



WALKER BOOKS
DISCUSSION GUIDE

Burn

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TWICE CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNER

£7.99 • Paperback • 9781406393972

“Clever, complex and completely engrossing.”
The Times

ABOUT THE BOOK

Burn is a genre-defying novel of superlative imagination in which Ness’s impressive prose cuts effortlessly through worlds of complex fantasy, love, destiny and politics. Set in a late fifties America in which dragons are a fact of existence, Sarah Dewhurst meets Kazimir – a much distrusted ‘Russian Blue’ dragon – who comes bearing a prophecy that will affect the entirety of the world. Playing out against the backdrop of a reimagined Cold War, Sarah must navigate dragon-worshipping cults, assassins, corruption and bigotry, and the depths of her own emotions, as the world edges ever closer towards its own destruction. A fiercely powerful book, *Burn* is a masterpiece of suspenseful ingenuity, narrative creation and world building.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Ness is the award-winning and bestselling author of the Chaos Walking trilogy, *A Monster Calls*, *More Than This*, *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, *Release* and *And the Ocean Was Our Sky*. John Green has described him as ‘an insanely beautiful writer’. He has won every major prize in children’s fiction, including the Carnegie Medal twice. He has written the screenplay for the film of *A Monster Calls* and the BBC Doctor Who spin-off, *Class*. The first Chaos Walking film was released in March 2021.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Burn is a novel that defies many conventions of fantasy and YA, yet comfortably sits across multiple genres. Within the novel are a large number of complex themes, typical of Ness's writing and imagination – the nature of fate, religion, politics, sexuality, discrimination, war, violence. While rooted firmly in fantasy these themes are explored with faithful adherence to the realities many members of a reading group may recognise in their lived experience, and as such, steps should be taken to ensure all members are comfortable discussing elements of the book. Appropriate support should be in place, should any members feel the need to access it, and members affected by these themes should be able to express themselves without fear of reprisal or discrimination.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Getting started

Before discussing the following questions in detail, ask what the group thought of the book. Did anyone have particularly strong feelings about the novel? Is anyone willing to expand on these feelings? Did the novel evoke any particular responses or reactions? It might also be worth discussing the group's familiarity with other novels by Ness, where relevant themes or comparisons might be highlighted. You may want to agree as a whole what is acceptable in terms of spoilers relating to other texts before you begin.

1. 1950s America

'If nothing else, they would both know there were chances to be had, even in this world.' -p.337

'The prophecy wasn't about a war between men and dragons. It was about a war between men.' -p.192

Why does Ness choose to set the novel in (a version of) 1950s America? You might consider the political and cultural implications in relation to race and sexuality in the novel. Despite taking place in a 'fantasy' version of this world, discuss the realism of the treatment and experiences of different characters that this time and place creates. Similarly, what is the significance of the threat of the Cold War and the impending Space Race on our reading of the novel? Does this relate to the destructive power of dragons/humans?

2. Sarah and ordinariness

"What you must remember through all of this," Kazimir said, "is that you are not special." -p.131

"I'm just a girl."

"It is tragic how well you have been taught to say that with sadness rather than triumph." -p.303

Discuss the character of Sarah. What, if anything, does she embody, or represent? Why is her lack of 'specialness' so important in the novel? Consider her part in the novel – when is she active, when passive, and why might this be significant? You might like to discuss the wider importance of the character as female and mixed race at this point.

3. Malcolm and belief

"I'm not sure. We've got a slightly different approach to reality."

"Do you now?"

Malcolm nodded.' -p.93

'Once more something about the other boy startled Malcolm into telling the truth when he knew he really shouldn't.

"Because I didn't want to have to kill them." -p.97

What role does belief play in the novel? As a 'believer' what, if anything, does Malcolm

represent? How does Malcolm change as the novel goes on, and what does this say about belief? Discuss the way in which Malcolm drives the plot of the novel as a character with a 'specialist' role, compared to Sarah and her ordinariness.

4. Prophecy

“Knowing the future is part of that future’s past. Perhaps the foreseen happens because we try to change it.” -p.139

“I don’t understand any of this either, but maybe we don’t have to. There’s a problem out there.” -p.339

What is the significance of prophecy in the novel? Is it self-fulfilling? Does the action of the book happen because it was prophesied? How does this differ from the idea of ‘recurrence’? (see p.305) What, if anything, does Ness suggest is knowable about the future? (NB: other Ness works explore elements of this theme and may be relevant for discussion at this point, particularly, *And the Ocean Was Our Sky*.)

5. Dragons

‘Fifty feet from wing tip to wing tip, possibly sixty.

The dragon was small.’ -p.15

‘They were not of this world. And then they were.’ -p.182

How does the portrayal of dragons, or Kazimir in particular, compare with other ‘dragon’ literature or media that group members have read or experienced? Consider the dragons themselves, and the mythology of dragons within the book, and their interactions with humans. At the book’s conclusion, Ness reveals that dragons came from humans – to what extent can the dragons in *Burn* be seen as a metaphor for human action and intent?

6. Humans

“I am always careful around men,” the dragon had answered. “You are dangerous animals.” -p.113

“Sometimes you just have to feel bad about a thing. Sometimes that’s the only thing that makes you human.” -p.105

What does the novel say about what it is to be human? What role does ‘humanity’ play in the events of the novel? Consider what changes Malcolm’s path, or what drives Kelby, ‘corrupted ... right at [his] heart,’ or even why the dragon that was Agent Woolf hesitates in her destruction.

7. Power and agency

“Don’t 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?”

“It’s always been that way,” Miss Archer said. “Just what humans do.” -p.160

Like Sarah and Malcolm, the novel is full of contrasts and similarities – multiple, slightly different universes, Blue and Red dragons, dragon and human, action and inaction, power and powerlessness. Consider how different characters’ own power and agency, and their desire for both, influence the novel. Who wants what within the book, and does anyone really achieve their goal?

8. Building suspense

‘So Malcolm stepped out of the trees and met Nelson, and the fate of billions was changed.’ -p.83

“You always need to watch your back when you meet a dragon, Agent Dernovich,” she said. “Surely whoever you pray to would agree with that.” -p.92

Explore the ways in which Ness builds suspense and intrigue throughout the novel. To what extent does the author foreshadow (or prophesise) later happenings? How does he achieve this? Discuss also the impact of omnipotent narration in the novel, as in the quotation given. What effect do hints and teases of what is to come have on the reader?

9. Multiple universes

“‘Aaron Burr,’ Malcolm said. ‘He was president.’” –p.286

In which worlds does the novel take place? Is the world into which they travel a fictionalised version of our world? Discuss the ways in which Ness leads the reader through these concepts as the novel develops – what is clear? What isn’t? At what point did anyone realise that the first world was never a ‘dragonified’ version of our exact world? (NB: Aaron Burr ran for president in 1800 but lost to Thomas Jefferson. He was later the other party in the duel that killed Alexander Hamilton.)

10. Religion

“‘On the whole, one should worry less about prophecies and more about the lunatics who believe them.’” -p.133

“‘A religion.’”

“‘A cult,’ Sarah said.

“‘Nomenclature,’ Kazimir said.’ -p.321

How is the subject of religion treated in the novel, in the world in which dragons exist? How does Ness imagine this to play out? How strong a place does religion have in a dragon-filled world, compared to others? What parallels can be drawn from the ‘believer’ cults and real-world examples of cults and religions?