

# A Monster Calls

Patrick Ness

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<https://patrickness.com/>

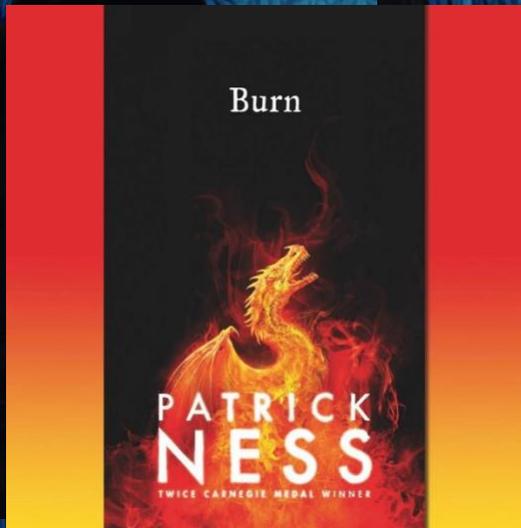


Patrick Ness was born October 17, 1971 in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Between childhood to young adulthood, Ness resided in Hawaii, Washington, and California. Ness's first published novel came out after moving to the United Kingdom in 1999. From his nine novels, Ness has acquired prestigious awards such as: the Carnegie Medal, the Costa Children's Book award, the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, etc. The hyperlink above provides more details on Ness's life, and oddly his fierce distaste of onions. (Ha-ha).

*A Monster Calls*, proves to be one of Ness's literary masterpieces as a young adult novelist, garnering him the Carnegie Medal for a second time in 2012. Ness accredits the renowned British author, Siobhan Dowd, for providing him a foundation for this novel. The characters, basis, and inception of the story were all products of Dowd's brilliant mind; Unfortunately, Dowd succumbed to breast cancer in 2007 and <http://siobhandowdtrust.com/about-siobhan/> her ideas were left adrift. In working with the same editor as Dowd, Ness was approached to revitalize Dowd's ideas and create a story. Ness did exactly that. *A Monster Calls* achieved such high acclaim that it was adapted into a film in 2016 and a stage production in 2017, both employing the same title.



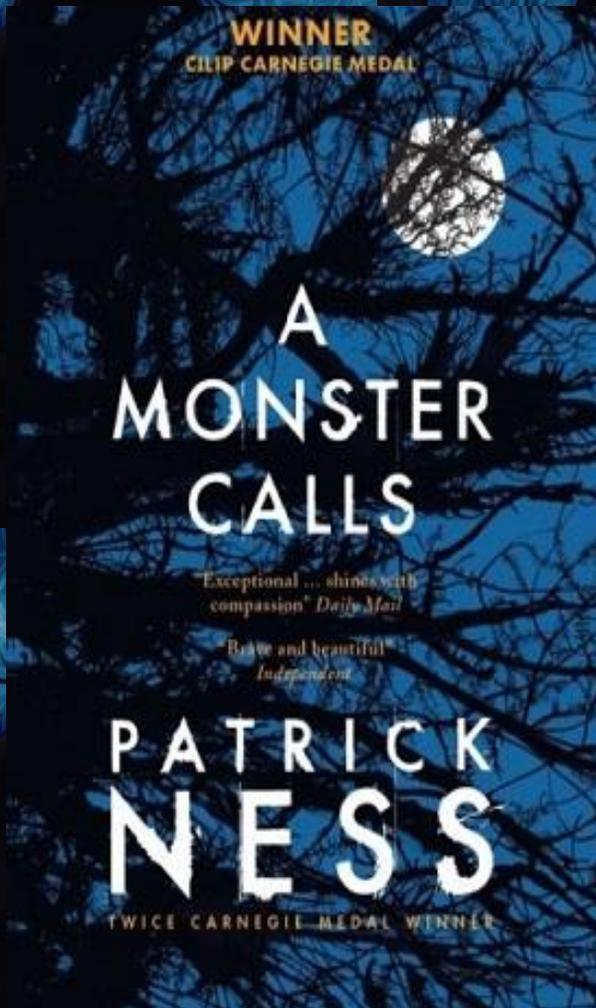
“Here’s what Siobhan and I came up with. So go. Run with it. Make trouble.” (Ness, Author’s Note)



Currently, Ness is working on the release of his newest novel, *Burn*, which is set to be published in May 2020. He revealed the book's cover this month! Good timing. 😊

<https://www.instagram.com/patricknessbooks/>

Running with it.



On an unwonted summery October night, Conor O'Malley awakens from his slumber. A nightmare rouses Conor; No, a recurring nightmare wakes him in a squirm of fear and panic. This odious nightmare has plagued Conor's dreams since knowledge of his mother's illness. He fears that this monstrous nightmare will manifest itself into the real world; And that is why, when another monster greets him in the form of a colossus yew tree, he is unimpressed. Nevertheless, this arboreal monster declares that it will tell him three stories, and at the end it demands that Conor tells his own. It demands the truth. As the monster shares its' crafty stories with Conor, his troubles with his ailing mother, absent father, strict grandmother, and abusive bully culminate. Conor finds himself more indignant than ever before; And even worse, he is apprehensive to what his telling of the truth will manifest.

## Making Trouble.

- “‘Stories are wild creatures,’ the monster said. ‘When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?’” (55)

Analysis: This quote is very perceptive of the power of stories. Separate from the narrative, the monster’s words are penetrating to the influence on action that stories incite. After I complete a book, I am prompted to act or feel a certain way because of the information I gained. Stories produce an aftereffect in their audiences. There is foreshadowing in this quote as well, as Conor wreaks his own havoc after listening to the monster’s three tales.

- “‘Son,’ his father said, leaning forward. ‘Stories don’t always have happy endings.’ This stopped him. Because they didn’t, did they?... Stories were wild, wild animals and went off in directions you couldn’t expect.” (148-149)

Analysis: Initially, Conor’s outlook into the world is very fixed. His mother assures him that the next treatments will work, grandma will only be staying for a couple of nights, etc. He identifies the villain and hero of the monster’s stories. Conor’s beliefs exhibit order and steadiness. However, the monster teaches Conor that life is hardly ever straightforward. There are curveballs. The heroes are not always virtuous, and the villains are not always evil. Later in the novel, this quote comes into play again to describe Conor’s anxiety over his true nightmare. The complexity of humans becomes an underlying interest of Ness.

- “‘You be as angry as you need to be,’ she said. ‘Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Not your grandma, not your dad, no one. And if you need to break things, then by God, you break them good and hard.’” (186-187)

Analysis: Conor’s mother’s dialogue in her final scenarios are pivotal to the future well-being of her son. She knows that empty promises were made, and Conor had to witness her deteriorate with false hope. There is a maternal connection present, where Conor’s mother can see the rage and hurt that Conor holds in. As her dialogue continues, she encourages Conor to be angry, at her, at the world. She wants Conor to free himself of his torment; And above all, she wants Conor to know that she understands his truth.

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## How Nightmarish is This Read?

- **Lexile Score:**730 L, Age Range 11-13 (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade)
- **ATOS Score:** ATOS Book Level: 4.8 Interest Level: Middle Grades (MG 6<sup>th</sup> and up) AR Points: 5.0
- **New Dale-Chall Readability Index:** Reading Level: Easy to read Grade Level: Grades 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>

Takeaway: The diction of this novel is very elementary. Two of the three text analyzers suggest that this book be picked up by middle schoolers. The ATOS and Lexile analyzers have examined the entirety of Ness's *A Monster Calls* and formulated similar scores. The remaining text analyzer, Dale-Chall, only examined an excerpt I inputted and not the novel. I tend to agree more with the ATOS and Lexile analyzers; The novel's substance cannot really be fully appreciated until later grades, when students are going through adolescence.

*A Monster Calls* is a harmonious book that fits into chapters 4, 5, and 8 of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*. The essence of the novel deals with the real devastation of cancer and how a child becomes a product of the illness's victimization. Conor suffers as being "the kid whose mother has cancer", he feels like he cannot escape the effects of death. Ness draws on elements of fantasy to divulge Connor's internal struggles.

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## Why Teens Should Let the Monster Loose.

All humans carry a nightmarish truth within themselves. Often, these truths grow into monsters that attack our thoughts and feelings; We end up burying these monsters to suppress the pain and confusion spurred by them. We fear what will happen if these truths are spoken. For teenagers, this fear is amplified tenfold. Especially in today's age of cancel culture, teenagers feel the anguish of withholding their truth to not disrupt the normalcy of their outside lives; They will accept being internally devoured than speak their thoughts. *A Monster Calls* is a remarkable novel that addresses this issue. Ness dissects this fear and provides a promising insight, that thoughts do not carry the same weight as actions. Teenagers need to know this.

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## Teaching with A Monster

*A Monster Calls* is a stupendous candidate for analyzing the effects of the fantasy genre. This book acts as a low fantasy novel, integrating mythology, magic, and other preternatural elements into Conor's realistic tragedy. Removing the fantastical components of this novel, the story would have a completely different tone; After all, the significance of the plot is Conor's mom losing her battle with cancer and how Conor makes sense of that. I would task my students with examining how Ness's inclusion of fantasy in Conor's existent predicament allows for a new scope to inspect Conor's internal dread of what future lies ahead of him.

I would also discuss Ness's usage of fantasy, including:

- Time and Dreams
  - There is an etymology of dreams and myth of "true" dreams occurring after midnight. On the bulk of occasions, Conor meets with the yew monster when the clock reads 12:07 a.m.
- Symbolism and The Yew Tree
  - The yew tree is known for its magical healing power in many legends and is referred to as the tree of life, rebirth, and regeneration. In this book, Ness also acknowledges the healing properties of the yew tree and utilizes it as the last-resort medicine for Conor's mom.
- The Monster's True Identity
  - When the arboreous monster reveals his many names, he lists: Herne the Hunter, Cernunnos, and the eternal Green Man. (36) All are mythological figures.
- The Stories
  - In the monster's tales of walking, he includes common mythical lore of giants, dragons, wizards, evil queens, and ancient apothecaries.

With Ness's book also having an adapted film, which he also wrote, there is a possibility to write a book-to-film paper as well. It would be enticing work for the students to see how similar or dissimilar Ness wrote the screenplay in comparison to the novel.

Background image: <https://vulpeslibris.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/a-monster-calls-3.jpg>  
(further edited by me).