

Challenger Deep Study Guide

Challenger Deep by Neal Shusterman

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Contents

Challenger Deep Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-33.....	4
Chapters 34 – 66.....	8
Chapters 67– 99.....	12
Chapters 100 – 133.....	16
Chapters 133 – 161.....	20
Characters.....	24
Symbols and Symbolism.....	27
Settings.....	30
Themes and Motifs.....	32
Styles.....	36
Quotes.....	38



Plot Summary

“Challenger Deep” is a young adult novel by Neal Shusterman that follows 15-year-old Caden Bosch as he descends into mental illness, and recovers. Caden understands that there are two worlds – one that is real, and one that is real in his mind. Over the past several months, Caden has slowly lost his grip on reality, unable to focus on anything, constantly needing to walk, believing a kid at school wants to kill him, and being visited by a pirate Captain. The Captain forms the backbone of the illness for Caden, in which a pirate-like world is created wherein the Captain seeks to explore Challenger Deep, the deepest part of the Marianas Trench, the deepest area in the world. The Captain says there is no telling how deep it goes.

Caden agrees to go on this expedition, which signals his descent into illness. Caden feels outside himself, existing both in his mentally-constructed world, reality, and sometimes a blend of both. Caden’s parents commit him to Seaview Memorial Hospital for treatment while Caden continues to spiral. The Captain tells Caden that there is no telling how deep the Trench, or Caden’s illness, actually may go. The Captain of the expedition is accompanied by a security parrot, a mental mirror for Dr. Poirot. It is Dr. Poirot who comes to treat Caden at Seaview. All of the crewmembers onboard that Caden encounters are mirror images of the patients he meets at Seaview. There is the navigator, Hal, who obsessively seeks to find patterns in maps and who serves as Caden’s roommate at the hospital; there is the beautiful but distant Callie who appears on ship as the wooden maiden; and there is Carlyle, the group therapist who appears on the ship as the swabby.

As the weeks pass, Poirot and Carlyle work to get to the heart of whatever illness Caden has contracted through medication and through therapy. Piece by piece, Caden begins to emerge from his illness. In Caden’s mental reality, the better Caden gets in real life, the closer he and the Captain draw to the Marianas Trench. Tragedy strikes, however, when Hal attempts suicide by slitting his wrists. Carlyle is unfairly blamed for the incident, and fired. Callie, with whom Caden has grown close, is released from the hospital. So much change causes Caden to reel mentally, during which time he descends to the bottom of the Marianas Trench. There, he discovers candy treasure, and recalls a memory of a homeless man during a visit to New York. The homeless man wore a Cap’n Crunch cereal box on his head, and told Caden there is not telling how deep the subway goes. This is the root of Caden’s mental descent. Acknowledging this, Caden rises to the surface and breaks free.

Caden is declared sound of mind and released to his parents and sister to return home. Caden knows that he has been treated, but may not actually be cured. He settles back down into his life as much as he can, knowing he has lost a serious part of his fifteenth year that he can never have back. At the same time, Caden has more encounters with the Captain, but is strong enough to resist the Captain seeking to entice Caden to journey back into the deep. Caden understands that he might indeed venture into mental illness again one day, but for the time being, he knows he has the power to refuse.



Chapters 1-33

Summary

In Chapter 1, Caden Bosch considers that there is a real world, and that there is another real world which no one else is aware of. Caden is in bed in the middle of the night, listening to the sounds around him and worried about forgetting things, missing details, and losing concentration. It is during this time that the Captain always appears. In Chapter 2, the Captain contends that the depths of the Marianas Trench are unmeasurable, though Caden explains the Trench has been measured to a depth of 6.8 miles. The Captain argues that anyone who says they have seen the bottom is a liar, and that it is forever “down there.” In Chapter 3, Caden has a dream where he is lying on a table in a sparkling white kitchen, surrounded by monsters disguised as his parents who then proceed to put something into Caden to tear him to pieces. In Chapter 4, the narrator reveals he is 15, and that he cannot remember where his journey began even though he and a number of other teens are crewmates on a ship. Like him, the other teens have all been cast out of their homes. The Captain and his parrot, who wears a security badge, keep an eye on everything. Caden says it is a mistake he is there, but is warned by one of the kids never to say anything to the parrot, because that is how “they” get someone.

In Chapter 5, Caden explains the emotions he feels are quick, uncontrollable, and cannot be described. Caden’s roommate, the ship’s navigator, says not to worry about such things, that Caden’s visions show them the way, that Caden is the compass to his own true feelings, and that Caden should draw to pass the time. Caden believes the navigator is brilliant, and sees patterns in the stars and things that no one else can see. In Chapter 6, Caden comes to stand in the doorway of his 11-year-old sister, Mackenzie, as their dad puts her to bed. When Caden’s dad asks if everything is alright, Caden says he thinks there is a kid at school who wants to kill him. In Chapter 7, Caden compares himself to a coin being dropped in a donation funnel spiraling out of control and heading toward a dark abyss, but keeping himself out through his own efforts. In Chapter 8, Caden’s father presses Caden for details about the boy who wants to kill him. Caden explains he doesn’t know the kid, passes him in the hall sometimes, and that it isn’t what the kid has said, but what he hasn’t said that makes Caden think he will be killed. Caden’s dad tells him he is probably just overreacting or stressed. Caden agrees, and knows his parents have been worried about him lately.

In Chapter 9, the Captain declares their ship to be the best of all, but that the ship cannot be named or it would invite wrecking. Caden sees a sign in the main hatch which reads “You are not the first and you will not be the last.” The parrot urges Caden to write down whatever the sign says to him. In Chapter 10, a masked woman in the White Plastic Kitchen reaches through Caden to retrieve milk from the refrigerator. In Chapter 11, the Captain tells Caden that nothing awful is without its beautiful side, such as the bowels of the ship which contain black pitch which keeps the water out. In Chapter 12, Caden recalls playing a game called “Psycho Shopping Spree” where he would pretend



random shoppers were actually killers with evil eyes. Caden has been seeing these eyes everywhere lately. In Chapter 13, Caden stands in the middle of the living room and tells Mackenzie he can hear termites, but not to worry. The more Caden thinks about something, the more he believes he can actually feel it, and realizes that nothing is what it seems to be.

In Chapter 14, Caden explores unknown corners of the ship, and encounters a strange girl with a choker who tells him that the hallway he is in goes nowhere. In Chapter 15, Caden anxiously awaits arrival at the Marianas Trench, and is assigned the role of Stabilizer on the ship, always standing on the opposite side of the ship when it rocks. In Chapter 16, Caden befriends an older shipmate named Carlyle, a swabby, who says the parrot clawed out the Captain's eye after the parrot was double-crossed by a witch. The witch had promised to change the parrot into an eagle in exchange for the parrot's own eye. In Chapter 17, Caden heads up to the crow's nest at the suggestion of the navigator. There, Caden sees a crewmate in a blue jumpsuit jump from the crow's nest and disappear. In Chapter 18, Caden tries to remind himself that no one at school wants to harm him, but he is not able to center on this idea. In Chapter 19, Caden and his friends Max and Shelby are creating a video game. Caden provides the artwork. Caden and his friends have noticed his artwork is deconstructing to become more abstract over time, though he does not know why. In Chapter 20, the parrot calls Caden to his office to fill out a questionnaire. In Chapter 21, the questionnaire is presented with questions such as "I sometimes worry the ship might sink" and "I can breathe underwater."

In Chapter 22, Caden and his family go to Las Vegas for two days while the house is sprayed for termites. Caden is very nervous, cannot eat, and collects business cards for escort services because they have pictures of girls in their underwear on them. At Caesar's Palace, Caden sees a copy of the statue of David and wonders if, like him, David saw monsters everywhere. In Chapter 23, Caden and his family go to the Stratosphere Tower, where his father convinces him to go for a ride on the tower drop. Caden and his family dress in blue jumpsuits for the ride. Caden is terrified on the way down, descending into a black pit. In Chapter 24, Caden wakes up from a nightmare to have the navigator explain to him that they all go to the White Plastic Kitchen. In Chapter 25, the parrot urges Caden to draw him, but the Captain says Caden must first have permission. In Chapter 26, Caden is given a mixture to drink and told his insurance will be billed.

In Chapter 27, Caden remembers feeling alone and isolated in the bustle of strangers on a trip to New York, and now feels that way again. In Chapter 28, Caden draws so furiously that he breaks his pencils, thinking the images he is drawing must mean something. The drawings worry both his mother and his sister. In Chapter 29, Caden feels alone even though he eats lunch with his friends at school. In Chapter 30, the Captain and the parrot urge the crew on in their work with strange sayings, such as "There is nothing to fear but fear itself, and the occasional man-eating monster." In Chapter 31, Caden draws the bugs he feels squirming in his head, but refuses to tell his mom about it when she asks. In Chapter 32, Caden learns that pennies may one day be done away with, and then he wonders where that would leave people who say "penny for your thoughts," and if thoughts will then become worthless. In Chapter 33, Caden



tries out for the track team, makes it, but loses focus and stops attending practice though he tells his parents he still is.

Analysis

“Challenger Deep” is a young adult novel by Neal Shusterman which describes 15-year-old Caden Bosch’s struggles with an unnamed mental illness. From the start, the reader witnesses firsthand Caden’s descent, and the fluidity of reality. For Caden, that which exists in the real world – the world his mother, father, sister, and friends occupy – is every bit as real as the world mentally formed in his mind. The Captain’s appearance to Caden while Caden is in the real world breaks down the barriers between real and imagined; and Caden finds himself immersed in one world, the other, or both at the same time. Caden thus has difficulty distinguishing what is real from what is not.

This difficulty can be seen as the chapters jump back and forth in time and reality. In some chapters, Caden is fully committed to his mental world; in others, he is fully committed to the real world; in others, both worlds are combined. The episodes of reality and mental illness are reflected in the short, alternating chapters that work like flashbacks and cut-scenes to unreality and reality. The lack of focus Caden experiences is reflected in these, as well as a brief glimpse into the way a mental illness can sometimes work. This difficulty in discerning reality from unreality leads to paranoia in the real world, in which Caden suspects someone at school wants to kill him.

Caden’s father recognizes that something is wrong, but does not yet attribute it to mental illness. At the same time, the reader is able to recognize the vestiges of truth and reality in Caden’s illness, such as the “White Kitchen” being an exam room. As the novel progresses, the chapters leap back in time to reality just as Caden was beginning to lose hold of it. This came in his seeming awareness of things going on around him that others could not sense, such as termites, and his lack of focus on anything and inability to concentrate when needed. The reader will note that Caden compares himself to a donation funnel at the mall, in which he, like the coin, is spiraling downward, out of control, to a black depth.

Spiraling out of control becomes a common idea and metaphor throughout the story. The Captain urges Caden to join their expedition to the Marianas Trench, the deepest place on Earth. This urging to join the expedition is metaphorical for Caden’s descent into mental illness. The Captain’s insistence that there is no telling how far down the Trench goes is to be seen as a metaphor for the uncertainty about the depths and extent of Caden’s mental illness. By now, the reader has some idea that Caden’s illness is very real, and very encompassing, as Caden’s mental disorientation culls from reality to supplement his unreality. For example, the Stratosphere Tower jump is seen as the suicide of a blue jumpsuit-wearing pirate in Caden’s illness-borne world.

Caden’s descent into mental illness is noticed not only by Caden’s parents, who at first believe their son is merely stressed out, but by his friends as well. This is seen through Caden’s artwork which he is providing for the video game he and his friends are



creating. The artwork itself becomes symbolic of Caden's descent. When Caden is healthy, his art is precise, realistic, and easy to identify. But as Caden's mental illness grows, his art becomes less rational, more passionate, and abstract. This is not by design or intent but as a result of Caden losing grasp of reality. Caden's family also notices the change in his artwork, which troubles them because art is such an important part of Caden's life, and speaks directly to his character.

Discussion Question 1

Who is the Captain? What does he entice Caden to do? Why? What is this metaphorical for?

Discussion Question 2

Why is artwork so important to Caden? How does his artwork change over time? Why? How do his friends and family react to these changes?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways do reality and unreality blend together in Caden's mental illness? What effect does this have on Caden?

Vocabulary

perspective, deceptively, kinetic energy, centrifugal, pungent, putrid, portents, elasticity, fundamental, perception, pretentious, abstract, diligent, clique, pontificate



Chapters 34 – 66

Summary

In Chapter 34, the Captain tasks Caden with the test of polishing the bowsprit. Caden nearly falls in but is saved by the ship's gorgeous wooden maiden in exchange for telling her all the things that go on behind her back. In Chapter 35, a dozen crewmates, including Caden, are chosen for a special mission. The Captain wishes to know what those assembled know of Challenger Deep in the Marianas Trench, saying all treasures lost at sea seek the deepest point. Choker girl says monsters keep people away from the Trench. Caden says they do not have the technology to reach the lowest point, and is given an F by the Captain. In Chapter 36, the Captain warns against going to the Crow's Nest and drinking concoctions, and tells Caden not to listen to Carlyle and the parrot. He also tells Caden the wooden maiden protects them against sea monsters. In Chapter 37, Caden has a horrible headache. In Chapter 38, Caden has a dream where he turns into a larva, and in which the parrot gives him a shot of sleeping fluid. In Chapter 39, Caden takes a science exam for which he did not study, loses track of time, and must suddenly hand in his test.

In Chapter 40, The blue-haired Mistress of the Treasury, and the pudgy Lore-master, and Bone Boy all predict doom while the navigator tells Caden the Captain has special plans for Caden. The Captain then announces that Caden will be the artist in residence. In Chapter 41, Caden realizes he both hates and does not hate the Captain, while a tattoo of a skull on the arm of the master-at-arms says the black tar in the ship is alive and waiting to be fed. In Chapter 42, Caden meets with the wooden maiden to tell her all he has learned, and cuddles with the maiden to keep her warm. In Chapter 43, Caden speaks with school guidance counselor Ms. Sassel because of his failed science exam, and notes that not only has his schoolwork been slipping, but all of his teachers are concerned. Caden uses the excuse that he was only having a bad day when he took the test. In Chapter 44, Caden becomes overwhelmed by a need to walk, cannot sit still, and wanders around his neighborhood. In Chapter 45, Caden wonders what it would feel like to suddenly fall into a hole. In Chapter 46, Caden's parents worry about his weight and his thinness.

In Chapter 47, the pirate ship transforms into a copper ship overnight, complete with a diving bell, which the Captain attributes to Caden's thoughts. In Chapter 48, Caden visits Calliope, the wooden maiden, who says Caden should not have surrendered so many thoughts to the Captain. In Chapter 49, Caden takes a walk in his neighborhood, letting the signs he sees tell him what to do. For example, at the "Left Turn Only" sign, Caden makes a left turn. However, Caden cannot recall when the game stops being a game.

In Chapter 50, Caden always sympathizes with the black widow spiders in the garage when he crushes them because their webs are messy and without patterns. In Chapter 51, Caden has difficulty working with Max on a science project because he can't focus.



This worries Max. In Chapter 52, Caden's father confronts Caden about quitting track, his constant walking, and his frame of mind. Caden believes he is being unfairly interrogated, and goes for a walk. In Chapter 53, Caden recalls a day driving with his dad where his dad had trouble driving because the rearview mirror had fallen off, not allowing him to instantly see behind him.

In Chapter 54, Caden tells his parents that a different kid at school now wants to kill him. His dad decides it is important to follow up on this. In Chapter 55, Caden learns the ship is infested with free-range brains, which escape from sailors' heads when they are asleep. Carlyle says these mindless sailors then have their minds filled by the Captain, and are sent on their way. In Chapter 56, Caden notices a storm on the horizon. In Chapter 57, Max and Shelby stop hanging out with Caden, while only Shelby speaks to Caden in school. Shelby asks if Caden is doing anything, but Caden says he is not doing drugs or drinking. In Chapter 58, Caden recalls a kid at school who slammed his head into the desk due to mental illness, and who preferred to be alone than with others. In Chapter 59, Caden loses focus at school and leaves, worried something may happen to his family. He discovers his cell phone is dead, panics, and believes "they" don't want him to warn his family.

In Chapter 60, at home in bed, Caden suspects his neighbor's sprinklers are actually hissing snakes. His mom comes into his room and suggests he see a therapist. In Chapter 61, Caden wonders if there might be a "check-brain" light like there is a "check engine" light in cars. In Chapter 62, Caden is assigned to shadow the Captain to watch and learn that the ship is alive, can be wounded, and can feel pain. The Captain says he would like to know if Calliope feels the ship's pain. In Chapter 63, Calliope tells Caden that she feels everything, including the people around her and people she does not know. Caden explains that he, too, feels such things. In Chapter 64, Caden and his parents meet with a psychologist who recommends weekly sessions, and who recommends seeing someone who can prescribe medicine. In Chapter 65, Caden explains the darkness he experiences can be either terrifying or glorious. In Chapter 66, Caden comes to realize he can truly feel things outside himself, that he is free of himself, and that he is hungry for things more than food.

Analysis

The blurring together of reality and unreality in Caden's mental illness continues unabated. The Captain's insistence that no one has the technology to reach the bottom of the Deep is metaphorical for the fact that not all mental illnesses can actually be cured, only treated. The crewmates selected for the Captain's special, but unidentified mission, all take the form of Caden's therapy group members. Carlyle, the group's therapist, makes a strong appearance in Caden's unreality as the ship's swabby, where he keeps the ship clean and the crew in order. Only the wooden maiden on the bowsprit remains unaccounted for, but her identity will be revealed in later chapters.

The Captain tells Caden not to listen to Carlyle and the parrot, because the Captain has his own special plans for Caden. But just who the Captain and the parrot are, or are



representative of, are not yet revealed because reality has been that obscured for Caden. At the same time, Caden begins spending more time with Calliope, the wooden maiden. As this occurs, the reader is treated to Caden's further descent in alternate chapters, leading his friends to grow distant and leading his parents to become deeply troubled. Caden's mental illness leads to a diminished appetite and increasing strangeness since Caden has difficulty distinguishing realities. As Caden loses focus and increasingly begins to wander, he recalls an incident where his father had difficulty driving because he could no longer see behind him. The absence of one important thing – the rearview mirror – led to great confusion for his father. The reader can only wonder what it is that is missing from Caden's mind, or what triggered the descent in the first place.

The tragedy of Caden's mental illness comes in Caden growing distant in his own mind, but also in Caden's friends and family being pushed away. Caden's parents, however, recognize that this is not like their son, and everything from his lack of appetite to his lack of work in school are something to be concerned about. While Caden's friends allow themselves to be pushed away (only Shelby breaks this trend by asking what is wrong with Caden, but assuming it has to do with drugs rather than anything else), Caden's family doubles down to see what they can do to make things better for their son. This is increasingly important as Caden begins to suspect, in a very paranoid way, that "they" are out to get him. Caden is taken to a therapist, who in turn recommends stronger treatment.

Caden recognizes that his perception of, and grasp on reality are slipping, though Caden himself does not recognize this, or attribute it to, mental illness. Caden himself explains this fluid reality as being either glorious or terrifying. The imbalance in Caden's perception of reality is therein reflected in his sense reaction to that perception. For example, Caden's time with Calliope is absolutely heartwarming and exciting to him, while his paranoia relating to "they" being out to get him is indicative of the terror that Caden must suffer. Caden's mental imbalances denote why the therapist recommends stronger treatment, not only in therapy but in the prescription of actual medication.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Caden's parents decide to bring him to see a therapist? What does the therapist recommend occur? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Caden describes his mental situation as both glorious and terrifying. Why? Provide examples from the text to explain fully.



Discussion Question 3

How do Caden's family and friends react toward his changing behavior? Why? What do you believe accounts for the different responses? Why?

Vocabulary

odious, libations, obligatory, bathyscaphe, anachronistic, insolent, inference, transmutation, reclusive, ironically, inquisition, compelling, incompetent, impotent



Chapters 67– 99

Summary

In Chapter 67, the Captain gathers everyone together to learn of their progress, but the Lore-master says he can't make heads or tails out of the runes in his book, so he is punished. The Captain announces they will conduct a test on Caden's diving bell, even though Caden says it is the wrong kind of bell. In Chapter 68, Caden feels as if he knows the answers to everything and so much share it with the world, such as telling a woman at the supermarket that there is a worm in her heart that she must cast out. Caden's behavior startles all those around him.

In Chapter 69, the Captain has the bell cast overboard, where it sinks. The Captain calls the test a success in that it has disproven Caden's theory about how to reach the bottom of the Trench. In Chapter 70, Caden's father follows him when he goes out for a walk. In Chapter 71, the parrot tells Caden he worries the Captain doesn't have Caden's best interests at heart, and that he needs to count on Caden to help kill the Captain if the Captain proves unworthy of the crew's trust. In Chapter 72, Caden believes something bad is going to happen, telling his mother that "they" are saying it will be the end of the world if he doesn't do something. In Chapter 73, the Captain asks Caden if Caden trusts him. Caden says no, to which the Captain is delighted because it means that Caden is learning. The Captain asks Caden to ask Calliope if there will be a mutiny, and if so, Caden gets to kill the parrot.

In Chapter 74, Caden admits that it always feels as if the drawings of presidents on money are staring at him. In Chapter 74, Caden's father says they are going on a trip and must leave because the ship sails soon, but the voices Caden is hearing tell him not to go. Caden is brought to a place called Seaview Memorial Hospital. In Chapter 76, Caden realizes he is trapped in a conspiracy of conspiracies, which he understands will not work out well for him. In Chapter 77, Caden is committed to Seaview, which he calls a deal with the Devil. Caden panics as his parents leave and lashes out, but attendants restrain him. In Chapter 78, Caden dreams of a happy vacation at the beach with his family, but knows it is only a dream. In Chapter 79, Caden explains that consciousness is a relative concept because he is pumped full of medicine, and that he feels elsewhere as though he is almost - but not yet - asleep. In Chapter 80, Caden relates that multiple people keep asking him if he is okay, and that he can't keep a tight grasp on what is going on around him.

In Chapter 81, the Captain tells the story of when Captain Ahab and Captain Nemo met one another and abandoned their monsters to live in peace, while their monsters, the white whale and the giant squid, waged war against each other. The Captain explains that both creatures are doomed to war with each other forever because Ahab and Nemo abandoned their beasts. The Captain goes on to say that they must never abandon their own beasts, that they must feed as well as fight them. But Caden argues that the captains deserve the peace they found. The Captain tells Caden that opinions have no



place at sea. The navigator urges Caden to do as the Captain says, while Caden tells the blue-haired girl that he believes the parrot is the Captain's monster. In Chapter 82, Caden is shoved into a ship's cannon to clean it, and knows no one can save him except himself. In Chapter 83, Caden's parents come to visit him each day during visiting hour, but refuse to bring Caden home with them.

In Chapter 84, Dr. Poirot tells Caden it is a good thing that Caden cannot get inside his own head since the things inside aren't doing him much good. Caden later throws up on a puzzle being worked on by a blue-haired girl, who then shoves Caden into a wall. In Chapter 85, Caden is taken to the White Plastic Kitchen where he argues he has a brain tumor, but is told his MRI and CAT scans are clear. In Chapter 86, Caden admits that existence now is measured by going from meal to meal and therapy session to therapy session each day. A new therapist, Carlyle, takes over for Caden.

In Chapter 87, the Captain expresses his concerns that Caden's dreams threaten to undo any progress that has been made on the mission, and tells Caden to resist the White Kitchen, and to stay with the ship and crew. In Chapter 88, Caden explains the first rush of medicine brings peace, but as they wear off, bring paranoia and anxiety. In Chapter 89, Carlyle tells Caden the kid across the room who looks at maps all day long, Hal, is nicknamed "the navigator." Hal explains to Caden there is a pattern in the maps that will solve everything. In Chapter 90, Hal becomes Caden's roommate. Hal explains the importance of math to his work, finding connections between important cities and their distances. Hal also says that Caden's artwork is a map.

In Chapter 91, Caden believes he is in the Olympics while he eats, but then returns to reality. In Chapter 92, Caden successfully cleans and emerges from the cannon, which earns the approval of the crew. Caden asks Carlyle which enemy to take down if two enemies attack the ship at once. Carlyle does not know, and suggests speaking with Calliope. In Chapter 93, Caden speaks with Calliope, who does not have an answer. In Chapter 94, Caden recognizes that he is in a hospital and now inside his body once more, though he knows he will soon return to the sea. In Chapter 95, Caden says it is difficult to explain being "there" and "here" at the same time. In Chapter 96, Shelby comes to visit with Caden's parents, though Caden does not remember her previous visits. Shelby explains she and Max are still working on the game, and will show him when he gets out. She also apologizes for accusing Caden of using. In Chapter 97, Caden approaches a girl with brown hair and brown skin the color of polished oak who always looks out of the window in the Vista Room. She introduces herself as Callie, and says she knows the others say terrible things behind her back. In Chapter 98, Caden admits he has a fear of not living out the future, and watching his potential die. In Chapter 99, Caden says the meds he is currently on leave his brain in orbit around Saturn.

Analysis

As Caden's treatment at Seaview Memorial Hospital gets underway, small bits of progress are made. Caden has enough clarity to be able to recognize that people like



Carlyle are in his mental reality as well as in actual reality. Indeed, Carlyle's appearance in both reality and mental reality are nearly identical. Others, like Dr. Poirot, assume symbolic form based on their physical characteristics and assume names reflective of this. Poirot is the parrot, while the African-American Callie is the oaken wooden maiden, Calliope. Hal, whose own mental illness consists of an obsession with maps, becomes Caden's roommate in reality, and bunkmate and ship navigator in Caden's altered reality. Caden himself recognizes not only that he has some form of mental illness, but that medicine and therapy are helping him to distinguish what is actually real, and what is only imagined.

One of the goals that Neal Shusterman seeks in his novel is to demonstrate to readers that mental treatment is crucial and very helpful, despite popular conceptions and mainstream portrayals of such places as being drab, cold, and cruel. The medicines that Caden is taking really are helping him. Caden himself explains that the medicines bring peace and chase away the paranoia. Interestingly enough, what makes mental illness and its treatment so difficult – and more tragedy than terror – is that even in insanity, shreds of undeniable truth emerge. For example, Hal notes that Caden's artwork is a map – not because it is actually a map, but because it is a metaphorical map for Caden's illness. As the reader will recall, Caden's descent into illness was measured in large part by the change in his artwork.

The reader should note that elements of truth continue to seep into Caden's imagined world. In this world, Caden is told to do as the Captain says by the navigator, while blue-haired Skye tells Caden the parrot is the Captain's monster. Hal, who does not appear to be getting any better in his own mental issues, should be held as untrustworthy by the reader, while Skye's observation that the parrot is the Captain's monster denotes that the parrot/Poirot is opposed to whatever the Captain is doing. For Caden, however, all this means is greater confusion. This becomes even more so confusing when both the Captain and the parrot urge Caden to take their side to act against the other. Caden seeks advice from Carlyle, who as therapist/swabby, is able to straddle the worlds in which Caden exists, guiding him in both. This demonstrates that Caden is improving, no matter how little. This should also be taken in conjunction with the cannon-cleaning scene. The cannon becomes representative of Caden's mind, something into which Caden himself can only truly, actually get into and clean to make better.

The idea that mental illness is more a tragedy than a terror is further examined in this section of the novel. Hal's obsession with maps is reflective of his searching for something that he will never find, which is arguably more tragic than the fact he is mentally ill at all. Caden himself understands that the medicines and therapy are helping him to break free of his mental fog. He notes that he is aware of how much his mental illness is costing him. He worries he will not be able to live out his future, or live up to his potential. Caden now understands his mental illness as a serious challenge that has to be overcome and, like the cleaning of the cannon, knows that the strength to overcome must be found within himself.



Discussion Question 1

In what ways do reality and unreality blur together in this section of the novel? What effect does this have on Caden and his ability to discern what is real and what is not? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Caden comes to recognize his mental illness as a serious challenge to be overcome. Why?

Discussion Question 3

How does Neal Shusterman demonstrate both the positive nature and positive effects of mental health treatment in this section of the novel? How is Caden's life changing as a result?

Vocabulary

irrelevant, paranoid, consciousness, psychoactive, echolocating, affinity, surmounted, malicious, inoperable, malevolence, subversive, pilfered, quandary



Chapters 100 – 133

Summary

In Chapter 100, Calliope tells Caden she is focusing on her legs, feet, toes, and toenails, even though she doesn't have them. Caden tells her the Captain fears her. Calliope says the Captain fears all he cannot control, and asks Caden to help her free her legs. In Chapter 101, Skye, the blue-haired girl, tells Caden Callie sits in front of the window because she needs to because she thinks the outside world goes away when she isn't looking. Caden responds that Callie only fears that it goes away while Callie gives Caden a piece of the sky from her puzzle. In Chapter 102, Hal's beautiful mother, deemed unfit (which Caden believes is true based on her cold nature when visiting Hal) comes to visit. In Chapter 103, Caden is annoyed by the mantras people repeat, such as his dad always repeating "This, too, shall pass." Caden says such phrases can be warped or twisted like balloon animals, and that the shape of one's balloon animals measures who someone is. In Chapter 104, Caden goes looking for Calliope's legs, but is stopped by the parrot who reminds Caden to be prepared to move against the Captain if necessary.

In Chapter 105, Dr. Poirot explains that everyone has a different way, or construct, of looking at the world, but that Caden's construct has gone out of alignment with reality, and that the price to live it is severe. In Chapter 106, Caden continues to spend time with Callie when he can, and even holds her hand. She is very cold, which she says is a genetic condition, and reminds Caden that bit by bit, they all slowly put themselves back together, but that it gets harder each time. In Chapter 107, Caden asks Carlyle where he can find the forecandle, or fo'c'sle. Carlyle says the key kept behind the peach pit in the socket of the dead eye of the Captain is needed. In Chapter 108, Caden relates that even God must have psychotic episodes given how things work out in the world sometimes, such as a woman drowning in an elevator due to a water main break. In Chapter 109, Caden considers how to steal the key while talking to the other crewmembers in the crow's nest. In Chapter 110, Hal asks if Caden is related to the famous painter Hieronymus Bosch, but Caden responds that he doesn't think so. In Chapter 111, Callie comes to cuddle with Caden that night so that Caden may warm her up. In the morning, Caden discovers Callie has left a slipper behind.

In Chapter 112, Carlyle assigns his therapy group wordless therapy by making them draw to express themselves. Caden draws a landscape of sharp edges and deep valleys without sense of gravity or perspective. Caden begins drawing for the group, and they are amazed to see that Caden can draw their feelings so perfectly. In Chapter 113, Caden reflects on artists who have lost their minds, such as Vincent Van Gogh and a rich artist who lived on the streets in LA. In Chapter 114, Dr. Poirot decides he will prescribe new medication for Caden when Caden explains they are eating crewmen with no brains. In Chapter 115, psych meds are brewed by witches. In Chapter 116, Caden's brain escapes through his nose, leaving him confused and reeling, and not wanting to let Calliope see him this way. Caden worries the rest of his life will be like



this. The parrot says the brain escape is unexpected but not irreversible. The parrot says the time has come, and the Captain must be dropped. In Chapter 117, Carlyle explains that everyone reacts differently to medication, and that Caden is no different. In Chapter 118, the Captain supervises the return of Caden's brain, telling Caden to trust him rather than the parrot. Caden reveals he encountered the Abyssal Serpent, a monster which stalks until it kills. The Captain says it is clear that there is more to Caden than meets the eye. In Chapter 119, Caden is restless but resists attempts to get him to watch "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" with the other kids. In Chapter 120, Caden learns from Hal that Hal's mother and her fiancée will be moving to Seattle without him.

In Chapter 121, new kids arrive in therapy, including Raoul who believes he can be beamed in and out of the hospital while Skye tells everyone God never gives them anything they can't handle. Caden believes God gives them the courage to deal with such things. In Chapter 122, Caden reveals that history has regarded mental disorders differently. For example, Native Americans found mental illness to be a sign of ancestors imparting wisdom, while in Dickensian England, he would have been thrown into the madhouse, Bedlam. In Chapter 123, Raoul reveals famous dead people, such as Shakespeare, visit him. Caden encourages Raoul to get Shakespeare to be humorous in order to make Raoul smile, but it does not work. In Chapter 124, admits to being bored with group therapy because it is always the same old thing day after day, which causes Caden to lash out at Alexa who attempted suicide after being molested by her stepbrother. Caden urges her to let things go and move on. Raoul agrees. In Chapter 125, Caden draws while hanging out with Callie in the Vista Room, then the two go for a walk around the ward. Callie admits she is afraid that one of them will be released before the other, leaving the other alone and behind, so she makes Caden promise that they will free each other when the time comes.

In Chapter 126, Caden and the others realize the Abyssal Serpent is stalking them. In Chapter 127, Caden gets food poisoning from eggplant parmesan smuggled in by his mother, which Hal suspects may be intentional. In Chapter 128, the Captain tells Caden he has endured his gut illness well, and that those who appear to be Caden's friends are not, meaning he should trust no one. In Chapter 130, Caden's stomach illness passes, prompting Poirot to explain that the sooner Caden recognizes he can disbelieve the things his mental illness tries to make him believe, the sooner he can go home. Caden is worried by this because he does not want to leave Callie, and worries that Callie may recover before him. In Chapter 131, Caden's parents bring Mackenzie to visit for the first time, who is happy to see Caden is better than expected. In Chapter 132, Caden mops while speaking with Carlyle on the deck of the ship during which time reality and Caden's imagined world cross. Carlyle says he is on Caden's side while working on his laptop while Caden continues to mop the deck.

Analysis

As the novel continues, Caden's mental illness continues to blur reality and the imagined world together, though it is clear that Caden is getting better. His experiences



in the depths of his mental illness are fewer and shorter, while his periods of lucidity and mental clarity increase and lengthen in their nature. A large part of this comes through having things in reality worth holding onto. This includes the time that Caden spends with Callie, and his decision to rely on God for strength and answers. Callie and Caden recognize similar experiences in one another, and take strength in one another, while Caden accepts the idea that God gives people the strength to deal with terrible situations.

As Caden improves, the parrot tells him that the Captain must be done away with. Who, or what the Captain is, is still unknown –but the Captain in turn urges Caden to remain on guard against the parrot. It is through this jockeying for position with one another that Caden learns of the Abyssal Serpent, which is the symbolic manifestation of the permanence of Caden’s mental illness. The Abyssal Serpent is like the white whale and the giant squid, but is Caden’s own personal monster. Caden can sense the monster stalking him all the time, especially as he begins to get better. The specter of the monster wanting to pull him into the deep (mental illness) for good, refuses to leave Caden alone.

But with all treatment, there are steps backward. This happens when Caden begins to take new medication, during which time the loss of mental self is manifested in the escape of his brain on board the pirate ship. The literal loss of his brain on the pirate ship is metaphorical for the temporary losing of his grasp on reality. At the same time, reality and unreality blend together in strange ways, such as when Carlyle is on the ship in his office working on his laptop while also speaking to Caden. However, Caden’s desire to fight to get back to reality, to overcome his mental illness, and to live as normally as possible again continues to drive him on. The visit with Mackenzie is proof of the good things that await Caden at the end of his journey.

The tragedy of mental illness continues to manifest itself in this section of the novel. Caden worries that the rest of his life will be a wash between reality and lucidity, and imagined reality and mental illness. This is especially true when Caden relapses and does not want Callie to see him in such a state. At the same time, Caden recognizes how blessed he is to have the family that he does, for Hal’s own mother refuses to remain in the area, and seeks to move to Seattle without Hal. In terms of love, Caden is also faring better than most. Because of the tragedy of mental illness, Caden has been brought together with Callie –something which could have never occurred otherwise. The two give each other hope and strength, and a reason to want to fight to be mentally well. Caden worries that Callie will be cured before he is, and will leave him alone at Seaview.

Discussion Question 1

What reasons does Caden come to find to fight through his mental illness? Why do these reasons matter so much to Caden?



Discussion Question 2

Describe the unfolding relationship between Callie and Caden. What is their time together like? What do they help each other to do? What does this say for their mental illnesses?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Caden's brief relapse. Why does this occur? How does Caden move beyond this relapse? Is Caden even aware of this relapse? If so, what does it cause him to do? If not, why not?

Vocabulary

construct, sinister, valiantly, angst, irreversible, incoherent, formidable, desensitized, confound, profoundly



Chapters 133 – 161

Summary

In Chapter 133, the ship sails into the storm front. Caden is ordered to man the tiller to keep the ship on course, but is interrupted by the parrot who says now is the time to dispatch the Captain. The parrot argues that the Captain is the cause of the storm, and the one who tore Caden from his life. Suddenly, monstrous crestmares leap onto the ship, attacking the crew. During the struggle, the key is knocked from the Captain's eye, which Caden collects and recovers Calliope's legs. Caden goes to rescue Calliope with a wrench from Carlyle, freeing her to run across the waves. The crestmares give chase to her, leaving the ship. For his work, Caden is promoted to Master of the Helm, with the intent to follow Caden rather than the wind. In Chapter 134, Caden learns that Callie is leaving, says goodbye to her, and meets her parents. He gives her his e-mail address to keep in touch.

In Chapter 125, the heartbroken Caden tells Poirot he wants to leave, but Poirot says such things take time because medications have to be adjusted and fine-tuned to ensure they work. In Chapter 136, the navigator refuses to take his concoction, saying that if he is to navigate them to the spot, he cannot feel so numb. In Chapter 137, Caden feels utterly lonely without Calliope on the bow. He also notices the dark tar pitch is following the navigator around. In Chapter 138, the Captain urges Caden to prepare to kill the parrot by pistol. Caden believes it is an impossible choice. In Chapter 139, Caden refers to Shakespeare's "Hamlet" to see what is said about sanity, ghosts, and killing, but finds no real answers. In Chapter 140, Caden has refused to kill either the parrot or the Captain. The ship comes to the waters of the Nemesi, the monstrous sea creatures. The white whale battles the giant squid, but when they see the ship, both turn on the ship. The navigator rushes to the crow's nest, ready to jump. Caden urges the navigator be saved, but the parrot says their science is not exact. Caden tries to stop the navigator, but it is too late. The navigator jumps, dying and transforming into pages. Caden believes the parrot could have saved the navigator, so he shoots the parrot. The parrot, as it dies, says Caden has seen the Captain before and is not what Caden thinks he is.

In Chapter 141, Caden's parents are sad to hear about Hal's suicide attempt. Caden explains that Hal took the blade from his pencil sharpener to slit his wrists. Carlyle later explains to therapy group that it would not be his place to say whether or not Hal dies. In Chapter 142, Caden wonders about suicide, and whether or not it is selfish or selfless, bravery or cowardice, if it is a cry for help, or a serious attempt to die. In Chapter 143, Dr. Poirot meets with Caden to talk about Hal's suicide attempt, and to let Caden know he will have a new roommate. Caden blames Poirot for not stopping the attempt, for which Poirot apologizes. Caden considers Poirot dead to him. In Chapter 144, Caden's parents consider transferring Caden to another hospital, but Caden insists on staying. In Chapter 145, the Captain comes to visit Caden in his bunk to tell Caden that it is he who will make the dive to Challenger Deep. The Captain also says the



parrot would never have seen the mission through, or allowed Caden to complete the mission. In Chapter 146, Caden knows the Serpent is stalking them, while Carlyle announces he will no longer be leading the therapy group since Carlyle is being blamed for Hal's actions. Caden is angered, knowing it isn't Carlyle's fault.

In Chapter 147, the new group therapy facilitator, Gladys, takes over things. No one takes warmly toward her even though it is not her fault Carlyle was fired. In Chapter 148, Caden feels depressed because he has not heard anything from Callie, and because so many changes have occurred so quickly. Caden decides to stop taking his medication. In Chapter 149, Caden reveals that after refusing to take medication for a few days, one feels normal before their lingering effects wear off and illness sets in once again. In Chapter 150, Caden knows the Serpent continues to stalk him, and the ship no longer feels magical. Only the Captain and Caden remain on board. They spot a scarecrow in the water, which marks the deepest place in the world. In Chapter 151, Caden prepares to venture into Challenger Deep in the Marianas Trench, though the means to do so has not yet been determined. The greatest treasure ever is expected in the Deep. Caden says he rejects the parrot and all his lies.

In Chapter 152, Caden heads toward the scarecrow in a small rowboat. The scarecrow is composed of his father's hat, his mother's shoe heel, his sister's blue buttons, and so on. Caden questions the scarecrow about venturing to the Deep and returning to the surface, alive, while a storm bears down on the area. The scarecrow will not answer. A whirlpool opens up, into which Caden jumps. In Chapter 153, Caden mourns the fact that he will never get his fifteenth year back, or be able to live it how it was originally meant to be – or if he will be able to live normally beyond it. In Chapter 154, it takes Caden several minutes to fall into Challenger Deep. Below are shipwrecks, gray ooze, and piles of gold and treasure. The ghost of the parrot appears and writes off these piles as only rewards, noting that each trip to the bottom gets deeper. It is then that Caden discovers the gold coins are foil-wrapped chocolate, while the jewels are Ring Pops. Caden then feels himself falling again. In Chapter 155, Caden recalls his vacation in New York where he saw a homeless man sitting with a Cap'n Crunch cereal box on his head, to whom Caden gave chocolate coins from the Hershey store. Caden recalls the man telling him it is good he and his family are taking a taxi, since the subway is "forever down there."

In Chapter 156, the waters and the Serpent close in around Caden, while Caden discovers the puzzle piece of sky in his pocket. Caden realizes the sky wants to be completed more than the depths want to drown him, and begins to rise toward the surface. In Chapter 157, Caden says people are creatures who like things contained in boxes and easily labeled, even if what is in the box is beyond labeling. In Chapter 158 Poirot is checking Caden's vitals and signs, saying Caden has had a brief setback. However, in the last few days, Poirot has seen nothing but upward momentum for Caden. In Chapter 159, the reader learns that no one ever tells Caden about Hal's fate, that Skye's puzzle piece is missing, and that Callie never writes to him. Caden comes to accept he is back in the real world, recovered in a "mental cast." Caden's parents arrive to bring him home, where Mackenzie has purchased a balloon for him. In Chapter 160, the reader learns that Caden was hospitalized for nine weeks, and that it is now the



middle of the summer. Cade now regularly sees a therapist named Dr. Fischel. In Chapter 161, Caden dreams of being on a boardwalk when he encounters the Captain once more, who now mans a yacht. The Captain invites Caden along, saying Caden will be back sooner or later anyway. Caden refuses, saying it will not be today.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, it is revealed that the Captain is representative of the mentally ill homeless man Caden saw in New York years before. The manifestation of the Captain as a pirate came from the Cap'n Crunch cereal box the homeless man wore on his head, and the Captain's assertions that there is no telling how deep the Trench (mental illness) is mirrors the homeless man's warnings about the depth of the subway system. The Captain becomes the trigger and progenitor of the mental illness that Caden faces, with the Captain himself being triggered by the homeless man. It is clear now why the parrot/Poirot is the Captain's enemy: the parrot is battling the Captain, who himself is urging on the Abyssal Serpent (the permanence of Caden's mental illness). The Captain says that the parrot would never have allowed Caden to see the mission – or the descent into permanent illness – through.

However, despite the progress that Caden has made, massive and heartbreaking changes temporarily throw Caden back into unreality. The departure of Callie, the near suicide of Hal, and the firing of Carlyle throw Caden off his game. But based on his treatment, Caden is able to break free of the hold the mental illness has on him. His arrival at the very bottom of the Trench signals the deepest extent to which his mental illness has carried, and he is now rising up to the top of the sea, up to the sky, in a physical metaphor for his recovery: He is emerging from the dark depths of the ocean to the clarity of day. This breakthrough – the return to reality – also means that Caden may leave Seaview and go home with his parents.

The tragedy of Caden's illness also comes in his release from Seaview. Caden, though he is mentally better, must still carry with him the heartache of never knowing Hal's true fate, knowing that Carlyle was unjustly blamed and unfairly fired, and in knowing he will probably never see or hear from Callie again. This is perhaps the most tragic of the changes Caden experiences in recovery, for in the darkest moments of his illness, he found hope and love in Callie, only to have that taken away now that he is better.

As a testament to Caden's treatment, and in the continued pursuit of shattering assumptions and popular images of psychiatric hospitals, Caden's treatment is successful. As with the cleaning and maintaining of the cannon and the avoiding of the Serpent, Caden's recovery in large part depends on his own ability to remain conscious of what is real and where the parameters of his illness rest. Yet, this is also the tragedy of things as well. The cannon can become dirty again, while the Serpent has only been avoided rather than destroyed. This is seen through Caden's encounter of the Captain at a distance. The Captain attempts to entice Caden to return, but Caden is consciously able to refuse – at least for now. The future may be different, but for the time being, Caden is successful in his avoidance of slipping back. He has been treated, but not fully



cured. This will form a struggle for the unforeseeable future, but also means that Caden has a chance to keep ahead of his illness.

Discussion Question 1

Is Caden treated or has Caden been cured? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

What tragedies must Caden confront toward the end of his time at Seaview? How do these affect his recovery? How does he handle these tragedies?

Discussion Question 3

How does Caden remain focused on reality, and his mental clarity especially after he is released? How does he handle the distant reappearance of the Captain?

Vocabulary

spontaneous, bane, heroism, prehensile, fickle, painstaking, infamous, ambivalent, delusional, insubstantial, asymmetrical, noncommittal, oblong, taut, alchemy, jagged, phosphorescent, insubstantial, vestibule, wrath



Characters

Caden Bosch

Caden Bosch is the 15-year-old narrator and principal protagonist of the novel “Challenger Deep” by Neal Shusterman. Caden is, by all accounts, a normal teenager. He has a loving mother and father, a sweet younger sister, and good friends, including Shelby. He does well in school, is athletic and artistic, and well-liked by other students and teachers. But through the course of his sophomore year in high school, Caden succumbs to a never-named mental illness which slowly manifests over time. Caden first loses focus, then the ability to concentrate at all, followed by restlessness and increasing abstraction in his artwork. At the same time, Caden begins to have visions of the Captain, begins to “feel” things around him, stops eating, and becomes paranoid. Caden’s parents ultimately have Caden committed to Seaview Memorial Hospital.

At Seaview, Caden meets with Dr. Poirot, Carylye, and others to undergo treatment. Through therapy and medication, Caden makes progress in recovery as he learns that he can fight to stay lucid. He befriends and falls for Callie, befriends Hal and Carlyle, and looks forward to visits from his parents and his sister. Caden is later devastated when Callie is released, Hal attempts suicide, and Carlyle is fired. Caden, however, is mostly distraught by the fact that he has lost so much time in the hospital, and wants to live as normally as he can. He begins to fight harder to get better, ultimately succeeding and getting released from Seaview. Caden understands, however, that he has only been treated because there is no cure for his illness. Much of his ability to remain grounded in reality will depend on his own efforts to do so.

The Captain

The Captain is the source and harbinger of the mental illness that Caden suffers. The Captain is based on a homeless man wearing a Cap’n Crunch cereal box for a hat in New York Caden encountered while on vacation there. The Captain appears each time Caden loses focus and his mind begins to slip, which occurs more and more frequently until Caden goes over the edge. There, the Captain leads Caden in a journey to the Marianas Trench on a pirate ship populated by mirror images of people and things Caden knows from real life. The Captain continues to drive Caden deeper into his mental illness until Caden is finally able to break away. Thereafter, the Captain continues to haunt the corners of Caden’s mind, hunting for the chance to pull Caden back under into mental illness.

The parrot/Poirot

Dr. Poirot is the psychiatrist in charge of Caden’s unit at Seaview Memorial Hospital, and is seen in mirror image as a security parrot in Caden’s imagined world. The parrot urges Caden to turn against the Captain, just as Poirot urges Caden to do the same.



Poirot oversees Caden's treatment and medicine, working closely with Caden to help him recover. However, Caden comes to be angry with Poirot for not doing more to prevent Hal's suicide attempt, while in the imagined world, Caden kills the parrot.

Calliope/Callie

Callie is a beautiful, gentle African-American girl who is a patient at Seaview Memorial Hospital where she spends most of her days in the Vista Room watching the outside world, for she is afraid it will disappear. Callie is reflected in Caden's dream world as the wooden maiden on the bowsprit, where she assumes the name Calliope. Caden falls in love with Callie in the real world, and Calliope in the dream world. Caden and Callie become almost inseparable and depend upon each other for hope and strength, so when Callie is released before Caden, both are devastated. Caden never hears from Callie again.

Carlyle

Carlyle serves as both a group therapist for Caden and his group at Seaview, and the swabby on the pirate ship in Caden's imagined world. Carlyle is one of the few individuals who remains relatively unchanged in his mirror form in Caden's invented world. Carlyle helps Caden to express himself through his artwork, and to work to mentally challenge the Captain. Carlyle becomes a reliable and trusted friend to Caden, so when Carlyle is unjustly blamed and fired for Hal's attempted suicide, Caden is very angry.

Hal

Hal, short for Harold, is Caden's roommate at Seaview and his bunkmate and ship navigator on the pirate ship in Caden's imagined world. Hal is obsessed with maps, believing they can lead to a deeper truth based on patterns found in them. This is reflected in Hal's mirror image as the navigator in Caden's unreal world. Hal's mother, in real life, is cold and uncaring, and leaves Hal alone at Seaview while she moves to Seattle with her fiancée. This helps propel Hal to attempt suicide by slitting his wrists in real life, and by actually committing suicide in Caden's imagined world.

Caden's mom

Caden's mom is a sweet, gentle woman who is very attentive to her son and daughter, Mackenzie, and to her husband. Caden's mom, along with Caden's father and sister, become very worried about Caden as he loses grip on reality. They ultimately commit Caden to Seaview Memorial Hospital, where they visit him on a daily basis to see about his recovery. Caden's mother and family are thrilled when Caden recovers and can come home.



Caden's dad

Caden's dad is a thoughtful, considerate man who is very attentive to his wife, son, and daughter. Caden's dad is the first to suspect that something might be off with Caden when Caden says he is being threatened by a kid at school whom he has never met or spoken to. Caden's dad, along with his mother, decide to commit Caden to Seaview for treatment, and visit him every day. Caden's dad and family are thrilled when Caden recovers and can come home.

Mackenzie

Mackenzie is the 11-year-old, younger sister of Caden. Mackenzie is a sweet, kind girl who deeply worries for Caden when Caden is stricken with mental illness. Mackenzie visits Caden with her parents at Seaview when Caden has made enough progress not to worry Mackenzie. Mackenzie is thrilled when Caden recovers and can come home, and so purchases a balloon for Caden to celebrate his return.

Shelby

Shelby is Caden's only friend who comes to visit Caden at Seaview. At first, Shelby blames Caden's mental illness as the result of drug use, but later apologizes for having assumed this. She reassures Caden that everything will be okay, and reminds him of the normality of the real world when she tells him she and Max are continuing to work on the video game all three have long been designing.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Marianas Trench

The Marianas Trench, at 6.8 miles in depth, is the deepest place on the planet Earth, and is metaphorical for the illness that Caden has. The Captain argues there is no measuring of the Trench and its depth, just as there is no telling how far Caden's illness will cause him to descend from reality. The Captain and Caden undertake a voyage to the Marianas Trench on a pirate ship in Caden's imagined world. Only upon descending to the bottom of the Trench does Caden begin an ascent to recovery.

Challenger Deep

Challenger Deep, at 6.8 miles in depth, is the deepest part of the Marianas Trench, and metaphorically signifies the deepest extent of Caden's mental illness. Only upon reaching the very bottom of Challenger Deep does Caden come to recognize the first trigger for his mental illness in the homeless man from New York City. It is from Challenger Deep that Caden begins his ascent back to the world of reality.

Medication

Psychoactive medicine is prescribed by Dr. Poirot at Seaview Memorial Hospital for Caden. The drugs are meant to return Caden's brain functions to normal, and to help Caden gather the mental strength to fight his illness. Caden must take multiple pills a day, that slowly but steadily help to break his mental illness. Caden often finds the medicine to be a relief since it calms him and breaks his paranoia apart.

Artwork

Artwork is created by Caden throughout the novel, and is symbolic of his descent into mental illness. Caden's artwork is initially realistic and reasonable, but as his mental state deteriorates, his artwork becomes abstract and nearly uninterpretable. Caden's artwork is a way for him to express the things he feels but cannot put a name to, and helps others around him to recognize Caden's mental illness. Hal describes Caden's artwork as a map of Caden's mental illness.

Art supplies

Art supplies is used by Caden to create artwork, and symbolize a return to normalcy when he is allowed to use them at Seaview. Caden continues to use the art supplies, such as pencils, markers, and pens, to create the artwork to express himself.



Unfortunately, Hal gets hold of Caden's pencil sharpener, and removes its blade in order to attempt suicide by using the blade to slit his wrists.

Donation

A donation funnel is used by Caden at the mall, and serves as a reflective symbol of his descent into mental illness. A coin is deposited at the top of the donation funnel, where it then rolls about repeatedly until it drops into a dark hole where it is deposited and disappears from view. Caden feels like the coins that are spiraling out of control toward an unknown darkness, which is his own mental illness.

Cannon

A cannon on the pirate ship is ordered to be cleaned by Caden, and symbolizes Caden's own mind. Only Caden is able to get into the cannon in the dream world to clean it, just as only Caden is really able to get into his own mind to understand it. Caden's cleaning of the cannon becomes symbolic of Caden's cleaning of his own mind. This occurs while Caden is taking great strides in his recovery.

Abyssal Serpent

The Abyssal Serpent is the monstrous manifestation of Caden's mental illness, and represents permanence. The Serpent stalks Caden throughout the course of the novel, with Caden understanding that the Serpent catching him will mean no escape from the mental illness from which he suffers. Such an illness will become permanent. Caden manages to avoid the Serpent, but does not actually defeat the Serpent. The same is true of his mental illness. He is able to break free of it, but not to totally defeat it.

Scarecrow

A scarecrow marks the edge of the Marianas Trench, and is essentially a strawman effort and warning to keep Caden away from the depths of his emotional illness. The scarecrow is composed of his family's clothing, symbolizing the things which Caden will leave behind if he cannot emerge from the depths. Caden speaks to the scarecrow about successfully entering and returning from the depths, but the scarecrow has nothing to say to this effect. Caden then uses the pole on which the scarecrow is suspended to reach the bottom of the Trench.

Puzzle piece

A puzzle piece with part of an illustration of the sky is given to Caden by Skye at Seaview as a way to remember the sky will not go away, while it later becomes symbolic of the one missing piece of Caden's mental illness puzzle – the Captain.



Caden uses the sky piece to return him to the light of day from the depths of the Marianas Trench after learning the Captain is reflective of a homeless man Caden encountered in New York City. With the final piece of Caden's own puzzle in place, he is able to rise up from his mental illness.



Settings

Seaview Memorial Hospital

Seaview Memorial Hospital is a psychiatric healthcare facility at which Caden spends nine weeks through the course of the novel. Caden is committed to Seaview by his parents when they learn that their son has a serious mental illness that requires intensive treatment. At Seaview, Caden is given a room with Hal while undergoing group therapy with Carlyle and one-on-one treatment with Dr. Poirot. Caden successfully manages to fight his mental illness at Seaview, though the road is long and difficult. Caden endures great losses at Seaview, such as when Hal attempts suicide and Callie is discharged before Caden is. Caden's parents, meanwhile, visit Caden on a daily basis to see how he is doing and how he is feeling. When Caden is treated successfully, he is released from Seaview to return home.

The Vista Room

The Vista Room is a room with a beautiful view at Seaview Memorial Hospital. The Vista Room is where Callie spends most of her time looking out through the window, afraid the world will disappear if she stops looking. Caden comes to spend much of his free time there with Callie as the two fall for one another. Caden, in addition to simply being with Callie, spends much of his time drawing while in the Vista Room as well. Between Callie and art, the Vista Room comes to represent peace and safety for Caden.

Dreams

Dreams – some influenced by reality, some influenced by mental illness, and some influenced by both – become a setting in and of themselves in the novel as a place of reality for Caden. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether Caden is dreaming or not because of the blurring of reality with the imagined due to mental illness, and due to Caden sleeping so much because of his medication. For example, Caden's dream of the White Kitchen turns out later not to be a dream at all, while his dream of turning into a larva while the parrot gives him a sleeping fluid shot is a dream, while Caden's dream of being on the beach with his family is clearly a recognized dream by Caden.

Imagined Reality

Caden's mental illness causes an imagined world in which Caden is taken on a pirate ship by the mysterious Captain. Caden's imagined world is a place of reality for Caden, for the place – though it does not exist in the real world – exists in Caden's mind. There, mirror images of real-life people and things appear – such as the parrot standing in for Poirot and Calliope standing in for Callie, while runaway brains stand in for mental illness and the Abyssal Serpent stands in for the permanence of Caden's mental illness.



It is in the imagined world that Caden travels to the bottom of the Marianas Trench and then ascends to break free of the imagined world.

Reality

Reality – the actual world that exists beyond Caden’s dreams and imagined world of his mental illness – is a setting for the novel where Caden is not affected by his illness. There, his parents, sister, friends, and school exist in a normal, calm, and peaceful way. Caden recognizes that he often exists between the real world and his imagined world, and longs desperately to stay in the place he understands is reality. As Caden descends into mental illness, his moments of clarity in, and consciousness of the real world becomes increasingly diminished, whereas while he recovers, Caden’s awareness of, and clarity in the real world increasingly improves. Caden eventually decides to fight to return to reality through treatment and medicine, and is ultimately successful.



Themes and Motifs

Mental illness as a means to discuss truth and reality

Neal Shusterman uses mental illness as a means to discuss truth and reality in his book *Challenger Deep*. The focus of the novel consists of Caden's struggles with mental illness, but enough information is given so that readers are aware of the struggles of others struggling with mental illness as well. Those suffering from mental illness are often unable to distinguish reality from imagined reality, but this does not mean that what they perceive as reality is not to some degree real or true.

Much of Caden's imagined reality stemming from his mental illness assumes portions of actual reality. There, Caden's mind warps what reality is to its most basic levels, often through metaphor. For example, the African-American Callie becomes the wooden bowsprit maiden, Calliope, where her genetic coldness and always looking away from the others is manifested in her wooden state and position on the front of the ship. While the entire existence of Callie as Calliope is not real, the characteristics of Calliope are indeed real. The mind has seized upon determining and essential characteristics to make what is real an imagined real in its own way.

Truth can be found in other places even in the midst of mental illness. The reader should consider that Hal's observation that Caden's artwork is a map is not mere chatter. Instead, it is truth as Caden uses his artwork to express the things he feels which do not have names, and in effect forms a map of his mental illness. When Skye gives Caden a piece of the sky from her puzzle, her intent is to provide reassurance, but she – knowingly or unknowingly – provides the final key and missing puzzle piece to Caden's mental illness later in the novel.

When one is mentally ill, one has little of anything, if anything at all. This is clearly the case of Caden, who has only moments of clarity which ultimately bring him to Callie. The love the two come to share is the only things either of them truly carry with them through and out of *Seaview*. Everything that exists in reality – school, careers, money, cars, vacations, television shows, technology – all takes a backseat to simple human truths, such as that love is more important than anything else. In their mental illness, Caden and Callie find love, and therefore find that simple, inarguable truth.

The fluidity of reality

Neal Shusterman argues that reality is a fluid thing in his book *Challenger Deep*. Essentially, the consideration of what is real and unreal, what is true and what is imagined, is constantly undertaken in the novel. Much of this comes through the presentation of Caden's mental illness, but much of it also comes through simple reality and dreaming. Often, what is considered to be unreal contains elements of truth, and reality and unreality are difficult to determine. Because they blur together, they are fluid.



Reality is something that exists, but in the novel, the things that exist in Caden's mind through his mental illness may be said to be real because they exist even if only in his mind. Because Caden's mind has reasoned such things out, it is difficult for Caden to differentiate between truth and the imagined. For example, Caden's difficulties in concentrating at night often lead to the appearance of the Captain, an invention of his mind that is manifested in the real world – a blurring together, or fluidity, of the real and the imagined. Likewise, as another example from later in the novel, Carlyle appears working in his office on a laptop while also being present on board the pirate ship in Caden's imagined world.

Likewise, what Caden considers to be dreams – such as the dream where he is in a sparkling white room, or where he is being administered a sleeping fluid – turn out to be real, and not dreams at all. At the same time, Caden is only able to distinguish a genuine dream as a genuine dream after he is able to reflect on it – such as the dream Caden has where he is on vacation with his family at the shore. In other places, what Caden perceives to be real as a result of his mental illness interferes with his dreams, such as when Caden encounters the now yacht-sailing Captain at the end of the novel.

Interestingly enough, Caden understands that he stands between two worlds – reality, and the imagined world of his mental illness. Yet because the imagined world exists in his mind, Caden participates in it as though it was actually real, rather than imagined real. In a sense, this imagined world actually becomes real to Caden, making his break with actual reality that much more dramatic and stark. Yet it is through Caden's perceived reality that those in the real world – such as Carlyle and Poirot – seek to work to bring Caden out of perceived reality, and back into actual reality. Here, the blurring and fluidity of the real and the imagined is at its greatest extent as Caden must consciously decide that what is real is not actually real, and that what is actually real is what is actually real.

Faith as a way to see higher meaning and purpose in difficult circumstances

Faith is presented as a way to see higher meaning and purpose in difficult circumstances in Neal Shusterman's novel *Challenger Deep*. Faith, which involves the belief in a higher power, is of subtle presence but immense importance to many of the characters in the novel, particularly Skye and Caden. Faith forms a point of strength and reflection for Caden, as well as a reason to struggle against his mental illness.

Caden's early considerations of the universe, and what is true and real, leads him to the idea that maybe even God has psychotic episodes where He loses touch with reality. Caden presents the story of a woman who drowned in an elevator as it descended to the ground floor following a water main break. Here, Caden's belief in God's goodness is revealed in that there must be a serious reason for such a terrible thing to have happened to someone.



The idea that everything happens for a reason in accordance with God's plan is given vocal support by Skye. Skye explains that she believes that God never gives people anything they cannot handle. For Skye, her mental illness is less a test to live up to expectations than a challenge to be overcome for an important reason. Her unwavering faith in God helps to inspire the other patients to look to God for help and strength as well.

Caden himself not only believes in the goodness of God, but believes that situations like mental illness are not God's way of testing or challenging people. Rather, they are simply the possible price to pay for being human – and that God gives them the strength to get through such trials and challenges. Caden comes to rely on God for some of the strength to get through his own mental illness, and succeeds in large part due to the value of his faith.

Mental illness as tragedy

Neal Shusterman presents the idea that the effects of mental illness are more often tragic than terrifying in his novel *Challenger Deep*. Caden himself explains that his mental illness is at times glorious, but also at other times, terrifying – primarily because he doesn't know just what will happen next. While mental illness is indeed a terrifying thing, the idea that it is even more tragedy than terror is prevalent.

Caden understands that most of his fifteenth year is gone forever, thanks to mental illness. He will never be able to get that time back to live as a normal kid. Having lost so much time and the chance to live normally deeply troubles and hurts Caden. Caden's parents must not only wait in tragic anguish as Caden struggles to recover, but Caden's own recovery is a thing of tragedy as he tries so hard – and often fails early on – to determine what is real and what is not. Caden, however, is blessed to have such supportive parents. Hal undergoes his own tragedy when his uncaring mother decides to move without him, leaving him behind at the hospital for good.

The tragedy continues with Caden and with Hal. Hal's mental illness is tragic because he is looking for patterns and answers in maps which he will never find – tragic irony in being unable to find something using a map. Caden's mental illness has, tragically, driven away all but one of his friends. Teenagers often thrive in social groups and among friends, but now Caden is without his normal friends. He instead befriends those around him, such as Hal – who tragically attempts suicide and is taken out of the hospital for good.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy endured by Caden comes not in what he has lost because of his mental illness, but because of what he will lose without it. It is only because of his mental illness that Caden and Callie meet one another in the first place. The two come to love one another, to draw strength from one another, and to give each other hope. Yet, when Callie is treated, she is released from the hospital. Caden soon follows. Without their mental illness to keep them together, Caden and Callie are forced apart. Callie never gets in contact with Caden, so Caden, tragically, never sees her again.



Challenge of the stereotypes and assumptions about mental illness treatment

In *Challenger Deep*, Neal Shusterman directly challenges the stereotypes and assumptions about mental illness treatment, and those who undergo or conduct it. In the popular mind, psychiatric hospitals are cold places full of cruel people who provide only marginal care, if it can be called care at all. Likewise, patients are seen as being pumped full of medicine that is not needed, and does nothing to actually treat the illnesses the patients are under. In Shusterman's book, nothing could be further from the truth.

Seaview Memorial Hospital is a warm, friendly place where the parents and loved ones of patients visit regularly, if not daily as in the case of Caden's parents. True, patients are given heavy doses of medication, but these medicines are very much needed. Caden, who at first considers the medications to be brewed by witches, later comes to admit they are helping him by calming him, clearing his mind, and eliminating his paranoia. This, says Dr. Poirot, is not an exact science, but is something which gets better and more accurate each year as the human brain is better understood.

At the same time, those who care for the patients at Seaview really do care. They have to in order to have earned the trust of people like Caden, who comes to trust Carlyle implicitly. When Carlyle is fired, Caden is enraged by this because the firing is not only unjust, but takes away someone who has provided excellent care for so many people. Carlyle himself also breaks the stereotype by serving as an actual therapist, rather than someone who only prescribes medicine. Carlyle urges his group members to express themselves in ways that have nothing to do with medication, which helps people like Caden to be able to function outside of medication.

Additionally, stereotypes about the patients themselves are challenged and done away with. For example, Shelby incorrectly assumes Caden is on drugs rather than considering he might be mentally ill, something which many perceive about such people. Shelby later apologizes for this assumption. The idea that mental patients are almost always simply unable to function at all is also disproven, as people like Caden and Hal can still function, even if their understanding of reality is not quite whole. Additionally, the idea that all mentally-ill people are cured is also disproven, as they may have successful treatments that ultimately fail and result in relapses.

Styles

Point of View

Neal Shusterman tells his novel *Challenger Deep* in the first-person, limited-omniscient narrative mode from the point of view of the main character, Caden Bosch. Because mental illness is such a personal struggle that those around the afflicted individual do not completely understand, Shusterman allows Caden to tell his own story. This gives readers a personal, firsthand look at mental illness, at the difficulty Caden faces in determining realities, and how Caden struggles to recover and beat his mental illness. It also creates a deeper understanding of such things as Caden's thoughts and feelings are displayed for the reader as though Caden were confiding to a journal or a personal friend. Likewise, given Caden's straddling of multiple realities because of his mental illness, the limited-omniscient aspect of the narrative means that Caden sometimes does something in the real world and in imagined reality of which he is not aware in the other, underscoring some of the challenges he faces in mental illness. This works in hand with both the language used, and the way the novel is divided.

Language and Meaning

Neal Shusterman tells his novel *Challenger Deep* in language that is simple, straightforward, and often in fragmented sentences. The simple and straightforward language is indicative of Caden's characterization as a 15-year-old, reflecting both his age and level of education. It also helps to make possible the fragmented nature of the actual construction of the prose. Consider Caden's statement from Chapter 94 about Caden's struggle to recover at the hospital: "You've begun to notice, though, that bit by bit the sense of being outside of yourself has diminished with each passing day... Just one. Just you. Just an individual. Me." Or consider Callie's statement about recovery from Chapter 106: "But if we endure it... I will find myself as I was before. We do, you know. Find ourselves. Although it's a little harder each time... Then we squeeze ourselves back into the skin of who were before all this. We put the pieces back together and get on with things." The fragmented language and incomplete sentences are reflective of the inability of those suffering from mental illness to sometimes form coherent thoughts or ideas grounded in reality. Just as the sentence is not all there even though the idea or truth is apparent, so too is the fragment of truth found in the incomplete thoughts of those suffering.

Structure

Neal Shusterman divides his novel *Challenger Deep* into 161 numbered, achronological chapters. Almost every chapter is very short, often numbering no more than a few paragraphs in length. Other chapters are incredibly short, lasting only a few sentences. Likewise, the chapters themselves leap back and forth through time between the past



and the present, and between reality, the imagined world of mental illness, and dreams. The short, episodic nature of the chapters is reflective of the episodes those suffering from mental illness may have – recalling clear, real memories, engaging in real experiences, dreaming, or experiencing breaks from reality – all of which can occur frequently, without warning, and may last moments or weeks. This challenges the reader to keep up with what is real, imagined, and a dream – much the way that Caden himself struggles to keep up with such things. This gives readers a firsthand look at mental illness, but also provides a sense of realism to Caden's mental illness.



Quotes

There are two things you know. One: You were there. Two: You couldn't have been there.

-- Caden (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: Caden understands that he is both a matter of reality, and losing grip on reality. He understands that there is a real world, and that there is another world that is real to him in his mind, but real to no one else. It is when he loses focus, is unable to concentrate, and unable to recall details that the Captain always appears to him – a Captain no one else can see.

There's no telling how far down it goes...

-- The Captain (Chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: The Captain and Caden converse about the Marianas Trench. The Captain says that the depths of the Trench cannot be known or measured, even though Caden says the depths have been measured. The Captain argues that anyone who says he has seen the bottom is a liar, and that there is no telling how far down the Trench goes. Here, the Marianas Trench is metaphorical for the mental illness that Caden has. Just as the Captain says there is no measuring of the trench, and that it is "forever down there," so too is the same for Caden's illness. There is no telling when it will end, and how far deep into it Caden will go.

The particulars change each time, just enough that I can't predict the outcome of the dream. If it was the same, at least I would know what to expect – and if I knew, I'd be able to brace myself for the worst of it.

-- Caden (Chapter 10 paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, Caden speaks not only of the nightly visits he has in the White Plastic Kitchen, but the illness which plagues him as well. Each break with reality is different, just as his dreams are different. He never knows what to expect, and this is one of the tragedies of his illness. Sometimes he seems like a ghost, while at other times, he is on a pirate ship.

Indeed, nothing awful is without its beautiful side.

-- The Captain (Chapter 11 paragraph 3)

Importance: While the Captain here speaks of the disgusting-smelling pitch in the bowels of the ship being beautiful because it helps to keep the ship afloat, his words also have a deeper meaning. The Captain refers to Caden's illness, which can be both heartbreaking and terrifying, but can also be a beautiful thing as Caden exists in a world not bound by the rules of reality. Even Caden's illness has its beautiful side.

My feet are on safe, solid ground, but that's just an illusion.

-- Caden (Chapter 13 paragraph 13)



Importance: Here, Caden stands in the middle of his living room floor and realizes that the more deeply he thinks about something, the more he can feel it. The more he can feel it, the more he realizes nothing is what it appears to be. Reality for Caden is split between mental health and mental illness; and the safe, solid ground he thinks he stands on may not be the safe, solid ground he thinks it is at all.

What do I see when I close my eyes? Sometimes there is darkness there 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.

-- Caden (Chapter 65 paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, Caden describes the experiences he has. His mental illness sometimes makes him feel terrified. Other times, it makes him feel happy and hopeful, and like he can fly. It is torment to Caden to know that he can never predict what his departure from reality might be like. This demonstrates Caden's emotional range as well, further complicating his illness.

Consciousness is a relative concept when you're pumped full of psychoactive meds.

-- Caden (Chapter 79 paragraph 1)

Importance: When Caden is first admitted to Seaview, the doctors pump him full of meds that leave him feeling disoriented and as though he is halfway between sleep and being awake. Because of this, Caden feels as if he is everywhere and nowhere, and has lost all grasp not only of reality, but his own mental world as well. Here, the process begins where the doctors attempt to separate Caden from his realities so that they might treat him.

Today you are in a hospital. Or at least this morning. This hour. This minute. Where you'll be three minutes from now is anyone's guess.

-- Caden (Chapter 94 paragraph 1)

Importance: As the medicine and therapy begin to work, Caden comes to realize that he is in a hospital. He recognizes that he is now, at least for the moment, grounded in reality. Everything, for a brief moment, makes sense again. It is as if he is slowly beginning to emerge from the depths of his mind where he has been lost. However, Caden frequently slips in his struggle to recovery, and returns to the depths though he comes up for air – to reality – more often than before.

You've begun to notice, though, that bit by bit the sense of being outside of yourself has diminished with each passing day... Just one. Just you. Just an individual. Me.

-- Caden (Chapter 94 paragraph 1)

Importance: As the medicine and therapy continue to work, Caden comes to recognize not only that he is in a hospital, but that his periods of mental clarity make him realize he is one with himself again. He no longer exists outside himself, but within himself as he should. He recognizes he is only one person, and does not exist in multiple places. This



is proof that Caden's mental illness is not permanent, and with work, Caden may yet recover.

But if we endure it... I will find myself as I was before. We do, you know. Find ourselves. Although it's a little harder each time... Then we squeeze ourselves back into the skin of who were before all this. We put the pieces back together and get on with things.

-- Callie (Chapter 106 paragraph 26)

Importance: Callie confirms that it is possible to put oneself back together again while speaking with Caden. She says it is hard work, and is done only bit by bit, but it can be done. Each time one falls apart, however, it is more difficult to get back together again. It is clear that Callie has been through such regressions before, and is once again on her way back to reality.

I hurt. I hurt everywhere – and I know I'm going to die this way. My body, on the ship, will go through the motions of living, but I will be gone.

-- Caden (Chapter 116 paragraph 11)

Importance: Caden relapses and loses grip of reality. Even in his mind-altered state, he recognizes that he has relapsed. He fears that he will live out the rest of his life in such a fashion – that his body will exist, but his mind will be gone. It is something that Caden cannot handle, and does not know how to respond to.

Maybe... Probably... But not today.

-- Caden (Chapter 161 paragraph 19)

Importance: As Caden returns home, the illness he has preys about the corners of his mind. The Captain returns to entice Caden to come back, to descend to the depths once more, but Caden refuses. Caden knows it may happen again someday, but tells the Captain it will not be that day. At least in the present, Caden is in control of his own mind and consciousness.