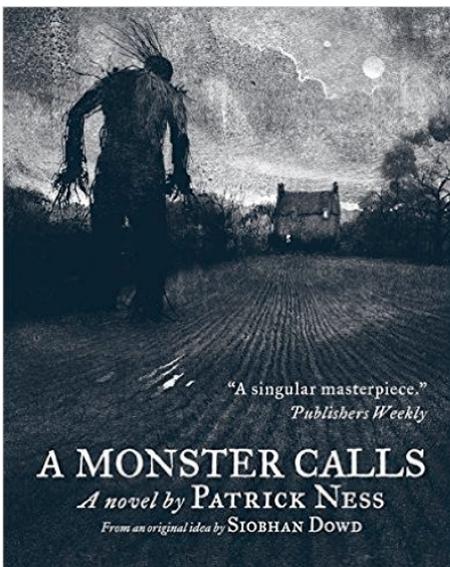


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## Recommended Reads

**Ness, Patrick (2011). *A Monster Calls* (Illus. Jim Kay, inspired by an idea from Siobhan Dowd). London: Walker Books.**

**Recommended by Alan Pulverness**



Patrick Ness's novel is about a 13-year-old boy, Conor O'Malley, gradually – and reluctantly – coming to terms with his mother's terminal illness. The monster of the title is rather unconventional: it is a yew tree that uproots itself to visit Conor at exactly 12:07 over the course of several nights, as treatments fail and his mum's condition deteriorates. The monster has come to tell Conor three stories over three successive visits, and predicts that Conor will tell him a fourth, which 'will be the truth'.

Conor is overwhelmed by the monster's power, but unimpressed by stories that punish the good, reward evil and upset the listener's expectations. The monster explains: 'Stories are the wildest things of all. Stories chase and bite and hunt.' Conor resists with the cheeky humour of a thirteen-year-old, interrupting the monster's tales with sceptical disbelief and complaints about his disregard for natural justice. The accounts of these night-time visitations alternate with the real-world narrative of Conor's mother's decline, his awkward relationship with his maternal grandmother and the bullying he suffers at school. By the end of the novel, Conor understands what the monster's stories are about and is able to tell his own story, one that deep inside he knew very well, but was afraid to admit to.

Stephen Krashen has recently updated his theory of comprehensible input, suggesting that the pre-requisite for language acquisition is not simply comprehensible input but what he now calls compelling input. *A Monster Calls* with its short chapters and

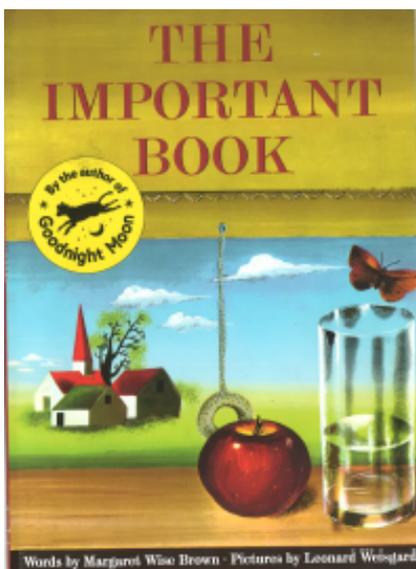
overall brevity, its straightforward, economical style and its unsentimental approach to the most delicate subject matter, seems to me to fulfil Krashen's requirement. Ness uses the storytelling within his story to challenge platitudes about life and death. And the book's dramatic impact is enhanced by Jim Kay's 2012 Greenaway Prize-winning illustrations. *A Monster Calls* is the book I wish I could have read when I was thirteen.

**Alan Pulverness**, Academic Director at NILE, is co-author of ELT textbooks, including the award-winning *Macmillan Short Course Programme* (1995). From 2002-2006 he co-chaired the British Council Oxford Conference on the Teaching of Literature. Recent publications are (with Brian Tomlinson) 'Materials for Cultural Studies' in *Developing Materials for Language Teaching* (Ed. Tomlinson 2013) and 'A Brief History of Cambridge English Language Teaching Qualifications' in *Studies in Language Testing 42: Assessing Teachers' Professional Skills and Knowledge* (Ed. Wilson & Poulter 2015).

**Brown, Margaret Wise (1949). *The Important Book* (Illus. L. Weisgard).**

**New York: HarperCollins.**

**Recommended by Gail Ellis**



The wonderful thing about picturebooks is discovering new ones. Imagine my surprise when a colleague at the British Council in Paris introduced me to *The Important Book* in 2014 and I discovered this book was first published in 1949! It was new to me but was certainly not a new book. I loved it immediately!

The black and white and colour illustrations have a slightly surreal feel to them, and on each double spread there is a poetic paragraph which describes the major attributes of everyday familiar things, such as a spoon, a daisy, the rain, grass, snow, an apple, the wind, the sky,

and a shoe. Each paragraph begins and ends with the key attribute, adding repetition. The rhythmic paragraphs assign a dream-like quality to reality, 'the important thing about a daisy is that it is white', 'the important thing about the sky is that it is always there.' And on closer reading there are a few surprises, 'the important thing about a cricket is that it is black', 'the important thing about glass is that you can see through it'.

The format of the book provides children with a perfect model in how to write a good paragraph, with a topic sentence and supporting sentences about an object of their own choice. The book encourages creativity and thinking skills as it invites children to construct their own opinions about everyday things and their world. It inspired my nine-year-old nephew, a reluctant reader and writer, to write his own paragraph about a floor tile and a teacher to write her paragraph which she called a 'poem' about a story. It also provokes discussion as peers may or may not agree with the key attribute described. If you would like to base a lesson around this book you can find a plan in *Teaching Children How to Learn* (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015, p. 90).

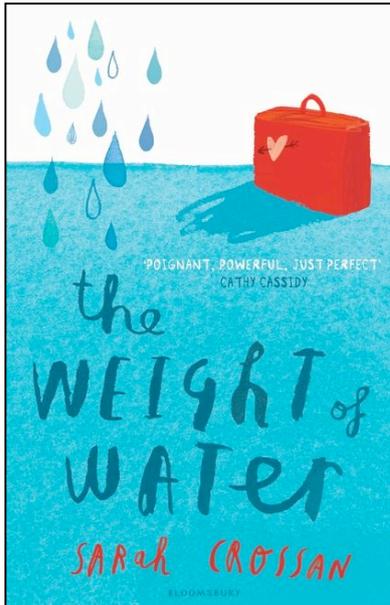
*The Important Book* is a timeless book, it encourages children to look at things in different ways, consider different opinions and value everyday things.

**Gail Ellis** is Adviser Young Learners and Quality, based at the British Council in Paris. She has over 30 years of experience as a teacher, teacher trainer and manager. Her publications include *Learning to Learn English* (with Barbara Sinclair), *The Primary English Teacher's Guide* (with Jean Brewster & Denis Girard), *Tell It Again!* (with Jean Brewster, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition published 2014 by the British Council) and *Teaching Children How to Learn* (with Nayr Ibrahim, published by Delta Publishing in 2015). Her main interests include children's literature, young learner ELT management and inclusive education.

**Crossan, Sarah (2012). *The Weight of Water*.**

**London: Bloomsbury.**

**Recommended by Liesel Hermes**



This verse novel is made up of 127 poems of different lengths that create a continuous story. At the centre of the narrative is the 13-year-old Polish schoolgirl Kasienska, the narrator, and the action unfolds like a first-person narrative.

Kasienska and her mother leave the Polish town of Gdansk and fly to England to look for her estranged father. They have to live in a miserable apartment and Kasienska's first experiences in an English school are anything but positive, as she is kept down a grade by an insensitive teacher and is bullied by classmates. Mother and daughter meet Kanoro, a doctor from Kenya, who lives in their

building and they become friends across cultures.

Kasienska's only consolation is swimming, in which she excels and where she meets William, an older pupil, who sees her talent. They help each other with English and maths and gradually fall in love. Kanoro helps Kasienska find her father, who she discovers has a new wife, Melanie, and another child. Despite being drawn to Melanie and wanting to live with her father, she stays with her increasingly depressed mother, as she has to acknowledge that her parents will never be reconciled. Later Kasienska makes friends with a new girl in class, Dalilah, who, like Kasienska, is different from everyone else. This helps her regain her confidence and finally when she participates in a swimming competition and wins, she is able to prove herself to her father and confront her bullying classmate. Her mother overcomes her depression with Kanoro's help, and the epilogue shows Kasienska emerging as a self-confident teenager.

This verse novel is particularly suitable for use in the classroom (from circa the age of 14) due to the multiple discussion topics it prompts: emigration and immigration, race

relations, alienation, language problems, school life with bullying and power games, mothers and daughters and family conflicts, first love, swimming and the opportunities of asserting oneself through sports.

**Liesel Hermes** is retired professor and President of the University of Education Karlsruhe, Germany. Her special interests are contemporary Australian literature, teaching literature and teaching EFL methodology. She has published widely in literary criticism and EFL methodology and has edited a number of novels for use in English language classrooms.

**Silverstein, Shel (2010). *The Giving Tree*.**

**London: Penguin Books**

**Recommended by Anna Pires**



‘Once there was a tree and she loved a boy.’ And so begins Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*. Originally published in 1964, this timeless classic, with its minimalist artwork and ‘poetic’ prose, is a parable of selfless love and devotion; a beautiful book that portrays the stages of human growth.

In the beginning, the love the tree and the boy share is enough to make them both happy. As the boy grows older, his needs change and the tree gives him everything to help him achieve happiness. The boy needs money, so she gives him apples to sell. The boy wants a wife and children, so the tree gives him

branches to build a house. The boy wants a boat to sail away, so she gives him her trunk. When the boy is gone and the tree is left with nothing, she is happy (but not really). Eventually, the boy returns and the tree has nothing left to give, she is a stump in the

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ground, but the boy has changed and no longer wants anything other than the companionship they once shared, and both are happy once again.

I fell in love with this book when I was child, but never considered using it with my own students until very recently, when I decided to read it to a small group of 12-year-olds. Right from the onset, the students found the story incredibly moving, and as I turned the pages, and the tree kept giving and the boy kept taking, the room went silent and eyes welled up. When I finished reading, I gave the children a bit of quiet time to process the meaning of the story and then asked them to write a personal response to the story in their journals. Some saw the tree as unconditional love from parents, others wrote about how we are takers and not givers when it comes to nature, and some focused on the topic of friendship. One student wrote 'I want to hug a tree!'.

**Anna Pires** is Assistant Director of Studies at International House Braga, Portugal. Her initial training is as a primary school teacher, but she worked in public schools teaching English to 10 and 11 year old children, before doing her CELTA and DELTA and moving into the private language school sector, where she now teaches learners of all ages. Over this past year she has been experimenting with picturebooks with her learners aged 12 and above to deal with classroom management issues.