

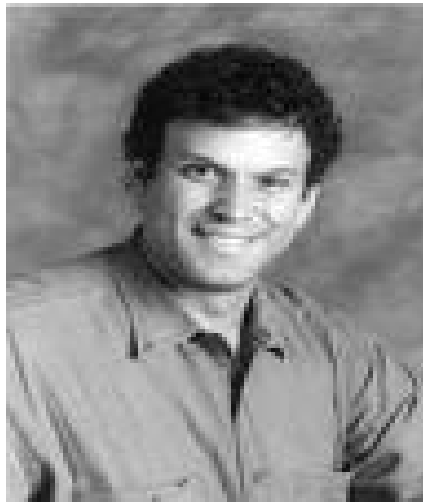
YHBA NOVEL RESOURCE #2

THE SCHWA WAS HERE

By
Neal Shusterman

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Neal Shusterman was born in 1962. He was raised in Brooklyn, New York, but he now lives in Orange County, California, with his four children. Even as a youngster he would rather write than play outside. Shortly after graduating from college, his humor college was syndicated, making him the youngest syndicated columnist.

Mr. Shusterman is a successful writer, screenwriter and television writer. He has received critical acclaim for his work, which also includes stage plays, musicals, and mystery games.

He is also recognized as a “Master Storyteller.” Mr. Shusterman enjoys speaking before large groups and, especially, school groups. In fact, he

thought of the idea for *The Schwa was Here* while speaking to a school group in their library. The media specialist mentioned that a young man had had his hand up during the entire talk, and Mr. Shusterman hadn't even noticed him. Thus, Calvin Schwa was born.

Neal Shusterman has degrees in both drama and psychology giving him a unique perspective to writing. His novels appeal to adults and teens. He weaves true-to-life characters, issues and, sometimes, out-of-this-world situations with a unique sense of humor.

Mr. Shusterman does not publish his email or snail mail address, but his web page address is: <http://www.storyman.com>

Mr. Shusterman has also written the following:

Full Tilt
The Shadow Club
The Shadow Club Rising
Downsiders,
The Dark Side of Nowhere
The Scorpion Shards Trilogy
What Daddy Did
The Eyes of Kid Midas
Dissidents
Speeding Bullet
MindQuakes
MindStorms

The Schwa was Here is most often listed in the contemporary fiction genre. However, some critics list it in the 'none-of-the-above' category, saying that it is unusual enough not to be labeled!

If you like *The Schwa was Here*, you'll like *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli and *The Woman in the Wall* by Patrice Kindl.

People who have bought *The Schwa was Here* have recommended Shusterman's books *The Eyes of Kid Midas* and *The Shadow Club*.

The Reading Level is 5.8 and the Interest Level: ages 8 and up.

BOOKTALK

The Schwa was Here

Have you ever been sitting in a classroom and suddenly realized that you have never noticed the kid sitting next to you? And it is November!! This is known as “The Schwa Effect.” Eighth-grader Anthony Bonano (Antsy, to his friends) was the first to recognize and define Calvin Schwa as functionally invisible.

Antsy, Calvin and a few friends test the theory of invisibility. The friends dress Calvin in outlandish outfits and put him in the middle of the boys’ bathroom to see if anyone notices. They don’t. They boys send him into the front of crowded rooms to see if anyone notices. They don’t. On a promising lucrative bet, Calvin sneaks into grumpy Mr. Crawley’s apartment to steal a dog dish. There were two problems: the dog dishes were nailed to the floor, and Mr. Crawley noticed.

Thus begins an uneasy relationship between Calvin, Antsy and Mr. Crawley. Mr. Crawley’s blind granddaughter, Lexie, comes to visit and Mr. Crawley hires Antsy to “date” her, and Calvin develops a crush on her.

Throughout this book we meet typical New York teenagers, colorful characters and neighbors, and we learn disturbing information about the Schwa’s home life. Is Calvin invisible or just unnoticed?

Antsy has one friend who cannot see and one who cannot be seen. He is witty and imperfect, but his loyalty to all of his friends is touching. Find out the answer to the mystery of what really happened to Calvin’s mother!

ANNOTATION

The Schwa was Here

Neal Shusterman has a knack for taking seemingly normal characters and putting them in bizarre situations and still tells a believable tale. He uses vivid characters, the illogical scheming by teenagers, and witty chapter headings to keep the reader wanting to know what will happen next.

Calvin Schwa is invisible, or is he? He is certainly unnoticed. Anthony Bonano (Antsy, to his friends) is the middle child who sometimes feels unnoticed. Antsy decides to help the Schwa find out what really happened to his mother, but then wonders if some secrets should be kept secret.

Antsy is an imperfect narrator whose witty observations of life in his Italian family in Brooklyn make him an endearing character. There are subplots about an indestructible test dummy, a grumpy old man and his blind granddaughter, and the mystery of the Schwa's mother.

Readers may forget Calvin (after all, everybody does), but Mr. Shusterman has written a book that will NOT be forgotten.

CHARACTERS

The Schwa was Here

Anthony (Antsy) Bonano – He is a 14 year-old, middle child in an Italian family in Brooklyn. He narrates his story about a friend who has unique character traits. Antsy often struggles with recognition in his own family. He is witty and has unusual observations about the world.

Anthony is the narrator for the story. It is told in first person point-of-view.

Calvin Schwa – Webster says “a schwa is a diacritic marking silence instead of a vowel sound.” Calvin is appropriately named. His mother disappeared from the frozen food section of the grocery store when Calvin was five. The Schwa fears that he will just fade away someday, and no one will notice. Calvin test “The Schwa Effect,” and make a little money by taking dares until they try a stunt that almost gets them arrested. Calvin is a classmate of Antsy. He is also fourteen.

Mr. Crawley – Mr. Crawley is a grumpy, old man who lives above his restaurant in a darkened apartment. He is a recluse, and his only companions are his fourteen Afghans who are names after the sins and virtues. He “blackmails” the boys into being his dog walkers, and he continues his enforced servitude when his granddaughter comes to stay with him.

Lexie – Lexie is blind. She “sees” better than most sighted people but now as well as she thinks she does. She objects to her grandfather hiring someone to be her companion, but she genuinely learns to care for both Calvin and Antsy. She is the same age range of the boys.

The Bonano Family – Antsy’s mother, father, sixteen year-old brother, and twelve year-old sister are a typical Brooklyn family where the parents argue, the siblings ignore each other, and Antsy sometimes feels ignored.

CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

The Schwa were Here

Calvin and Antsy both exhibit internal conflict while they search for their own recognizable identity.

The conflict in Mr. Shusterman's novel deals with Calvin's sense of identity and the degree to which he would make himself recognized and validated. Is Calvin destined to just disappear like his mother did? Will he just fade away and be forgotten by all those who know him?

As Antsy and Calvin test "the Schwa effect" by performing several experiments, they get bolder (and richer) and emboldened to try more outrageous stunts. They get caught and are punished by one of their victims.

Antsy learns more about Calvin's home life and realizes that Mr. Schwa doesn't remember his son most of the time. Antsy and Lexie decide to find out what really happened to Calvin's mother. The answer is painful, but Calvin uses that information to confront his father and make a new life for himself. Antsy decides to leave messages all over his neighborhood, and others, even strangers, continue the message. Soon, the whole world will know that *The Schwa was Here!*

READ-ALOUD PASSAGES

The Schwa was Here

This is the first time Antsy and some friends notice Calvin. He has been in sight, but he has always been unnoticed..

Chapter 1, pages 6 and 7

“ ‘Don’t I know you?’ I asked the kid. I took a good look at him. His hair was kinda ashen blond – real wispy, like if you held a magnetized balloon over his head, all his hair would stand on end. He was about a head shorter than me; a little too thin. Other than that, there was nothing remarkable about him, nothing at all. He wasn’t good-looking; he wasn’t ugly; he wasn’t buff and he wasn’t scrawny. He was just, like, average. Like if you looked up “kid” in the dictionary, his face would be there

‘I’m in some class with you, right?’ I asked him.

‘Science,’ he said. ‘I sit next to you in science.’

‘Oh, yeah, that’s right. Now I remember.’ Although for the life of me, I have no memory of him sitting next to me.

‘I’m Calvin,’ he said. ‘Calvin Schwa.’

Ira took a step back.”

The Schwa and Antsy have been caught in Mr. Crawley’s apartment. He is ready to pronounce their punishment.

Chapter 6, pages 56 - 58

“ ‘Mr. Crawley, those boys are here,’ the maitre d’oorman said as he knocked. Barking and the pounding of paws followed. Then all I could hear. Then I could hear all the bolts sliding open on the other side, and Crawley pulled open the door while blocking the escape of the dogs with his wheelchair.

‘You’re five minutes early,’ he said, the tone in his voice like we were half an hour late.

We stepped in, he pushed the door closed behind us, a dog yelped because his nose got caught in the door for an instant, and there we were.

Crawley reached into the pocket of his fancy robe – a dinner jacket, I think it’s called. The kind of thing Professor Plum would wear before killing Colonel Mustard in the ballroom with the candlestick. From the pocket he pulled a few doggie treats and hurled them over his shoulder so the dogs would leave us alone.

‘I’ve decided to sentence the two of you to twelve weeks of community service,’ he said. ‘Mr. Bonano, from this day forward, you shall be responsible for the sins. You, Mr. Schwa, will be responsible for the virtues. Take all the time you need each day, but by no means are you to complete the task any earlier than five PM. Now get to it.’

I looked at the Schwa, and the Schwa looked at me. I felt like I had just been called up to the board to explain an Einstein theory, but I don’t think Einstein could figure this one out, even if he was alive.

‘Why are you staring like imbeciles? Didn’t you hear me?’

‘Yeah, we heard you,’ I said. ‘Sins and virtues. Now would you mind speaking in English that people who aren’t , like, ninety years old can understand.?’

He scowled at us. He was really good at that. Then he spoke, very slowly, as if to morons. ‘The seven virtues and the seven deadly sins. *Comprendo?*’

‘*Oigo,*’ I said, ‘*pero no comprendo.*’ I hear, but I don’t understand. At last my two years of Spanish had paid off! It was worth it for the surprised look on Crawley’s face – to see that, as Howie would put it, I was only half the moron he thought I was.

‘Great,’ mumbled the Schwa. ‘Now he’s really gonna be pissed off.’

But instead of saying anything, Crawley put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. All the dogs came running.

As they crowded around him, jockeying for position, he touched each of them on the head and announced: ‘Prudence, Temperance, Justice,

Fortitude, Faith, Hope, and Charity.’ He took a breath, then continued, ‘Envy, Sloth, Anger, Lust, Gluttony, Pride, and Avarice. Do you understand now, or shall I get you a translator?’

‘You want each of us to walk seven dogs each, every day?’

‘Gold star for you.’

Crawley peered at me, but I just returned his unpleasant gaze. ‘Why not Greed?’ I asked.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Avarice is Greed, right? That’s the way I learned the seven deadly sins. So why not just name the dog Greed?’

‘Don’t you know anything?’ Crawley growled. ‘Avarice is a much better name for a dog.’

He spun his wheelchair and rolled into the deepest recesses of his apartment. ‘Leashes are hanging in the kitchen’ And then he was gone.”

THEME

The themes that run throughout this novel are friendship and self-perception.

KLIATT critic Paula Rohrlick refers to this novel as an *ode to friendship*. Two boys from quite different home situations find common ground while each seeks his identity. Calvin Schwa is lonely and easily forgettable, assuming he was noticed in the first place. Anthony Bonano is the middle child in a loud Italian family, but is still seeking his own place in his community. Their friendship and mutual struggle for self-perception makes for an interesting novel.

SETTING

The setting is in Brooklyn, New York. The story takes place in contemporary or modern-day time. (Early 2000’s)