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Dr. Warner

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A Monster Calls

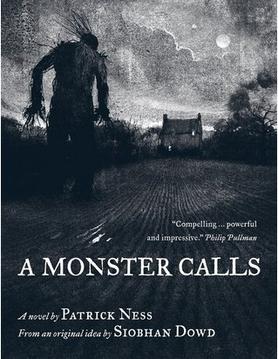
Author Information

* Ness was born in Virginia, grew up in Hawaii and Washington, college in California, lives in UK
* He has won many awards such as the Carnegie medal (twice)
* Book was inspired by author Siobhan Dowd, who set up the characters, premise, and beginning, but passed away from cancer
* https://patrickness.com/



Summary

Ever since his mother’s cancer diagnosis, thirteen year old Conor suffers from the same recurring nightmare every night. At school everyone treats him differently because of his mother’s illness, and some even bully him for it. Internally, he struggles greatly with his mother’s condition and is struggling to accept that he has to let her go. One night, at 12:07 the yew tree behind Conor’s house comes to life and tells Conor he will tell him three stories. Every few nights the monster returns at 12:07 to tell him a new story, each about different humans. After the third story, Conor gains the strength to let go of his mother.



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\_Monster\_Calls

Quotes

“Stories, he thought again. ‘Your stories,’ Mrs. Marl had said in their English lesson. ‘Don’t think you haven’t lived long enough to have a story to tell.’” (20)

This quote stands out because it not only highlights a big struggle for Conor in this story, but it also gives a lot of credit to students in the real world as well. Sometimes kids are not given the proper acknowledgement they deserve, all because of their age. A lot of kids feel as though they’re not taken seriously by adults, and this quote feels like the book is saying “I see you, I understand your struggle”. This struggle is shared by Conor throughout the book, because everyone around him treats him differently not only because of his mother’s condition, but also because they believe that due to his age, he isn’t mature enough to properly process and understand what it is he’s going through.

*Here is what will happen, Conor O’Malley,* the monster continued, *I will come to you again on further nights*. Conor felt his stomach clench, like he was preparing for a blow. *And I will tell you three stories. Three tales from when I walked before.* Conor blinked. Then blinked again. ‘You’re going to tell me stories?’ *Indeed,* the monster said. ‘Well -” Conor looked around in disbelief. ‘How is that a nightmare?’ *Stories are the wildest things of all,* the monster rumbled. *Stories chase and bite and hunt.* ‘That’s what teachers always say,’ Conor said. ‘No one believes them either’ *And when I have finished my three stories,* the monster said, as if Conor hadn’t spoken, *you will tell me a fourth.* (27)

If I were to get up in front of an English classroom and say a quote similar to what the monster said, I would like to imagine that I’d get a few nods in agreement from my peers. That’s because I feel that everyone in those classrooms are there because they all share a belief in the power of storytelling. The real challenge is getting others to believe in that, which is why the eye rolling from Conor really stands out to me because I feel like that’s a common sentiment shared by many students in middle school and high school classrooms. I’m sure many questions arise such as “Why do we have to search for meaning in these stories?” and “Why is this important to us?”. The story acknowledges that here with Conor’s reaction to the monster. Conor doesn’t understand how stories can carry that power, even though people have told him this before. So I hope that through the eyes of a “non-believer”, when skeptical readers see how the stories help Conor through a tough time in his life, they understand how strong stories can be if you give them a chance.

“They shook hands like two businessmen at the end of a meeting. ‘Good-bye O’Malley,’ Harry said, looking into Conor’s eyes. ‘I no longer see you.’ Then he let go of Conor’s hand, turned his back, and walked away. Anton and Sully looked even more confused, but after a second, they walked away, too” (102).

To be seen, that’s something I believe everyone in this world wants. We want to be acknowledged, respected, understood, validated, fulfilled, and when we don’t receive that we can feel a little helpless and lost. Throughout the story, everyone looks at Conor through a certain lens, calling him so brave and cutting him a lot of slack and letting him get away with things he knows he shouldn’t. Conor doesn’t feel like they’re truly seeing him, they’re just keeping their distance and keeping this image of a brave but tragic boy in their head because it’s easy to do. Conor feels scared, helpless and alone and so ironically, his bullies are some of the people closest to him, because they don’t care what he’s going through, they treat him horribly regardless. Conor has this internal sense of guilt because of his reaction to his mom’s condition, and so he believes he deserves what the bullies are doing to him, because no one else will treat him the way he feels he deserves. So when the bullies tell him they won’t acknowledge him anymore he finally has a breakdown and lashes back out at them. Just like Conor, we all want to be seen, and this book acknowledges that and reminds us that we have to see each other as well.

Teaching Plan

At the end of the story, the monster tells Conor he has to tell his own story, and so if I were to introduce this story to a classroom I’d invite them to do the same. That’s a little general, so to specify I’d want to focus on times where they didn’t feel seen, or felt alone, or perhaps if they ever lost someone close to them, if they felt comfortable sharing that with me. I’d want them to see that no matter how young they are, everyone has a story that’s theirs, and that story has power. Perhaps some of the themes, especially about loss, grief, and acceptance would really resonate with them now, and in the future. This book teaches about accepting and overcoming loss and the fear that accompanies it, and so even if the book doesn’t click with them at first, perhaps in the future they’ll face a rough time similar to Conor, and they’ll think back on this story. It’s a short book and easy to read, so I think I’d introduce it at a middle school level, plus a big theme in this story is trusting young kids to know more than we think they do, and so it’d feel appropriate to teach it at a younger age. The category this book would place into in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story* would be chapter 5, books about facing death and loss.

Text Complexity

The New Dale-Chall Readability Formula scores the book at 46.6 and suggests that it’s appropriate for age level 9 in the fourth grade. While it is an easy book to read, the themes addressed in this story have to do with heavier themes such death, loss, acceptance, etc. To write about and engage with the heavier themes in the story, I’d want a higher age group to introduce it to. The themes aren’t too extreme, and there are important lessons to hold onto throughout life and so middle school classrooms feel most appropriate for teaching.

Closing Quote

When I was asked if I would consider turning her work into a book, I hesitated. What I wouldn’t do – what I couldn’t do – was write a novel mimicking her voice. That would have been a disservice to her, to the reader, and most importantly to the story. I don’t think good writing can possibly work that way. But the thing about good ideas is that they grow other ideas. Almost before I could help it, Siobhan’s ideas were suggesting new ones to me, and I began to feel that itch that every writer longs for: the itch to start getting words down, the itch to tell a story. I felt – and feel – as if I’ve been handed a baton, like a particularly fine writer has given me her story and said, “Go. Run with it. Make trouble.” So that’s what I tried to do. Along the way, I had only a single guideline: to write a book I think Siobhan would have liked. No other criteria could really matter. And now it’s time to hand the baton on to you. Stories don’t end with the writers, however many started the race. Here’s what Siobhan and I came up with. So go. Run with it. Make trouble.