition on the same timeline as Caden himself, allowing the reader to struggle, discover, and overcome with him.

**Imagine** that Caden's life is a bottle of oil and vinegar. Left alone, the layers are right on top of one another, but they remain separated. Caden's paranoias act like a force on the bottle, shaking it vigorously until the liquids seem to blend into one consistency. As Caden tries to overcome the shaking, the layers start to settle - but will they ever be perfectly separated again?

**All illustrations** were completed by Shusterman's son, Brendan. Sometimes the art is symbolic, sometimes frenzied, but it always contains a mysterious fluidity. The artwork serves to express Caden's inner turmoil when he can't articulate his thoughts. Art is his own form of communication.

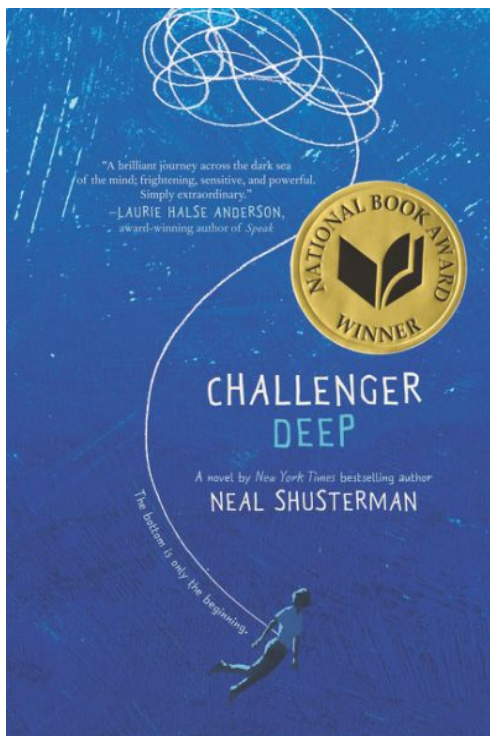


**Communication** is a key theme in *Challenger Deep*, and Caden serves as a vessel for understanding. He says early on in the book, *“The things I feel cannot be put into words, or if they can, the words are in no language anyone can understand. My emotions are talking in tongues.”*

**Caden himself** emphasizes a nonverbal aspect of language that requires visual attention, symbolic referents, and both analytical and associative processes to discern meaning.

**Challenger Deep** will take you on an incredible voyage, not only to the deepest place on earth, but to the deepest places in yourself. Neal and Brendan Shusterman proffer an artistic and linguistic reality that not everyone experiences on their own, and they do it with poignant metaphors and heartbreaking honesty. *Challenger Deep* will make you empathize, it will make you worry, and it will make you wonder.

**Challenger Deep** received the 2015 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature. You can find the book trailer on Neal Shusterman’s website [here](#).



#### Book information:

- Title: Challenger Deep
- Author: Neal Shusterman
- Illustrator: Brendan Shusterman
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- [Link to purchase](#) at River’s End Bookstore

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Book cover image from Harper Collins website. All illustration images are from Neal Shusterman’s website, [www.storyman.com](http://www.storyman.com).