***A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness**

1. **I. Present the novel**

In *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness, issues of truth and fear are addressed. The protagonist, Conor, is overwhelmed with the possibility his mom will die, his father left them and has started a new family, and he is being bullied and feels isolated. Needless to say, Conor endures a great deal of anxiety which manifests itself through his nightmares. He is visited by a monster yew tree. Through the monster Conor develops his ability to make decisions and find his truth. The monster shares three stories that take Conor though the experiences of the stories without ever having to have these experiences himself. Conor fights the changes in his life because he must go into the unknown, life without his mom and dad. He feels he has no control or power in his own life. The monster helps him find his own personal truth which helps Conor be more truthful to himself. Through the monster and the stories, especially his own, he discovers his truth, not the truth he had been telling himself before the monster came walking.

The monster Showed up just after midnight. As they do. Conor was awake when it came. He’d had *a* nightmare. Well, not a nightmare. *The* nightmare. The one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming. The one with the hands slipping from his grasp, no matter how hard he tried to hold on. The one that always ended with-…He listened, straining against the silence, but all he could hear was the quite house around him, the occasional tick from the empty downstairs or a rustle of bedding from his mum’s room next door. Nothing. And then something. Something he realized was the thing that had woken him. Someone was calling his name. *Conor*…Conor…*Conor*…*Conor*. (15-17)

 Conor is afflicted by a reoccurring nightmare, but on this particular night he meets a monster that has come walking for him. Through this opening Ness creates an attention grabber right away, without any hesitation. This is very important for young readers because they frequently have a hard time getting interested and staying interested. When the monster appears on the first page of the novel it creates the need to continue reading. The language perfectly describes Conor’s fear, and it establishes the emotion and sets the mood for the novel. The novel is written in the voice of a thirteen-year-old boy. The short sentences are easy to understand and Ness moves through the emotions of fear in quick, succinct manner. Conor is filled with fear, and this fear comes out in his nightmare. Conor hears the monster call is name four times. This makes it clear that the monster is present and wants Conor’s attention, and not part of Conor’s nightmare as Conor initially thinks. It is a monster yew tree that has come walking for Conor. The text in the novel addresses the fact that at thirteen children are growing out of fairytales and happily-ever-after ending. Stating though Conor that “Only a baby would believe that it really happened. Only a baby would believe that a tree – seriously, a tree – had walked down the hill and attacked the house.” (26) But it is the monster that is the device and symbolism of which Conor comes to know his truth; even knowing monsters are for babies finds his truth through the monster who is real, but not real.

The monster stood in his garden, looking right back at him.

*“Open up, I want to talk to you.”*

“Yeah, sure,” said Conor.

“Because that’s what monsters always want. To talk.”

“What do you want from me,” Conor said (47)

*“I do not often come walking*,” the monster said, “*only for matters of life and death*.” (50)

*“I will tell you three stories.”*

“Stories?” Conor asked

*“Stories are the wildest things of all*,” the monster rumbled. “*Stories chase and bite and hunt*.” (51)

*“You know that your truth, the one that you hide, Conor O’Malley, is the thing you are most afraid of.”*

*“You will tell it. For this is why you called me*.” (52)

*“You will tell me the fourth tale. You will tell me the truth.”* (53)

“Stories are wild creatures. When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?” (68)

Ness opens up dialogue between Conor and the monster right away. This dialogue is a straightforward lesson in the importance of stories, for the monster will tell Conor three stories before Conor must tell the fourth. Stories provide experiences in a safe environment of the imagination. It is through the imagination that is guided by the stories within the story that revelations are made, and learn that truth is not black and white, nor obvious “sometimes people need to lie to themselves most of all.” (81) The monster teaches that in life there isn’t always a good guy and a bad guy in its stories to Conor, and, in fact, “most people are somewhere in between.” (84) And, if the first story’s lesson in truth isn’t enough Ness provides two more using the power of threes. Conor’s questioning is like that of a thirteen-year-old boy who is discovering a depth of truth that he hadn’t been able to conceive previously. The language is simple and straightforward providing easy, smooth progression through the novel. The monster tells Conor three stories that help Conor develop a manner of thinking that is more mature. Ness states that “conor’s realization that he can think two contradictory things at the same time…is a step into adulthood.” (246) It often takes more than one experience to teach and develop this more mature manner of thinking. The novel offers the experience through the protagonist worded in a simple clear way with repetition for added clarity and understanding. Finally, the monster makes it clear to Conor why it has come walking. It is because Conor needs its help to come to his truth.

“You still do not know why you called me, do you” The monster asked. “You still do not know why I have come walking. It is not as if I do this every day, Conor O’Malley.” (166) “Stories are important,” the monster said. “They can be more important than anything. If they carry the truth.” (168)

There are stories within a story. These stories take Conor on his journey to find his own personal truth. There are lessons in these stories that teaches Conor to question and partake in the decisions of the characters. He is able to come closer to an understanding about himself, the world, people, perspective, and that truth is not black and white. He must dig deeper, and there is no better way to do that than through stories the monster shares with him. Ness offers this up in simple clear language through experiences that are safe for Conor to embark upon, for its just a story, right?

Ultimately Ness provides the feelings and experiences of death in a noncomplicated way, but nonetheless sad and tragic. Conor wakes up every day and must deal and grapple with being his mom dying, being bullied, and isolated and invisibleness this causes him to feel. *A Monster Calls* is filled with daily confrontations that are common experiences at some time or another. Dealing with the loss of loved ones through death or abandonment is what the novel offers as well as teaches a solution to the confrontations though the thought process to come to understand and accept the things that cannot be changed. But, the real lessons in one’s own personal truth and how to acknowledge it are the real gift for all young and old.

I encourage you to read *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness.

**Why you should give this novel to teens**

* This novel is about death, bullying, and feeling invisible and powerless. It teaches through stories and symbolism, which is how young adults understand best. This is a great read for children 4th through 6th grade.
* The protagonist is on a journey that is useful and beneficial. The stories within the story are thought provoking lessons. They are lessons that build confidence in decision-making as well as lessons through experiences through the protagonist: lessons about people, what is good and bad, and that there are two sides to every story.
* This novel is about how not every story ends happy. Real life is not a fairy tale with a happy ending. The aids in the lesson that life is not a fairy tale, and bad things happen even to good people, and death comes to us all.
* This novel encourages exploration through stories, and the value of stories for exploration of feelings, emotions, and experiences.
* This novel presents the complex issue of death (loss) in bite size digestible pieces from word choice to sentence length and structure.
* This novel also expresses feelings of fear and anxiety, and powerlessness over death. Children can learn to identify and deal with the unfamiliar, unknown, or new feelings of fear and anxiety. This book provides support and understanding, and perhaps how to express and deal with fear and anxiety, and it’s okay to be angry.

**This novel in teaching**

I have begun teaching using this book. I have introduced vocabulary I think useful, especially because the novel was written in England and takes place in England, so there are words that need further explanation for my thirteen-year-old students. I am planning for them to read assigned sections each week. They will be required to list unknown words as they read. They will be required to write a quote from the reading and write - or discuss, or make slides - explaining their quote with history and meaning as well as explain the significance of the quote. And, we will celebrate finishing the book by watching the film. We will of course discuss the novel vs the movie. Through this book I hope to foster the maturation of my young adult students through the stories of the monster to Conor. It is my aim to teach them through the journey of the protagonist with Ness’s simple, succinct language providing the story through which truth can be found, and ability to confront fears. This is empowering and fostering transition from being victim of circumstance to achieving victory over sadness and fear that life can be sometimes. And, according to ATOS this book is ideal for MG = Middle Grades (4-8); MG+ = Upper Middle Grades (6 and up) as the complexity results.

According to the ATOS estimated word count analyzer text used for Book Talk results are:

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| **A Monster Calls****ATOS Book Level:**  | 4.8  |
| **Interest Level:**  | Middle Grades Plus (MG+ 6 and up) |
| **AR Points:**  | 5.0 |
| **Rating:**  | 3.5 |
| **Word Count:**  | 33446 |
| **Fiction/Nonfiction** | Fiction |
| **Topic - Subtopic:**  | Award Winners-SLJ Best Book; Award Winners-Kate Greenaway Medal/Honor Book; Award Winners-Publishers Weekly Best Book; Diseases/Disorders-Cancer; Family Life-Single Parents; Horror/Thriller-Monsters; Recommended Reading-YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults;  |

**NOTE:** The estimated word count you provided is a factor in calculating both book level and points. Incorrect word count estimate can cause inaccurate ATOS Analysis.

(<http://www1.renaissance.com/Products/Accelerated-Reader/ATOS/ATOS-Analyzer-for-Estimated-Word-Count?_ga=2.198460649.732307672.1520186032-1032161469.1520186032>)

**II. Author and author notes**

Patrick Ness

<http://patrickness.com/>

 

Google Images

*A Monster Calls* was actually the idea of Siobhan Dowd. Siobhan had begun *A Monster Calls*, but unfortunately, she died after only having the characters, a premise, and a beginning. Ness was asked to turn what she had into a book; though, he refused to write it in her voice, or how he thought she sounded. He took her characters, premise, and beginning and wrote *A Monster Calls*. Dowd was a British writer, and Ness is an American-British writer. Ness was born in America but lives in England. He states that he didn’t think *A Monster Calls* would be so well received by readers, and that it was never just for children, for “a good story should be for everyone.” (244)

Ness, Patrick. *A Monster Calls* Publisher: Walker Books; 2011. ISBN 978-1-4063-7652-4

**III Favorite passage**:

“The monster showed up just after midnight. As they do. Conor was awake when it came. He’d had *a* nightmare. Well, not a nightmare. *The* nightmare. The one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming. The one with the hands slipping from his grasp, no matter how hard he tried to hold on. The one that always ended with-…He listened, straining against the silence, but all he could hear was the quite house around him, the occasional tick from the empty downstairs or a rustle of bedding from his mum’s room next door. Nothing. And then something. Something he realized was the thing that had woken him. Someone was calling his name. *Conor*…Conor…*Conor*…*Conor*.” (15-17)

While there are many great passages, this is my favorite. This is because it is the beginning and it starts the novel off with excitement, intrigue, and fear and anxiety. Ness does not hesitate with long introductions or explanations but rather has chosen to dive right in. This is what is necessary, and often needed as an attention-grabber. It is immediately clear the significant fear and anxiety the protagonist is under. This sets the mood for the entire novel. I love it!

IV. Other writings by Patrick Ness and Siobhan Dowd



Walker Books, 2008, 2009, 2010. ISBN 978-1-4063-1026-9

Other novels by Siobhan Dowd

*A Swift Pure Cry* 2006 David Flicking Books ISBN: 978-0-385-60970-8

*The London Eye Mystery* 2007 David Flicking Books ISBN: 978-0-385-61266-1

*Bog Child* 2008 David Flicking ISBN: 978-0-385-61431-3

(www.wikipedia.org)

