

Q&A with Patrick Ness



1. Todd, the main protagonist of *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, has a wonderfully individual and powerful voice. From where did the inspiration for this character come.

Todd's partly me at that age: sensitive, serious, probably a little too intense. But his voice is a creation that took a couple years of listening to him in my head. There's a little bit of Russell Hoban's great *Riddley Walker* to him, but I kept trying different approaches until suddenly, one day, there he was on the page. Part of it's hard work, but part of it is that unknowable creative magic thing: he wasn't here, then the next minute he was. I sort of don't want to know, really.

2. Where did the inspiration come from for the idea that germ warfare could kill all the women and leave the surviving men and boys able to hear each other's thoughts?

The idea of the germ warfare that killed all the women was the strongest, saddest way to make clear this is a dying town. There can be no more children, and Todd is the youngest one there, so he's even further isolated. What can you do when you're facing a future like that? How do you feel? And the idea of the Noise, where everyone can hear everyone else's thoughts, is just the logical next step from the kind of world we live in today: texting, emails, messaging, the internet. Information is everywhere, whether you want to hear it or not, and it's harder and harder to be a private person. I just went another step to wonder how hard it would be for a teenager at their most awkward age to have no privacy at all. It would be a nightmare, really.

3. Who are your favourite writers and how have they inspired your work?

My favourite adult writer is Peter Carey, easily. An Australian who's won the Booker Prize twice, he's a master of different voices and creating whole new visions of reality. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is an inspiration on *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, with its odd narrator and different world. When I was growing up, I loved to read the oddball children's writers that everyone else thought were too weird or disreputable. One in particular is an American called Daniel Pinkwater, whose books are completely out there. I remember one where the hero and his grandfather drive past Hell and discover it's a huge tourist attraction.

4. How much of your inspiration comes from real life and real people?

Not a lot, only in general characteristics. I don't write historical fiction, nor is my work often obviously realistic; I like to push things out there a bit, see how I can bend reality in unusual ways. I find this frees me up to pick and choose inspirations and blend them together. Having said that, I had a fantastic great aunt called Ingeborg from Norway, a real grandmother figure to me. And in *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, there's a character called Hildy who's Ingeborg all over, so real people do show up in the oddest places.

5. Each of the characters can hear everything that everyone else is thinking. This is a clever device but was the writing difficult to pull off?

Only in the planning, because I had to really believe that the characters had lived like this for years. So you have to ask yourself questions like: how would they keep secrets? How would they tell lies? How would they interact with each other if you couldn't disguise how you really felt about someone? After I got all that figured out, it took on a life of its own and felt like it was writing itself.

6. Which authors do you think readers of *The Knife of Never Letting Go* will also enjoy?

Phillip Pullman is an obvious choice, everyone should read him. And there's a great American writer called M T Anderson who's worth searching out. *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing* is absolutely remarkable, and the sequel's coming out soon, too.

7. Why did you want to focus on a teenage main character and reader?

Truthfully, because it suited the material the best. That's my only criterion. I think if you start out saying, "I want to write for teenagers, so what should I write?", you're asking the wrong question. You should always start with "What's the best way to tell this story?". And the best way to tell *Knife* was with a teenage main character and for a teenage reader. Those were the ways that were going to make the book its most free, hard-hitting and exciting to read.

8. What advice can you give would-be children's authors in getting published?

Kind of like what I said above: you should always, always, always start with a story, not with the idea of getting published. Write a book you'd want to read, write a book that excites you, and you're halfway there already. Your goal should always be writing the best book, not getting it published. If you can do that, your chances of actually getting it published are much better, because then you'll have a good book to show people.

9. What made you leave your native America and move to the UK?

Simply put, the opportunity came up and I took it. I think all writers are wanderers at heart (we spend most of our time wandering off in our imaginations anyway), so if you get a chance to change your surroundings, it can only be a good thing for your work

More About Patrick Ness

As a child

I was born on an army base called Fort Belvoir, near Alexandria, Virginia, in the United States. My father was a drill sergeant in the US Army, but much nicer than that makes him seem. I only stayed at Fort Belvoir for the first four months of my life and have never even been back to the East Coast of America. We moved to Hawaii, where I lived until I was almost six. I went to kindergarten there, and we used to have field trips down to Waikiki Beach. I once picked up a living sea urchin and got about a hundred needle pricks in the palm of my hand. I made up stories all the time as a kid, though I was usually too embarrassed to show them to anybody.

As an adult

I've only ever really wanted to be a writer. I studied English Literature at the University of Southern California, and when I graduated, I got a job as a corporate writer at a cable company in Los Angeles, writing manuals and speeches and once even an advertisement for the Gilroy, California Garlic Festival. I got my first story published in *Genre Magazine* in 1997 and was working on my first novel, *The Crash of Hennington*, when I moved to London in 1999. I've lived there ever since. I taught Creative Writing at Oxford University for three years, usually to students older than I was.

As an artist

So far, I've published two books for adults, a novel called *The Crash of Hennington* and a short story collection called *Topics About Which I Know Nothing*, a title which seemed funny at the time but less so 10,000 mentions later... Here's a helpful hint if you want to be a writer: When I'm working on a first draft, all I write is 1000 words a day, which isn't all 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 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.