Patrick Ness

(17 October 1971 –)

Tom Ue
University College London

BOOKS: *The Crash of Hennington* (London: Flamingo, 2003; New York: HarperFlamingoCanada, 2003);
Topics About Which I Know Nothing (London: Flamingo, 2004; enlarged edition, London: Fourth Estate, 2014);
The Knife of Never Letting Go (London: Walker Books, 2008; Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick, 2008);
The Ask and the Answer (London: Walker Books, 2009; Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick, 2009);
Monsters of Men (London: Walker Books, 2010: Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick, 2010);
A Monster Calls, inspired by an idea from Siobhan Dowd, illustrated by Jim Kay (London: Walker Books, 2011; Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick, 2011);
More Than This (London: Walker Books, 2013; Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick, 2013);
The Crane Wife (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2013; New York: Penguin, 2013);
The Rest of Us Just Live Here (London: Walker Books, 2015; New York: Harperteen, 2015).

PRODUCED SCRIPT: *A Monster Calls*, motion picture, Apaches Entertainment, 2016.

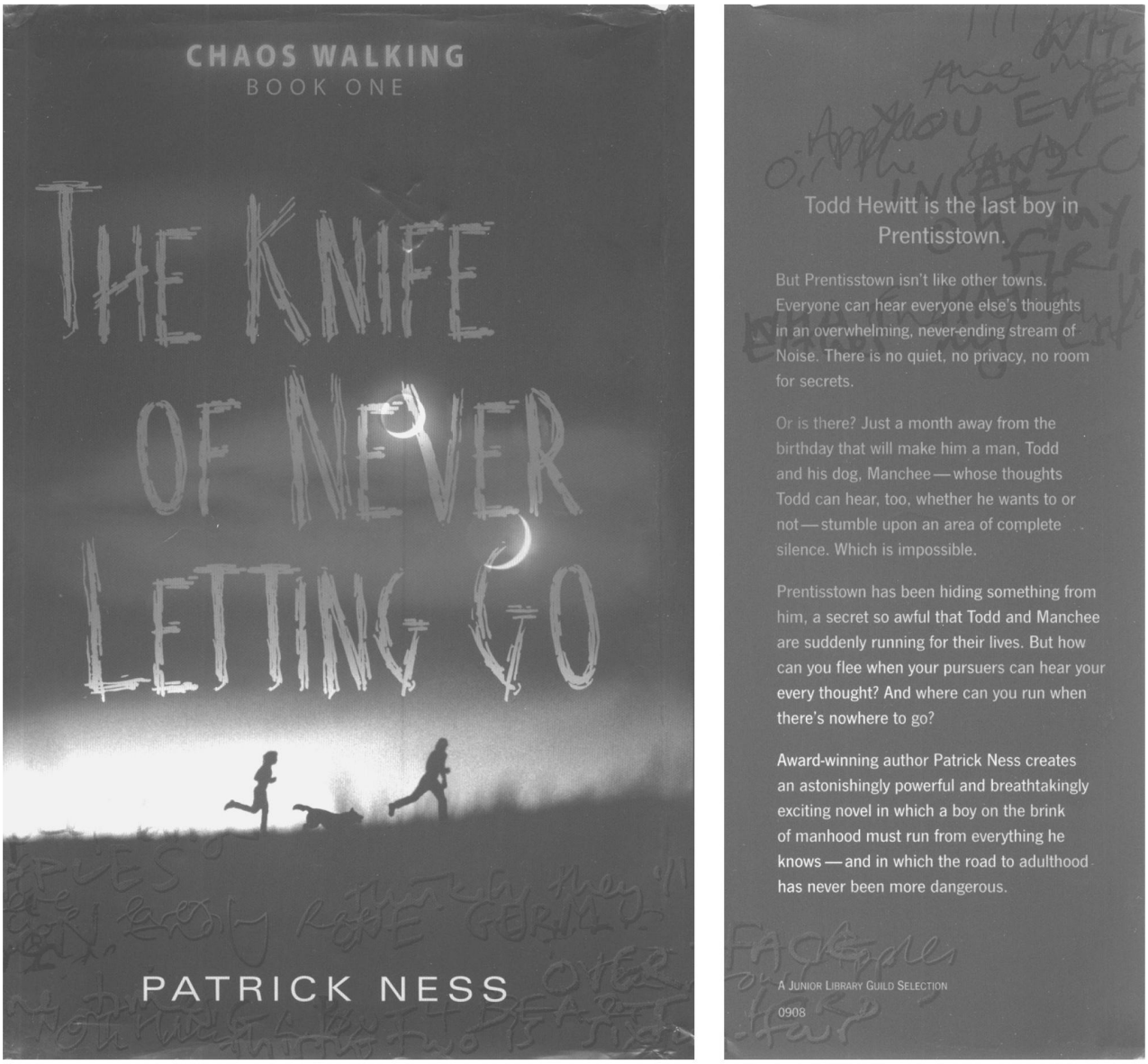
OTHER: "The New World," "The Wide, Wide Sea," and "Snowscape," *chaoswalkingstories.com* [Web, accessed 22 August 2015];
"Patrick Ness: His Edinburgh Speech in Full . . .," Siobhan Dowd Trust Memorial Lecture, *The Siobhan Dowd Trust*, 16 August 2014 [Web, accessed 26 August 2015].

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS—UNCOLLECTED: "Patrick Ness's Top 10 'Unsuitable' Books for Teenagers," *Guardian*, 8 April 2011 [Web, accessed 30 June 2015];

Patrick Ness (photograph © Helen Giles; courtesy of Walker Books)

"Patrick Ness: Censorship in the Internet Age," *Guardian*, 20 August 2012 [Web, accessed 29 June 2015].

Best known for his writing for children and young adults—works that successfully bring together fantasy, realistic dialogue, and his political inter-



Dust jacket and front flap for the American edition of Ness's first novel for young adults (Lexington County Public Library)

ests—Patrick Ness has earned every major prize in children's fiction, including, for two consecutive years, the Carnegie Medal. In his Siobhan Dowd Trust Memorial Lecture, delivered in the Edinburgh Book Festival on 16 August 2014, Ness explains why he writes children's books: "A book, any book, is a cry in the wilderness. It's a cry that says, This is the world I recognize, do you recognize it, too? And for children's books, I'd say that we issue that cry on behalf of the voiceless, on behalf, too, of that voiceless part of ourselves." He concludes: "Young people aren't a separate species. They're us. We're them. No getting around it. And they need stories just as badly as we do to deal with an inexplicable world. Stories told with empathy. Stories told with compassion. Stories—of any kind—told with love."

Patrick Ness was born 17 October 1971 on the army base Fort Belvoir, near Alexandria, Virginia. His father was a drill sergeant in the United States Army. When he was an infant, the family moved to Hawaii, where he lived until he was six, moving then to the state of Washington. As a teenager in Tacoma, Ness was a goth, albeit a church-going one. In an article in *The Guardian* (14 June 2012) following his second Carnegie medal win, he described himself during his teenage years as a "gay, preppy, deeply

anxious son of American fundamentalist Christians" who "couldn't have felt more different than if I'd had a tail." In his acceptance speech for the award he remembered sporting "that Bono Sunday Bloody Sunday-era mullet." As a child, Ness read widely. "My childhood reading was blissfully unchaperoned," he writes in "Patrick Ness's Top 10 'Unsuitable' Books for Teenagers": "My parents were just happy I liked to read, and so I—in utter innocence—would wander into the public library and pick up any old thing. I read Harold Robbins' Celebrity when I was 13, for example. It was VERY educational." Unlike his brother and sister, who went to college in Idaho, Ness attended the University of Southern California, where he gained his B.A. in English *summa cum laude* in 1993. There, he took creative-writing classes with American novelist and short-story writer T. C. Boyle. He has cited the Australian writer Peter Carey as his favorite author and an influence on his writing, others being Nicola Barker, Don DeLillo, Terry Pratchett, Ali Smith, and David Foster Wallace. During his college years Ness worked first at a library on campus and later at a marine biology library and at a government depository.

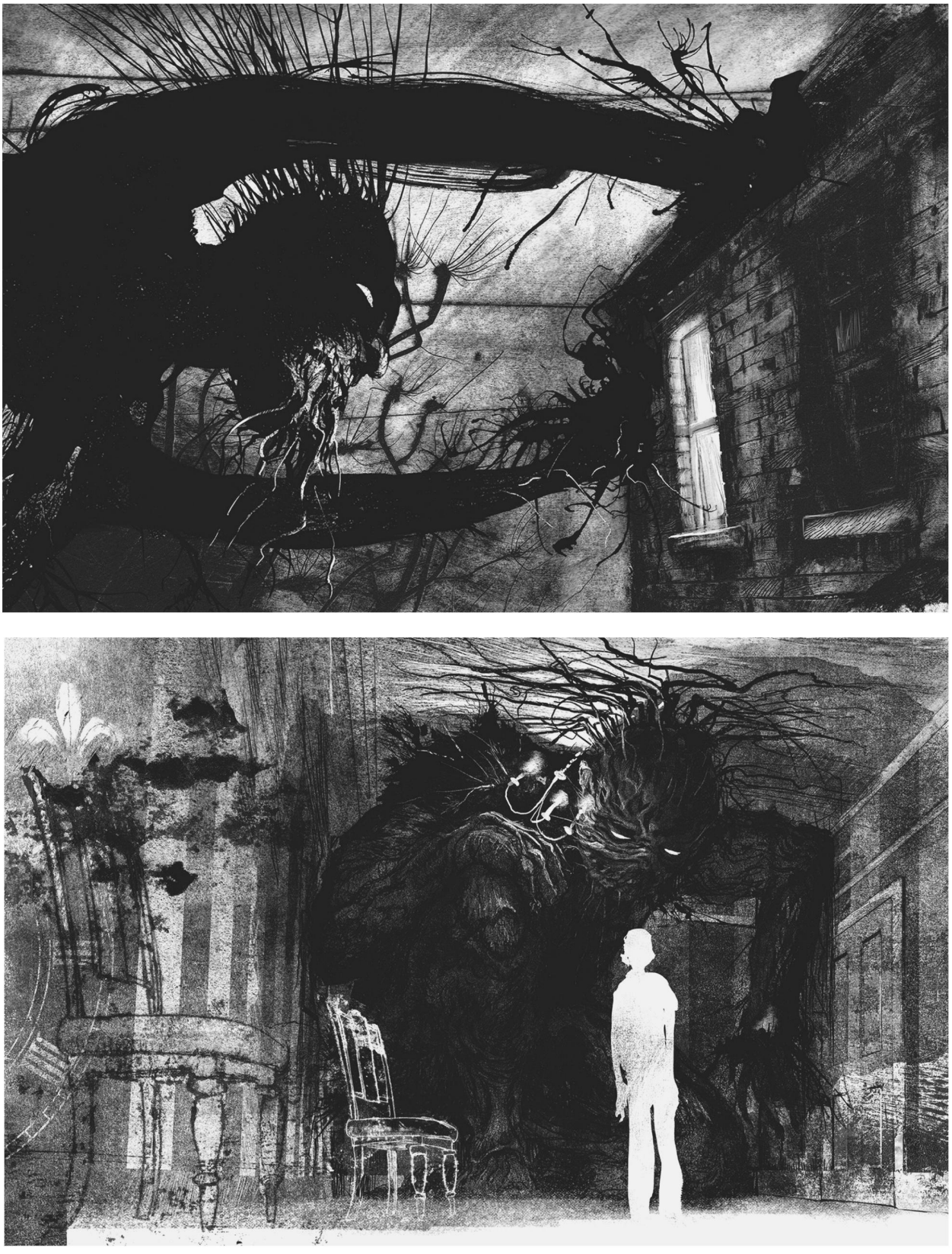
After graduation he became a writer for a cable company in Los Angeles, authoring manuals and speeches. Ness's first short story, "Sydney Is a City of Jaywalkers," was published in *Genre* magazine in 1997 and later included in his first short-story collection. In 1999 he moved to London, where he has lived ever since. Addressing his assimilation into the U.K. a decade after his move, Ness told interviewer Michael Levy, "I always feel between worlds, between cultures, and I think that's not necessarily a bad place for a writer to be. Writers are kind of on the fringe anyway, observing, writing things down. I'm still mostly American, but it's a nice tension."

At the time of his move to the U.K., Ness was at work on his first book, a novel in 117 chapters for adults titled *The Crash of Hennington* (2003). A political satire, the novel follows the adventures of Jon Noth, who returns to the fictional seaside metropolis of Hennington to reclaim his lost love—four decades later. A mysterious herd of rhinoceros wander the city's streets. (Ness has a rhinoceros tattoo.) Hephzibah Anderson in *The Observer* (12 January 2003) commended the novel for its formal challenges: "Ness juggles stories involving ménages à trois, miracles, and a thwarted love involving the twin genies of religious extremism and megalomania, switching ably between more than 10 different viewpoints, among them the leader of Hennington's free-roaming herd of rhinos, the Crash. It is a tricky act to pull off unsentimentally, but through the rhino's keen eyes, nose and taste buds, the dramas of the 'thin creatures,' that most jittery and uncommunicative breed of mammals, are put uniquely into perspective. This is a very humane and entertaining tale."

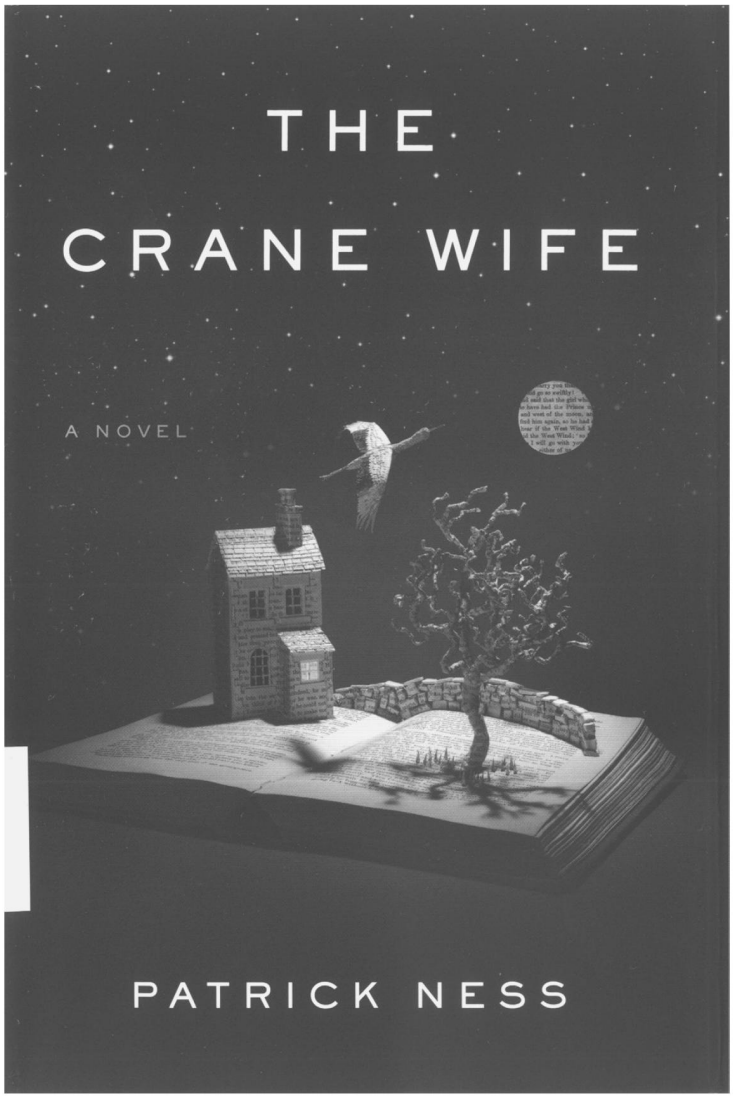
Ness's second book, also for adult readers, is a collection of ten short stories titled *Topics About Which I Know Nothing* (2004). Nicholas Lezard wrote favorably of the collection in *The Guardian* (19 March 2005): "each story is a tasty titbit, to be savoured briefly before moving on to the next one. What makes these stories so delightful is that there actually is something very substantial at work behind them, however airy they seem at first. They'll lodge in the mind." In his review in *The Telegraph* (9 May 2004), Lloyd Evans drew parallels between Ness's background and his imaginative work: "Patrick Ness is a sort of American gypsy. Raised in Hawaii, California and Washington, he is currently living in London. His first collection of short stories brims with inventiveness and creative audacity. Travel has stocked his mind with a rich thesaurus of characters, locations and settings. He knows America and Canada thoroughly and he appears to have criss-crossed Australia's crimson hinterland many times." "Many writers," Evans wrote, "come to fiction as a form of retribution. In the dreamscape of storytelling, the slights and injuries of youth are magically smoothed away. This may be Ness's motivation too, but in his case revenge is sweet."

In his introduction to the 2014 enlarged edition of this collection, Ness revealed that his story "Sally Rae Wentworth" was among his favorites; that "The Gifted," which provides an outsider's perspective on a gifted class, was "a rare instance" of autobiographical writing; and that "Quis Custodiet" was a heavily revised version of a story that he had written in his college writing classes with T. C. Boyle. In his review in *The Independent* (16 March 2014) Brandon Robshaw cited "Sydney Is a City of Jaywalkers" as probably the best story. The new addition to the volume, a story titled "Now That You've Died" that Robshaw describes as "a dramatic monologue about the afterlife," was commissioned by the Royal National Institute of Blind People. It was recorded as an immersive play dramatized by actor Christopher Eccleston. The story was staged at London's Roundhouse during "Read for RNIB day," part of a campaign to make books more accessible for blind and partially-sighted people, and it was made available by *The Guardian Books Podcast*. In its concerns about living, death, and the afterlife, the story is very much in keeping with Ness' novel *More Than This* (2013).

Ness has taught creative writing at the University of Oxford and has been a prolific literary jour-



Illustrations by Jim Kay for Ness's A Monster Calls*, in which thirteen-year-old Conor O'Malley must tell a monster a parable to avoid being eaten alive (courtesy of Walker Books)*

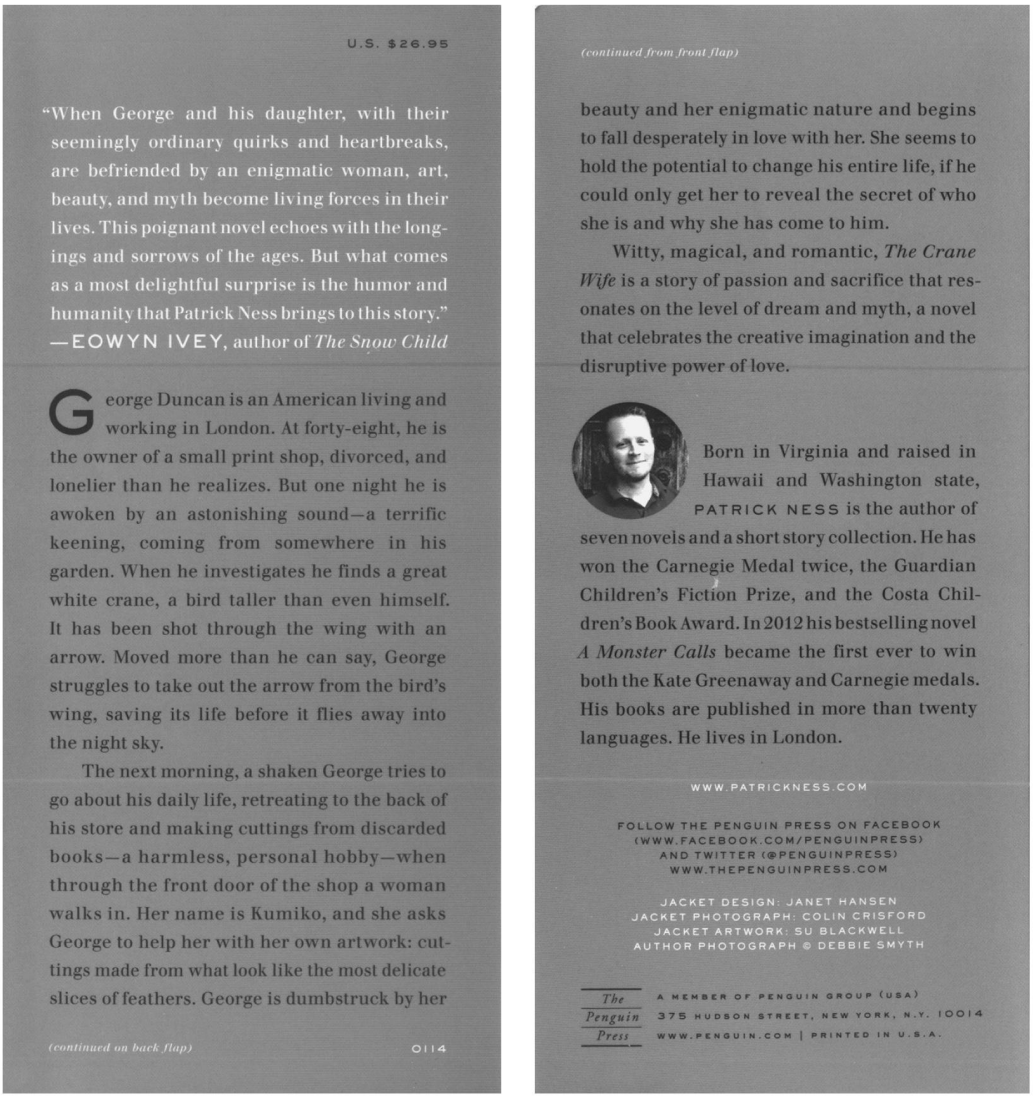


Dust jacket, with front and back flaps, for the American edition of Ness's novel that was inspired by a Japanese folk tale. The sculpture featured on the cover was created by Su Blackwell (Richland Library).

nalist, contributing criticism to the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. He also regularly reviews books and writes opinion pieces mostly for *The Guardian*. Ness became a naturalized British citizen in 2005 and holds both American and British citizenship. The following year, he entered into a civil partnership with his British partner, M. A. Nowell, less than two months after the Civil Partnership Act came into effect. (The couple married in 2013, following the legalization of same-sex marriage in Washington state, which preceded the legalization of such unions in the U.K.)

In 2008 Ness published his first novel for young adults, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, the initial volume in his *Chaos Walking* trilogy; the series firmly established his reputation as a leading novelist in the field. In the brief autobiographical piece he wrote for Walker Books, Ness describes his writing practice and his work on this novel in particular:

> When I'm working on a first draft, all I write is 1000 words a day, which isn't that much (I started out with 300, then moved up to 500, now I can do 1000 easy). And if I write my 1000 words, I'm done for the day, even if it only took an hour (it usually takes more, of course, but not always). Novels are



U.S. $26.95

"When George and his daughter, with their seemingly ordinary quirks and heartbreaks, are befriended by an enigmatic woman, art, beauty, and myth become living forces in their lives. This poignant novel echoes with the longings and sorrows of the ages. But what comes as a most delightful surprise is the humor and humanity that Patrick Ness brings to this story."
—EOWYN IVEY, author of *The Snow Child*

George Duncan is an American living and working in London. At forty-eight, he is the owner of a small print shop, divorced, and lonelier than he realizes. But one night he is awoken by an astonishing sound—a terrific keening, coming from somewhere in his garden. When he investigates he finds a great white crane, a bird taller than even himself. It has been shot through the wing with an arrow. Moved more than he can say, George struggles to take out the arrow from the bird's wing, saving its life before it flies away into the night sky.

The next morning, a shaken George tries to go about his daily life, retreating to the back of his store and making cuttings from discarded books—a harmless, personal hobby—when through the front door of the shop a woman walks in. Her name is Kumiko, and she asks George to help her with her own artwork: cuttings made from what look like the most delicate slices of feathers. George is dumbstruck by her

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beauty and her enigmatic nature and begins to fall desperately in love with her. She seems to hold the potential to change his entire life, if he could only get her to reveal the secret of who she is and why she has come to him.

Witty, magical, and romantic, *The Crane Wife* is a story of passion and sacrifice that resonates on the level of dream and myth, a novel that celebrates the creative imagination and the disruptive power of love.

Born in Virginia and raised in Hawaii and Washington state, PATRICK NESS is the author of seven novels and a short story collection. He has won the Carnegie Medal twice, the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, and the Costa Children's Book Award. In 2012 his bestselling novel *A Monster Calls* became the first ever to win both the Kate Greenaway and Carnegie medals. His books are published in more than twenty languages. He lives in London.

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anywhere from 60,000 words on up, so it's possible that just sixty days later you might have a whole first draft. *The Knife of Never Letting Go* is 112,900 words and took about seven months to get a good first draft. Lots of rewrites followed. That's the fun part, where the book really starts to come together just exactly how you see it, the part where you feel like a real writer.

Set in a dystopian world where, because of a virus, everyone can hear everyone else's thoughts, *The Knife of Never Letting Go* won the 2008 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize and the Booktrust Teenage Prize and was shortlisted for the 2009 Carnegie Medal. Ness was named the first online writer-in-residence for Booktrust, and kept a blog about his writing on the reading charity's website from March to September in 2009. Despite the widespread critical recognition, *The Knife of Never Letting Go* was criticized for its violence. In an article titled "Children's Books Are 'So Violent They Need a Health Warning'" in the *Daily Mail* (26 December 2008), Sarah Harris explores some of these claims, citing the views of Rona Tutt, a former president of the National Association of Head Teachers. The second book of the trilogy, *The Ask and the Answer* (2009), won the Costa Children's Book Award, and the third, *Monsters of*

Men (2010), not only won the 2011 Carnegie Medal, Ness's first, but also was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award.

Initially told from the perspective of Todd Hewitt, the series reveals how the stories that he had been told as a child are false, despite the "openness" imposed by the virus that infects Prentisstown. Ness addresses the inspiration for the series in a statement given in the jacket copy of the first novel: "Information is absolutely everywhere today—texts and e-mails and messaging—so much it feels like you can't get away from it. I began to wonder what it would be like to be in a town where you really *couldn't* get away. How could you keep hold of who you are? What price would you be willing to pay to save yourself?" In addition to affecting the minds of the people, the virus killed all of the women; it was released by the Spackles, the planet's native species. These accepted truths, however, are called into question when Todd meets Viola, a source of silence whom the virus should have killed. Ness returns to the world of the series in the short stories "The New World," "The Wide, Wide Sea," and "Snowscape," which accompanied the paperback editions of the three novels, and to the trilogy's concerns about privacy and censorship, especially those that we impose on ourselves, in a lecture given at the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference in 2012 (published as "Patrick Ness: Censorship in the Internet Age" in *The Guardian*), where he warns that the Internet has failed to deliver its promise: "Instead of bringing us all together in an omnipresent, multi-faceted discussion, the internet instead has made sectarianism an almost default position. The nature of mass debate has become solely binary: you're on one side or the other. Factor that in with whatever combination of debates you've been forced to take sides on, and the number of people willing to listen to you—because they agree with you—shrinks daily. Try stating a strong opinion on gun control, for example, on Twitter and see how many followers you lose."

With *A Monster Calls* (2011), Ness moved on to write for a younger audience. The book began as an original idea by Ness's fellow Carnegie Award–winner Siobhan Dowd. Dowd described her project to Denise Johnstone-Burt, her commissioning editor at Walker Books, in an email reprinted in Nicolette Jones's interview with Ness and illustrator Jim Kay:

> The story's theme is healing. It is really my paeon to that great, ancient tree, the yew, without which I might not be alive today, as all the Taxol drugs that so successfully treat breast cancers are derived from it. The yew is the oldest tree in the United Kingdom; it is thought that some live for 2,000 years (and in other parts of the world, yew trees live even longer). The tree is known to be poisonous, especially the red berries on the female variety, but its healing properties were only appreciated in recent decades.

Dowd's death from breast cancer in 2007 prevented her from completing what would have been an illustrated children's novel, but she left behind characters, the premise (in which a monster tells a child three stories), the beginning (approximately 1,500 words), and some notes. Johnstone-Burt approached Ness with the project after Dowd's death, which he accepted. The completed work was dedicated to Dowd, and illustrated by Kay; and for the first time in over fifty years, the Carnegie and Greenaway Medals were both awarded to the same book.

The novel tells the story of thirteen-year-old Conor O'Malley, whose single-parent mother suffers from terminal cancer. He is visited by a monster, part giant part yew tree, who tells him three parables and insists that Conor tell a fourth in return—on pain of being eaten alive. In contrast to C. S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* (1955), wherein an apple restores the health of Digory's ailing mother, Conor's mother never recovers and he must come to terms with this imminent loss, one made more poignant by the absence of supportive parental figures: his grandmother is disapproving; his father, who has separated from his mother, has a new family in the States; and his teachers' sympathy never manifests to constructive support. Ness explains to an interviewer that Conor is "first an observer, then a participant, then a hero, then he tells his own story." As different as *A Monster Calls* is from the *Chaos Walking* trilogy, Ness came to realize, as he remarked in his Siobhan Dowd Trust Memorial Lecture, that "they're both about how to survive after the worst thing happens."

The process by which Conor seeks solace necessitates his confrontation with the teachers' pet Harry, who routinely bullies him, and with a recurring nightmare that he has had every night since his mother began her treatment, one in which his mother is pulled down the edge of a cliff and in which he lets her go. Privately, Conor had always known that she will die, but more to his anguish, he must confess to himself that he had wanted it to be over. The novel ends in an understated but ultimately moving paradox, after Conor told his mother that he does not want her to die: "Conor held tightly onto his mother. And by doing so, he could finally let her go." Both Daniel Hahn in *The Independent* (10 May 2011) and Jessica Bruder in *The New York Times* (14 October 2011) have identified something potentially hopeful in the

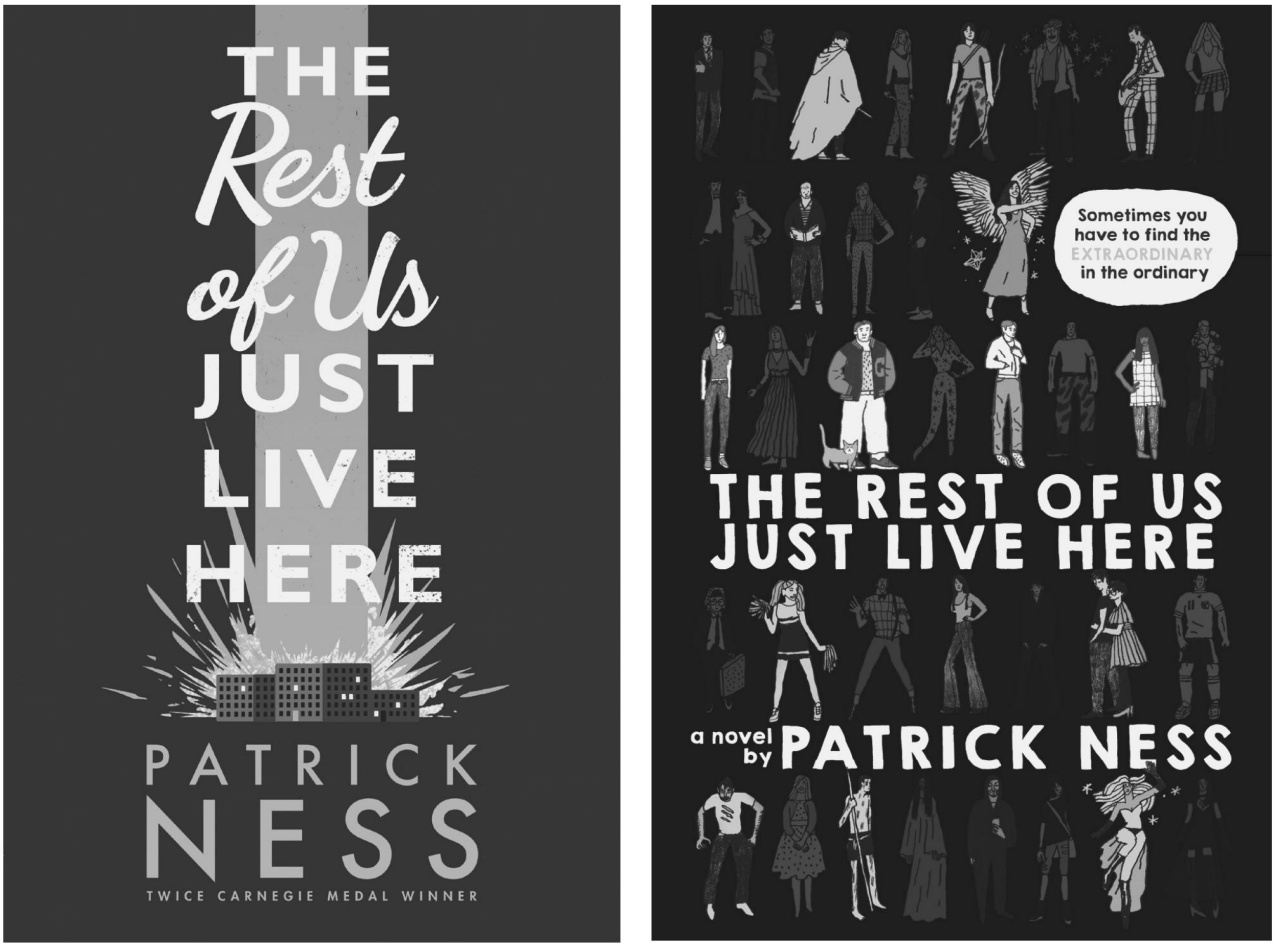
novel's ending, the former claiming, "Here the desperate honesty and refusal to compromise do allow for a sort of brutal clarity to emerge, and from that finally a glimpse of something like hope." The many accolades that *A Monster Calls* received also include the British Children's Book of the Year, the overall Red House Children's Book Award, and The Kitschies' Red Tentacle award for a novel, with speculative or fantastic elements, that is intelligent, progressive, and entertaining. Ness wrote the screenplay for the novel's feature-film adaptation, which is scheduled for release in 2016.

If both *Chaos Walking* and *A Monster Calls* concern the survival of tragedies, then *More Than This*, *The Crane Wife* (2013), and *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* (2015) can be seen as novels "about living without knowing"—to use Ness's description in his Siobhan Dowd Trust Memorial Lecture. Bullying is a theme to which Ness returns in *More Than This*. This imaginative novel opens with the suicide of sixteen-year-old Seth Wearing after he learns of the infidelity of his boyfriend Gudmund with one of his best friends, and her responsibility in circulating intimate images of Seth with Gudmund. After his death, Seth awakes to a different reality, one that bears close resemblance to his home in England prior to his family's move to Halfmarket, Washington. As the novel unfolds, readers learn that the world Seth now inhabits is a post-apocalyptic but real world, one that is slowly healing itself: the food on the supermarket shelves dated back eight to ten years before his death. Conversely, the world from which Seth had departed by suicide was a simulated reality. Seth meets and learns about the real world with new friends—those who had also died in the simulated world—and he gradually regains memory of his past: the eight-year-old Seth was partly responsible for his younger brother's death and, as a result, their family embraced a simulated reality so that they could pretend that he had survived. By the end of the novel, Seth recognizes that the world his family had chosen to escape was less bleak than they had believed it to be and, paradoxically, that the world that he had left holds much for him. He decides to travel between the two worlds and make it his mission to remind the people in the simulation of who they were and perhaps wake them from their unreality.

Reviewers generally praised *More Than This*. Tony Bardman in *The Guardian* (7 September 2013) found the novel "a bit long and the characters talk a lot, especially in the second half" but praised Seth's characterization: "Seth is a terrific exemplar of the eternal teenage desire for there to be, in the words of the novel's title, 'more than this'—more than a world in which prejudice and hypocrisy dictate how people should or shouldn't live their lives." Martin Chilton in *The Telegraph* (14 October 2013) called it "an impressively challenging and philosophical book for young adults, because Ness, author of the prize-winning book *A Monster Calls*, captures the ambiguity and bewilderment of being young and the uncertainty of what will happen to any of us next in life." The novel was shortlisted for a Carnegie Medal and an Independent Booksellers Week Award in the children's fiction category.

In *The Crane Wife*, Ness draws on a Japanese folk tale that he heard when he was in kindergarten in Hawaii, one in which a man finds a white crane wounded by an arrow. In the novel George Duncan helps the bird, and the next day he is visited at his print shop in London by a beautiful woman called Kumiko, with whom he falls in love and creates some extraordinary art. Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Guardian* (20 April 2013) applauded the kindliness in the novel, though she was critical of its language and self-consciousness. Leyla Sanai found the surrealism in the novel a barrier in *The Independent* (20 April 2013): "I found myself mildly impatient to rush through the more ethereal, mythical parts in order to feast on his talents as a realist." Yet, Ness's melding of these qualities is, as Helen Brown recognizes in *The Telegraph* (27 March 2013), one of the novel's central strengths: "*The Crane Wife* is a special novel: a perfect fusion of surreal imagery and beautifully crafted internal logic. Turning it over in my hands once I'd finished, I began to think of it as the literary equivalent of a Japanese puzzle box with poetry, ideas and jokes twisting and sliding out of it at surprising angles."

The Rest of Us Just Live Here follows the teenaged Mikey, who, along with his best friend Jared (a descendent of the God of cats), aspires for the adolescent normalcy emblemized by graduation and prom. Mikey's tribulations—his longstanding (but largely unrequited) affection for Henna, his jealousy toward his schoolmate Nathan, his obsessive-compulsive disorder, his sister Mel's history with eating disorders, their mother's political antagonism toward Jared's father, and their father's substance abuse, among others—are held in contrast to, but informed by, a parallel story, narrated principally in italics following chapter headings, in which indie kids (that is, children who are gifted with extraordinary powers) are at war with, and often falling victim to, the Immortals. This juxtaposition powerfully suggests the fact that there is something exceptional to be found in the ordinary. Ness explains in a press release: "I have so much sympathy for all the Unchosen ones because I always assumed I'd be one of them. I certainly was



Dust jackets for the British and American editions of Ness's 2015 novel (courtesy of Walker Books and HarperCollins)

when sports teams were chosen in PE. There are a whole lot more of us than there are Heroes and Heroines with capital Hs. But don't we get to be the heroes and heroines of our own lives? Maybe with small Hs? Aren't the things we do kind of extraordinary, too? Isn't loving your friends and making your own decisions kind of amazing? I think so." The ending of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in which Buffy's adopted hometown of Sunnydale is swallowed up, provides an important reference. Early in the novel Jared wryly remarks about the indie kids, "They better not blow up the high school again. . . . My cousin had to have his graduation ceremony in a parking lot." Indeed, Mikey and Jared's school is destroyed by the story's end.

As the *Rest of Us* in the title may suggest, the focus of the novel is on the ordinary plight of Mikey and his friends, not the indie kids. In *The Independent* (22 August 2015) Nicholas Tucker found the novel "bold and well written" as well as thought-provoking but was troubled by the imbalance: "Normal life can, of course, more or less carry on even in the most dramatic circumstances, and Ness seems to be suggesting that successfully negotiating the ordinary ups and downs of teenage life also requires courage and at times even a measure of quiet heroism. But while his main characters are afforded the time and space to hone and develop their personal psychologies, the 'indie kids' continue to fight for their very existence. He could be contrasting here the obsession with the self found in the West as opposed to a Third World refugee's determination above all else simply to stay alive." Tucker thought the novel lacked "any truly satisfying sense of ultimate purpose" because of its focus on a cast of relatively affluent teenagers. Linda Buckley-Archer in *The Guardian* (29 August 2015) argued that Ness's main goal was "to turn the ubiquitous 'Chosen One' meme on its head" and that he

had succeeded in constructing a "a story that puts 'the chosen ones' in their place, consigning them, literally, to the margins of the action." She concluded: "In this smart, funny and entertaining novel, Ness, who is never afraid to wear his heart on his sleeve, successfully challenges the notion that real life is elsewhere."

Ness's concern about politics, society, and real life is evident beyond the pages of his novels and the words of his speeches. Responding to the escalating Syrian refugee crisis on 3 September 2015, he set up a Virgin Money Giving account wherein he pledged to match £10,000 of donations for Save the Children, a goal met in less than two hours. In one week his fundraising efforts raised more than $1 million.

In his interview with Levy, Ness talks about his characterization of Mayor Prentiss, one of the villains in the *Chaos Walking* series:

> Is evil something you are or something you do? Is he just someone who had a propensity and then was given a lot of little opportunities along the way? I don't like people who are just monsters. I think that lets us off the hook, because you think, well, I don't have to worry about him because he's just a monster and that's not how a real human would act. I try to keep him as a man who through various circumstances simply went wrong. Basically, I like to believe that everyone can be redeemed. The potential for redemption has to be in everybody, otherwise there's no hope for us. Now whether he wants to be redeemed, that's a different question, but the possibility needs to be there. There's still some humanity in him somewhere. I think that makes him more interesting as well, because a pure psychopath, a pure monster, is fun, but limited.

Still in his early forties and having shown he can write for both young and old, Patrick Ness would seem to have a long career ahead in which to explore human nature in all its complexity.

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Terry Pratchett

(24 April 1948 – 12 March 2015)

Pete Orford
University of Buckingham

BOOKS: *The Carpet People* (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1971; revised edition (London & New York: Doubleday, 1992);
The Dark Side of the Sun (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1976; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976);
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Equal Rites (London: Gollancz, 1987; New York: New American Library, 1987);
Mort (London: Gollancz, 1987; New York: Harper, 1987);
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