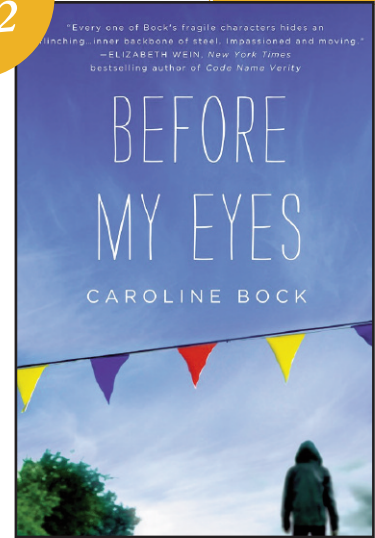


Grades  
9-12Accelerated  
Reader

# Before My Eyes

by Caroline Bock



304 pages • 978-1-250-04558-4

“Every one of Bock’s fragile characters hides an unflinching inner backbone of steel. Impassioned and moving.”—**Elizabeth Wein**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Code Name Verity* and *Rose Under Fire*



## PRAISE FOR BEFORE MY EYES

“Grades 9 and Up. The summer before his senior year, Max, 17, is disillusioned with his New York state senator father and ambitious mother. He has grown tired of and dissatisfied with his planned-out life and doesn’t quite know what his next step should be. He works at the Snack Shack at a Long Island beach, where he is surrounded by a motley crew, including his strange coworker Barkley. Max just wants the summer to be over. Seventeen-year-old Claire has her own set of problems and has had to grow up quickly. Her mother had a stroke, leaving Claire to keep the house, cook, watch over her younger sister, and share money woes with her father. All she wants is to be understood. This summer, Barkley, 21, has reached his limit and gives in to his darker nature and the voices he hears in his head. Over a Labor Day weekend, Claire’s, Max’s, and Barkley’s lives come together. The three are forever changed when Barkley brings a gun to a political event. The first-person narrators speak with unique voices, and their tales entwine to create a compelling story. Bock has crafted a suspenseful and intense novel that is sure to keep readers turning the pages.”—**Elizabeth Jakubowski**, *School Library Journal*

“[An] unflinching thriller.”—*Bookpage*

“[A] moody, dread-filled microdrama that resists easy classification. In a way, it’s an almost-love triangle: Claire, 16, is processing guilt connected to her mother’s recent stroke; she meets Max, a state senator’s shiftless son with a burgeoning addiction to pain pills. Max buys these pills from 21-year-old coworker Barkley, who is losing touch with reality in his secret obsession with Claire. This tale is told from the three points of view, each one suitably different but sharing Bock’s polished second-by-second prose—thick paragraphs filled with short sentences that possess the quality of flash photography or stage directions: ‘The winds pick up. The trees rustle. I didn’t expect to find myself here. I really didn’t.’ We know from the prologue that the story concludes with a shooting at a political event; the book, then, concerns itself less with plot—little about the story will surprise—and instead impresses with a series of elegantly conceived scenes of character building. [Readers] will find themselves lost in the strange spell. Grades 9-12.”—**Daniel Kraus, *Booklist***

“Bock returns to the Long Island setting of her critically acclaimed first book for teens, *LIE*, as the lives of three young people intersect over a weekend . . . Bock’s story unfolds as an hour-by-hour account of the Labor Day weekend before Claire and Max’s senior year, told in three alternating points of view. Bock’s prose is fluid and resonant, and her characters fully realistic . . . A sense of dread and the threat of violence hang over this gripping novel (the book opens with Barkley pulling out a gun at a campaign event for Max’s father), as do the failings of parents, friends, and society. Ages 14–up.”—***Publishers Weekly***

## SYNOPSIS

*Before My Eyes* is a powerful young adult novel about a fateful summer’s end in the fictional Long Island town of Lakeshore, New York. Following on the path of her acclaimed debut young adult novel, *LIE*, Bock brings forth complex characters in nuanced, descriptive language, layering relevant contemporary themes: Gun violence, mental illness, prescription drug abuse, and internet risks with timeless themes of love and hope. *Before My Eyes* captures a moment when possibilities should be opening up, but instead everything teeters on the brink of destruction.

*Before My Eyes* unfolds in the tightly woven first person narratives of Claire, Max and Barkley. Claire has spent the last few months taking care of her six-year-old sister, Izzy, as their mother lies in a hospital bed. Claire believes she has everything under control until she meets a guy online who appears to be a kindred spirit. Claire is initially flattered by the attention but when she meets Max, the shy state senator’s son, her feelings become complicated. Working alongside Max at a beach-front food stand is Barkley. Lonely and obsessive, Barkley has been hearing a dangerous voice in his head. No one—not his parents, not his co-workers—realize that Barkley is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, until the voice in his head orders him to do the unthinkable.

What is seen and unseen, concealed and unconcealed, and ultimately known and unknown layers this richly metaphorical text, and along with the deeply felt characters, makes *Before My Eyes* a novel that teens and their adults will be eager to read, discuss, and analyze.

## SETTING

The setting is critical to understanding how the author of *Before My Eyes* structured the text in order to build suspense and develop multi-dimensional characters. Here follows insight into the setting:

**Place:** The town of Lakeshore in Long Island, New York, about thirty miles east of New York City during the end of a simmering hot summer. The majority of the novel takes place at the fictional Lakeshore town and at its town beach along the Atlantic Ocean on the southern shore of Long Island. In New York, state parks, most notably, Jones Beach, are open to all for a modest fee. However, as is commonplace, there are more exclusive “town” beaches where one must be a resident in order to use a beach, and that is the case with this setting. This exclusive town beach gives the teens the illusion of safety and security.

**Time:** The novel opens on Labor Day Monday at a community park in Lakeshore at an event for state senator Glenn Cooper, who is running for re-election and is the father of Max Cooper. Barkley, suffering from what we will soon understand to be paranoid schizophrenia, is outside the tent—a gun concealed in his sweatshirt. Max is insider the tent. The foreshadowing is there in the text—there is going to be tragic confrontation—but who are these two young men? And who is the girl, Claire, that they are both waiting to see will also appear? After these two short chapters, the novel will flashback to the Thursday prior and follow our three main characters—Barkley, Max and Claire—back to this fateful day, and one day beyond for a total of six critical days in the lives of these three teens. Day and times are marked at the head of each chapter in order to give the reader a sense that every moment of life is critical.

## CHARACTER AND METAPHOR

This novel comprises the first-person points of view of three characters: Barkley, Max and Claire. One of the central metaphors of *Before My Eyes* is the idea that we often do not understand what we see right before our eyes; sometimes, we don't really *see* it at all. These characters are each hiding things from their parents, their friends, and even from themselves. To explore the metaphor of what is seen or not seen in the novel, students should analyze these complex characters by looking closely at textual details. Here is a short description of each character:

**BARKLEY** is a twenty-one-year-old community college drop-out, a would-be filmmaker, an environmentalist, and a grammar fanatic. He has begun to hear voices, a symptom of undiagnosed paranoid schizophrenia. He is obsessed with Claire. His family and friends do not *see* what is happening to Barkley, that he is losing touch with reality.

**MAX** is about to turn eighteen. He is the son of New York state senator Glenn Cooper, a New York state senator, and Debbi Cooper, who manages her husband's political campaigns. His dog, King, is blind. Max has spent his summer working at the Snack Shack at

the town beach and obsessing over a missed penalty kick in the last soccer game of the year and the seemingly unattainable girls in bikinis on the beach. On the surface, Max has everything going for him—loving parents, a nice car, his senior year ahead of him. But what no one *sees* is that Max is in pain, both physically and psychologically, and he’s secretly abusing his father’s prescription pain medication to conceal it as he tries to cope.

#### CLAIRE

has been taking care of her six-year-old sister, Izzy, ever since her mother suffered an aneurysm earlier in the spring. Her father is distracted, struggling to cope emotionally and financially with his wife’s condition and rehabilitation. He does not notice or *see* the sadness overcoming his dreamy, literary seventeen-year-old daughter. Claire turns to the Internet, where she expresses herself by blogging her poetry. Online, she meets “Brent,” and she begins to look for this new friend, hoping they can meet in person. She doesn’t recognize that “Brent” is “Barkley” until it is almost too late. Claire conceals her unhappiness from everyone, for various reasons, but she secretly wishes someone would *see* her.

#### INSIGHT INTO THE WRITER’S RESEARCH

A variety of research and outside sources were consulted in order to develop realistic, multi-dimensional characters and themes.

According to the author, Caroline Bock, the novel was inspired in part by a true event: “I was taken aback by what happened in Tucson, Arizona on January 8, 2011, the day U.S. representative Gabrielle Giffords and eighteen others were shot during a meeting at local supermarket. Six people died, and many others were injured by Jared Loughner, a 22-year old Tucson man. I followed this case closely in news reports, shocked and angry, before I began to write this novel.”

Key outside sources and research was utilized to write this novel. On a personal level, the novel was reviewed by Dr. Frances Bock, Ph.D., a neuropsychologist, and by David Blech, a nurse practitioner with psychiatric experience, particularly in working with young male schizophrenics. Both are close relatives of the author and offered a careful reading of early drafts of the novel in order to help shape Barkley’s story. In addition, many books and websites regarding mental illness in teens, most notably the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), were consulted.

Research on gun violence and gun control in the United States, a controversial subject under much debate in our society, was also critical. The websites of the

Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, Mayors Against Illegal Guns and Moms Demand Action for Sensible Gun Control were also researched for key points on gun violence and young people. And while a novel is by its very nature not a work of journalistic balance, but a subjective story of people and their actions, the author also considered the other side of the debate, those that advocate for gun owners, The National Rifle Association.

“Ultimately, the background research done on this novel should only serves to enrich the character’s lives and situations, and I hope this research lends to the richness and complexity of *Before My Eyes*,” notes Bock.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS  
AND ACTIVITIES  
FOR THE CLASS**

1. Analyze how these complex characters—Barkley, Max, and Claire—each with multiple or conflicting motivations, develop over the course of the novel. How do they interact with one another? How do they each contribute or develop the novel’s broader theme?

2. Is there a point in the novel where one can feel empathy for Barkley? How does the author pivot the reader’s empathy away from Barkley and toward Max and/or Claire?

3. What inferences can be drawn by the opening two chapters of the novel? How does opening in the present and then flashing back to the past add suspense to the novel? How does the reader infer the mental states of Barkley and Max at the beginning? Cite specific textual references.

4. How does the title, *Before My Eyes*, describe a central metaphor or idea in the text? How does it emerge and shape the text through the characters and what they see or hide, what they conceal from or reveal to their parents and peers?

**Related activity:** Have students closely analyze each of the main characters and create a chart or character map that cites specific textual references on what is seen/not seen or unconcealed/hidden or unknown/known to parents and peers.

5. Claire writes poetry—some of her poems are included within the text. Examine these poems closely. What are the poems’ central ideas? How do they relate to the novel as a whole?

**Related activity:** Have students write poems inspired by the novel and/or building on the metaphor of what is seen/unseen about them or their world. (A special note to teachers from Caroline Bock: “I was the editor of my high school literary magazine, *Opus*, at New Rochelle High School in New Rochelle, New York and referred to back issues to remember how it was to write as a seventeen year old, and to write Claire’s poetry.”)

6. Consider the scenes that take place in Barkley’s house, especially conversations between Barkley and his parents. What does Barkley’s bedroom door represent in his mind, and what does it represent to his parents? Compare and contrast the symbolism or significance of Claire’s and/or Max’s bedroom doors with Barkley’s.

7. The novel implies a particular point of view on gun violence. Read the text closely (particularly the final chapters) and discuss the point of view expressed.

8. What role does Claire’s mother, a psychologist, serve at the end of the novel?

9. Compare and contrast the main characters’ different reactions to gun violence.

**Related activity:** Have students write their own responses to the issue of gun violence in America, citing textual references in the novel and citing research from other sources to support their arguments.

10. The novel ends on a Tuesday afternoon, and “Tomorrow, Wednesday, school starts” (p. 287). Following the events that have taken place over the summer, how will the next day, the next month, and the next year be different than what the characters might have expected when the summer began?

**Related activity:** Building on textual references and their understanding of the characters, have each student write an epilogue, a scene that might take place in the future.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Bock, a novelist, screenwriter, and poet, is the author of two critically-acclaimed young adult novels: *Before My Eyes* (St. Martin’s Press, 2014) and *LIE* (St. Martin’s Press, 2011). She holds a MFA-Fiction from The City College of New York and a Bachelor of Science Degree from Syracuse University, where she was honored to have studied with Raymond Carver. She lives in Maryland with her husband and two children, and is working on her first adult novel. More about Caroline Bock and her work can be found at [www.carolinebock.com](http://www.carolinebock.com).

Special note on first edition of *Before My Eyes*:

Erratum, an error in printing or writing. The error is in the writing and the author takes full responsibility. A quote attributed on p. 169 to Lewis Carroll, “All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream,” is in fact attributable to Edgar Allan Poe from his poem, “A Dream Within A Dream.”



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