

A Monster Calls

By Patrick Ness

Original concept by Siobhan Dowd

Let's get this out of the way: *A Monster Calls* is a story about cancer. It's not a secret and it's not subtle, which typically equates to a deluge of trite sentimentality intended to cheaply manipulate you, the reader, into crying like a baby. *A Monster Calls* will still (probably) make you cry, but it actually earns its sadness; the only time it treads into triteness is on the final page, and that's a forgivable slip given the quality of the material that comes before it.

The original concept for the novel comes from Siobhan Dowd, an author of young adult novels who passed away from cancer in 2007; acclaimed novelist Patrick Ness (author of the *Chaos Walking* series) brought the book to fruition. Told from the perspective of a boy named Conor, the fear of losing his dying mother is appropriately wrapped up in monster metaphors that aren't dissimilar to the incarnate emotions of, say, Pixar's *Inside Out*—one of these monsters, a yew tree come to life, repeatedly visits Conor at 12:07 in the morning and explains that he will tell him three stories. When he is finished, Conor must tell his own story.

These stories form the heart of the novel, and they elevate it beyond your average young adult fare. I was reminded, in some ways, of Garth Nix's *Keys to the Kingdom* series; even though *A Monster Calls* feels like something entirely new, it draws upon a long tradition of great English literature that enriches its subtext and use of metaphor. Specifically, it calls upon the mythical Green Man (a sort of nature god—think Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings*, who, given Tolkien's predilections, was likely inspired by the Green Man figure) by way of the 14th-century Arthurian poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

A quick recap for those unfamiliar: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* tells the story of Sir Gawain, one of King Arthur's knights, who accepts a challenge from the mysterious Green Knight—he will allow Sir Gawain to strike him once in the neck with his axe, on the condition that Sir Gawain must meet him one year and one day later and receive the same strike (it's a chivalry thing; don't ask). Sir Gawain decapitates the Green Knight, but his opponent merely picks up his severed head, reminds Sir Gawain of their deal, and leaves.

Sir Gawain, intending to honor the agreement, departs some months later in order to search for the Green Knight. He eventually takes up residence at a castle near the Green Knight's chapel while waiting for the day of reckoning, and during that time he undergoes three trials that test his honor. The nuances are too complicated to explain here, but suffice to say that the trials become relevant to the Green Knight plotline and everything turns out all right for Sir Gawain. (Is it possible to spoil a piece of literature written more than six hundred years ago?)

You can see the similarities: the arrival of a supernatural entity in the form of the Green Knight/the monster, the three trials/stories motif, the inevitability of death and whether one has the cowardice or courage to confront it. This theme is brought into focus by the monster's three stories, just as it was by the obscene injustice of the Green Knight's rigged challenge in *Sir Gawain*—the tales that the creature tells (which, stylistically and thematically, would rest comfortably alongside the stories from *The Canterbury Tales*; Chaucer's magnum opus came into being around the same time as *Sir Gawain*) are full of irrational suffering and uneasy morality in the vein of the fables originally collected and retold by the Brothers Grimm.

It is through storytelling that Conor comes to terms with the unfairness of the world, and *A Monster Calls* attempts to serve the same purpose for its own readers. I don't know what it's like to lose someone to cancer, so I can't speak as to how the book might communicate to

someone who can personally relate to such a situation, but it hit me harder than I would have expected for a novel so explicitly intent on tearjerking. Thanks to Ness' fine prose, Jim Kay's eye-catching illustrations, and the deep well of mythology and literary history from which it draws, *A Monster Calls* sets itself apart as one of the finer young adult books I've had the privilege of reading.

Review by Aaron Larson