***Scythe***

By Neal Shusterman: <http://www.storyman.com/about/>

Book Talk by Jacob Stewart

**Author Biography**

 

 Neal Shusterman, born on November 12th in 1962, was quite an ambitious child. On his website, he describes how he desired to follow nearly a dozen career paths. He remembers a teacher telling him “You can’t do [all these things]. You’ll be a jack of all trades and a master of none!” His response: “I’d be a jack of seven trades, and a master of three.” Luckily for all of us readers, another of his teachers- his ninth grade English teacher- nurtured young Shusterman’s love of writing. It became his driving passion, and all of that ambition became focused on becoming a storyteller.

 Shusterman has written over thirty novels, primarily for teenagers but some for children and adults as well. As his website says, he has degrees in both psychology and drama, “which give him a unique approach to writing.” His novels, especially *Scythe,* focus heavily on character, exploring the depths of the human experience as well as commenting on the nature of human society. He is a highly decorated author; his novels have earned him many awards, as well as the respect of his colleagues and audiences.

Other Novels by the Author

*Thunderhead, The Toll,* (respectively the second and third book in the *Arc of a Scythe* series), *Unwind*, *Dry, Challenger Deep, The Acceleration Trilogy,* his upcoming 2021 novel *Game Changer,* and many more.

**A Summary of *Scythe***

 It’s difficult to summarize *Scythe* without going into the detailed backstory of the world its characters inhabit. The story could easily be generally summed up, but the context in which it takes place adds so much that it is hard to leave out. I will do my best to be concise:

 In the year 2042, humanity attained immortality. This was accomplished by the Thunderhead- the sentient entity born from all of humanity’s knowledge, which had been stored in the digital “cloud.” The Thunderhead is loving, loyal, incorruptible and infallible. Human government stepped down so as to let humanity be ruled by this perfect intelligence. Under the Thunderhead, the world entered the Golden Age, making unbelievable strides in all forms of science. Now, humanity lives in a world free of all crime, all poverty, all war, and even death. With the Thunderhead’s help, mankind found ways to eliminate all disease, heal all wounds, even reverse the aging process, allowing human beings to live for an eternity. Even if someone were to have a fatal accident, they could effortlessly be brought back to live at a revival center. It was also in the year 2042 that the Scythedom was created. The Thunderhead had determined that humanity would be unable to colonize other planets for the foreseeable future, and so population control was unfortunately still a necessity. The Thunderhead declared it would be morally wrong for it to handle this matter, as it was born to serve humanity, to nurture life, and that it should have no part in ending it. Scythes are the humans tasked with doling out death- or “gleaning,” as it is called now. They were meant to be the best and brightest of humanity, for only those with the greatest conscience, and the most incorruptible souls, should be the bearers of such a grim and important power. Centuries after the creation of the Scythedom, the novel follows Citra Terranova and Rowan Damisch. Both are teenagers who each have an encounter with a scythe- the Honorable Scythe Faraday. Both of them prove they possess the moral standing, in one way or another, to be worthy of Scythehood, and so Faraday takes them both on as apprentices. The Scythedom they enter is very different from how it was intended; over the centuries, more and more scythes had turned to the “New Order.” Where scythes were meant to never *enjoy* their duty, but to respect the position with a grim solemnity, the New Order scythes seek joy in their killings. Citra and Rowan have to face the trials of their apprenticeship amidst corruption, schemes, and deceits as they each have to decide what kind of scythes they want to become.

**Quotes From *Scythe***

 In the world of *Scythe*, Scythes are required to keep a “gleaning journal,” in which they make an entry each day. The journal is very open ended- scythes can write about whatever they wish more or less. Some write about the days gleanings, some record their dreams, others simply write down memories or thoughts that occurred to them that day. Regardless, every scythe keeps a journal, meant to serve both as a record of their work and as proof that they are *human.* Every chapter of the novel is prefaced by a journal entry from various scythes with various perspectives and beliefs. The passages I’ve selected are each a journal entry from three different scythes, for I found these musings to be incredibly profound, not only in the context of the novel, but in the context of the real world as well.

 “We must, by law, keep a record of the innocents we kill.

 And as I see it, they’re all innocents. Even the guilty. Everyone is guilty of something, and everyone still harbors a memory of childhood innocence, no matter how many layers of life wrap around it. Humanity is innocent, humanity is guilty, and both states are undeniably true.

 We must, by law, keep a record.

 It begins on day one of apprenticeship- but we do not officially call it “killing.” It’s not socially or morally correct to call it such. It is, and has always been, “gleaning,” named for the way the poor would trail behind farmers in ancient times, taking the stray stalks of grain left behind. It was the earliest form of charity. A scythe’s work is the same. Every child is told from the day he or she is old enough to understand that scythes provide a crucial service for society. Ours is the closest thing to a sacred mission the modern world knows.

 Perhaps that is why we must, by law, keep a record. A public journal, testifying to those who will never die and those who are yet to be born as to why we human beings do the things we do. We are instructed to write down not just our deeds but our feelings, because it must be known that we do have feelings. Remorse. Regret. Sorrow too great to bear. Because if we didn’t feel those things, what monsters would we be?”

 -From the gleaning journal of Honorable Scythe Curie (page 1)

 “I am not a man easily brought to fury, but how dare the old-guard scythes presume to dictate my behavior? Let every last one of them glean themselves, and we can be done with their self-loathing, sanctimonious ways. I am a man who chooses to glean with pride, not shame. I choose to embrace life, even as I deal death. Make no mistake- we scythes are above the law because we deserve to be. I see a day when new scythes will be chosen not because of some esoteric moral high ground, but because they enjoy the taking of life. After all, this is a perfect world- and in a perfect world, don’t we all have the right to love what we do?”

-From the gleaning journal of Honorable Scythe Goddard (page 162)

 “Each day I pray as my ancestors did. They once prayed to gods that were fallible and fickle. Then to one God who stood in harsh and terrifying judgement. Then to a loving, forgiving God. And then finally to a power with no name.

 But to whom can the immortal pray? I have no answer to that, but I still cat my voice out into the void, hoping to reach something beyond distance and deeper than the depths of my own soul. I ask for guidance. And for courage. And I beg- oh, how I beg- that I never become so desensitized to the death I must deliver that it feels normal. Commonplace.

 My greatest wish for humanity is not for peace or comfort or joy. It is that we all still die a little inside every time we witness the death of another. For only the pain of empathy will keep us human. There’s no version of God that can help us if we ever lose that.

-From the gleaning journal of Honorable Scythe Faraday (page 388)

 The biggest reason that I found *Scythe* to be such a profound novel- worthy of canonization, in my opinion- is that Shusterman manages to explore universal truths of the human experience in extreme depth, in a setting that strengthens that exploration. These journal entries give a glimpse into the beliefs to the two conflicting schools of thought within the Scythedom, and I believe this conflict mirrors the conflict we Americans face in our country today. It seems more and more people are losing *empathy* for one another*,* which Honorable Scythe Faraday believes is the one thing most necessary, the one thing that maintains the soul. The novel as a whole closely looks at humanity- in a world without adversity, what is there to live for? What makes a human *human?* Even more centrally, how does one maintain humanity when one’s existence is steeped in death? Scythes Curie and Goddard represent two extreme ends of this spectrum, and the tension between these two belief systems is the driving force of the novel. Does a scythe maintain humanity by refusing to lose sight of the grimness of his/her duty, or does a scythe maintain humanity by embracing that duty? Through examining these themes of life, death, and humanity, Shusterman weaves an insightful and thought-provoking tale worthy of being studied.

**Text Complexity and Notes on Writing Style**

 As a novel, *Scythe* is written in simple, yet efficient language that is still varied and creative enough to be interesting without being difficult to decipher. This very simple language is well-complimented by a twisting and turning plot, full of surprises. By keeping the line-by-line writing straightforward, the reader is free to give more thought to the interpretation of the overarching story; Shusterman capitalizes on this, making his plot complex and mature, full of layered character relationships, sly political maneuvers, shocking twists, and thrilling action. Through this engaging the reader, Shusterman’s plot allows the themes and insights of the novel to be explored with much more nuance.

 *Scythe* has been given an 830L on the Lexile Range. Shusterman’s writing style is simple and effective, and though the book is nearly 500 pages it is an incredibly quick read for how easy Shusterman’s language is to digest. Though a rating of 830L would suggest *Scythe* could be suitable for proficient middle schoolers, I think the book would actually be best suited for a high school class at the junior level. While the language isn’t too elevated, the complicated plot- full of deception, half-truths, and multiple point of view shifts- may be more difficult to follow for less advanced readers at the middle school age. In addition, the themes, musings, and insights of the novel require a little more maturity to fully appreciate than the simple language would suggest.

**Why Should *Scythe* Be Given to Teens?**

* The novel’s main characters are teenagers of high school age, and their journey through adversity and self-discovery will likely resonate with high school students.
* There are complex and well-explored themes of death, humanity/human nature, and the relationship between humans and technology. Each of these themes are deeply examined, and the novel will leave teenagers with valuable insights that may help shape their world view as they become adults.
* The book is easy to read, exciting and engaging, with very few barriers to comprehension. This will make it easy for readers to interact with the themes at play.

**Exemplified Exeter Qualities in *Scythe***

* Exeter Quality 2: Exciting plots that include secrecy, surprise, and tension brought about through narrative hooks and a fast pace.
* Exeter Quality 3: Characters who reflect experiences of teen readers. (Additionally, multiple strong female protagonists)
* Exeter Quality 4: Characters who go beyond typical experiences so that readers can use fictional experiences to learn and develop in their own lives.
* Exeter Quality 5: Lively, varied, and imaginative language that is grammatically correct while being neither patronizing and simplistic nor unnecessarily confusing through lexical density or complexity.
* Exeter Quality 7: Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues.