



# RELEASE

## A NOVEL BY PATRICK NESS

### DISCUSSION GUIDE

Grades 9 & Up

### About the Book

Seventeen-year-old Adam Thorn is devastated by the end of his relationship with Enzo and uncertain about his new relationship with Linus. But then he pricks his finger on a rose and sets in motion a chain of events that may change destinies, for a ghost soon rises from a nearby lake, a ghost whose spirit will become entwined with that of a murdered girl. How will Adam's search for love and the two spirits' search for release come together and with what consequences? The answer is imperative, for lives and the future of a mythic world are at stake.

### Discussion Questions

1. Ness has said he had two models in mind when he wrote *Release*: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Judy Blume's *Forever*. What do you make of this odd juxtaposition and how might the two books have influenced Ness? Further, the author calls *Mrs. Dalloway* one of the three best books written in the English language (George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are the other two). Do you agree? What three books would you cite as the best?
2. When Adam was eleven, his mother said he's a "little bit" gay. Can someone be only a little bit gay? What special problems do being the gay son of an evangelical minister pose for Adam? How does he feel about his parents? Would he agree with Angela when she hotly says, "They're your parents. They're meant to love you *because*. Never *in spite*." "Nothing was free with [Adam's] parents," Ness writes. What does that mean? And "Twelve more months and the Yoke is off," Adam thinks. What does he mean? In light of all this, what does "family" mean to Adam?
3. The biblical character of the prodigal son is invoked more than once in *Release*. Who is the prodigal son in this novel? Why? Unlike the forgiving father in the story of the prodigal son, "You have no idea how much I work to love you," Big Brian says to Adam. How does Adam react to this? How would you?
4. Love is a—some would say the—theme of the novel. In this connection the French philosopher and mathematician Pascal once wrote, "The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know." What does this mean, and does it apply to Adam? If so, how?
5. C. S. Lewis, author of the Chronicles of Narnia books, has said there are four kinds of love: affection, friendship, eros (sex), and charity (the love of God). How do these apply to *Release*, and does the book contain other kinds of love? Of Wade, Marty and Enzo, Adam thinks, "None of them could see past the body." In dramatizing this, Ness is relatively open in describing the physical act of sex. What does this have to do with love?
6. How would you describe Adam's relationship with Enzo? With Linus? How are his feelings for Linus different than for Enzo? "Can I love? Can I? Can I be loved?" Adam thinks desperately. Why is he so uncertain? And of Linus, Ness writes, "Adam wanted to love so much it almost physically hurt." Yet what things keep Adam from wholeheartedly loving him? Are they justified? And what of relationships? For example: Angela likes but doesn't love Kurt, "which she thought was the perfect combination." Would Adam think that? She also observes, "Never pass up the chance to be kissing someone. It's the worst kind of regret." Why does she say *regret*?

7. Adam is routinely told he is too young to experience love. Do you agree or disagree? Why? “Teenage love isn’t love,” his brother, Marty, says, adding, “especially if it’s . . .” (he stops there). Then he says, “It’s not real love.” What does “it’s” refer to? Adam later admits that he believes what his brother said. Linus says of this belief: “Adam Thorn doesn’t deserve it. And never will.” Does he actually mean that, or is he being ironic? Later, of Linus’s love, Adam hopes “he would deserve it.” Do you think he does? “Maybe love made you stupid. Maybe loneliness did,” Adam thinks. “Please don’t leave me unloved,” he poignantly begs Linus. Why does he think he might be unloved?
8. Physical beauty, Adam thinks, is a curse. Why? Do you agree? But then he says, “Everything’s easier when you’re beautiful.” Is he being inconsistent? And what does this mean for him, because, as Linus says, “You are a big, beautiful guy.”
9. When Adam sees the beautiful Enzo at the party, “his heart broke, it broke, it broke.” Later, “Adam thought, maybe hearts don’t ever stop breaking once broken. Maybe they just keep on beating, until they’re broken again . . . His heart was broken just at the sight of Enzo, it *longed* to touch him again, even after all that Enzo had done.” How so? What finally frees Adam from Enzo? And why?
10. There is a ghost in *Release*, Ness has said a bit whimsically, because “of course there’s a ghost.” What does he mean by this and what role does the ghost play in the novel? How do the Queen’s spirit and the murdered Katherine’s become intertwined? Why do they? What impact will this have on their two worlds? How are the spirits and their plight related to Adam? As for the Queen’s story, it is a novel within a novel. How do the two novels relate to each other?
11. What is the significance of Adam’s full name? And of the rose? (When the Queen wakes, she is surrounded by thorns and wild rosebushes.) Of the rose, Adam says, “I got it this morning. Just felt right. Like I had to.” Why does he say this? And why does he prick his thumb with the rose? What do you make of the subsequent statement, “What is this thorn in [the Queen’s] heart and what does it bind there?” “She sees herself, all of herself, in a single drop of blood, a single drop of blood on a day where destinies changed, a single drop of blood that started this all—” How so?
12. In a larger sense, is Adam himself wounded? Linus says, “You give off this vibe of somebody trying to hide their wounds, wounds you didn’t deserve but maybe you think you did.” At one point Big Brian says to Adam, “We all need healing.” Do we? Does Adam?
13. The Queen is trapped by Katherine’s spirit, “snagged and bound by a frightened soul.” How so? The Queen is “the keystone between the worlds.” What is the relationship between the two worlds? She needs to be free—“She is the Queen. She must stand alone”—but is she the only one who does?
14. At the end, the Queen asks Adam, “How do I let go?” And he answers, “That’s the question, isn’t it, For everyone.” Is it? Why?
15. The significance of the title *Release* is clear but the question remains, as the Faun thinks, “release into what, though?” How would you answer that?
16. One school of literary criticism is called Reader Response Theory, which focuses on the reader and his/her reaction to the text. In that context, how do you, as a reader, respond to *Release*, both emotionally and intellectually?

## About the Author



Photo by Helen Giles

**PATRICK NESS** is the author of nine novels, including his *New York Times* bestselling *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, the Chaos Walking trilogy, *More Than This*, *A Monster Calls*, which was made into a major motion picture with a screenplay adaptation by Patrick himself, and *Release*. Born in Virginia, Patrick lives in London.  
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