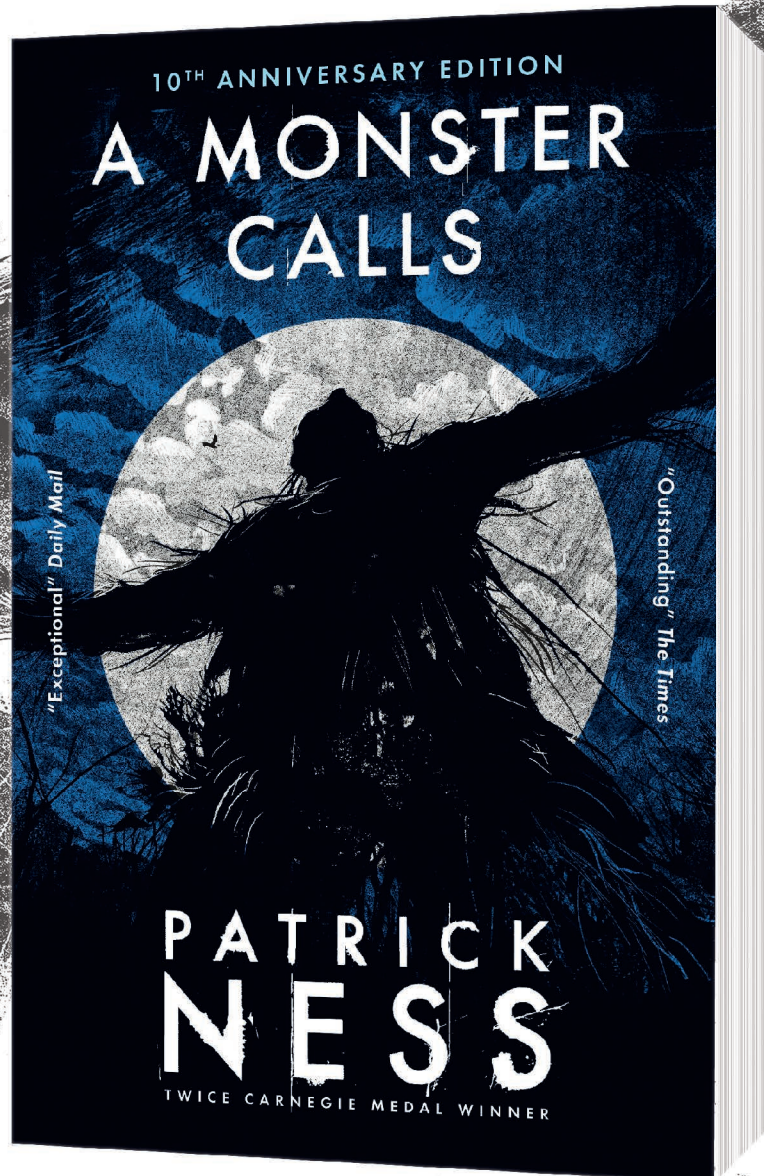


TEACHERS' NOTES

10 YEARS OF A MONSTER CALLS

PATRICK NESS

TWICE CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNER



ISBN 9781406398595 • £7.99 • Paperback • For Ages 12+

The 10th anniversary edition of the bestselling novel about love, loss and hope from the twice Carnegie Medal-winning Patrick Ness.

Conor has the same dream every night, ever since his mother first fell ill, ever since she started the treatments that don't quite seem to be working. But tonight is different. Tonight, when he wakes, there's a visitor at his window. It's ancient, elemental, a force of nature. And it wants the most dangerous thing of all from Conor. It wants the truth.

Patrick Ness takes the final idea of the late, award-winning writer Siobhan Dowd and weaves an extraordinary and heartbreaking tale of mischief, healing and above all, the courage it takes to survive. Since publication, *A Monster Calls* has become an international bestseller and been made into a film starring Felicity Jones, Liam Neeson and Sigourney Weaver.

WALKER BOOKS

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

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A MONSTER CALLS BY PATRICK NESS

TEACHER'S NOTES

These notes have been written by the teachers at the [CLPE](#) to provide schools with ideas to develop comprehension and cross-curricular activities around this text. They build on our work supporting teachers to use quality texts throughout the reading curriculum. They encourage a deep reading of and reflection on the text, which may happen over a series of reading sessions, rather than in just one sitting. We hope you find them useful.

BEFORE YOU START

- As you read through the book it would be helpful to use a group journal to organise and store discussions and responses to the text, including thoughts on the writer's use of language to depict characters and events.
- Teachers should be aware that *A Monster Calls* addresses a child's response to the illness and death of a parent through cancer. Understanding would need to be shown when introducing the book to any group members who may have experienced similar issues in their own lives. The Young Minds organisation shares support and advice that may be useful in exploring issues raised in the text: <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/feelings-and-symptoms/grief-and-loss>. Macmillan Cancer Support have also produced a guide to talking to children and young people about cancer, that may help to support discussions raised by the text: <https://be.macmillan.org.uk/be/p-25218-talking-to-children-and-teenagers-when-an-adult-has-cancer.aspx>
- These notes refer to the 10th Anniversary Edition, published by Walker in April 2021.
- As this book has become a celebrated modern classic, you may want to find out if the group have read the book already, or if they have seen the film and discuss their responses to this, reflecting on how they might engage with the suggested activities given this prior knowledge. Re-reading is an excellent reading behaviour. On a second reading, readers may notice things they didn't on their first reading, or look at events and characters through different eyes.

DEVELOPING INITIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE BOOK: COVER

- Begin by sharing Jim Kay's cover illustration, asking readers to look at it carefully, considering what messages it might contain about the book they are about to read, and unpicking any connections they may make with other stories they already know. *What sort of a story do you think this will be? What genre is it likely to be? What makes you think that?* Record their responses in the group reading journal and return to these as you read the book, comparing their thoughts to how the story actually unfolds.
 - *Who do you think this figure could be? What clues does their body language give?*
 - *Where do you think they are standing, where are we looking from? What do you notice about the layout, colours and background; the moon and clouds: how do these make you feel?*
 - *Where and when do you think the story might be set? What leads you to think this? Do you know any other stories with a character or setting like this?*
 - *Does the cover make you want to read the story? Why? Why not?*

DEVELOPING BOOK TALK AND EXPLORING CHARACTER

– ‘A MONSTER CALLS’ AND ‘BREAKFAST’

- Read aloud the first two pages of the first chapter, ‘A Monster Calls’ (page 15) up to the line, **Someone was calling his name. Conor.** (page 17). Give the group time and space to reflect on and discuss what they have heard and consider:
 - *What do you think is happening in the extract you have just heard?*
 - *Who is the main character and what do you learn about him?*
- Ask the readers to predict what is going to happen in the story and to give reasons for their answers. *Does the beginning of this story remind you of any other stories you have read or films you have seen? What sort of genre do you think this story is going to be now?*
- Read the rest of the first chapter and ask: *what do you think might happen in the rest of this story? What do you make of the monster? Do you think it is ‘real’ or in Conor’s imagination? What makes you think this?*
- Reread the section from page 20, **And then the monster spoke.** Again, allow the group time and space to reflect on what they have read. You may wish to give the readers a copy of this extract to re-read independently and text mark and annotate with their ideas and observations to come back to as part of a group discussion, focused around the character of the monster. You could provide questions to facilitate and focus their thinking as they re-read and make notes, such as; *what do you make of the monster itself; what sort of a character is he? How does Patrick Ness tell us about or gives us ideas about the monster’s character in the text? Does he act in the way you would expect a monster to act?*
- Come back together to share ideas as a group, asking the group to refer specifically to parts of the text as they explore their thinking. Does every reader share the same perspective or do different readers have different opinions? This is a good chance to explore the fact that every reader will bring their own experience to the reader and may respond to the text in different ways. One reader’s view may help clarify, shape or challenge the ideas of another and discussions between the group are beneficial in building a shared view.
- Read the next chapter, ‘Breakfast’ (page 24). Ask the group to summarise the events, discussing what is happening in Conor’s home life. *What is the situation he is dealing with? Does this have any bearing on what you think about the events of the first chapter?*
- Before continuing to read the next chapter, reflect on the characters of Conor and the monster. Ask the group to complete a role on the wall for each. This technique allows the reader to summarise what they know about a character and to begin to make inferences about their internal characteristics based on what you know about them. Have a prepared template of the outline of each figure onto which the readers can record their ideas. Ask them to write words or phrases sharing what they know about their outward appearance or other information they have found out about them on the outside of the outline. Then, use these to begin to infer and deduce the internal feelings and characteristics of the characters and note these on the inside.
- To promote a higher level of thinking, ask the group to consider what we know from their speech and the narration and what we can infer from body language, gestures and actions. Support them in making explicit links between the external and internal. For example, *how does something Conor does tell us about his personality? Or, how does the monster’s personality make a specific action seem most likely?* Encourage the group to return to these as you read on, using a different colour each time to highlight the knowledge they gain each time they read more.

EXPLORING INTERACTIONS AND AUTHORIAL INTENT – ‘SCHOOL’ TO ‘THE REST OF THE FIRST TALE’

- Read aloud the chapter ‘School’ (page 32) then allow time and space for the readers to reflect on what they have heard, before asking them to consider the motivation, actions and reactions of each of the characters: Conor, Harry, Lily and Miss Kwan.
 - *Why do you think each character behaves as they do, what insight do their actions give you into their personality? Why do you think Conor reacts as he does to Lily’s intervention?*
 - *What do you think Miss Kwan really thinks happened, and does she believe Conor’s answer about falling? Why do you think Conor acts to protect someone who has attacked him?*
 - *Why do you think Lily intervenes and how does she feel by the end of the chapter?*
- Go on to read aloud the chapter ‘Life Writing’ (page 38) and ask the group if anything in this chapter changes their opinions about why Conor acts as he does with the bullies and the teacher.
- After reading aloud the chapter ‘Three Stories’ (page 45), go back to reread from page 49, ***I am not a “what”, frowned the monster. I am a “who”***, in which the monster tells Conor who he is. Give each member of the group a copy of the monster’s speech to highlight and annotate, identifying particular words and phrases that stand out to them as revealing the monster’s nature. *How has the author conveyed the special nature of the monster? You may wish them to work in pairs, so that they can clarify and discuss ideas together as they work. Come back together to discuss ideas as a whole group.*
- Ask the group to read the chapters ‘Grandma’ (page 55) and ‘The Wildness of Stories’ (page 63) independently, then to work in pairs or small groups to summarise what they have found out, how the story has advanced and how their insight into Conor and his situation has been deepened. This would also be a good point to update the information they have collected on the role on the wall diagram.
- Now, read aloud ‘The First Tale’ (page 70). Give the group time and space to reflect on the chapter they have heard, and discuss the story the monster tells.
 - *Does the monster’s tale remind you of any other stories you have heard; what kind of stories are these? Readers may offer other examples of oral storytelling, e.g., myths, fairy tales, morality tales, fables etc.*
 - *What do you think the monster’s choice of tale tells us about the kind of creature he is?*
- Go on to read ‘The Rest of the First Tale’ (page 79) and discuss: *do you think, like many traditional tales, this story has a moral? If so, what might it be? Do you believe the monster’s statement, **There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere in between.** Do you agree with this statement? Why? Why not? Can you think of other characters in stories you have read that fit this description? What do you think the monster is trying to show Conor by telling him his tale?*

EXPLORING DILEMMAS AND DEEPENING RESPONSE THROUGH VISUALISATION – ‘UNDERSTANDING’ TO ‘DESTRUCTION’

- Read aloud the chapter ‘Understanding’ (page 86), and allow the group time and space to reflect on the chapter they have heard, then discuss the character of Lily.
 - *What sort of person do you think Lily is? What do we see in the text that supports our understanding of her?*
 - *Do you think she should have told more people about Conor’s Mum? Why do you think she told other people, after Conor had asked her not to?*
 - *To what extent do you think she is breaking his trust in her? What do you think her responsibilities and loyalties should have been in this situation?*
- Ask the group to read the chapters ‘Little Talk’ (page 96), ‘Grandma’s House’ (page 103), ‘Champ’ (page 111) and ‘Americans Don’t Get Much Holiday’ (page 117), independently then to work in pairs or small groups to summarise what they have read. *What do you think happened in these chapters, how did the story develop, and what more did we find out about Conor?*
- Now, read aloud the chapter ‘The Second Tale’ (page 125), and ask the group if they can explain why the monster destroyed the parson’s home. *What do you think might have motivated him to act as he did? Why do you think this?*
- Then read aloud ‘The Rest of the Second Tale’ (page 133), up to page 136, where the monster says **I await your command, boy**. Discuss the dilemma facing Conor; do you think he should continue with the destruction or calm down and walk away? You could extend this into the group creating a conscience alley, where they form two lines opposite each other with a path in between. Choose one person to play the part of Conor and, as he walks down the path, the rest of the people they pass should share their views and opinions. Ask the person who has walked the alley as Conor to share which opinions or advice they remember most vividly and why, and what they feel they should do next, as this character. You could build on this activity by asking each member of the group to write a brief note of advice, summarising what they think he should do and why, or outlining the consequences of making the wrong choice.
- Now read the first paragraph of ‘Destruction’ (page 139, up to **hurled to the floor**). Ask the group to visualise the scene in their mind’s eye as you are reading aloud, closing their eyes and picturing the scene unfolding as if it were a scene in a film. Re-read the section aloud two or three times and then ask them to describe to a partner what they pictured. Now, give the group art materials which they will be able to work swiftly with to depict their visualisation. Soft pencils or charcoal and cartridge paper would work well for this.
- Go on to ask the group to share what they imagined, comparing and contrasting the different interpretations shared and identifying key vocabulary or phrases which supported their understanding or interpretation. For example, ... **settee shattered into pieces beyond counting ... the wallpaper had been ripped back in dirty, uneven strips...** or ... **everything inside hurled to the floor...** Ask them why these words or phrases in particular stood out to them.
 - *What made them so vivid or memorable?*
 - *What impression is created by the author through the descriptions?*
 - *How do these descriptions make you feel?*
 - *What would you be thinking if you were an onlooker? What if you were Grandma?*
- Re-read the passage and then read on, up to the point Grandma enters the room (page 141). Ask the group for their personal reactions to Conor’s destruction of the room.
 - *Are you shocked by his actions?*

- o *Why do you think he behaved as he did?*
- o *Have you ever felt the way he felt? Or seen someone else who has been struggling to handle their emotions in this way? How did you deal with your emotions or react to someone else's behaviour? Why? Why not?* This could lead to a much larger discussion around self-regulation, and reacting to or managing emotions.
- Read aloud to the end of the chapter 'Destruction' and discuss Grandma's response.
 - o *Did you expect Grandma to behave as she does?*
 - o *Why do you think she responds in this way?*
 - o *Do you see the Grandma in a different light because of the way she acts here? Why or why not?*

DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING OF CHARACTER, WRITING IN ROLE – ‘INVISIBLE’ TO ‘A NOTE’

- Read aloud the chapter ‘Invisible’ (page 146). Give time and space for the group to reflect on what they have heard, and discuss:
 - *How do you think Conor might feel to be shunned by Lily, Harry, Sully and Anton? Have you ever experienced a situation like this; how did it feel?*
 - *What do you think Conor’s response to his father’s lack of reaction to his destruction at Grandma’s house conveys about his state of mind?*
- Go on to read aloud the chapters ‘Yew Trees’ (page 153) and ‘Could it be?’ (page 158) then discuss:
 - *How do you think Conor might feel about the possibility of the yew tree providing medicine that could help or heal his mother? Do you think he dares to hope, or fears for his hopes to be dashed? How do you know this?*
 - *How might he feel about his father’s return to America? Do you think he will share Grandma’s anger at his leaving? What makes you think this?*

Recall the school project on life writing and invite them to write in role as Conor, taking any part of ‘Could It Be?’ as their starting point, e.g., his feelings about his mother, or his father’s return to America. Model how to base this on Conor’s experiences and what is happening at this point in the story, writing in first person and including a detailed, personal account of events.

- Ask the group to read aloud the chapters ‘No Tale’ (page 164) and ‘I No Longer See You’ (page 170) then to summarise what they think has happened; identifying the significance to the narrative and to their understanding of the character of Conor. This could be another opportunity to update the role on the wall. Come back to discuss together: *Why do you think Harry’s treatment of Conor – telling him ‘**I no longer see you**’ – is the worst thing he can do to him? What aspect of Conor does this target?*
- Discuss Harry’s behaviour, exploring why he acts as he does, and inviting them to draw on personal experience:
 - *Why do you think Harry picks on someone who is already suffering?*
 - *What do Harry’s actions tell the reader about his character, and his understanding of Conor’s situation and inner feelings?*
 - *Have you ever witnessed a situation like this? What insights does your experience offer you into the story, or what insights does the story offer into what you experienced?*
- Read aloud ‘The Third Tale’ (page 175) and ‘Punishment’ (page 180), in which Conor fights Harry and we witness the aftermath of the attack.
 - *How does the monster’s third tale, of the invisible man, give form to Conor’s feelings?*
 - *What do you think is the monster’s role in the story? Is he helping or hurting Conor? What makes you think this?*
 - *How do you understand the relationship between Conor and the monster? Has it stayed the same since the monster first visited Conor? If you think it has changed, how is it different?*
- Support the group in considering events from Lily’s perspective by sharing ‘A Note’ (page 188). Now, ask them to recap on the key events that Lily would have observed of Conor’s story, up to the point where she sends him the note.

- o *How do you think her understanding of his situation changes over the course of the book?*
- o *Why do you think she decided to send Conor the note?*
- o *What do you think Lily hoped would happen as a result of sending it?*

REVISITING THE STORY AS A WHOLE – ‘100 YEARS’ TO ‘THE TRUTH’

- Ask the group to work together to summarise events so far, so that they see the journey leading up to this point and understand how things stand with Conor, his mother and Grandma and with the monster.
- Continue to read aloud the chapters ‘100 Years’ (page 193) and ‘What’s the Use of You?’ (page 201) in which Conor pays a difficult visit to his mum and an angry visit to the yew tree.
 - *What mood do you think the author is creating as he moves the story on?*
 - *What do you predict will happen, and what form might Conor’s nightmare take?*
- Read aloud ‘The Fourth Tale’ (page 207) up to the line, **The real monster was coming** (page 216). Allow time and space to reflect on what they have heard, and invite them to visualise and discuss the nightmare, sharing what elements it might include.
- Continue to read aloud the remainder of ‘The Fourth Tale’ and ‘The Rest of the Fourth Tale’ (page 215), then explore Conor’s truth and the groups’ reactions to it:
 - *Was there anything that surprised you about the ‘truth’?*
 - *Was there anything you found strange about it?*
 - *Can you think of a reason why Conor had been hiding this truth from himself?*
 - *Does the ‘truth’ change the way you feel about Conor?*
- Ask the group to read the chapters ‘Life after Death’ (page 221) and ‘Something in Common’ (page 227) independently, then to summarise what they have read in pairs or small groups. *What do you think happened in the two chapters you have read? What might this suggest about the way the story might conclude? What do you predict will happen as the story draws to a close?*
- Read aloud ‘The Truth’ (page 232), and give time and space to reflect on what they have heard. Reflect on the story as a whole, using what Aidan Chambers calls ‘the four basic questions’. These questions give readers accessible starting points for discussion:
 - *Tell me ... was there anything you liked about this story?*
 - *Was there anything that you particularly disliked?*
 - *Was there anything that puzzled you?*
 - *Were there any patterns ... any connections that you noticed? Did it remind you of anything else you’ve read, experienced or seen?*
- The openness of these questions unlike the more interrogative ‘Why?’ question encourages every reader to feel that they have something to say. It allows everyone to take part in arriving at a shared view without the fear of the ‘wrong’ answer.
- Asking these questions will lead children inevitably into a fuller discussion than using more general questions. You may, for example, ask the group:
 - *How does the author use the real world and that of the monster and his stories? How important do you think the two worlds are to the story? What happens when they overlap or collide?*
 - *Which character, aspect of the story, incident or episode interested you the most?*
 - *Did any of the characters or situations remind you of characters or situations in other books?*

- Would you recommend *A Monster Calls* to a friend? If a friend asked you what it was like and what it was about, how would you answer, without giving away the ending?
- Ask the group to summarise their final thoughts about the monster. Do you think the monster was ever 'really' there, or was he a product of Conor's imagination? What role do you think the monster plays in the novel – what does he do for Conor? Remind the group of the monster's words at the top of page 69, **Stories are wild creatures... When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?** How do you understand his words in the light of the role he played in Conor's story?
- Support the group in discussing the role of stories in *A Monster Calls* – you could ask them to make a list of all the different stories that are told within the novel, and consider what the effect of them is, on both the characters and the reader. Consider again the moral aspect of stories – are they always clear-cut in terms of what they are saying to the reader? Do you think *A Monster Calls* has a message to give to the reader? If so, what do you think that message is?
- Turn to the 'Author's Note' (page 7) to engage the group in discussing this story's origins, asking them to consider their personal reactions to the note. How does learning that Patrick Ness took the idea for the novel after Siobhan Dowd's own death from cancer affect your understanding and appreciation of the story? Whose story do you think this is? What do you think each author contributed to it? Do you think it would have been the story it is if either of them had worked on it independently?

AFTER READING, YOU COULD ALSO:

- Review the story in chronological order, considering the different emotions that Conor has felt throughout the story, the high and low points, using the role on the wall to support discussion of his emotional journey. You could use hot-seating to explore the feelings of any of the characters further; in hot-seating one member of the group role-plays a central character and is interviewed by the others included. This activity involves closely examining a character's motivation and responses.
- The group could work collaboratively to choose words that describe a character's emotions at different points of the story, write these on post-it notes, then organise them to demonstrate shades of emotional intensity in the story, to create a graph of emotion.
- Through modelling, ask the group to describe their favourite part of the story. Provide them with an oral scaffold, for example: *the most memorable part of the story was... because...; my top moment in the story was... because...* and ask them to identify their favourite part of the narrative. Encourage them to give reasons for their choices and invite them to share these.
- If possible, leave copies of the book in the book corner for readers to revisit and re-read in independent reading time, by themselves or socially in a group.
- Think about the text as a whole, including the front and back covers and the praise pages. *Do you agree with the praise lavished on the book and its author? Why do you think the publisher decided to bring out a tenth anniversary edition? What do you think might make this book a modern classic?*
- *A Monster Calls* won the prestigious Carnegie Medal and was also the first book to win the Greenaway Medal as well. Readers may wish to re-read all or parts of the story in the illustrated edition, and explore the impact of Jim Kay's illustrations and their interplay with Patrick Ness's prose.
- The story was adapted for the screen in 2016, directed by J.A. Bayona. Readers over the age of 12 could watch the film, and consider how Conor's world and the monster are realised, comparing and contrasting with the novel.
- You could research the history, stories, and characters of the mythological Herne the Hunter, Cernunnos and the Green Man to see what insight this gives into the character of the monster, and the reasons why he appears to Conor.
- *A Monster Calls* is concerned with the importance of story, so you could go on to investigate fairy tales and morality stories, maybe preparing an oral retelling of their favourite. *How do the stories you have explored and retold compare with those the monster tells? Do they have clear messages?*
- Cancer Research UK is a charity whose website includes facts and figures about different forms of cancer, information about what cancer is, preventing cancer and the search for cancer cures: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/>.

OTHER SUGGESTED TITLES BY OR TO FURTHER SUPPORT THE EXPLORATION OF THEMES ARISING FROM THE BOOK:

N.B: Patrick Ness's other titles are definitively categorised as Young Adult Novels and are most suited to readers in KS3 and KS4

- *The Knife of Never Letting Go* by Patrick Ness (Walker)
- *The Ask and the Answer* by Patrick Ness (Walker)
- *Monsters of Men* by Patrick Ness (Walker)
- *More Than This* by Patrick Ness (Walker)
- *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* by Patrick Ness (Walker)
- *And the Ocean was Our Sky* by Patrick Ness, illustrated by Rovina Cai (Walker)
- *Burn* by Patrick Ness (Walker)

- David Almond's *The Savage*, illustrated by Dave McKean (Walker Books) is another powerful story about the power of stories to explore grief.
- Siobhan Dowd's *Bog Child* (Definitions) won her a posthumous Carnegie Medal. You could explore her style as compared to Patrick Ness's, comparing and contrasting similarities and differences in their writing, and inviting the group to consider and discuss why Patrick Ness might have been chosen to complete an idea started by Siobhan Dowd.