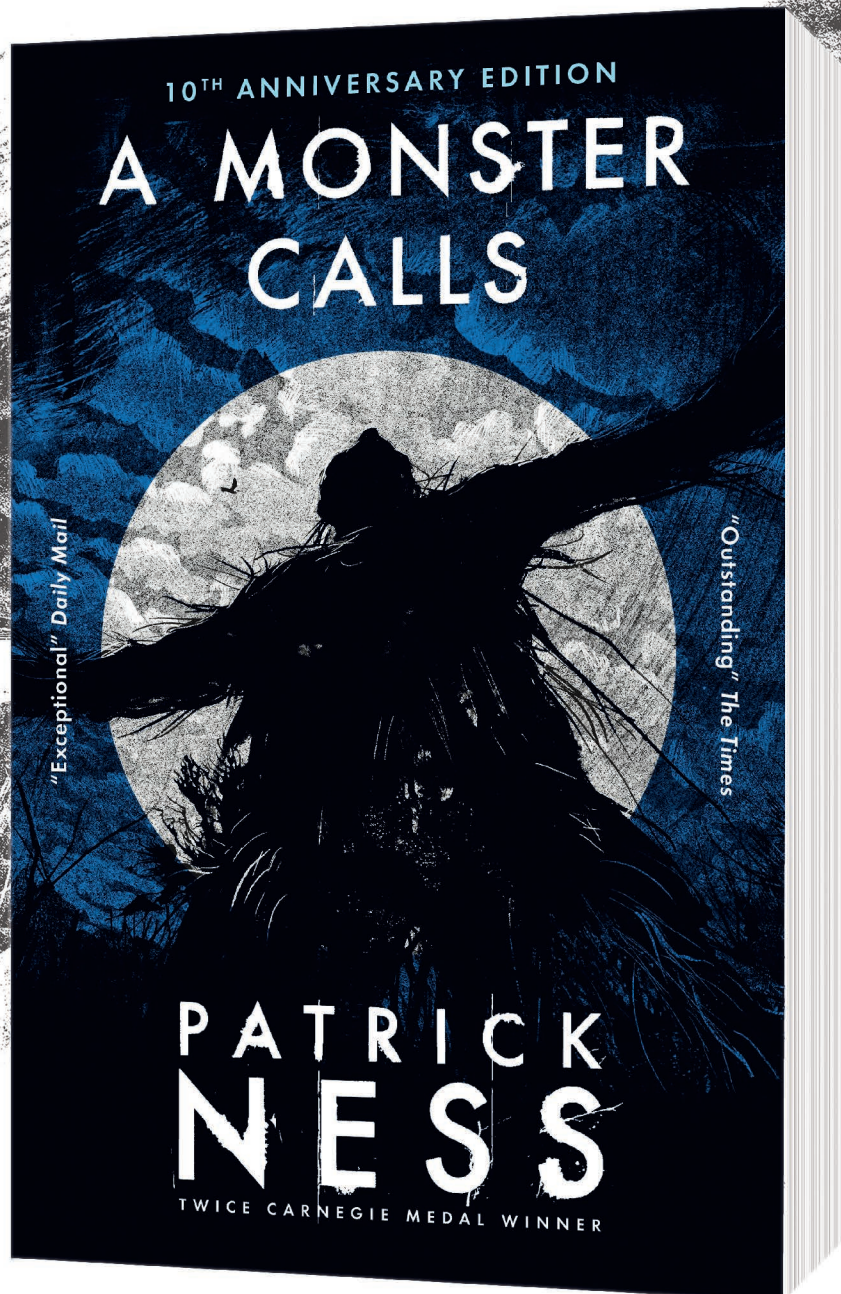


DISCUSSION GUIDE

10 YEARS OF A MONSTER CALLS

PATRICK NESS

TWICE CARNEGIE WINNER



**"GRIPPING,
MOVING,
BRILLIANTLY
CRAFTED."**

The Times

"ELECTRIFYING."

Telegraph

"MAGICAL."

The Sunday Times

**"AUTHENTIC
AND MOVING."**

Irish Times

"BRILLIANT"

Frank Cottrell Boyce

**"COMPELLING
... POWERFUL
AND
IMPRESSIVE"**

Philip Pullman

WALKER BOOKS

 [Patricknessbooks](https://www.instagram.com/Patricknessbooks) [#AMonsterCalls](https://twitter.com/AMonsterCalls) www.patrickness.com

A Monster Calls Discussion Guide © 2021 Walker Books Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Written by Ben O'Donnell

A MONSTER CALLS BY PATRICK NESS

Walker Books Discussion Guide

ABOUT THE BOOK

Patrick Ness's masterful book, based on an idea by Siobhan Dowd, sees thirteen-year-old Conor, caring for his sick mother, visited by a monster in the form of a yew tree with a promise to tell him three stories. In return Conor must tell him his 'truth'. This astonishing Carnegie-medal winning novel is a vital read, exploring with a subtle and devastating grace the power of story, and the nature of love, loss and family. Ness's sparse and exhilarating prose, without condescension or sentimentality, pinpoints the beautiful fragility of the human condition in this book for all time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Ness is the award-winning and bestselling author of the Chaos Walking trilogy, *A Monster Calls*, *More Than This*, *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, *Release*, and *the Ocean Was Our Sky and Burn*. John Green has described him as "an insanely beautiful writer". He has won every major prize in children's fiction, including the Carnegie Medal twice. He has written the screenplay for the film of *A Monster Calls* and the BBC *Doctor Who* spin-off, *Class*. The Chaos Walking film is releasing in 2021.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

A Monster Calls is a novel that approaches a range of subjects and experiences that may prove difficult for members of discussion groups to discuss. It is very likely that lived experience within any group may encompass the novel's themes of death, parental loss, cancer, separation, bullying, isolation, and child-carers. As such, great care should be taken when discussing the novel to ensure that members feel supported to contribute, or not contribute, as they are comfortable. This should not detract, however, from discussion of the novel as a work of art. If particular subjects are sensitive enough to be avoided, then shift focus towards other aspects of the book – the style of Ness's prose, the relationship between Dowd's idea and the final novel, etc.

It is also worth noting that many members of the group may have seen the film adaption of *A Monster Calls*, or the stage play, or both. It might be worth checking with members before beginning in earnest, to ensure shared understanding of the adaptations that exist, and discuss parameters for the conversation around spoilers for those yet to see these versions.

Lastly, be aware that the original edition of the novel was accompanied by Jim Kay's illustrations and many readers may have read this version. It is worth bearing in mind the different media through which readers may have experienced this story, and how this might affect the reading, or watching, experience (see question 6).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Getting started:

Begin by asking for the group's thoughts on the novel. Who enjoyed it? Did anyone not enjoy it? Would anyone like to elaborate on their response? What did the novel evoke for different readers? Check also who has experienced the novel in another format, and how they felt these compared. (See general introduction.) You might like to start by discussing how the book came about, written by Ness from an idea from Siobhan Dowd (see author's note). What do group members think of this process?

1. The power of stories

'Stories are wild creatures, the monster said. When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?' - p.69

'You think I tell you stories to teach you lessons?' p.83

Discuss the significance of 'story' in the novel. Why is the idea of telling stories so significant? What about them is significant – is it the way they are told? The way they make the listener feel? The 'truth' they contain? What is the 'point' of stories? Bear in mind that the novel is itself a story, and therefore subject to the same considerations. What is Ness saying about stories, novels, books, etc., and the idea of teaching 'lessons'?

WALKER BOOKS

 [Patricknessbooks](https://www.patrickness.com) #AMonsterCalls www.patrickness.com

A Monster Calls Discussion Guide © 2021 Walker Books Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Written by Ben O'Donnell

2. The Monster

'I have had as many names as there are years to time itself! Roared the monster. I am Herne the Hunter! I am Cernunnos! I am the eternal Green Man!' - p.49

Who is the monster? What does the monster embody within the novel? Why is the monster a yew tree? Look at the monster's description of itself on page 50 together – what do members of the group think this means? What purpose does the monster serve within the narrative?

3. Fear

'You really aren't afraid, are you?

"No," Conor said. *"not of you, anyway."* - p.22

What part does fear play in the novel? Why is Conor not afraid of the monster? Discuss, also, the monster's reaction to this lack of fear. Consider also Conor's relationship towards the school bully, Harry.

4. Expectation and disappointment

'He scrambled up... feeling more excited than he thought he would.' - p.110

Throughout the novel Conor's expectations regularly clash with the reality of his situation. Discuss the ways in which Conor's expectations shape his experiences in the novel – his responses to the monster's stories, his mum's recovery, his friendship with Lily, his desire to be punished, his disappointment in his father. How is this expectation vs reality reflected in the stories the monster tells?

5. Destruction, death, rebuilding and rebirth

'What shall I destroy next, it asked...' - p.136

Conor finds himself swept up in violence and destruction, blurring the boundaries between real and fantastical as he takes out his anger and frustration, first on his grandma's sitting room and later in the fight at school. Through the novel destruction and death are closely associated, while new life and rebuilding either cannot happen until the end (e.g., his friendship with Lily), or they happen far away (e.g., his father's 'new' family in America). Why does Ness create this sense of imbalance in the novel? Why does destruction come so easily, while rebuilding proves so difficult? In what sense is the destruction necessary for Conor?

6. Forming pictures

'A sudden hard wind swirled up around them, and the monster spread its arms out wide, so wide...' - p.49

The first published version of *A Monster Calls* also won the Kate Greenaway medal for Jim Kay's illustrations. Members of the group may have read this version or have it with them. Discuss the impact of having, and not having, those illustrations as a reader. How does it affect the reading of the book? Did anyone imagine the book differently from someone who had a different version? How did having seen the film or stage play affect the way anyone pictured the story while reading the book?

7. The three stories

'And I will tell you three stories. Three tales from when I walked before.' - p.51

Consider the details of each of the three stories the monster tells (pages 70, 125 & 175). What do readers think of these stories? What do they illustrate, for Conor? What do readers like, or dislike about them, and the ways they relate to the wider story? Do they work as stories outside of the narrative?

8. Truth, thought and action

'Not just any truth. Your truth.' P.52

'You do not write your life with words, the monster said. You write it with actions.' - p.225

Discuss the relationship between truth, thought and action in the novel. What does the monster mean, 'you do not write your life with words'? What is 'truth' to Conor? In what ways is 'truth' personal? Talk about the difference between thinking of something as true, and acting on that thought.