

**“YOU’VE JUST GOT TO FIND A WAY TO LIVE THERE
ANYWAY”: TRAUMA, EMPATHY AND HEALING IN
PATRICK NESS’S *MORE THAN THIS*.’**

Dr Sonya Andermahr, University of Northampton, UK
sonya.andermahr@northampton.ac.uk

Outline

- Patrick Ness – brief biography and bibliography
- Themes and tropes in the YA novel
- The appeal of Dystopian fiction
- Trauma and identity in *More Than This*
- The concept of the crew
- The role of empathy in healing trauma
- Conclusion: the meanings of “more”
- References

Patrick Ness



- British-American author, critic, lecturer and screenwriter
- Born in the US in 1971, and emigrated to UK in 1999.
- First adult novel, *The Crash of Hennington*, published in 2003 followed by a book of short stories in 2004.
- The first book of his prize-winning trilogy for teens, *Chaos Walking*, was published in 2008.
- *A Monster Calls* (2010), co-written with Siobhan O'Dowd, was made into a film in 2016.
- *More Than This* (2013)
- *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* (2015) and *Release* (2017)
- Numerous awards including Carnegie Medal, Costa Children's Book Award, Booktrust Teenage Prize, Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, and the James Tiptree Jnr. Award

YA Themes and Tropes

- Identity formation and the quest for selfhood
- Sexual development and experimentation
- Psychological growth (self-knowledge, agency, resilience)
- Emotional and moral development (understanding and respecting other people's emotions and points of view)
- Experiencing and dealing with traumatic events and loss (death, illness, persecution, discrimination)
- Narratives of hope and yearning, expressing a (utopian) desire to make things better/for "more"

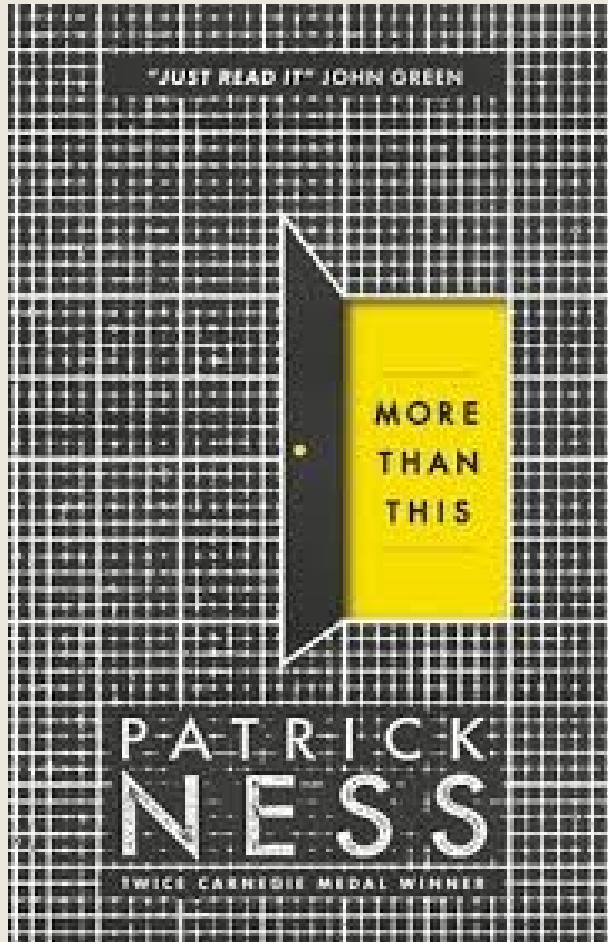
Focus on adolescent subjectivity

- “YA fiction conveys exactly an adolescent’s inability to understand the world and other people; the confusion and anxiety of emergent selfhood; the discomfort about the fluidity of mind and body.” (Nikolayeva 252)
- “Since empathy is an essential social skill, YA fiction offers a unique opportunity for readers to train their empathetic ability in a safe mode, which can be transferred to real life. Such a text-to-text reading strategy is valuable; yet another reason we read fiction is that we are curious about cognitive and emotional experiences that we – perhaps fortunately – will not encounter in real life.” (Nikolayeva 253)

Appeal of YA dystopian fiction

- “They [dystopian novels] speak to the young adult inside us all, the part whose identity is yet unformed, full of rage and fear and longing.” (Penny qtd in Cart 124)
- “These are dark, sometimes bleak stories, but that doesn’t mean they are hopeless. Those of us who write for young people are reluctant to leave our readers without hope.” (Young qtd in Cart 125)
- “...the narratives reveal their utopian hope in that they provide their adolescent protagonists with the choice of a different path, offering an alternative to the dystopian status quo.” (Schmeink 160)

More Than This (2013)



- Dystopian fantasy and coming-of-age novel
- Deals with traumatic experiences of homophobia, child abuse, murder and suicide.
- Expresses a teenager's "lifelong yearning, a feeling that there had to be more, more than just all this weight. Because if there wasn't, what was the point?" (Ness 139).
- Terrific opening in which a boy drowns and then wakes up to an afterlife >second chance

Trauma in *More Than This*

- The novel opens with one trauma: Seth's suicide by drowning following discovery and break up of his relationship with another boy.
- In psychoanalytic theory one traumatic event may trigger an earlier primary trauma:
- "...the disenchantment that I experience here and now, cruel as it may be, appears, under scrutiny, to awaken echoes of old traumas, to which I realize I have never been able to resign myself." (Kristeva 4-5)
- Primary trauma: abduction and death of Owen, Seth's younger brother while in his care - "the very worst thing" (Ness 26) - and the catastrophic effect it has on his family unit.

Trauma and narrative identity

- The text alternates between 3rd person present tense narrative and 3rd person past tense narrative (rendered in italics).
- The precise connection between the two isn't clear for much of the novel but mimics the fragmented character of traumatic memory.
- The past and present constantly impinge on each other and the involuntary movement between the two signifies Seth's trauma.

Trauma and Character Identity

- Violent slippage between past and present > loss of coherent identity
- Traumatic memories > radical alienation from self and place
- In his “post-death” state, Seth’s identity is radically dislocated:
- *“I am Seth Wearing. I was Seth Wearing.”* (Ness 32)

PTSD Symptoms

- Seth exhibits a number of classic PTSD symptoms (Lewis Herman):
- intrusion (re-living trauma): “The terror of it, the sheer awful terror that never seemed to stop.” (Ness 78); and “Isn’t dying once enough? [...] Am I going to have to keep doing it?” (112)
- constriction (paralysis): “He feels like he’s underwater again, fighting for breath.” (152); “His chest begins to ache again.” (114)
- hyperarousal (involuntary strong emotion): “He begins to shake, as the terrible knowledge of what he saw [...] starts to overtake him.” (26); and nausea – “He vomits.” (27)

The concept of the crew

- Along the way, Seth meets two other traumatised young people, Regine and Tomasz, who challenge the primacy of his own trauma in the narrative, and facilitate the process of working through his – and their - traumatic experiences together.
- “A community united by cooperative struggle and connectedness to others in order to survive. Loyalty is given to those with whom one is working in collaboration; actions determine one’s worth.” (Schmeink 174)
- “Are we not some funny kind of group?” Tomasz says. “Child abuse, murder and suicide.” (Ness 370)

The crew as a challenge to solipsism

- “He sneaks a peek back as he turns up the path ... A short happy Polish kid and a big, suspicious black girl. Did he create them? Because they’re just about the last and weirdest thing he’d pick to create.” (Ness 192)
- “I don’t think you’re really here. I don’t think *any* of this is really here.”
- “If we’re not here”, Regine says, holding his stare, “then neither are you.” (Ness 201)
- “And that’s actually kind of it. The way you think you have the right to know everything. That it’s all about you. I mean, even thinking me and Tommy are here to help you somehow. How self-centred is that? You ever think maybe you’re here to help us?” (Ness 337)

Connection to others as basis for recovery

- “Recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central focus of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life.” (Lewis Herman 133)
- “Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connection with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic operations of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy.” (Lewis Herman 134)

Role of friendship and empathy in healing trauma

- The young people share experiences, confront, rescue and comfort each other, working through their various traumas individually and together.
- “His brain is still overloaded with unsorted memories, but for a fleeting moment [...] he realises he almost feels safe.” (Ness 340)
- “Whatever you see, wherever you are, we’re still here with you. Me and Tommy.” (306)
- “These two funny, different people. He hears them and his heart hurts a little.” (Ness 420)
- The novel works to ameliorate the effects of pain and loss in young people’s lives today and in the process foreground the healing powers of friendship and empathy.

Conclusion: the meanings of “more”

- The “more” in the title functions as a polysemic sign signifying:
- a utopian impulse: “He’s uncertain what’s going to happen next [...] But as his friends begin the final steps, ... he thinks that what is forever certain is that there’s always more. Always.” (477)
- the self-in-relation to others: “What I’ve learned is that there actually *is* more. There’s you guys. You guys are my more.” (442)
- Resilience in the face of life’s challenges: “Real life is only ever just real life. Messy. What it means depends on how you look at it. The only thing you’ve got to do is find a way to live there.” (462)

References

- Armit, Lucie. *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic*. Macmillan, 2000.
- Cart, Michael. *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*. Neal-Schuman, 2016.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Black Sun*. Columbia UP, 1989.
- Lewis Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books, 1992.
- Ness, Patrick. *More Than This*. Walker Books, 2014.
- Nikolayeva, Maria. 'Voicing identity: the dilemma of narrative perspective in twenty-first century Young Adult fiction.' *Modern Children's Fiction: An Introduction*, edited by Catherine Butler and Kimberley Reynolds. Palgrave, 2014.
- Schmeink, Lars. "Coming of age and the other: critical posthumanism in Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* and *The Drowned Cities*." *Posthumanism in YA Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*, edited by Anita Tarr and Donna R White. University Press of Mississippi, 2018, pp 159-178.