

Parents' Guide to *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness

Grade Levels: 9–12

Lexile Level: 730L

Genre: Low Fantasy/Realistic Fiction

Publisher: Walker Books Ltd

ISBN: 978-1406361803

Page Count: ~237 pages

About the Book

A Monster Calls tells the story of Conor O'Malley, a young teen struggling to cope with his mother's serious illness. One night, a mysterious monster begins visiting him, telling stories that challenge Conor to confront his deepest fears and emotions. Blending fantasy with realism, the novel explores grief, truth, and the complexity of human emotions in the face of loss.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Literary Analysis:** Students can explore symbolism, allegory, and nonlinear storytelling.
- **Critical Thinking:** The story encourages reflection on emotional honesty and alternative perspectives.
- **Social & Emotional Growth:** *A Monster Calls* helps students process themes of grief, anger, denial, acceptance, and love.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** The novel connects to science (medicine and health), religion (pastoral care), and fine arts (visual media/illustrations).

Discussion Topics for Home

- Why does the monster visit Conor, and what purpose do its stories serve?
- How do grief and fear affect the way people act toward each other in this book and in the real world?
- How does the novel show that people can feel more than one emotion at the same time? When have you felt conflicting emotions in your life?
- Conor experiences raw grief and confusion. How does [Psalm 13:1-6](#) affirm that it is okay to bring anger, doubt, and sadness to God?
- What does the story suggest about truth—even when it is painful? How does that message connect to [John 8:32](#)?
- In [John 11:35](#), even Jesus himself experiences grief. How might this comfort someone like Conor?

Why We're Reading *A Monster Calls*

This novel offers a meaningful way to explore difficult emotions through storytelling. It encourages empathy, self-reflection, and viewing grief and healing through a pastoral lens. Its combination of fantasy and realism allows students to engage with complex emotional experiences in a safe and thoughtful way.

Parents' Guide to *I Must Betray You* by Ruta Sepetys

Grade Level: 9-12

Lexile Level: 850L

Genre: Historical Fiction/Thriller

Publisher: Penguin Random House

ISBN: 978-1984836045

Page Count: ~336 pages

About the Book

I Must Betray You is a gripping historical novel set in 1989 Communist Romania during the final days of Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship. The story follows Cristian Florescu, a 17-year-old boy who is blackmailed by the secret police into becoming an informant. As Cristian navigates a world of fear, suspicion, and propaganda, he must decide what it means to be loyal, truthful, and brave in a system built on betrayal.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Literary Analysis:** *I Must Betray You* explores first-person narration and perspective, complex character development, motivation, tension, and suspense.
- **Historical and Cultural Context:** The story provides insight into life under a communist dictatorship and the Romanian Revolution of 1989.
- **Civic Understanding:** The book explores themes of freedom, surveillance, propaganda, moral courage, and the role of government.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to world history (Cold War and Communism), religion (ethics and morality, human rights and dignity), media literacy (investigating information sources for bias), and science (forensics).

Discussion Topics for Home

- How does living under constant surveillance affect people's behavior and relationships? Do you behave differently if you think an authority figure is watching? Why?
- How do propaganda and misinformation shape what people believe? What strategies can we use to critically evaluate information?
- Fear controls much of society under Ceaușescu's regime. What message does [2 Timothy 1:6-8](#) give us about bravery in the face of fear? Where do we see moments of courage breaking through that fear in the novel?
- How do [Isaiah 10:1-3](#) and [Matthew 5:10](#) connect to the government system and its citizens in the novel? What does Catholic social teaching tell us about moral courage and the cost of silence?

Why We're Reading *I Must Betray You*

I Must Betray You offers students a compelling look at a lesser-known moment in world history while exploring timeless questions about integrity, courage, and freedom. Its brief chapters and fast pace engage readers of all levels. The novel encourages students to reflect on the value of truth and the responsibilities of citizenship, helping them better understand both past and present struggles for human rights.

Parents' Guide to *When Stars Are Scattered* by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed

Grade Levels: 7-10

Lexile Level: HL 530L

Genre: Graphic Novel Memoir

Publisher: Penguin Random House

ISBN: 978-0-525-55390-8

Page Count: ~257 pages

About the Book

When Stars Are Scattered is an award-winning memoir in a graphic novel format based on the real-life childhood of Omar Mohamed, who grew up in a refugee camp in Kenya after fleeing war in Somalia at just four years old. The story follows Omar and his younger brother Hassan as they grow up in the Dadaab refugee camp, facing uncertainty while holding on to hope for education, stability, reunification with their lost mother, and a better future.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- Visual Literacy: The integration of text and illustrations strengthens comprehension and adds new layers of interpretation to explore in the classroom (color analysis, composition elements, etc.).
- Global Awareness: The story provides insight into the realities of refugee life and international conflicts.
- Social & Emotional Learning: *When Stars Are Scattered* encourages empathy, resilience, and compassion.
- Cross-Curricular Engagement: The book connects to world history and geography (historic conflicts in the Horn of Africa), civics (humanitarian aid), religion (hope, charity, fortitude, human dignity), and fine arts (visual media).

Discussion Topics for Home

- How does Omar balance his responsibilities as a brother with his own hopes and dreams? How do you balance what you must do and what you want to do?
- How does access to education impact Omar's life and future? Does his story affect your view of school?
- What does "home" mean to Omar? How does that definition change over the course of the story?
- How does [Matthew 25:31-40](#) connect to the way Omar and Hassan are treated?
- Read [1 Corinthians 12:12-26](#). How does this passage relate to the human dignity of Omar, Hassan, Maryam, Nimo, and the other refugees in the book? How can we respect and support one another in our own communities beyond our immediate families?

Why We're Reading *When Stars Are Scattered*

This memoir helps students build empathy and awareness of global issues through a personal and accessible story. The graphic novel format engages a wide range of readers while addressing serious and important topics. It encourages students to reflect on perseverance, gratitude, and the power of education. It serves as a powerful starting point for the English II/English II Honors curriculum, which surveys literature from different countries and cultures around the world.

Parents' Guide to *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury

Grade Level: 11 (English III)

Lexile Level: 740L

Genre: Science Fiction

Publisher: Simon & Schuster

ISBN: 978-1451678192

Page Count: ~256 pages

About the Book

The Martian Chronicles is a collection of loosely connected short stories that chronicle Earth's colonization of Mars. Set between 1999-2026, Bradbury's visionary work blends science fiction with poetic language, examining themes of exploration, technology, human nature, and destruction. As Earth's settlers arrive on Mars, they bring with them both their hopes and flaws, echoing the complexities of colonization and cultural erasure.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Literary Analysis:** The stories provide ample opportunities to explore allegory, symbolism, setting, and tone across a short story cycle.
- **Historical Context:** *The Martian Chronicles* reflect Cold War-era anxieties, post-WWII tensions, and themes of American expansionism.
- **Ethical Inquiry:** The text promotes dialogue on colonization, environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and Catholic social teaching.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to science (space exploration, environmental studies), history (colonialism, technological ethics), art (futurism, speculative design), and religion (human dignity, stewardship, Catholic social teaching).

Discussion Topics for Home

- What responsibilities do we have when exploring new worlds? What responsibilities do we have as stewards of God's creation?
- How do these fictional stories reflect real-world historical colonization?
- What does Bradbury suggest about technology's impact on society? How do you feel technology impacts you?
- How do the different stories and perspectives in the book challenge our understanding of progress, humanity, and home?
- How do the characters' actions compare to [Genesis 2:15](#) and [Proverbs 16:18](#)?

Why We're Reading *The Martian Chronicles*

The Martian Chronicles provides a rich platform for exploring both imaginative futures and pressing moral questions. Bradbury's work challenges students to think deeply about human nature, cultural responsibility, and the consequences of unchecked advancement. Its poetic style and philosophical depth make it a valuable and thought-provoking addition to our curriculum.

Parents' Guide to *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

Grade Level: 11 (English III Honors)

Lexile Level: 890L

Genre: Dystopian Fiction/Science Fiction

Publisher: Simon & Schuster

ISBN: 978-1451673319

Page Count: ~249 pages

About the Book

Fahrenheit 451 is a dystopian novel set in a future where books are banned and “firemen” burn any that are found. The story follows Guy Montag, a fireman who begins to question his society’s anti-intellectualism and suppression of free thought. Ray Bradbury’s classic novel is a powerful commentary on censorship, conformity, and the importance of independent thinking.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Critical Thinking:** The book promotes reflection on censorship, media, and intellectual freedom.
- **Civic Awareness:** *Fahrenheit 451* sparks discussion on democratic values, freedom of speech, and resistance to authoritarianism.
- **Literary Analysis:** The story introduces dystopian genre conventions, symbolism, dynamic character development, and figurative language.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to history and government (censorship, book banning, totalitarian regimes), religion (ethics and morality), and technology (mass media).

Discussion Topics for Home

- What role does media play in shaping our beliefs and actions?
- Why would a society want to ban books? What makes books—or stories—so powerful?
- What are some real-world examples of censorship today?
- How does [John 1:1](#) relate to Montag’s journey as he longs for both a literal and symbolic “Word”?
- How does [Romans 12:2](#) inform our understanding of Montag’s transformation? How does it guide our own growth and development?

Why We’re Reading *Fahrenheit 451*

Fahrenheit 451 offers students a compelling exploration of personal freedom, generational knowledge, and the dangers of apathy. Bradbury’s timeless warning against censorship and intellectual complacency is especially relevant in today’s fast-paced media landscape. The novel encourages students to think critically, value literature, and become thoughtful participants in a democratic society.

Parents' Guide to *Out of the Silent Planet* by C. S. Lewis

Grade Level: 11 (AP Language & Composition)

Lexile Level: 1020L

Genre: Science Fiction

Publisher: Scribner

ISBN: 978-0743234900

Page Count: ~160 pages

About the Book

Out of the Silent Planet is the first novel in C. S. Lewis's Space Trilogy. The story follows Dr. Elwin Ransom, a scholar studying the history of language, who is kidnapped and taken on a journey to the planet Malacandra (Mars). There, he encounters intelligent extraterrestrial species and learns that the universe is far more complex and interconnected than he imagined. As Ransom explores this alien world, he confronts questions about humanity, morality, and humanity's place in creation.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Literary Analysis:** The novel introduces students to science fiction as a vehicle for philosophical and moral exploration.
- **Thematic Study:** *Out of the Silent Planet* explores themes of good and evil, pride, stewardship, and cultural understanding.
- **Worldview Exploration:** The text encourages discussion of ethics, religion, and humanity's relationship with the natural world.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to science (space exploration, environmental studies, astronomy), linguistics, philosophy, and religion (morality, human dignity, God's creation).

Discussion Topics for Home

- How does Lewis use the beauty and strangeness of Malacandra to inspire wonder and reverence for creation?
- How do the different species on Malacandra interact, and what can humans learn from them?
- What responsibilities do we have when encountering new cultures or environments? What responsibilities do we have as stewards of God's creation?
- How does [Proverbs 16:18](#) relate to Weston and Devine? How does their arrogance blind them to the true nature of Malacandra and its inhabitants?
- Even though Earth is the "silent planet," signs of truth, goodness, and light remain. How does Ransom serve as a witness to that light described in [John 1:4-5](#)?

Why We're Reading *Out of the Silent Planet*

Out of the Silent Planet challenges students to think beyond their own experiences and assumptions. Through imaginative storytelling, Lewis explores profound questions about morality, human nature, and our place in the universe. The novel provides opportunities for literary analysis while encouraging students to engage with philosophical, ethical, and spiritual ideas in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

Parents' Guide to *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

Grade Level: 12 (English IV)

Lexile Level: 1170L

Genre: Allegorical Novella/Political Satire

Publisher: Signet Classics

ISBN: 978-0451526342

Page Count: ~140 pages

About the Book

Animal Farm is a political allegory in which a group of farm animals overthrow their human owner, hoping to create a more just and equal society. However, the pigs gradually become indistinguishable from the tyrants they replaced. Orwell's novella is a powerful satire of the Russian Revolution and the rise of authoritarian regimes, particularly Stalinist Russia, but it also serves as a timeless warning about power, propaganda, and corruption.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Political Context:** This novel helps students understand propaganda, manipulation of language, and the mechanics of authoritarianism.
- **Historical Connections:** *Animal Farm* serves as an accessible allegory of Soviet communism and totalitarian regimes.
- **Literary Analysis:** The story uses allegory, irony, symbolism, and characterization to convey political commentary.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to history and government (Russian revolution, communism), religion (ethics and morality), and media literacy (propaganda, rhetorical analysis).

Discussion Topics for Home

- What does *Animal Farm* suggest about the nature of power and leadership?
- In what ways do propaganda and fear shape the animals' beliefs and behaviors?
- How do the pigs change the rules over time—and why does no one stop them?
- Are there modern parallels to the events and dynamics in the story?
- How does [Luke 22:25-27](#) challenge the leadership style of Napoleon and the pigs?

Why We're Reading *Animal Farm*

Animal Farm is a short but powerful introduction to the dangers of authoritarianism and the importance of civic awareness. Its accessibility and layered meanings make it an excellent starting point for conversations about justice, freedom, history, and leadership. Orwell's use of allegory encourages students to analyze beyond surface meaning and apply lessons to both historical and current events.

Parents' Guide to *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien

Grade Level: 12 (English IV Honors)

Lexile Level: 1000L

Genre: Fantasy/Adventure

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

ISBN: 978-0547928227

Page Count: ~300 pages

About the Book

The Hobbit is a beloved fantasy adventure that follows the journey of Bilbo Baggins, a quiet and comfort-loving hobbit who is swept into an epic quest to help a group of dwarves reclaim their mountain home from a dragon. Along the way, Bilbo encounters trolls, goblin-like creatures called orcs, elves, and a mysterious creature named Gollum. Tolkien's richly imagined world and themes of courage, friendship, and personal growth have made *The Hobbit* a timeless classic.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Literary Analysis:** *The Hobbit* introduces students to fantasy conventions, character arcs, world-building, and archetypes.
- **Theme Exploration:** The story explores themes of courage, greed, wisdom, and the archetypal hero's journey.
- **Vocabulary Development:** With its high lexile level, Tolkien's descriptive prose enriches student vocabulary.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to mythology (epic quests and world-building), linguistics (fantasy foreign languages), geography (map reading), and art (illustrating characters and fantasy worlds).

Discussion Topics for Home

- What makes someone a hero? How does Bilbo redefine heroism?
- What lessons can we learn about greed and generosity from Smaug and the dwarves?
- How do the characters' decisions reflect their cultural and personal values?
- Why are friendship and loyalty so important in the story?
- How does [Matthew 6:19-21](#) inform your interpretation of the characters' differing ideas of treasure?

Why We're Reading *The Hobbit*

The Hobbit introduces students to rich storytelling, moral reflection, and imaginative thinking. Bilbo's journey invites readers to consider what it means to grow, face fears, and stand up for what is right. This novel provides a foundation for understanding fantasy as a literary genre and inspires creativity, empathy, and perseverance.

Parents' Guide to *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

Grade Level: 12 (AP Literature)

Lexile Level: 970L

Genre: Literary Fiction/Historical Fiction

Publisher: Dover

ISBN: 978-0486264646

Page Count: ~72 pages

About the Book

Heart of Darkness follows the journey of Charles Marlow, a sailor who travels deep into the Congo River basin in search of an enigmatic ivory trader named Kurtz. As Marlow ventures further into the African interior, he confronts the brutal realities of European imperialism and the psychological cost of unchecked power. Joseph Conrad's novella is a foundational work of modern literature, exploring themes of civilization, savagery, and moral ambiguity.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Historical Awareness:** *Heart of Darkness* critically examines European imperialism and its dehumanizing impact.
- **Literary Analysis:** The novella teaches modernist techniques such as unreliable narration, symbolism, allusion, and frame narrative.
- **Ethical Inquiry:** The book encourages reflection on moral hypocrisy, exploitation, and psychological conflict.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to world history (colonialism), psychology (identity, madness), and religion (human dignity, morals and ethics).

Discussion Topics for Home

- How does Conrad portray imperialism—as a civilizing mission or a corrupting force?
- What does the journey into the jungle—both Marlow's and Kurtz's—symbolize about human nature?
- How can modern readers approach the book's racial depictions and language?
- The indigenous people in the Congo are treated as subhuman. How does this violate Catholic teaching based in [Genesis 1:27](#) on the inherent dignity of every person?
- Marlow hesitates to act or speak at critical moments. According to [James 4:17](#), what is the cost of moral inaction?
- Marlow is both horrified by and complicit in the system he witnesses. According to St. Paul in [Romans 7:19-20](#), how can sin trap individuals and societies into these systemic patterns?

Why We're Reading *Heart of Darkness*

Though controversial, *Heart of Darkness* remains a profound critique of power, exploitation, and the thin veneer of civilization. Reading this novella, particularly in tandem with our other AP Literature summer reading selection, *Things Fall Apart*, helps students grapple with difficult historical truths, literary complexity, and the enduring relevance of colonial legacies. Guided discussion in the first days of school will ensure students critically engage with both *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart* with regard to perspective, complexity, and literary merit.

Parents' Guide to *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

Grade Level: 12 (AP Literature)

Lexile Level: 890L

Genre: Literary Fiction/Historical Fiction

Publisher: Penguin

ISBN: 978-0385474542

Page Count: ~209 pages

About the Book

Things Fall Apart tells the story of Okonkwo, a respected Igbo leader in pre-colonial Nigeria, whose world begins to unravel with the arrival of British colonizers and Christian missionaries. Through Okonkwo's personal struggles and the broader societal shifts, Chinua Achebe offers a powerful, African-centered perspective on colonialism, cultural identity, and change. The novel is a foundational work of African literature and post-colonial studies.

Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Historical and Cultural Awareness:** *Things Fall Apart* gives students insight into traditional Igbo life and the impact of colonialism from an African perspective.
- **Literary Analysis:** The novel introduces complex characters, symbolism, and narrative structure that contrast oral and written storytelling traditions.
- **Ethical Exploration:** The story challenges students to reflect on justice, tradition, masculinity, and cultural conflict.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to history (imperialism), religion (world religions, morals and ethics), and sociology (culture and identity).

Discussion Topics for Home

- How does Okonkwo's upbringing shape his values and choices?
- What are the strengths and limitations of Igbo society as portrayed in the novel?
- How does colonialism affect both individual characters and the larger community?
- Why is it important to seek out and interact with history from diverse cultural viewpoints?
- Some of the missionaries in the book (like Mr. Brown) build bridges, while others (like Mr. Smith) cause division. According to [Romans 12:15-21](#), what kind of evangelization reflects Christ?
- Okonkwo's fate is tragic, but not inevitable. How does [Galatians 6:7-8](#) highlight the weight of Okonkwo's moral choices?
- Okonkwo's downfall is largely tied to his pride. How do [Proverbs 16:18](#) and [Luke 14:11](#) reflect Okonkwo's classic tragic arc? What would true strength and leadership look like in Christ's model?

Why We're Reading *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's novel provides a crucial counter-narrative to colonial-era literature (like our other AP Literature summer reading selection, *Heart of Darkness*) by centering African voices and values. Students gain a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity, historical complexity, and the legacy of imperialism. *Things Fall Apart* helps foster global empathy, critical thinking, and literary analysis skills essential for AP Literature students. Together with *Heart of Darkness*, students will begin the year with a complex and nuanced discussion of perspective, complexity, and literary merit.