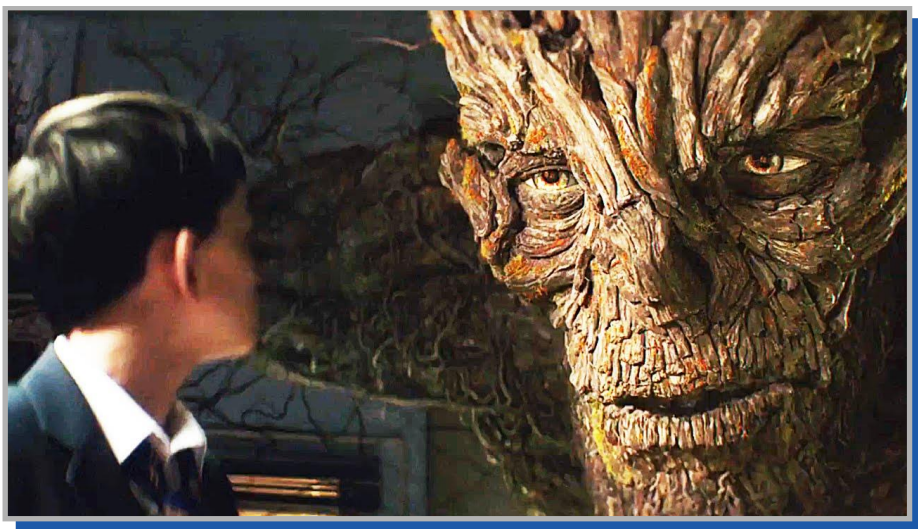


# A MONSTER CALLS: A BOOK REVIEW

BY GABRIELLE BRAND



This book is based on the original story ideas of author Siobhan Dowd whose premature death from breast cancer prevented her from writing it herself. Following her death in 2007, Patrick Ness was asked to turn her work into a book which he titled: *A Monster Calls*. It is an extraordinarily moving novel about coming to terms with loss, grief and death.

Set in England, the story follows 13-year-old Conor O'Malley as he comes to terms with his mother's terminal illness. Conor is isolated and alone, estranged from his father who lives in America with his new family, and learning to live with his strict and distant grandmother who, consumed by her daughter's illness, has little compassion for him. He is also a victim of the school bully.

Conor is haunted by a recurring nightmare '*the one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming*' until one night when a monster (giant yew tree) begins to visit. The monster demands to be listened to. He tells Conor three contradictory human tales, after which Conor must speak *His* truth, a tale that exposes the honest and harsh meanings behind his recurring nightmare.

As the story unfolds, the monster's three tales '*chase and bite and hunt*' by exposing the complexity of being human, the need to lie to oneself, that belief is half of all healing, and how being seen can be lonelier than being invisible. These stories bring to light the impending reality of Conor's mother's death from cancer as he is forced to grow up and face his demons.

Ancient and wise, The Monster hasn't come to hurt Conor. It has come to save him. Through the Monster, Connor ultimately comes to understand that he must accept his

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<sup>1</sup> A Monster Calls [online image]. Retrieved August 28, 2018 from [https://www.dr.dk/images/article/2016/12/07/syv\\_minutter\\_over\\_midnat.jpg](https://www.dr.dk/images/article/2016/12/07/syv_minutter_over_midnat.jpg)

mother's imminent death and that he should not feel guilty for wanting it to be over. Connor visits and comforts his mother one last time with the Monster by his side. He then returns home with his grandmother, with whom he has reached an understanding, and she gives him the room that used to be his mother's. In the room, he finds his mother's old art book, which depicts the stories that were told to him by the Monster, and a drawing of his mother as a child with the Monster.

This book provides a potent stimulus for exploring themes around death and dying and the three tales highlight the complexity of the grieving process. Throughout the book the reader feels a strong sense of empathy for Connor, as he desperately tries to make sense of his mother's death. The book reminds us how grieving is unique to each individual and it honours the courage needed to confront the awful truths when a loved one is dying. The story encourages the readers to explore the needs and experiences of patients and their families, not just in palliative care settings, but across a range of clinical contexts.

## DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. From the outset, *A Monster Calls* is about grief and loss, however, the truth about his mother's imminent death is kept from Connor.
  - Do you think Connor should have been told about his mother's prognosis at an earlier stage?
  - Do you think giving Connor hope was the right decision?
  - When and how should children and young people be told that they or someone they love is going to die?
  - How can this story be used to help people come to terms with loss, grief and death?
2. How does the monster describe itself to Connor? What does it want? What is its purpose?
3. One of the things that tortures Connor most is his guilt about letting his mother go—for both wanting her to live but needing to be free from the pain of living in the 'not-knowing':

*'I didn't mean to let her go! And now it's for real! Now she's going to die and it's my fault!'*

  - Have you even been in a situation where you have had to 'let go' of someone? Did you experience the same type of conflicting feelings that Connor did?
4. Connor's monster appears to him in the form of a giant yew tree.
  - What is the medicinal value of the tree?
  - How effective is it as a treatment for his mother's illness?
  - Why does she want to believe it will help?
5. Connor displayed some destructive behaviours (challenging the school bully and destroying his grandmother's belongings) in response to his grief.
  - Why do you think Connor responded in this way?
  - How might you (as a healthcare professional or friend) help someone like Connor deal with the grieving process?

6. Explore the core messages of each of the monster's three tales and discuss how these insights relate to Conor's journey.
7. Lily was Conor's closest friend but she betrayed him, and he can't forgive her.
  - How do most people behave around Conor once they learn about his mother's illness? Why?
  - Are these types of reactions typical when people hear about a serious illness or the imminent death of someone they know? Why?
8. Harry, the school bully, looks straight into Conor's eyes and says, '*I no longer see you*' (page 145). Why is this such a cruel thing to say?
9. At the very end of the novel, what does Conor say to his mother? Why must he say it? Why must she hear it?
10. Did the end of the book surprise you? If so, why? Discuss the ending in relation to grieving for a loved one.
11. How do the illustrations in *A Monster Calls* capture the tone of the novel and express Conor's emotions?

## LINKS

The *Monster Calls* was recreated into a film by J. A. Bayona in 2016. This is a trailer to the film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVm20Di9Wg>

The *Monster Calls* fourth story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7t5rDb9c9Cg>

## REFERENCE

Ness, P. (2011). *A Monster Calls*. New York: Candlewick Press

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