

## **Downsiders**

by Neal Shusterman

(Simon and Shuster Reading Group Guide)

### **About the Book**

Below the city, in secret tunnels and cavernous spaces unknown to all but those who live there, is a place called the Downside — a tight-knit society several thousand strong. Talon Angler, a boy who lives in this underground world, has learned from his elders to shun the Topside — the world aboveground that we all know — yet Talon is somehow drawn to this world of light. When he accidentally meets Lindsay Matthias, a girl from a broken home, unhappy with the trajectory of her own life, it changes both of their worlds in ways neither of them could predict.

### **Discussion Topics**

- Talon and his friends Gutta and Railborn all catch glimpses of the Topside. Why do you think Talon is the only one so entranced by the Topside world he sees?\_
- The legend and lore of the Downsiders (for example, “if you see the sun, you’ll go blind”) is really designed to keep the young people in line. Can you think of any myths we have that regulate the behavior of young people?\_
- The Downsiders’ prejudices and misinformation about us help us see our own prejudices about others more clearly. What are some of the prejudices we carry around that we normally wouldn’t question? What myths do we believe about other peoples and cultures?\_
- Talon has three main sources of information about the Topside: brief glimpses through the grates, old tales of his people, and the ramblings of the Champ. How trustworthy are these sources? What are your main sources of information? How trustworthy are they?\_
- Compare the tight family units of the Downsiders with the absent parents in Lindsay’s life. How do you think these family dynamics affect the events of the story?\_
- The novel is a double “fish out of water” story: Talon in the Topside, and Lindsay in the Downside. What are some of the things they see and experience? How do they react? How does this change them? In what way are their experiences similar? In what way are they different?\_
- In the Downside, the people use socks as currency. This seems absurd, but is it really any sillier than using pieces of paper as money?\_
- Whatever your parents do in the Downside world is what you will do — in other words, there is no social mobility. How would you feel if you had to make your career the same as your mother’s or father’s?\_
- Imagine a visit you might take to the Downside. How do you think you’d feel about what you experience there?\_
- The Wise Advisors decide to make an example of Talon for his “crime.” From their point of view, and giving their goal of keeping control of their way of life, do you think it was the right thing to do?\_
- When Lindsay tells Talon how the Downside came to be, thinking this information will help him, it ends up nearly shattering his world. Even though it was painful, Talon ultimately feels a new sense of purpose. Do you think Lindsay did the right thing — that the truth did set Talon free? Or was there another way she could have handled it?\_
- The Wise Advisors manipulate Railborn, giving him what he wants in order to get what they want. How could you tell if you were being manipulated? Who do you think might be interested in manipulating you?\_
- The people of the Downside don’t believe Talon when he returns from his journey to the Topside and describes the vastness of our world. How would you convince someone of something that seems unbelievable? What ways would you find to address someone’s preconceived notions? What proof do you think would satisfy most objections?\_

### Summary Analysis

Website: <http://calyoda.ho8.com/match/pdfs/Downsiders.pdf>

- 1) Read the plot summary. Is there anything you would add or take out from this summary? If so, what?
- 2) According to this handout, the conflict is man vs man. Do you agree?

### Review a Review

Website: <http://lookingglassreview.com/books/downsiders>

- 3) Read the review. Do you agree with the review? Is there anything you would add or take out from this summary?
- 4) "The story explores the idea that the truth must be faced and accepted even when it is painful." What truth do the main characters face in the novel: Talon, Lindsay, Railborn, Gutta, and The Champ?

### A Student Review

Website: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/s/neal-shusterman/downsiders.htm>

- 5) "They also encrust the tunnel walls and dress themselves with the debris." What kind of debris do the downsiders dress in? Why do they do this?
- 6) "It's a story about what happens when cultures clash, about how our cultural identities and worldviews are shaped, about prejudice, creativity, and hope." What two cultures clash in the novel?
- 7) How is prejudice a theme on the novel? Provide an example from the text.
- 8) How is creativity a theme in the novel? Provide an example from the text.
- 9) How is hope a theme in the novel? Provide an example from the text.
- 10) Explain this quote: "Psychologically, each of them shatters and dies in the commotion that builds around them."

### Another Student's Take

<http://haleysdownsidersproject.wordpress.com/places/>