



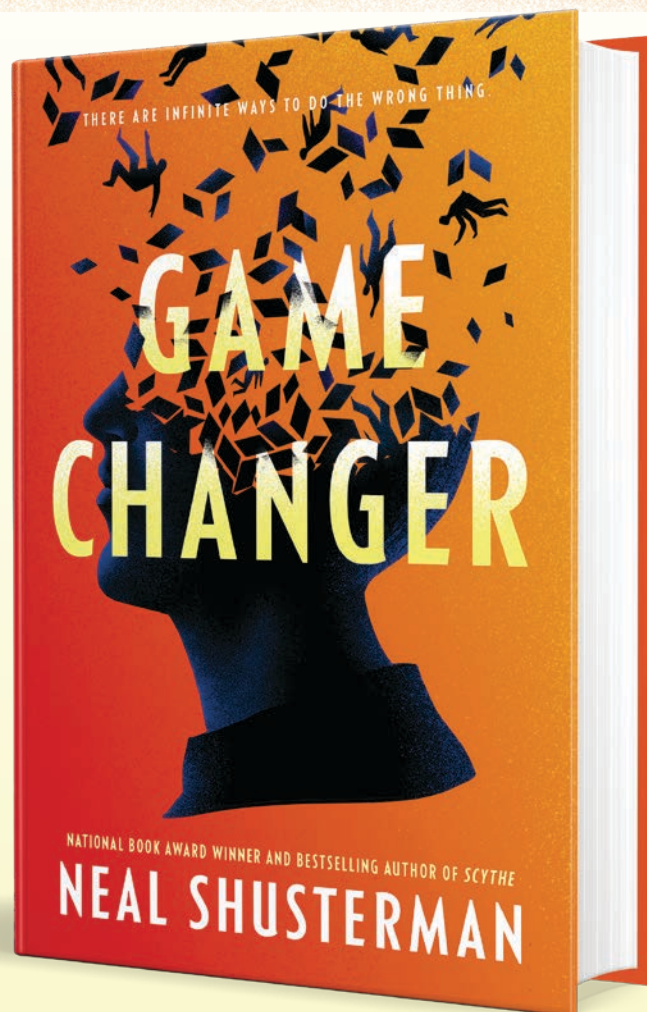
GAME CHANGER

BY NEAL SHUSTERMAN

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Ash is an average white heterosexual football player who believes he's a pretty decent guy, overall. But when he gets tackled during a game, he ends up in another dimension. Things seem pretty much the same, but tiny differences begin to surface that throw him off. And then he gets hit again, leaving him in a reality where his family is suddenly wealthy, and he has more privilege than ever. Each hit leads to an increasingly unsettling new reality where racism, homophobia, sexism, and toxic masculinity are rampant. Ash is forced to confront his biases, his privilege, and his complicity in the systems of oppression that become more prominent with each new reality he inhabits. Can he find a way to control the shifts? Or will reality as he knew it cease to exist entirely?



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neal Shusterman is the *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author of *Challenger Deep*, which won the National Book Award; *Scythe*, a Michael L. Printz Honor title; *Dry*; *Bruiser*, which was on twelve state lists; *The Schwa Was Here*; and the UnWind series, among many other books. He lives in Florida. You can visit him online at www.storyman.com.



QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

RACISM: *Game Changer* very intentionally confronts systems of oppression, including racism and segregation, and makes references to real world politics, both historical and current. Consider how political systems affect the ways in which people understand race and other intersectional parts of identity (gender, sexuality, class, disability, etc.).

PRIVILEGE: Not everyone has the same access to opportunities. Leo, one of Ash's friends at the beginning of the novel, explains it this way: "When you gotta spend all your time just kicking down the door, you're already exhausted, and miles behind the ones who get to prance right through..." (p. 13). Consider the variety of ways that privilege exists in the novel. In what ways do you see privilege in the world around you?

GOOD INTENTIONS: Leo tells Ash, "The country is filled with the well-intentioned ignorant.... It's a freaking plague, and you're a carrier" (p. 13). What do you think Leo means by this? What kind of well-intentioned ignorance have you encountered in your own life? Is there a way to change or shift this ignorance?

TOXIC MASCULINITY: Layton is a very explicit example of toxic masculinity. Think of what makes Layton's type of masculinity toxic. What do you see as indications of toxic masculinity? How does toxic masculinity affect or hurt others? What are some other, more subtle examples of toxic masculinity from the story? What are some examples you've experienced in your life?

HISTORY: Much of *Game Changer* relies on an understanding of history and the complex connections between historical events and various types of unrest, particularly in America. Which of these historical events and/or connections did you know about before? Which ones were new to you? What was most interesting to you? What connections are you able to make between the historical events discussed and contemporary realities (consider Ash's conversation with the skaters on p. 131)?

PERSPECTIVE: "The center of the universe. I suppose we all imagine ourselves in that position" (p. 124). According to Ash, how do people change over time when it comes to feeling like the center of the universe? How do people's perspectives shift when they are no longer as self-centered? What happens when that shift doesn't happen? Think about how you position yourself in relationship to the experiences and perspectives of others. Are there shifts you could or should be making in your perspective?

NATURE VS NURTURE: As he switches between realities, Ash begins to wonder which parts of him come from nature, and which parts come from nurture. He says, "It was both humbling and horrifying to see what I *could* be under certain circumstances" (p. 62). How do nature and nurture play out for Ash as the novel progresses? How is the theme of privilege linked to the nature vs. nurture debate?

EMPATHY: How does empathy help us understand each other? What happens when we are unable or unwilling to imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes? Ash, for instance, says about Leo, "I'm ashamed to admit it, but I remember thinking why would I ever want to see things from his point of view, if it meant I'd always be pissed off?" (p. 59). How do the previous themes affect ability and willingness to empathize?

ANTI-RACISM: Anti-racism is about identifying, challenging, and changing values, behaviors, systems of power, and other parts of society that perpetuate racism. In one reality, Ash realizes that segregation is still legal (p. 97-98). How does he, along with friends, try to confront this particular systemic injustice? In what ways do Leo, Ash, and others engage in anti-racism throughout the novel?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

SPLIT DECISION: Divide a blank sheet of paper into three sections. Imagine yourself in three of the alternate realities Ash experiences. In each section of the paper, brainstorm how you would react to elements of those realities. How might your thoughts on race, class, disability, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity be affected in each reality?

ANYONE CAN CHANGE THE WORLD: In one alternate reality, Ash joins the anti-segregation group at school in an attempt at allyship. Find other moments of allyship throughout the novel. In a group, brainstorm what makes these acts of allyship effective or not. Are there ways that Ash or others could be more effective allies? Now consider how you may be a more effective ally in your own life. Brainstorm some concrete actions with your group.

SPICY MAYO: Make a list of ten of your favorite artists, actors, characters on television, etc. Consider your list in relation to diversity (i.e. gender, sexuality, race, disability, class). Is there diverse representation? Compare your list with those of your peers. Consider Ash's comment about the "mayonnaise blandness" of his music in the one reality (p. 108) and discuss how diverse creators and representation can change and strengthen arts and culture. What other evidence of this do you see around you? Contributions of marginalized groups are often ignored, forgotten, or discounted; how have the artists and creators on your lists been influenced by people of other races and ethnicities?

GREEN, YELLOW, BLUE: On your own, define what color blindness means as a metaphor for how people respond to racial difference. Compare your definition with those of your peers. Now in a group, discuss how color blindness might be a problematic approach to racial differences. How does Ash come to terms with color blindness, and how does his opinion shift throughout the novel? What is the difference between "color doesn't matter" and "color shouldn't matter"? How can ignoring racial differences contribute to the perpetuation of inequality? Consider how your own understanding of color blindness has changed while reading the book.

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