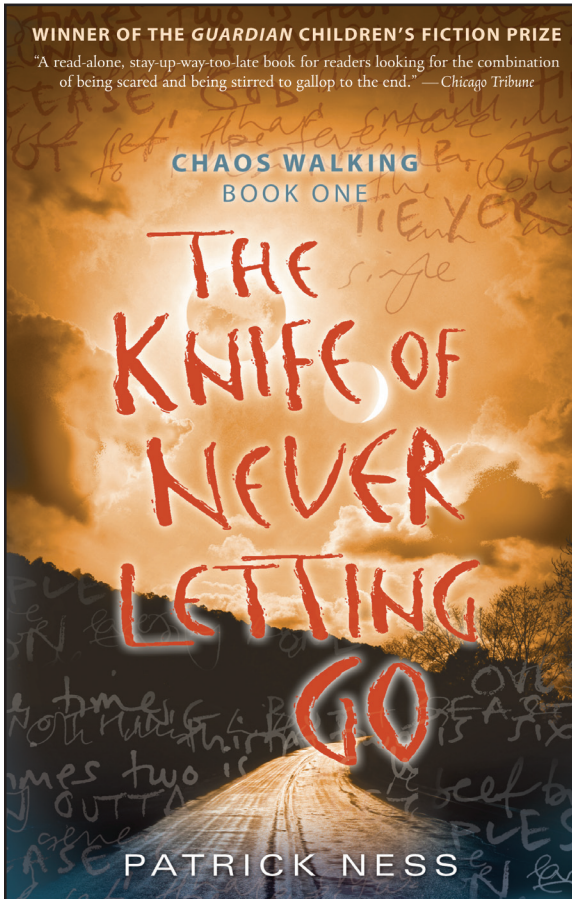


# THE KNIFE OF NEVER LETTING GO

THE FIRST BOOK IN THE CHAOS WALKING SERIES



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I look at the knife again, sitting there on the moss like a thing without properties, a thing made of metal as separate from a boy as can be, a thing which casts all blame from itself to the boy who uses it.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Todd Hewitt is the only boy in a town of men. Ever since the settlers were infected with the Noise germ, Todd can hear everything the men think, and they hear everything he thinks. Todd is just a month away from becoming a man, but in the midst of the cacophony, he knows that the town is hiding something from him—something so awful that Todd is forced to flee with only his dog, whose simple, loyal voice he hears as well. With hostile men from the town in pursuit, the two stumble upon a strange and eerily silent creature: a girl. Who is she? Why wasn't she killed by the germ like all the females on New World? Propelled by Todd's gritty narration, readers are in for a white-knuckle journey in which a boy on the cusp of manhood must unlearn everything he knows in order to figure out who he truly is.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Patrick Ness chose to write Todd's voice in the vernacular, as Todd actually speaks, with grammatical and spelling errors. For instance, on page 4, Todd thinks, "The plans are being planned, the preparayshuns prepared, it will be a party, I guess, tho I'm starting to get some strange pictures about it." His voice reflects things about his environment and how he was raised. What, in particular, does Ness's use of the vernacular show us about Todd? About Hildy? Wilf? Look for more examples of Ness's use of the vernacular in *The Knife of Never Letting Go*.
2. Think about the title of the book: *The Knife of Never Letting Go*. On page 84, Todd says, "But a knife ain't just a thing, is it? It's a choice, it's something you *do*. A knife says yes or no, cut or not, die or don't. A knife takes a decision out of your hand and puts it in the world and it never goes back again." Todd describes the knife on page 341 by saying, "As long as I hold it, as long as I use it, the knife lives in order to take life, but it has to be commanded, it has to have me to tell it to kill, and it wants to . . . but I have to want it to as well, my will has to join with its will." What does the knife

symbolize? What does Todd do, and not do, with the knife? Think about the Spackle, the turtle, and Aaron. What happens to the knife in the end? What do you think this signifies?

3. On page 8, Todd talks about the “crops” in the swamp. When you read his description of the crops, you realize they are not like the crops we might be familiar with. They are “easily big enough to kill an almost-man and his dog. The fins on their backs look just like a row of rushes and if you get too close, *WHOOM!*—outta the water they come, flying at you with their claws grasping and their mouths snapping.” In *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, Ness imagines what it might be like to settle a new world. In a July 2009 interview at [www.yareads.com](http://www.yareads.com), he said, “I started thinking, how would settlers really be? What would they really do? I thought that they would take names from Earth and stick them on whatever seemed closest. Some people don’t realize they’re on another planet for a hundred pages, which I like. Todd has always lived there, so it’s not another planet, it’s home. I really like that kind of world building.” What clues did you pick up early on that led you to the conclusion that the book is set in a world different from our own? Look for words and phrases such as grublets, cassors, crested pine, fission-bike, and Packy Vines. What do these unfamiliar terms refer to?
4. Todd tells us on pages 18 and 19 that he has had little education. In fact, reading and writing are forbidden by the Mayor of Prentissstown. On page 51, Ben tells Todd that “knowledge is dangerous.” At one point in the story (page 142), Todd realizes, “The world’s a dangerous place when you don’t know enough.” How does Todd’s lack of education and knowledge affect his journey, especially in terms of his inability to read Ben’s note and map or his mother’s journal? How does the denial of education allow totalitarian governments (like that in Prentissstown) to control their citizens?
5. On pages 20–22, Todd refers to the Noise that fills his life. The author indicates Noise through the use of font. Do you think this effectively communicates what Noise might look and feel like? Where did this Noise come from? On page 391, Todd describes Noise as “Informayshun, all the time, never stopping, whether you want it or not. . . . And too much informayshun can drive a man mad.” And on page 42, he says, “The Noise is a man unfiltered, and without a filter, a man is just chaos walking.” (Note that this last phrase, *Chaos Walking*, is the title of the trilogy of which *The Knife of Never Letting Go* is the first book.) Dystopian

novels—ones that describe a future that is bleak, dark, and often fearful—offer the author a chance to comment on present-day society. What in our contemporary lives might we consider Noise? What positive and negative impact do you think this Noise has on our lives?

6. On page 26, Todd tells us that Old World (Earth) was full of “corrupshun and sin.” On page 163, Hildy says, “Old World’s mucky, violent, and crowded, a-splitting right into bits with people a-hating each other and a-killing each other, no one is happy till everyone’s miserable.” Is Patrick Ness making a statement about the world in which we currently live? What do you think of his assessment? If the people of Prentissstown have come to the New World to find a paradise—“a new way of life, one clean and simple and honest and good, one different from Old World in all respects, where people could live in safety and peace with God as our guide and with love of our fellow man” (page 414)—have they been successful and changed their ways? Explain.
7. When New World is described as “a whole new Eden” on page 26, this is an example of an allusion. Patrick Ness assumes that the reader will have heard of Eden and know what it means. Ness also makes allusions to Nazi Germany, Al Qaeda and terrorism, and so on. Look for additional allusions throughout *The Knife of Never Letting Go*.
8. Prentissstown is characterized by a complete lack of privacy. Patrick Ness said, speaking about contemporary life in an interview at [www.bookdepository.com](http://www.bookdepository.com), “No one’s allowed a private life, because even your friends might sell you to the papers if you’ve allegedly done something ‘shocking.’ And with camera phones and Facebook, suddenly every action, even ones meant for just close friends, can be broadcast to the entire world. . . . I think it’s robbing us of something.” Do you agree or disagree with Ness? Do we suffer from a lack of privacy? What are some examples? What are the costs of lack of privacy? Are there any benefits?
9. In chapter 1, “The Hole in the Noise,” Todd mentions Spackles and uses the racial slur “Spacks.” He describes them on page 69. What is a Spackle? On pages 413–419, Viola reads to Todd from his mother’s journal. His mother writes that Aaron has said some things she doesn’t agree with “about the natives of New World. Which are called the Spackle . . . and which were a BIG surprise, since they were so shy at first neither the original planners back on Old World or

our first scout ships even knew they were here! They're very sweet creachers. Different and maybe primitive and no spoken or written language that we can really find but I don't agree with some of the thinking of the people here that the Spackle are animals rather than intelligent beings." How is the treatment of the Spackle reminiscent of the treatment of the Jews during Hitler's regime and the treatment of Native Americans by European colonists? In chapter 25 (pages 271–280), why do you think Ness decided to show the participation of the hero of the story, Todd, in the degradation and destruction of a Spackle? How do these actions change Todd? How do these actions change Viola's feelings about Todd? Do they change your feelings about Todd?

10. Throughout *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, Ness explores gender roles. In a February 10, 2010, interview at [presentingLenore.blogspot.com](http://presentingLenore.blogspot.com), he said, "The gender roles were more a way of exploring my theory about how bad we are as a species at handling difference. If something is different, it's either better (in which case we need to destroy it) or worse (in which case we need to exploit it). That was more a plea to accept difference as merely difference." How would you respond to Ness's comments?

11. On pages 64–68, when Todd sees a girl for the first time, he's surprised that she is not what he expected a girl to be like. He says, "Girls are small and polite and smiley. They wear dresses and their hair is long. . . . They do all the inside chores. . . . They reach womanhood when they turn thirteen . . . and then they're women and they become wives." Viola tells Todd when they are in Carbonel Downs that the women there "clean and they cook and they make babies and they all live in a big dormitory outside of town where they can't interfere in men's business" (page 362). What do you think of Todd's description? Think about Ness's use of gender roles in the novel. How are the roles played by both genders in the book similar to contemporary American gender roles, and how are they different? How does Todd, through Viola, eventually see women and their roles? (Check out pages 380 and 408 if you aren't sure.)

12. In *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, Todd faces many ethical dilemmas, in which he has to choose between what is right (and usually more difficult) and what is wrong (and usually easier). In some cases he makes the right decision. In others, he does not. For instance, on page 79, he realizes that the girl he has found is considered a "sign" and is wanted

by the citizens of Prentisstown to be sacrificed. He considers giving her over to Aaron and the Mayor: "They could have what they want and leave me alone and I could go back and everything could be like it was . . . it might save me." What does he ultimately decide to do? Why? Look for additional examples of ethical dilemmas that Todd faces. What is the ethical dilemma that Ben and Cillian face in how they raise Todd? (See pages 393–397 if you need help.)

13. Follow the relationship between Todd and his dog, Manchee. At the beginning of the book, Todd tells us that Manchee was an unwanted birthday present. On page 333 Todd says, "I rub the ears of my . . . ruddy *great* dog that I never wanted but who hung around anyway . . . and who's right there when I need pulling back from the darkness I fall into and who tells me who I am whenever I forget." The two become true friends and companions. List the ways in which Manchee shows his devotion to Todd. Explain Manchee's part in Todd's ethical dilemma.

14. In the last hundred pages of the book, there is much talk of hope. Ben talks to Todd and Viola about hope. In her journal, Todd's mother says, "*Let me tell you about the place you've been born into, son. It's called New World and it's a whole planet made entirely of hope*" (page 414). Later Todd says, "I think how hope . . . may be the thing that keeps you going, but that it's dangerous, too, that it's painful and risky." (page 423). For Todd and Viola, hope lies in what they think they will find in Haven. It is what allows them to continue their journey and not give up. Do they find what they hope to find at the end of the road? Explain.

15. In *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, though the men can hear one another's thoughts via Noise, do they really know one another? Todd says on page 308, "the lesson of forever and ever is that knowing a man's mind ain't knowing the man." Though Todd cannot hear Viola's Noise, he eventually is stunned to realize that he knows "what she's thinking and feeling and what's going on inside her. . . . I can read *her*" (pages 419–420). Think about the development of their relationship. How is it that Todd knows these things in the midst of Viola's silence?

16. One of the themes of *The Knife of Never Letting Go* is that "*war makes monsters of men*" (page 430). What occurs in the story that proves this to be true? Can you think of present-day examples that either support or negate this idea?



17. In the climax of the book (starting on page 440), Todd must face his final ethical dilemma. What is the ethical dilemma that Aaron forces him to confront? How does this tie in with Aaron's preaching that "if one of us falls, we all fall," which is stated several times throughout the story? How does Viola help Todd resolve this dilemma?
18. Todd uses what some consider obscenities in the book. Why do you think Patrick Ness made the choice to have Todd use these terms? Does it add to, or detract from, his character development? Why does Todd sometimes use euphemisms like "effing" in place of the obscenities themselves? What does that tell you about him?
19. In an interview at [www.yareads.com](http://www.yareads.com), Patrick Ness says that the books in the Chaos Walking series are "probably most about how hope lies in the people

we love, that if you can find someone to count on and who counts on you, then that's probably the best meaning life is going to get. A hopeful message." How is this idea communicated in *The Knife of Never Letting Go*? What do you predict will happen in *The Ask and the Answer*, the second book in the Chaos Walking series?

20. *Publishers Weekly* conducted an interview with Patrick Ness in October of 2009 in which he says, "Teenagers are a terrific audience. You have to respect them or they'll put you down immediately. There's no sentimentality about it; if they don't like you, they just won't read you. . . . If you can keep their respect and get them to come with you, they're willing to follow you anywhere, much farther than an adult audience." Has Ness earned your respect as a writer? Why or why not?

## ABOUT PATRICK NESS



Patrick Ness was born on an army base in Virginia, where his father was a drill sergeant. As a child he also lived in Hawaii, Washington state, and California. As a young adult, Patrick Ness studied English literature at the University of Southern California. In 1999 he moved to London, where he has lived since. He has

taught creative writing at Oxford University and written book reviews for several publications. Most of his time is spent writing.

The books in the Chaos Walking trilogy have won many awards. Most recently, *Monsters of Men* was short-listed for the 2010 W. H. Smith Children's Book of the Year. It also appears on several "best books of 2010" lists.

Interesting facts about Patrick Ness include that he was a goth as a teen, has a tattoo of a rhinoceros, is a certified scuba diver, will not eat onions under any circumstances, is a marathon runner (and says he gets his best ideas while running), was accepted into film school but

turned it down to study writing, wrote a radio comedy about vampires, and always knows the last line of his books before he starts writing.

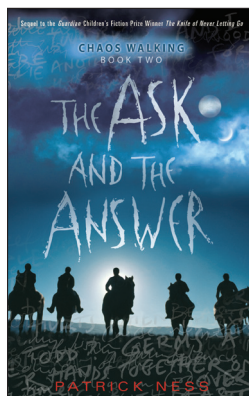
Patrick Ness on writing *The Knife of Never Letting Go*: When he was asked by [yareads.com](http://www.yareads.com) how he came up with the idea for the book, he said, "It was two ideas really, as I like to say, one serious, one stupid. The serious one was that the world is a noisy place already, with mobiles and the Internet and networking sites and on and on. You can't really turn anywhere without someone telling you their opinion. So I thought the next logical step was, what if you couldn't get away? What if you and everyone else was completely robbed of privacy? Especially if you were a young person.

"The other idea was that I've never liked books about talking dogs, and I thought it would be funny to have a dog character talk like an actual dog would, instead of just being a miniature person. And I think dogs would talk about things important to a dog, like eating and going to the bathroom, and how excited they were to see you.

That's how it began, and it just grew from there."

## ALSO BY PATRICK NESS:

### BOOK TWO IN THE CHAOS WALKING SERIES



#### *The Ask and the Answer*

A Costa Children's Book Award Winner

A *Publishers Weekly* Best Children's Book of the Year

A *Booklist* Editors' Choice

★ "Grim and beautifully written. . . . Uses a brilliant cast of well-developed characters and its singular setting and premise to present a provocative examination of the nature of evil and humanity. This is among the best YA science fiction novels of the year."

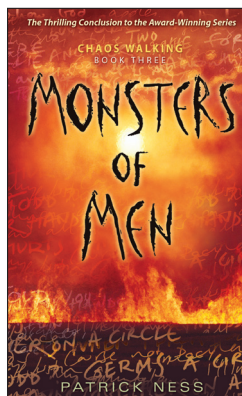
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

★ "An amalgamation of society's most brutal facets—fascism, terrorism, torture, ethnic cleansing—with all kinds of relevance to our world . . . a relentless flurry of heavy-hitting issues, hinging on appeasement, complicity, and maintaining one's morality in the face of impossible choices."

—*Booklist* (starred review)

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### BOOK THREE IN THE CHAOS WALKING SERIES



#### *Monsters of Men*

A Carnegie Medal Winner

A *Booklist* Editor's Choice

A U.S. Board on Books for Young People Outstanding International Book

A *Publishers Weekly* Best Children's Book of the Year

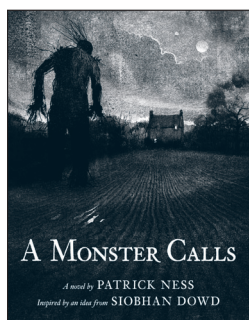
★ "This is science fiction at its best, and is a singular fusion of brutality and idealism that is, at last, perfectly human."

—*Booklist* (starred review)

★ "As in his preceding books, Ness offers incisive appraisals of violence, power, and human nature, and with the series complete, it's clear that he has crafted one of the most important works of young adult science fiction in recent years."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

HC: 978-0-7636-4751-3 • PB: 978-0-7636-5665-2 • E-book: 978-0-7636-5211-1



#### *A Monster Calls*

★ "From a premise left by author Siobhan Dowd before her untimely death, Ness has crafted a nuanced tale that draws on elements of classic horror stories to delve into the terrifying terrain of loss."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

★ "Beautiful in its execution, and fearless in its honesty."

—*Booklist* (starred review)

★ "A profoundly moving, expertly crafted tale of unaccountable loss."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

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This discussion guide was written by Terri Evans, media specialist at Champlin Park High School in Minnesota. In 2010, Patrick Ness visited Champlin Park High School to spend three days discussing *The Knife of Never Letting Go* with the nearly 3,500 students and staff who had read the book over the summer.



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