

THE GLOBAL BESTSELLER

PATRICK NESS



PIPER
AT THE
GATES
OF
DUSK

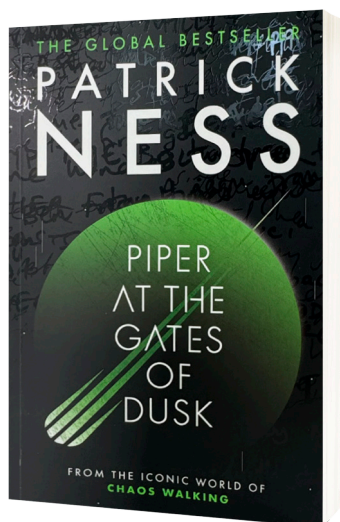
FROM THE ICONIC WORLD OF
CHAOS WALKING

TEACHER NOTES

Teacher Notes by Belinda Bolliger

WALKER BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK



PIPER AT THE GATES OF DUSK
AUTHOR: PATRICK NESS
ISBN 9781529537581 PAPERBACK
APRIL 2026

The first in a new trilogy set in the world of the groundbreaking *Chaos Walking* series.

Now, almost twenty years on, Patrick Ness makes a momentous return to New World.

Something has been spotted in the night sky. Something that's bringing back dreams of Noise, dreams of terror. Brothers Ben and Max have never really gotten on, each being more like one of their parents – Todd and Viola. But now they will have to come together. **SOMETHING IS COMING.**

For ages: 12+ years

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Ness is the award-winning and bestselling author of *A Monster Calls*, *More Than This*, *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* and *Release*, as well as the legendary *Chaos Walking* trilogy. The first book in his middle-grade series, *Chronicles of a Lizard Nobody*, was shortlisted for the Nero Awards. John Green has described him as 'an insanely beautiful writer'. He has won every major prize in children's fiction, including the Carnegie Medal for Writing twice. He has written the screenplay for the film of *A Monster Calls* and the BBC *Dr Who* spin-off, *Class*. He lives in London.

THEMES

Storytelling and narrative truth • Belonging, difference and voice •
Family, inheritance and moral responsibility • Power, control and fear •
Colonisation, coexistence and cultural conflict • Environmental responsibility
• Loyalty and courage • Identity and moral choice

CURRICULUM LINKS

English (Literature, Literacy and Language): Analyse how authors develop themes, ideas and moral perspectives in complex texts; Examine characterisation, motivation and relationships; Interpret symbolism, narrative voice and structural choices; Compare representations of society, culture and power; Discuss how language shapes meaning and emotional response; Create analytical, imaginative and persuasive responses to literature.

General Capabilities

Critical and Creative Thinking: Students analyse ethical dilemmas, evaluate competing perspectives and imagine alternative futures.

Ethical Understanding: The novel prompts reflection on responsibility, justice, the consequences of violence and moral decision-making.

Personal and Social Capability: Exploration of empathy, identity, belonging, relationships and emotional resilience.

Intercultural Understanding: Consideration of different ways of living, knowledge systems and cultural conflict.

Cross-Curriculum Priorities

Sustainability: Discussion of environmental stewardship, long-term consequences of human activity and alternative relationships with land and resources.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures: The novel can support discussion about colonisation, connection to Country and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems (acknowledging that it is a speculative work rather than a direct representation).

BEFORE READING

BACKGROUND

Piper at the Gates of Dusk is set in the same world as Patrick Ness's acclaimed Chaos Walking trilogy (*The Knife of Never Letting Go*, *The Ask and the Answer*, *Monsters of Men*).

While you don't need to have read these novels to understand *Piper at the Gates of Dusk*, familiarity with the trilogy provides valuable context for the setting and its history.

The Chaos Walking trilogy follows Todd Hewitt, a boy raised in an all-male settlement on the New World. Human colonists arrived on the planet seeking a fresh start, but soon encountered the native species known as the Land. During this conflict, a phenomenon called Noise emerged: the thoughts of men are broadcast aloud, making privacy impossible and amplifying fear, anger and suspicion. Women, however, are not affected in the same way, and this difference profoundly shapes social dynamics and power structures.

Across the three books, Todd and his companion Viola uncover the truth about the colonists' past, including the violence used to establish human settlements and the manipulation of history to justify that violence. The trilogy explores themes of war, propaganda, leadership, moral responsibility and the possibility of peace between humans and the Land.

By the end of *Monsters of Men*, the New World stands at a fragile turning point. Attempts at coexistence have begun, but the consequences of colonisation, environmental damage, and generational trauma remain unresolved. *Piper at the Gates of Dusk* returns to this world at a later time, examining how the legacy of those earlier conflicts continues to shape society and individual lives.

If you haven't read the Chaos Walking trilogy, *Piper at the Gates of Dusk* can be read as a standalone story about identity, belonging and responsibility in a troubled world. If you are familiar with the trilogy, this new novel further explores the moral questions raised in the earlier books, offering a perspective on what happens after the apparent end of conflict.

DISCUSSION TOPICS AND ACTIVITIES

STORYTELLING

One of the key themes of *Piper at the Gates of Dusk* is storytelling. The stories in the novel are not simply entertainment. They are warnings, memories and explanations – a way to make sense of fear and harm. Stories carry knowledge across generations and shape how characters understand their world.

The Pied Piper

The title of the novel evokes the traditional tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, a medieval legend in which a mysterious musician rids a town of rats but, after being denied payment, leads the town's children away as punishment. The story raises enduring questions about trust, responsibility, revenge and the consequences of broken promises.

'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' (*Wind in the Willows*)

The title also references Chapter 7 of *The Wind in the Willows*, 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn,' as quoted on the opening page of the novel, in which Mole and Rat encounter a mysterious, benevolent being (often interpreted as the god Pan) while searching for a lost child. In this scene, the Piper is not

a figure of punishment but of protection, comfort and quiet power. After the encounter, the characters are allowed to forget most of what they have experienced, suggesting that some knowledge is too overwhelming or sacred to hold.

This version of the Piper emphasises themes of guardianship, connection to nature and the presence of something ancient and beyond human understanding.

Discuss

By drawing on both of these stories, the novel invites readers to consider a range of possibilities.

- Is the Piper a threat or a protector?
- Does the Piper lead characters to harm or to safety?
- Is the Piper an individual, a force or an idea?
- Can a figure be both dangerous and benevolent at the same time?
- What is the traditional story of the Pied Piper? Who tells it and how might versions differ?
- Why do you think this story has survived for centuries? What fears or anxieties does it reflect?
- In the original tale, who do you think is at fault – the Piper, the townspeople or both? Why?
- Why do you think the children are taken rather than the adults? What might this symbolise?
- In *The Wind in the Willows*, how is the Piper figure different from the one in the tale of the Pied Piper?
- Why do you think the author has used both a threatening and a protective version of the Piper?
- How does your knowledge of these stories influence your interpretation of the novel's title?
- Who or what might represent the Piper in *Piper at the Gates of Dusk*? Is this figure presented as threatening, protective, ambiguous or something else?

Activities

- Research different versions of the Pied Piper story (folk, literary, modern adaptations) and identify similarities and differences.
 - What elements remain constant across the different versions?
 - What details change? Why might they change over time?
- Read or listen to a retelling of 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' chapter from *The Wind in the Willows*.
- How does the mood differ from the Pied Piper story?
 - What role does nature play in this version?
 - How are fear and safety presented?
- Compare the two Piper traditions. Create a Venn diagram that shows similarities and differences in themes, characterisation and symbolism.
- What might the Piper symbolise in the context of the novel? Support your interpretation with evidence from both the original stories and the novel.
- Create a contemporary version of the Pied Piper story set in today's world. (What problem does the Piper solve? What price is demanded in return?) Decide how you are going to present your story, for example, a short story, a script, a graphic novel and so on.

The Power of Stories

Quote: "Stories are more than words. They're what's behind the words. He told the story in this way because he thought it would mean something to us, but that story is only a carrier for what's beneath." (p. 121).

The novel asks readers to consider whose stories are believed, whose are ignored and what happens when stories are forgotten or deliberately erased.

Discuss

- Why are stories so important in the world of the novel?
- How do stories influence fear, hope and decision-making?
- Who controls the dominant stories in the society of the novel and why does that matter?
- Can stories be dangerous? Can they also be necessary?

Activities

- Rewrite a key event from the novel as a 'warning story' told to future generations.
- Create a short oral or written story that explains a difficult truth without directly stating it, mirroring the novel's use of metaphor and myth.

THE NOISE

In the world of the novel and the trilogy that precedes it, all men and boys are affected by the Noise – a condition that makes their thoughts visible and audible to everyone around them, leaving them with no privacy and no way to hide what they think.

Patrick Ness has said the Noise isn't just about mind-reading. It's a metaphor for: toxic masculinity (men taught they must be loud, aggressive, dominant, never vulnerable); lack of emotional privacy; the danger of living without reflection or restraint; what happens when power is built on fear and constant surveillance.

Key Ideas to Explore

- Privacy vs. exposure
- Communication beyond words
- Power dynamics in who is heard and who is ignored
- Silence as strength vs. silence as vulnerability
- Neurodiversity, trauma or difference
- Listening as an active skill
- The difference between speaking and being understood

Discuss

- How does the Noise affect relationships between people?
- Is a world without private thoughts more honest or more dangerous? Why?
- Can people still lie if everyone hears their thoughts? How?
- How might constant Noise affect a person's mental health?

Quote: "The problem is that over the years, Pop's grown to think the cure was a mistake. He didn't take it himself, after all, and the planet functions on Noise. He's always thought it wasn't Noise that was men's problem, it was men themselves." (p. 32).

- What do you think the effect would be when only men have the Noise? How does this make women the enemy?
- Why do you think the Noise is so unsettling?
- Discuss the idea that the Noise removes something we take for granted: the right to keep parts of ourselves private.
- As you read *Piper at the Gates of Dusk*, flag:
 - one moment where Noise causes harm
 - one where silence protects someone
 - one where a character actively chooses restraint.
- Compare the Noise to social media oversharing.
- Explore links to surveillance and privacy in modern society.
- Discuss how different cultures value silence and speech.
- Consider whether true understanding requires both speaking and listening.

Activities

- Create an artwork that illustrates your impression of the Noise.
- Create an artwork that expresses a strong emotion without using any words. Display and interpret as a class.
- Write two short pieces:
 1. Private thoughts – what a character really thinks.
 2. Spoken words – what the character actually says.
- Compare how different they are and discuss why people filter their speech.
- In small groups, each student tries to complete a simple task while the rest of the class speaks all at once or reads unrelated sentences aloud. Reflect on how it felt. Could you focus? How might the Noise feel in daily life?

SILENCE

(NB: Ben's silence should be discussed respectfully and without assumptions. The text allows for multiple interpretations, encouraging students to consider empathy, difference, and the many ways people communicate.)

Quote: “Now don't get any stupid ideas. This story, whatever it is, isn't about me “finding my voice.” I have a voice just fine, thank you. It's in my face and my gestures and my words.” (p. 31).

- Why might silence be especially noticeable in a world dominated by Noise?
- How do other characters react to Ben's lack of speech?
- In what ways does Ben communicate without words?
- Does Ben seem powerless because he is silent, or powerful in a different way?
- How do you think Ben's silence has formed his character?
- How does the novel challenge assumptions about communication?
- Is privacy necessary for developing identity and emotional safety?
- Compare two extremes:
 - A world where thoughts are constantly exposed (Noise).
 - A world where some people communicate primarily without speech.
- Which environment would make relationships easier or harder? Why?

BROTHERS AND CHOSEN FAMILY

The relationship between Ben and Max is at the heart of the novel. Their bond highlights themes of loyalty, protection, rivalry and divergence. As the story progresses, the brothers are forced to confront difficult truths about each other, about responsibility, and about what it means to act ethically when survival is at stake.

The author also expands the idea of family beyond biology – a chosen family – suggesting that care, trust and shared values can create powerful bonds.

Discuss

- How are Ben and Max different? What values and traits do they share?
- How does the relationship between Ben and Max change over time?
- How does each brother influence the other's choices through the story? Are they moving closer together or further apart in their thinking?
- In what ways do the brothers respond differently to danger and fear?
- Do the brothers trust each other completely? Why or why not?
- How does the novel explore the tension between protecting someone and controlling them?
- What does loyalty look like when people disagree? Is loyalty always the same as doing what is right? How do Ben and Max navigate this dilemma?
- How does the novel challenge traditional ideas of family?

- What does the relationship between Ben and Max suggest about growing up and becoming separate from family?
- Can love survive when people make very different moral choices? Use examples from the novel.

Activities

- Write a key scene from each brother's perspective, focusing on their fears and motivations.
- Create a relationship timeline. Map key moments in the brothers' relationship across the novel, noting:
 - Trust
 - Conflict
 - Protection
 - Misunderstanding
 - Change.

Quote: "“You are like your father,” the Sky says.
 “We’re not related, though,” I say, “by blood.”
 “That is only one measure of fatherhood. There are others.”” (p. 226).

As well as the relationship between Max and Ben, the author also focuses on father-son relationships – the relationship between Pop and his sons and the relationship between Pop and Granddad Ben. These relationships raise questions about inheritance, responsibility, influence and what it truly means to be a parent.

Discuss

- The Sky suggests that fatherhood is not defined solely by biology. What other forms of fatherhood are shown in the novel (emotional, moral, protective, symbolic)? Provide examples.
- In what ways do fathers shape their sons' identities, values and choices – even when they are absent or flawed?
- How does the novel portray the tension between guidance and control in father-son relationships?
- What responsibilities do fathers have toward their children in a world shaped by danger, survival and moral uncertainty? Do the fathers in the novel fulfil these responsibilities?

THE LAND

Quote: "“It’s hard being in that city with all those people who think they can live their lives without being part of the world they’re living on.” He looks up into the stars in the night sky. “How different it all could be.”” (p. 133).

One of the novel's most powerful themes is its critique of human dominance over land, knowledge and other cultures.

- What is your understanding of the Land, the Sky and the Conversation? Why do you think the author has given them these names?
- How would you describe the Land? How are they different from the people who live in the city?
- How do the Land live? How does this compare to how people in the city live? In your answer, consider the priorities of the Land (relationships, memory, survival) compared to the priorities of the city people (expansion, exploitation, technical progress).
- How do humans and the Land understand survival differently? (Refer to the cure in your answer).
- What has been taken from the Land and what has been lost as a result?
- How does the novel challenge the idea of 'advanced' societies?
- What responsibilities come with power and technology?
- Create an artwork that shows what you think the Land look like.

Class Debate

Divide the class into two groups:

- The Land – representing those who live according to the ways of the Land.
- The city – representing the people of the city.

Debate question: Which way of life offers the best future for humanity: living with the Land or living in the city?

Gather evidence from the novel to support your assigned viewpoint, even if it does not reflect your personal beliefs. Think beyond simple good vs. bad judgments.

After the debate, as a class, reflect and discuss the following questions:

- Did your personal view change during the activity? Why or why not?
- Which arguments were most persuasive?
- What challenges did each society face?
- Is a compromise between the two ways of life possible?
- What might a balanced future look like?
- The city – representing the people of the city.

Extension

Design an ideal society that combines the strengths of both the Land and the city, explaining:

- How people would live
- How resources would be used
- How decisions would be made
- How conflicts with nature would be handled.

COLONISATION

Quote: “The Conversation of the Land covers everything. All history, time, current events, decisions, warnings, inventions, progress, wars, everything. Humans weren’t built for living in it. They can live near it, like Pop, dipping in and out of the waters, or they can let themselves be swept away and swim in it like fish do.” (p. 129).

- While the novel does not present a direct real-world allegory, it invites readers to reflect on histories of colonisation, environmental destruction and the dismissal of Indigenous and non-dominant knowledge systems. Find quotes from the text that illustrate this statement. (Pages 259 to 262 provide a useful starting point for discussions around colonisation).
- In what ways might the city’s expansion resemble historical patterns of colonisation?
- What attitudes toward nature, ownership, and control are revealed by each society?
- How does the novel challenge the idea that technological advancement automatically equals improvement?
- Whose voices or perspectives are prioritised — and whose are ignored or misunderstood?
- What might be lost when traditional knowledge systems are dismissed?
- Many Indigenous cultures around the world maintain knowledge systems that are similarly place-based and relational. Similarly, the Land has the Conversation. What other systems can you think of? For example: oral storytelling traditions, song, dance and ceremony and so on.
 - What are the strengths and limitations of each method?
 - Who controls access to these histories?
 - What kinds of knowledge might be lost when cultures are disrupted or displaced?
 - Can knowledge exist without written language?

- Is the Conversation something humans could truly understand, or does the novel suggest that some forms of knowledge cannot be fully translated into human systems?

THE GODS: POWER, FEAR AND BELIEF

The terrifying figures known as gods are a disturbing element in the novel.

Discuss

- How is the god described when it first appears? What emotions does it evoke in characters and readers and why?
- Once the gods are revealed to be made of Noise, how does this change your interpretation of what they represent?
- Are the gods an independent being, a weapon, a manifestation of collective fear or something else entirely? Support your interpretation with evidence from the text.
- Why are children specifically targeted? What might this suggest about innocence, vulnerability or the future of the society?
- Do the gods represent something supernatural, technological, psychological, or symbolic? Can they be more than one of these at the same time?
- Create an artwork that shows your impression of what the gods look like.

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Throughout the novel, characters struggle to understand who they are, how they see themselves, and where they fit.

Discuss: Identity

Quote: ""You, more than anyone, know that no one else should be allowed to decide who you are."" (p. 302).

Quote: ""You, more than anyone, know that no one else should be allowed to decide who you are."" (p. 302).

- Why might Max's statement be described as 'heartbreaking'? What emotions might be involved for both brothers?
- What does the novel suggest about the courage required to name or claim one's identity?
- Why is it important that individuals are allowed to define themselves rather than being defined by others?
- How do other characters respond to differences in identity? What does this reveal about their values?
- In what ways can identity be shaped by relationships, community, or conflict?
- How might identity change over time?

Discuss: Belonging

Quote: "When we were thirteen, Max told me, "I'm a boy," and then he cried and it was the most heartbreaking thing I've ever seen." (p. 89).

- Why does Ben say it is not a bad thing to want to belong? Do you agree?
- What kinds of belonging are shown in the novel (family, friendship, community, place, ideology)?
- Why might trying to belong 'to everything and everyone' result in belonging nowhere?
- Can belonging sometimes require compromise or sacrifice? Should it?
- How does exclusion affect characters' decisions and behaviour?
- Are there moments when characters must choose between belonging and staying true to themselves?

FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

Choice

““You honestly don’t think I was listening all those times you told us, ‘We are the choices we make?’ That’s all we are. We’re a series of choices and consequences, so we make the best ones we can.”” (p. 223).

Hope

““Yeah,” he finally says. “But that’s the thing, though. You gotta hope anyway. It’s terrifying. It’s the scariest thing in the world ...”” (p. 299).