One of the themes of *The Knife of Never Letting Go* is that “War makes monsters of men” (page 430). What occurs in the story that proves this to be true? Can you think of present-day examples that either support or negate this idea?

Think about the title of the book: *The Knife of Never Letting Go*. At one point, Todd says, “But a knife ain’t just a thing, is it? It’s a choice, it’s something you do. A knife says yes or no, cut or not, die or don’t. A knife takes a decision out of your hand and puts it in the world and it never goes back again” (page 84). What does the knife symbolize? What does Todd do, and not do, with the knife? Think about the Spackle, the turtle, and Aaron. What happens to the knife in the end? What do you think this signifies?

In Prentisstown there is a complete lack of privacy. Patrick Ness stated in an interview with Mark Thwaite at www.bookdepository.com that, “With camera phones and Facebook, suddenly every action, even ones meant for just close friends, can be broadcast to the entire world. . . . I think it’s robbing us of something.” Do you agree or disagree with Ness? Do we suffer from a lack of privacy? What are some examples? What are the costs of this lack of privacy? Are there any benefits?

Todd tells us on pages 18 and 19 that he has had little education. In fact, reading and writing are forbidden by the Mayor of Prentisstown. On page 51, Ben tells Todd that “knowledge is dangerous.” At one point in the story, Todd realizes that “The world’s a dangerous place when you don’t know enough” (page 142). How does Todd’s lack of education and knowledge impact his journey, especially in terms of his inability to read Ben’s note and map and his mother’s journal? How does the denial of education allow totalitarian governments (like that in Prentisstown) to control their citizens?

Throughout *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, Ness explores gender roles. In a February 2010 interview he stated, “The gender roles were more a way of exploring my theory about how badly we are as a species at handling difference. If something is different, it’s either better (in which case we need to destroy it) or worse (in which case we need to exploit it). That was more a plea to accept difference as merely a difference.” Respond to Ness’s comments.

On pages 67–68, when Todd sees a girl for the first time, he says, “Girls are small and polite and smiley. They wear dresses and their hair is long. They do all the inside-the-house chores. They reach womanhood when they turn thirteen . . . and then they’re women and they become wives.” Viola tells Todd, when they are in Carbonel Downs, that the women there “clean and they cook and they make babies and they all live in a big dormitory outside of town where they can’t interfere in men’s business” (page 362). What do you think of Todd’s description? Think about Ness’s use of gender roles in the novel. How are the roles played by both genders in the book similar to contemporary American
gender roles, and how are they different from them? How does Todd, through Viola, eventually see women and their roles? (See pages 380 and 408 for reference.)

On pages 20–22 Todd refers to the Noise that fills his life. The author indicates this Noise through the use of a distinctive font. Do you think this effectively communicates what Noise might look and feel like? Where did this Noise come from? Todd says he has “Informayshun, all the time, never stopping, whether you want it or not. . . . And too much informayshun can drive a man mad” (page 391). *The Knife of Never Letting Go* is a part of a series called Chaos Walking. Todd tells us, “The Noise is a man unfiltered, and without a filter, a man is just chaos walking” (page 42). Patrick Ness tells us that dystopian novels are often more about the present than the future. If that is so, what in our contemporary lives might we consider Noise? What positive and negative impact do you think this Noise has on our lives?

On page 26, Todd tells us that Old World (Earth) was full of “corrupshun and sin.” On page 163, Hildy tells Todd that “Old World’s mucky, violent, and crowded. . . . a-splitting right into bits with people a-hating each other and a-killing each other, no one is happy till everyone’s miserable.” Is Patrick Ness making a statement about the world in which we currently live? What do you think of his assessment? The people of Prentisstown came to New World to find a “whole new Eden” (page 26), “a new way of life, one clean and simple and honest and good, one different from Old World in all respects, where people could live in safety and peace with God as our guide and with love for our fellow man” (page 414). Have they been successful and changed their ways? Explain.

Patrick Ness chooses to write Todd’s voice in the vernacular. He writes like Todd actually speaks, with grammatical and spelling errors. For instance, on page 4, Todd thinks, “The plans are being planned, the preparayshuns prepared, it will be a party, I guess, tho I’m starting to get some strange pictures about it.” His voice reflects things about his environment and how he was raised. What, in particular, does Ness’s use of the vernacular show us about Todd? Hildy? Wilf? Look for more examples of Ness’s use of the vernacular in *The Knife of Never Letting Go*.

Todd uses what some consider obscenities in the book. Why do you think Patrick Ness made the choice to have Todd use these terms? Does it add to, or detract from, his character development? Why does Todd sometimes use euphemisms like “effing” instead of the obscenities themselves? What does that tell you about him?

In an interview for yareads.com, Patrick Ness says that the books in the Chaos Walking series are “probably most about how hope lies in the people we love, that if you can find someone to count on and who counts on you, then that’s probably the best meaning life is going to get. A hopeful message.” How is this idea communicated in *The Knife of Never Letting Go*? What do you predict will happen in *The Ask and the Answer*, the second book in the Chaos Walking series?

In *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, Todd faces many ethical dilemmas, where he has to choose between what is right (and usually more difficult) and what is wrong (and usually easier). In some cases he makes the right decision. In others, he does not. For instance, on page 79 he realizes that the girl he has found is considered a “sign” and is wanted by the citizens of Prentisstown to be sacrificed. He considers giving her over to Aaron and the Mayor: “They could have what they want and leave me alone and I could go back and everything could be like it was. . . . It might save me.” What does he ultimately decide to do? Why? Look for additional examples of ethical dilemmas that Todd faces.
Follow the relationship between Todd and his dog, Manchee. At the beginning of the book, Todd tells us that Manchee was an unwanted birthday present. On page 333 Todd says, “I rub the ears of my . . . ruddy great dog that I never wanted but who hung around anyway . . . and who’s right there when I need pulling back from the darkness I fall into and who tells me who I am whenever I forget.” The two become true friends and companions. List the ways in which Manchee shows his devotion to Todd. Explain Manchee’s part in Todd’s ethical dilemma.

In the last one hundred pages of the book, there is much talk of hope. Ben speaks to Todd and Viola about hope. In her journal, Todd’s mother says, “Let me tell you about the place you’ve been born into, son. It’s called New World and it’s a whole planet made entirely of hope” (page 414). Later, Todd says, “I think how hope . . . may be the thing that keeps you going, but that it’s dangerous, too, that it’s painful and risky” (page 423). For Todd and Viola, hope lies in what they think they will find in Haven. It is what allows them to continue their journey and not give up. Do they find what they hope to find at the end of the road? Explain.

In The Knife of Never Letting Go, though the men can hear one another’s thoughts via Noise, do they really know one another? Todd says on page 308, “the lesson of forever and ever is that knowing a man’s mind ain’t knowing the man.” Though Todd cannot hear Viola’s Noise, he eventually is stunned to realize that, “I know what she’s thinking and feeling and what’s going on inside her . . . I can read her” (pages 419–420). Think about the development of their relationship. How is it that Todd knows these things in the midst of Viola’s silence?

In Chapter 1, “The Hole in the Noise,” Todd mentions Spackle and uses the racial slur “Spacks.” He describes them on page 69. What is a Spackle? How is the treatment of the Spackle reminiscent of the treatment of the Jews during Hitler’s regime and the treatment of Native Americans by European colonists? In Chapter 25, why do you think Ness decided to show the hero of the story, Todd, participating in the degradation and destruction of a Spackle? How do these actions change Todd? How do these actions change Viola’s feelings about Todd? Did they change your feelings about Todd?

In the climax of the book (starting on page 440), Todd must face his final and ultimate ethical dilemma. What is the dilemma that Aaron forces him to confront? How does this tie in with Aaron’s preaching that, “If one of us falls, we all fall,” which is stated several times throughout the story? How does Viola help Todd resolve this dilemma?

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Patrick Ness, an award-winning novelist, is the author of the acclaimed Chaos Walking trilogy. He has written for England’s Radio 4 and The Sunday Telegraph and is a literary critic for the Guardian. Born in Virginia, he currently lives in London. (www.patrickness.com)

The Chaos Walking Series includes:

