

The book cover for 'Burn' by Patrick Ness features a black background with a glowing, fiery dragon in the center. The dragon is depicted with its mouth open, breathing fire. The title 'Burn' is at the top in white, and the author's name 'PATRICK NESS' is in large white letters across the middle. Below the name, it says 'TWICE CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNER'.

Burn

WALKER BOOKS

TEACHERS' NOTES

Burn

**PATRICK
NESS**

TWICE CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNER

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ABOUT THE BOOK

"On a cold Sunday evening in early 1957, Sarah Dewhurst waited with her father in the parking lot of the Chevron Gas Station for the dragon he'd hired to help on the farm."

This dragon, Kazimir, has more to him than meets the eye. Sarah can't help but be curious about him, an animal who supposedly doesn't have a soul but is seemingly intent on keeping her safe from the brutal attentions of Deputy Sheriff Emmett Kelby. Kazimir knows something she doesn't. He has arrived at the farm because of a prophecy. A prophecy that involves a deadly assassin, a cult of dragon worshippers, two FBI agents – and somehow, Sarah Dewhurst herself.

From the bestselling author of the Chaos Walking trilogy comes a heart-stopping story of fanaticism, hope, bravery and impossible second chances, set in a world on the very brink of its own destruction.

ABOUT THESE NOTES

These notes are written principally for teenage book groups. A focus for discussion is suggested for each chapter. The range of topics invites a consideration of the literary aspects of the book, but also encourages readers to think about themes raised and to relate them to their own lives and contemporary issues. They are deliberately open to allow readers to consider a wide range of views in a supportive environment with a teacher or librarian. Written by Nikki Gamble from Just Imagine Centre for Excellence in Reading.

Students taking GCSE History could make connections with their studies if the post-war US is part of their studies. The novel is an alternate history, but the connections can be used to generate discussion around key issues of the time, particularly regarding the space race and civil rights movements.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

American-born, Patrick Ness, is a novelist, journalist and screen writer. His first young adult novel, *The Knife of Never Letting Go* was awarded the Guardian Fiction Prize. He is the recipient of two Carnegie Medals in 2011 for *Monsters of Men* and in 2012 for *A Monster Calls*, (original idea Siobhan Dowd).

A Monster Calls has been adapted for stage and film (Ness wrote the screenplay).

Ness is also the writer and co-producer of a spin off Doctor Who series, *Class* (2016).

Books for Children and Young Adults

Chaos Walking Series:	<i>A Monster Calls</i> (2011)
<i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> (2008)	<i>More Than This</i> (2013)
<i>The Ask and the Answer</i> (2009)	<i>The Rest of Us Just Live Here</i> (2015)
<i>Monsters of Men</i> (2010)	<i>Release</i> (2017)
	<i>And the Ocean Was Our Sky</i> (2018)

BEFORE READING

The story is set in 1957 in an alternate universe. It isn't necessary to know much about this period before reading but you may want to share prior knowledge.

- Do you know anything about life in the US in the late 1950s?
- Have you heard of the Space Race? What was it all about?
- What do you know about the Cold War?

Pool collective knowledge of Patrick Ness's other books.

- What have you read?
- Based on what you know of the author's previous work, what do you expect from this story?

DURING READING

Chapter 1

From the first paragraph, Patrick Ness roots his story in a specific time and reality and then hits us with the impossibility of a dragon being 'hired to help on the farm' (p11).

- What effect does the juxtaposition of the real and the fantastic have?
- What questions does it provoke for you, the reader?
- What expectations do you have for this story?

Chapter 2

In this chapter we meet another major character, a teenager called Malcolm.

- What impression do you form of Malcolm?
- What do you learn from the access that the third person narrator gives you to Malcolm's thoughts?
- Have you formed any ideas about what his mission could be?

Chapter 3

Gareth Dewhurst refers to the dragon as a '*claw*'.

- Does the italicisation of the term indicate how this is spoken?
- Do you see any connection between Gareth's attitude towards the dragon and the way other characters in this chapter are regarded by others?

Chapter 4

- What have you learnt about Agent Woolf from Agent Dernovich's view of his partner?
- We find out more about the Believers in this chapter. Does their belief system have any resonance with our contemporary world? What connections do you make?

Chapter 5

When Sarah looks up Kazimir's name she finds that it has more than one meaning: 'destroyer of peace' and 'bringer of peace'.

- Do you know of any other instances where a name, word, phrase or saying can mean one thing and its opposite? Note: one class of words called contronyms or Janus words have exactly this capacity. For example, cleave can mean 'to split' and 'to adhere closely'. Strike can mean 'to act decisively' or 'to refuse to act'.
- In what sense do you think someone, or something, could be both a bringer of peace and destroyer of peace?
- Do you expect the meaning of the dragon's name to have a bearing on the story?

Chapter 6

At the beginning of this chapter, Malcolm recollects a lesson with the Mitera Thea, in which she reminds him why he has been selected as 'the chosen one' (p82).

- What rhetorical powers does she use to convince Malcolm that he is special?
- Where have you seen this type of language in contemporary use?

'The chosen one' is a common trope in science fiction and fantasy, though its roots are even older, reaching back to pre-literature myth and legend. In literature, King Arthur, Frodo Baggins and Harry Potter are well-known examples. World faiths also have 'chosen' or 'expected' ones (called Maitreya in Buddhism!).

- What other books, films or television programmes do you know which revolve around the quest of a 'chosen one' who will save the world?
- What characteristics or features do you associate with this type of narrative?
- Do you find anything problematic about the 'chosen one' or 'Hero's Journey' (Joseph Campbell, 1949) narrative? In what way might this be a bad thing?

Chapter 7

One of the themes emerging in this chapter is an exploration of the tenuous balance between trust and mistrust, the challenge of detecting truth from lies. What do each of the following add to your thoughts on this subject?

- Sarah and Gareth Dewhurst's failure to tell each other their truths
- The anonymous correspondence sent to Gareth Dewhurst

- Kazimir’s exchange with the sheriff

Writing in *The New Yorker*, Salman Rushdie argued that in the countries he knows best, India, the UK and USA, ‘self-serving falsehoods are regularly presented as facts, while more reliable information is denigrated as “fake news”.’ (Truth, Lies and Literature accessed 26th April 2020 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/truth-lies-and-literature>)

- Do the interactions between the characters in this chapter and what you have read so far resonate with Rushdie’s global view?

Chapter 8

In this chapter, Malcolm meets Nelson.

- What impression have you formed of Nelson?
- In what ways do you think this meeting might affect Malcolm’s mission?

Chapter 9

In this chapter we learn more about the prophecy and the role that Sarah is destined to play.

- What views about prophecies are expressed in this chapter?
- How do they relate to what we have learnt previously from Agent Woolf?
- What other prophecies have you read or heard about? (You could research the prophecies of Nostradamus.)
- Is there anything about the language of prophecy that you find interesting or noteworthy?
- ‘What you must remember through all of this,’ Kazimir said, ‘is that you are not special,’ (p131). How does Kazimir’s explanation of the prophecy contrast with Mitera Thea’s instruction to Malcolm in chapter 6?

Chapter 10

Malcolm tries to explain the basis of his faith to Nelson. As he searches for an explanation he thinks, ‘*Believer was an ironic name. Like he’d said to Nelson, it was an unnecessary word when what you believed moved among you. It merely distinguished them from all the unbelievers who had to take on a kind of bizarre anti-faith not to believe*’ (pp150-1).

Here are some other ideas about faith. Share your thoughts about them.

‘Now faith is the assurance of what we hope for and the certainty of what we do not see’
Hebrews 11:1

‘In the affairs of this world, men are saved not by faith, but by the want of it.’ Benjamin Franklin

‘The faith that stands on authority is not faith.’ Ralph Waldo Emerson

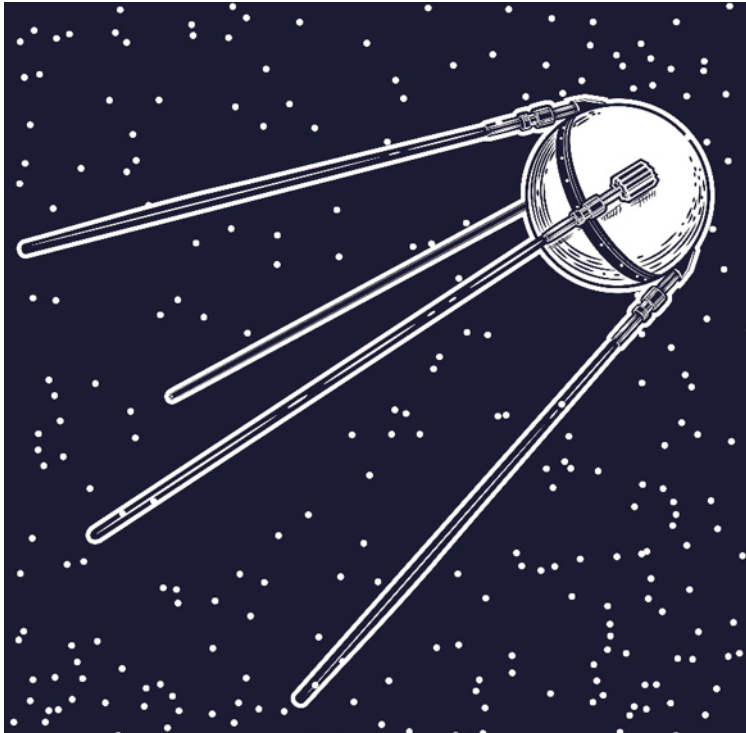
‘Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.’ Rabindranath Tagore

‘Faith to my mind, is a stiffening process, a sort of mental starch.’ E M Forster

- Does designating yourself a ‘Believer’ automatically put people in negative opposition to each other?
- Can a distinction be made between ‘faith’ and ‘blind faith’? Do either of these apply to any of the characters in this story?

Chapter 11

'Do you feel helpless sometimes?' Sarah said, not looking up. 'Caught in the middle of other people's decisions? All these important things they do, not caring that people they'll never meet get hurt?' (p160)



1957 was, in our world, a pivotal moment when two giant political powers went head to head. The Russian launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957 sparked a crisis which led to the formation of NASA and was a catalyst for the Space Race, to be the first nation to put a human (man) on the moon. In 1958 the US responded by launching Explorer 1. For the next twenty years the geopolitical tension called the Cold War intensified. The period was characterised by espionage and the threat of nuclear attack.

Sputnik 1 image purchased from Shutterstock

Twelve years earlier, in August 1945, the US had dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is referenced in the tense exchange between Deputy Kelby and Jason Inagawa in Chapter 3 (p38).

Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Dome 1945



Purchased from Shutterstock

There are two schools of philosophical thought that have relevance:

Technological determinism – the notion that the role of a progressive society is to adapt and benefit from technological change.

Social determinism - that society is ultimately responsible for the development and deployment of technology.

One further argument is put forward by Leila Green who describes the A B C of social power: armed forces, bureaucracy and corporate sector. Green argues that it is these three powers that ultimately determine what happens with technology and thus have the responsibility for its use and misuse.

- Do you think any of these ideas are relevant to *Burn*?
- Which relate most closely to the ideas expressed by the main characters?
- Does analysing the characters' thoughts get you close to the author's point of view? Which do you think are the most reliable indicators of authorial point of view?
- Do you think advanced technology (for example Artificial Intelligence) is full of promise which will enhance our lives?
- How far do you agree with the statement, 'Technology may be the problem, but it is always part of the solution too'?
- Do the images of Sputnik 1 and the Hiroshima Dome add anything to your thinking?

Chapter 12

Travelling in the truck provides time for Malcolm and Nelson to talk about what happens.

Re-read aloud pp171 – 174. If possible, read in groups of three with one person reading the narration, one reading Malcolm and one reading Nelson.

After reading, talk about the scene:

- Does the scene add anything to your understanding of the relationship between Malcolm and Nelson?
- What effect do you think the relationship could have on Malcolm?
- Why do you think Malcolm makes the assertion, 'I have no doubts'? (p174)

Chapter 13

Although only halfway through the book, this chapter feels as though we are heading towards a climax and an end to Malcolm's mission.

- What were your thoughts and feelings as the chapter progressed?
- How does Patrick Ness build tension in this chapter?
- Were there any surprises? How did you react to them?
- Think back to your previous discussion about the narrative of 'the chosen one'. Does this chapter confirm or subvert your expectations? Why?
- Assign one word to each character which summarises the role they have played in the story so far (e.g. revenge, love, hate, reason). Make a list and then share your ideas with a partner or group. Are there any areas of disagreement?

Chapter 14 and 15

Kazimir explains that they have come through the aura to a parallel universe. There are, 'an infinite number of universes' (p211).

- What are your expectations for the story now?
- What possibility does the existence of a parallel universe open up for the story?
- Have you read any other stories which have parallel universes?
- Do you know any theories of quantum mechanics that claim the existence of parallel universes?

Chapter 16

This chapter is devoted to exploring the thought process of Agent Woolf-turned-dragon.

- What certainties and what doubts does the dragon have?
- What drives her?
- Do you think she has the capacity for love?

Chapter 17

'And this girl looks like Sarah, but she clearly isn't her,' Darlene said.

In the parallel universe the characters are confronted with alternate versions of themselves and other characters who have died in their own universe. They look and even smell the same. They have similar preferences and characteristics and even display similar behaviours. But Darlene is not convinced that Sarah is her daughter.

This raises the question of what makes you 'you'. Philosopher John Locke believed that personal identity was synonymous with the physical body, but linked to the memory and experiences. This is called data theory; the idea that it is your brain's data that makes you, 'you'.

- If you were to transplant your brain's data into another body, would that new body, now be you? (This is the premise of a novel called *Eva* by Peter Dickinson in which a girl's brain data is transplanted into a chimpanzee after she is involved in a catastrophic skiing accident.)
- Do you agree with Darlene that Sarah is not her daughter? Do you think she should accept her as her daughter?
- Do you remain the same person throughout your life or can new experiences cancel out old ones? Does this have implications for how we treat people who may have carried out atrocities? What about Malcolm, is he the same person in this new universe?

Chapter 18

'This learning of herself, this leaping of taboos – sure, she had killed before, but she had never consumed – was dizzying.' (p251)

This chapter contrasts the red dragon's destruction with the vulnerability of a child. Grace clutches her copy of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Wood*, an American classic which celebrates family, fortitude and homesteading skills. The Little House books focus on overcoming adversity through love.

- Consider the interspersing of passages which focus on the dragon and on Grace.
- How does this affect your response?
- What difference would it have made if two different perspectives had been presented sequentially (first the dragon and then Grace) rather than alternated?

Chapter 19

'Don't!' Sarah yelled.

'I wasn't going to,' Malcolm said, and only realized it was true as he said it. 'I want no more death on my hands.' (p261)

- What are the critical incidents that have brought about this transformation in Malcolm?

Chapter 23

'I began to dread that it wasn't fulfilment I was documenting.' He looked in her eyes now. I fear I may have been writing the prophecy itself. (p304)

*'Dragon magic is about the realization of unrealizable possibility. That's why it's **magic**. It subsumes reality, subsumes what is real, while all the time worlds spring up again and again, plying out infinite choices in infinite varieties. Am I the thread in that variety that has caused this to happen?'* (p305)

Chapter 23 poses some interesting philosophical ideas.

- What responses do you have to this chapter?
- Is there anything that you found strange or puzzling? Share and talk about these ideas.
- What questions did it provoke?
- Do you agree with Sarah when she says, *'Then all you can do is your best. Always. That's it'* (p306)?
- To what extent do you think being a good human (or dragon) is about making the best possible choices? And how do we know if those choices are good?

Chapter 28

After finishing the book, share your responses and talk about what interested you most.

- Did you expect Malcolm to kill the dragon? Have you read other stories or seen films where a child kills a parent or surrogate parent? Are there any connections with this story? (Patricide – and it usually is a father, rather than a mother – is as old as myth.)
- Revisit the discussion about 'the chosen one' or 'Hero's Journey' myth. Have you had any further thoughts about this now that you have read the entire story?

AFTER READING

Some questions for further discussion:

- What do you think are the most important themes and ideas in *Burn*?
- How does setting the narrative in an alternate reality, as opposed to a purely fantastic setting, affect the story.
- How would the story have been different if the war was between humans with no dragon interference? What does this add beyond introducing a fantasy element?
- What views or religion are expressed in this novel? In addition to thinking about the Believers, consider Kazimir's role as a theologian.
- If you have read any other novels by Patrick Ness, can you identify common threads linking the books?
- There are two epigraphs at the beginning of the book. They are lyrics from music of

the 1970s and 1980s, one disco and one punk/gothic. Find the music and lyrics. As a soundtrack to the book, do they suggest a playfulness, a reminder not to take ourselves too seriously, perhaps?

- In an adult novel called *The Crane Wife*, Patrick Ness wrote 'All stories begin before the start and never, ever finish.' What do you imagine would happen next in the continuation of this story?

Some thoughts about 1957

The characters in *Burn* have a range of cultural backgrounds. Sarah Dewhurst is mixed heritage, Jacob Inagawa is American from Japanese heritage, Nelson is Guatemalan Canadian. There are references to racial tension throughout.

This is mirrored in the treatment of the dragons, contemptuously referred to as 'claws', who are treated with suspicion. The Blues, of Russian descent, are especially reviled.

Explicit reference is made in the novel to race laws that existed in different states in 1957. Interracial marriages were legalised but continuation of racist attitudes makes life difficult for those that take this path and their children.

In January 1957, 60 black pastors and civil rights leaders including Martin Luther King met in Atlanta to co-ordinate a nonviolent protest.

That same month members of the Klu Klux Klan abducted and terrorised a 24-year-old black delivery driver, Willie Edwards, for allegedly making offensive comments to a white woman. He was forced at gun point to jump from a bridge to his death.

The Jim Crow Laws enforcing so called 'separate but equal' segregation were still functioning in 1957. This was the year the Little Rock Nine, a group of African American students enrolled at the all-white Little Rock school, where they were barred entry by the Governor of Arkansas. President Eisenhower intervened, directing federal troops to escort the children into school. Five days later, on the 9th September 1957, the Civil Rights act was signed into law by President Eisenhower.

Malcolm and Nelson are given the derogatory label, 'fruits'. Nelson's own family reject him because of his sexuality and Sarah fails to comprehend that Malcolm might love Nelson in any way other than as a brother. Attitudes to homosexuality in 1950s America were changing very slowly. In 1958 The United States Supreme Court ruled that the gay publication *One Inc* was not obscene, and it was therefore protected as a legitimate form of expression protected by the First Amendment. It was a decade later that the Stonewall riots took place as a demonstration against police harassment and brutality towards the LGBT community. The gay activism movement was born.

Notes by Nikki Gamble, Just Imagine

Just Imagine is a Centre for Excellence in Reading and runs reading programmes and training for teachers across the UK.

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