



# A MONSTER CALLS

FROM THE NOVEL  
BY PATRICK NESS  
INSPIRED BY AN IDEA BY SIOBHAN DOWD



**THE MONSTER CHALLENGE**  
A CREATIVE WRITING CHALLENGE

# CONTENTS

The Monster Writing Challenge	3
4 Steps to Writing a Short Story	5
Synopsis	7
Themes	9
Tour Dates	11
Support	13

Content by and with thanks to Susie Ferguson, the Old Vic Education Team, Michelle Kass Associates, Christopher Elmer-Gorry

Design **MUSE**

Production Photography  
**MANUEL HARLAN**

Further details can be found at  
**AMONSTERCALLSTHEPLAY.COM**

 @AMONSTERCALLSPLAY

 @AMONSTERCALLSPLAY

 @AMONSTERPLAY

# THE MONSTER WRITING CHALLENGE

**‘Stories are important. Stories can be more important than anything. If they carry the truth.’** Patrick Ness, *A Monster Calls*

Are you a young person with a passion for telling stories? Do you feel the itch to grab a notebook and pen to respond to the world around you? Do you know a young person aged 10-25 who loves creative writing? Then keep reading...

## WHAT IS IT?

Alongside the tour of the Olivier award-winning production *A Monster Calls*, based on the critically-acclaimed novel by Patrick Ness we are running The Monster Writing Challenge.

We’re seeking short stories from young people aged 10-25. The challenge is open to individuals, school groups and community groups – anyone who has a story to tell! We are looking for the most creative short stories from the length and breadth of the UK!

## HOW DOES THE MONSTER WRITING CHALLENGE WORK?

We are challenging young people to write a short story of maximum 500 words that is inspired by any of the themes that are present in *A Monster Calls*.

The story can be about anything you like, but it should be inspired by one of the following themes:

- FAMILY
- GRIEF
- HIDDEN EMOTIONS
- TRUTH
- PEOPLE ARE COMPLICATED
- BEREAVEMENT
- FRIENDSHIP

We are looking for the boldest, bravest and most creative short stories, so let your imaginations run wild!

## HOW DO YOU ENTER THE CHALLENGE?

Find your local venue in the list below to see when you need to submit your story by.

You will need to send your story:

- As a Word Document or PDF
- Include your name
- Your age
- The name of your local theatre from the list below

Send your entry to:

[info@amonstercallstheplay.com](mailto:info@amonstercallstheplay.com)

Venues	Submit your story by
<b>CHICHESTER FESTIVAL THEATRE</b>	Thursday 6th February 2020
<b>THEATRE ROYAL NOTTINGHAM</b>	Thursday 13th February 2020
<b>THE LOWRY, SALFORD QUAYS</b>	Thursday 20th February 2020
<b>BELGRADE THEATRE, COVENTRY</b>	Thursday 27th February 2020
<b>LYCEUM THEATRE, SHEFFIELD</b>	Thursday 7th March 2020
<b>HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, ABERDEEN</b>	Thursday 12th March 2020
<b>CAMBRIDGE ARTS THEATRE</b>	Thursday 19th March 2020
<b>MARLOWE THEATRE, CANTERBURY</b>	Thursday 26th March 2020
<b>KING'S THEATRE, EDINBURGH</b>	Thursday 2nd April 2020
<b>MALVERN THEATRE</b>	Thursday 9th April 2020
<b>NORWICH THEATRE ROYAL</b>	Thursday 16th April 2020
<b>WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE</b>	Thursday 23rd April 2020
<b>THEATRE ROYAL NEWCASTLE</b>	Thursday 30th April 2020
<b>YVONNE ARNAUD THEATRE, GUILDFORD</b>	Thursday 7th May 2020
<b>THEATRE ROYAL PLYMOUTH</b>	Thursday 14th May 2020
<b>CURVE, LEICESTER</b>	Thursday 21st May 2020
<b>BRISTOL OLD VIC</b>	Thursday 28th May 2020

### WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

After each of the submission deadline dates, we will select at least one piece of creative writing to celebrate each week. The selected short stories will be read out by a member of the cast and will be shared on our Social Media Channels during the week of performances at your local venue.

The writers of the stories we share will also receive *A Monster Calls Goody Bag* as a celebration of their achievement.

### KEEP AN EYE OUT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Be sure to check out the latest news and information on The Monster Challenge by searching **#AMonsterChallenge**



# 4 STEPS TO WRITING A SHORT STORY

## BY AUTHOR PATRICK NESS

### 1

#### GETTING STARTED

There's no single right way to write a story as long as you end up with one. The key is knowing who you are:

Are you a planner? Do you like structures and layouts? Then you'll probably have success planning out your story in detail. Lots of writers do.

On the other hand, do you fear the idea of planning a story will kill all inspiration? Lots of other writers plan less and let inspiration take them where it will.

It's very important to play to your strengths, all those things that will reduce your anxiety, and not try to be someone else just because they've got a story written.

So, to begin. Prepare yourself, know who you are, and then write those first words.

Congratulations, you're on your way.

### 2

#### LAYING OUT A STRUCTURE

The wonderful and terrible thing about writing is that you can pretty much do whatever you want, as long as it's serving the story you're telling. It's up to you to figure out what those needs are, however, and that's what makes you a writer.

So why not make it easier on yourself and make a few of those decisions before you start writing? Because, believe it or not, this is writing, too.

So before you start, ask yourself a simple question... What's going to happen where?

Really, easy as that. I'm not talking details, I'm talking about the general thrust to the story that should already be cooking around your head.

For example, where does the heartbreak occur so that the reconciliation that never happens is as poignant as possible? Literally where. At the front? Halfway through? Where? If you don't know, maybe you're not ready to start yet.

Get even a few of these ideas sorted before you set out, and you're going to be a lot more comfortable settling into your early writing.

### 3

#### FREEDOM FROM TYRANNY

So what happens when you could, almost literally, choose to write about anything for your story? No wonder so many of us grow faint of heart.

Why not limit your choices a bit? Make a couple of bold choices for the narrative, see what happens. Sometimes they don't work (that's what first drafts are for), but sometimes they can be the key to un-damming that river and letting it flow. A well-chosen limitation can make your story reach even farther. Funny how that works.

Are you struggling with third person omniscient? Maybe make it third person non-omniscient, so we're only ever in the point of view of one character, even if they're not narrating. What interesting challenges does that pose to your story and the reveal of information?

Form is a limitation. One of the short stories in my collection is told as a newspaper article. BIG limitation, but great fun to try and get a story across. Maybe part of your story is just emails. What creative choices are you going to have to make to have those read like real letters, not just convenient plot devices?

### 4

#### IT TALKS! HOW DOES YOUR STORY SOUND?

How does your story sound?

No, really. If it was talking aloud, how would it sound? Queen's English? Northeast accent? Chirpy and fun? Confidently invisible?

I want you to consider this: every story has a voice. Every single one. Even the ones that stay as unobtrusively out of your way as possible. Every story speaks in its own particular way, some more flamboyantly than others, of course, but every story is talking away, most especially when you're writing it.

Think of a person you know, get them chatting away, and then write a scene where they get bitten by a dog. What do they say? How do they describe it? What's the voice of their little scene?

Now try it again with someone else you know. See how different the two scenes are? You know their vocabulary and style, their particular syntax and mood, their humour, their history, their - wait for it - voice.

Once you know how your story sounds, some days it becomes as easy as sitting down and setting it talking. Then basically you're just hoping you can type fast enough to copy down what it says as the story tells itself...

---

Ready to take the next step and write a full-length novel? Maybe even find an agent and get it published? Patrick has lots more tips for aspiring writers online.

[www.booktrust.org.uk/books-and-reading/tips-and-advice/writing-tips/writing-tips-from-authors/patrick-nesss-guide-to-writing/](http://www.booktrust.org.uk/books-and-reading/tips-and-advice/writing-tips/writing-tips-from-authors/patrick-nesss-guide-to-writing/)

# SYNOPSIS OF A MONSTER CALLS

Thirteen year old Conor wakes from a nightmare. It is 12.07am. It is the same nightmare that he has had before and he finds it difficult to accept the images that he keeps seeing. In the morning Conor notices that his mum hasn't got out of bed yet and so gets himself ready for school and completes other chores. Mum arrives in the kitchen and apologises for not being able to do more: her latest round of chemotherapy has made her extremely weak and unwell. She explains that Grandma will arrive the following day to help, despite Conor's insistence that they are coping fine without her.

At school, Conor encounters Harry, Anton and Sully who bully him. Harry and Anton are particularly cruel when they mention his mum and her hair loss. Miss Godfrey arrives just in time to see Conor's friend Lily push Anton to the floor. However, when Miss Godfrey asks Conor if Lily's version of events is true, Conor denies it. He acts as if he doesn't care when Lily confronts him after school.

Conor wakes from another nightmare, again at 12.07am. This time the Monster speaks to him from outside the window and emerges from the yew tree. Conor insists that he is not afraid of him and the Monster tells him:

**'I do not often come walking, boy. Only for matters of life and death. I expect to be listened to.'**

The Monster pledges to tell Conor three stories, after which Conor will tell his own story: his truth, which the Monster is convinced Conor is most afraid of.

Grandma arrives and begins to talk about an independent school near her house that she thinks would be suitable for Conor, who continues to deny any need to even consider it. It is clear to Grandma that Mum hasn't been completely honest about the seriousness of her illness, or that Conor is refusing to face the reality of possibly losing his mum.

The Monster arrives and tells his first story. It involves a King, who loses all but one of his

family through war. His grandson is his only living relative until the King marries a strange woman in order to heal his grief. A year before the Prince can legally take the throne, the King dies and so the crown goes to the Queen. Rumours spread that she has played magic tricks in order to gain power. The Prince falls in love with a humble farmer's daughter and they run away. Sleeping under a large yew tree, the Prince wakes to find the daughter dead. The Queen is blamed for the death of the daughter. The Prince asks for help from the villagers and the Green Man. The Prince manages to overpower the Queen who is condemned to burn at the stake. At the last minute the yew tree plucks the woman from the fire and takes her to a village by the sea where she cannot be found.

Conor is shocked to hear that the Monster has saved the woman, who has been accused of killing the daughter. However, the Monster reminds him,

**'I never said she killed the farmer's daughter. I only said that the Prince said it was so.'**

The Monster reminds Conor that people sometimes need to lie, including to themselves. In some stories, and in life, there are characters who aren't totally bad or totally good. Most people are somewhere in between.

At school Lily tells Conor that she forgives him for not telling Miss Godfrey the truth about what happened in the playground, making allowances for what he's going through. Conor feels increasingly isolated and that everyone now treats him differently following his mum's diagnosis. Harry and the boys approach to taunt Conor but he refuses to react even when Harry raises his fist.

It becomes clear that Mum's treatment is not working as it should and so Conor must go and stay with Grandma whilst his mum is back in hospital. His Dad flies in from America, where he lives with his new wife and child. As Conor hugs his mother she notices the yew tree outside.

Grandma's house is very neat and tidy with valuable antique furniture and Conor does not feel at home there. When Conor forces the hands of an antique clock to 12.07, the Monster appears once more.

Story Two involves an Apothecary (the old name for a chemist or someone who uses herbs and plants to heal illness) during the Industrial Revolution. The Apothecary becomes increasingly bitter that the new sprawling towns and cities are making it difficult to find the plants that he needs. He asks the Parson if he can cut down the yew tree that grows in his garden. The Parson refuses and preaches against the Apothecary's approach to healing. Suddenly, the Parson's two daughters become very ill and the bark of the yew tree could potentially save them. The Parson appeals to the Apothecary who refuses and the daughters die. The Monster tears down the parsonage and Conor helps, but he is actually destroying Grandma's precious living room. When Grandma arrives home from the hospital she is speechless with emotion.

Dad tells Conor that he will not be punished, as there is no point: he is dealing with more than enough. Conor goes to see Mum in hospital. She has taken a turn for the worse. She is given a new drug, made from the bark of yew trees, that she hopes will make a difference but Dad tells Conor that this is the time when he needs to be particularly brave. Dad then returns to America because his daughter is ill, and Conor is left once again

feeling lonely and isolated.

At school, Harry shakes Conor's hand and tells him that he no longer sees him proceeding to ignore him completely. No longer able to cope with feeling invisible, Conor beats up Harry, with the help of the Monster, and Harry ends up in hospital. Miss Godfrey tells Conor that in his circumstances, the usual punishment of expulsion would be pointless, he is being punished enough already. Lily writes Conor a note, which says, 'I see you'.

Conor is collected from school by Grandma, who explains that Mum's treatment is no longer working. Later that night the Monster tells Conor

**'I did not come to heal her. I came to heal you.'**

Conor's nightmare returns — he dreams that he is trying to prevent his mum falling off a cliff but she keeps slipping away from him. Conor admits that he just wants it all to be over but feels guilty for feeling that way. The Monster explains that the human mind is complicated and contradictory, and that Conor's wish is simply to end the suffering and pain.

Collected by Grandma, Conor arrives at the hospital to see his mum and say goodbye, shortly before 12.07am.





# THEMES

## FAMILY

Conor lives with his mum and is very loyal to her. He does not agree that sometimes they need help from Grandma, particularly as he does many of the chores himself, even though he is only thirteen.

Grandma arrives to help both Mum and Conor, despite Conor's resistance and although they are very different to each other, they both realise that they are going to have to rely on each other after Conor's mum loses her battle with cancer.

Conor's dad now lives in America and has a new wife and baby. Conor finds it difficult to understand why he cannot go and live with his dad in America rather than live with Grandma. He finds it difficult to understand why Dad's American family seems to take priority over him and his mum, and feels isolated and lonely.

## HIDDEN EMOTIONS

Many of Conor's emotions are only shown through his nightmare which he has repeatedly after his mother is diagnosed with cancer. Only towards the end of his mother's life can he admit that in some ways, he just wants it all to be over so that he is no longer so frightened of what the future has in store.

The Monster's stories are carefully chosen by him to teach Conor that emotions are difficult, and life can be cruel and complicated. The stories also demonstrate that we all have good and bad inside ourselves and by sharing our nightmares with other people, we can understand and deal with them. Many of the characters in the Monster's stories are adults and so Conor learns that life can be complicated regardless of age.

## GRIEF

Conor experiences a range of emotions as a result of what is happening. He finds it difficult to admit that he is frightened and the Monster and his stories enable him to process the grief that he is feeling. This includes the emotions of anger, loneliness, fear, resentment, denial, guilt and sadness which are all common and normal responses to losing a loved one.

The grief felt by Grandma is not explored as much in the story, but it is clear that she is also trying to negotiate the difficult emotions surrounding her daughter's death. Whilst Conor might deny what is really happening, Grandma tries to be more practical, having Conor to stay at her house, visiting Mum in hospital and starting to make arrangements for a new school for Conor when the time comes.

Dad is also experiencing a sense of grief, but his return to America at a crucial time suggests that he is finding it too difficult and needs to remove himself from the situation.

## TRUTH

Conor's mum has tried to protect Conor from the reality of what is happening. The day before she tells him about the diagnosis, she allows him a day off school to create happy, fun memories. But later she is perhaps not so truthful about what is going to happen, and both Dad and Grandma become concerned that Conor does not completely understand that at some point, he will need to go and live with Grandma.

## PEOPLE ARE COMPLICATED

In the stories that the Monster tells, he often includes characters who are not completely 'good' or totally 'bad'. The Prince does not tell the whole truth about what happened to the farmer's daughter, and the Apothecary and the Parson cannot or do not save the Parson's daughters. Most people are somewhere in between good and bad.

## BEREAVEMENT

Conor's mum is terminally ill and he will have to say goodbye to her. He is only 13 and the adults around him are aware that he is finding the process very difficult — perhaps even more difficult than he himself realises. It is even harder for Conor because he is an only child and his mum is a single parent.

Conor also finds it increasingly frustrating that he feels invisible and isolated. Since other people have found out about his mum's diagnosis, they have begun to treat him differently, including being extremely unkind. Conor experiences some very difficult emotions about the way in which people now view him because of what is happening to his mum.

## FRIENDSHIP

When Harry and his friends bully Conor, they are particularly cruel about his mum and her hair loss (which has been caused by the chemotherapy treatment she has undergone). Lily steps in and pushes Anton to the ground. Although Conor denies the story that Lily tells Miss Godfrey, Lily later forgives him because she realises that he is having a very difficult time. She has found it difficult to understand why Conor didn't tell the teacher the truth about the bullying but after speaking to her own mum, she realises that he is experiencing some very difficult emotions.



# TOUR DATES

6 February –  
15 February 2020

## **CHICHESTER FESTIVAL THEATRE**

Oaklands Park, Chichester PO19 6AP  
Box Office: 01243 781312

18 February –  
22 February 2020

## **THEATRE ROYAL NOTTINGHAM**

Theatre Square, Nottingham NG1 5ND  
Box Office: 0115 989 5555

25 February –  
29 February 2020

## **THE LOWRY, SALFORD QUAYS**

Pier 8, The Quays, Salford Quays M50 3AZ  
Box Office: 0843 208 6000

3 March –  
7 March 2020

## **BELGRADE THEATRE, COVENTRY**

Corporation Street, Coventry CV1 1GS  
Box Office: 024 7655 3055

10 March –  
14 March 2020

## **LYCEUM THEATRE, SHEFFIELD**

55 Norfolk Street, Sheffield S1 1DA  
Box Office: 0114 249 6000

17 March –  
21 March 2020

## **HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, ABERDEEN**

Rosemount Viaduct, Aberdeen AB25 1GL  
Box Office: 01224 641122

24 March –  
28 March 2020

## **CAMBRIDGE ARTS THEATRE**

6 St Edward's Passage, Cambridge CB2 3PJ  
Box Office: 01223 503333

31 March –  
4 April 2020

## **MARLOWE THEATRE, CANTERBURY**

The Friars, Canterbury CT1 2AS  
Box Office: 01227 787787

7 April –  
11 April 2020

## **KING'S THEATRE, EDINBURGH**

2 Leven Street, Edinburgh EH3 9LQ  
Box Office: 0131 529 6000

14 April –  
18 April 2020

## **MALVERN THEATRE**

Grange Road, Malvern WR14 3HB  
Box Office: 01684 892277

21 April –  
25 April 2020

## **NORWICH THEATRE ROYAL**

Theatre Street, Norwich NR2 1RL  
Box Office: 01603 63 00 00

28 April –  
2 May 2020

**WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE**

Cardiff Bay, Bute Place CF10 5AL  
Box Office: 029 2063 6464

6 May –  
9 May 2020

**THEATRE ROYAL NEWCASTLE**

100 Grey Street, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 6BR  
Box Office: 0844 811 2121

12 May –  
16 May 2020

**YVONNE ARNAUD THEATRE, GUILDFORD**

Millbrook, Guildford GU1 3UX  
Box Office: 01483 44 00 00

19 May –  
23 May 2020

**THEATRE ROYAL PLYMOUTH**

Royal Parade, Plymouth PL1 2TR  
Box Office: 01752 267222

26 May –  
30 May 2020

**CURVE, LEICESTER**

60 Rutland Street, Leicester LE1 1SB  
Box Office: 0116 242 3560

2 June –  
6 June 2020

**BRISTOL OLD VIC**

King Street, Bristol BS1 4ED  
Box Office: 0117 987 7877



# SUPPORT

**‘If you speak the truth, you will be able to face whatever comes.’** *A Monster Calls*

If you have been affected by any of the themes in this production and would like to speak with someone in confidence, the following services offering help and advice are available:

## **KOOTH**

Kooth.com

XenZone is a provider of online mental health services for children, young people and adults. Kooth, from XenZone, is an online counselling and emotional well-being platform for children and young people, accessible through mobile, tablet and desktop and free at the point of use. Please note that Kooth is not currently a UK wide service. Please visit the website for more information.

## **MACMILLAN CANCER SUPPORT**

macmillan.org.uk  
0808 808 00 00

Macmillan Cancer Support is one of the largest British charities, providing specialist health care, information and financial support to people affected by cancer.

## **MARIE CURIE**

mariecurie.org.uk  
0800 090 2309

Marie Curie is a registered charity that provides care and support for people living with any terminal illness, and their families.

## **MIND**

mind.org.uk  
0300 123 3393

Mind offers information and advice to people with mental health problems and lobbies government and local authorities on their behalf.

## **SAMARITANS**

samaritans.org  
116 123

Samaritans is a registered charity aimed at providing support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide throughout the UK and in Ireland.

## **CHILDLINE**

childline.org.uk  
0800 1111

Childline is a counselling service for children and young people up to the age of 19 that deals with any issues that cause personal distress or concern.

## **CHILD BEREAVEMENT UK**

childbereavement.org  
0800 02 888 40

Child Bereavement UK supports families and educates professionals when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement.