

The Originals *Teacher's Notes*

Written by Cat Patrick

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, 2013

Summary:

Elizabeth Best might seem like a typical bright, well-rounded teenaged girl, but there's a lot more to her than immediately meets the eye. Elizabeth is actually three girls – Lizzie, Ella and Betsy – clones who are secretly sharing a life.

This disconcerting arrangement is one that their strict and controlling mother, a former geneticist, believes is necessary in order to keep both herself and the girls safe from a government organisation she fears is trying to track them down in order to lay kidnapping charges against her. To keep under the radar, the three girls rotate through 'shifts'. Lizzie attends the first half of the school day before being replaced by Ella; Betsy does evening classes and activities.

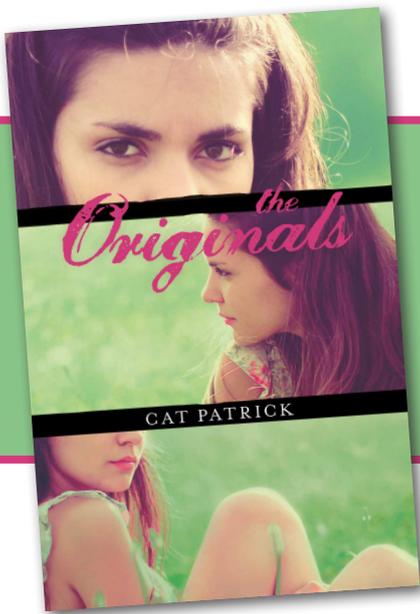
The charade requires careful co-ordination, with the girls having to ensure that they are dressed identically, and that they brief each other on everything that has happened to 'Elizabeth' during their particular shift. However, with the girls now teenagers, maintaining the facade of being one person is becoming more difficult.

As the clones grow older, their personalities and interests are becoming more divergent: this is particularly true of narrator Lizzie, who is showing 'right brain' tendencies. Her interest in the humanities begins to set her apart from the others, with the first 'breach' in Elizabeth's facade appearing when Lizzie fails an algebra test. The girls' mother goes into damage control, and responds to this by swapping Lizzie and Ella's 'shifts' so that the myth of Elizabeth can be maintained.

With the scheduling change, Lizzie is now taking a creative writing class, which is better suited to her right-brained interests. However, things become more complicated when she develops an interest in her classmate Sean Kelly – just as Ella develops a crush on David Chancellor. The friction between the two girls grows when their mother agrees to let 'Elizabeth' date, but decides that David is more suitable as a boyfriend.

Lizzie, who is already deeply ambivalent about her identity and who feels somewhat inadequate because of her divergent interests and skills, feels hugely slighted by the decision and begins to see Sean on the sly. She is also increasingly mistrustful of their mother, whom she suspects might be leading a double life.

Soon enough she and the others decide to let Sean in on their secret. He is surprisingly unbothered by the cloning aspect of it, with his concerns being more about the girls' mother's ethically questionable decision to force the girls to live a shared life. Meanwhile, Lizzie has been looking further into their mother's activities, and is unnerved by the realisation that their mother is not the ER doctor she claims to be. Instead, she seems to be still working on the cloning project that was meant to have been shut down years ago.



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Determined to find out what's going on, Lizzie poses as Betsy so that she and Sean can sneak out to spy on the girls' mother and find out more about what she's up to. When they return home, the others are gone, and Lizzie realises that they must have gone on the run in order to escape the authorities the girls' mother has long feared are after them. Lizzie and Sean go after them, and find them at a university campus in Colorado.

Ella explains that they were tracked down by a woman, a rival geneticist, who'd threatened to turn in their mother to the authorities on kidnapping charges if Ella and Betsy didn't go along with her. The woman had offered the girls new identities in exchange for information about the cloning project. The girls' mother finally explains that she's still involved in the project, and that she's been collecting information about the girls for her research from the very beginning.

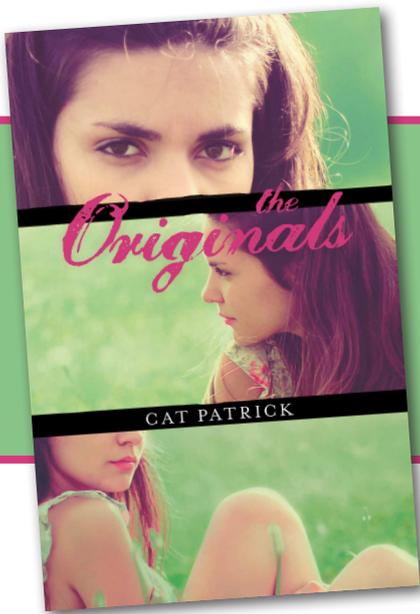
The girls demand to be allowed to lead their own individual lives as triplets, and their mother relents, although it's a pyrrhic victory. The girls have fake identity documents made, and make themselves over so that they look physically distinct – like sisters rather than clones. The final change comes when, upon the girls' eighteenth birthday, their mother leaves a note saying that she has turned herself into the FBI, and that the girls are now free to lead their own lives.

Style of telling:

The book is written in first-person, present tense from the perspective of Lizzie. This is an interesting choice on the author's behalf given that Lizzie is in many ways the 'black sheep' of the Best family. It's also worth considering why the author chose to offer a single viewpoint perspective to represent the three sisters, particularly since much of the book deals with their frustrations over having all three of their personalities represented through a single persona (that of Elizabeth).

The fact that the narrator and viewpoint character are one and the same assumes knowledge on the part of the reader, with much of the mystery of the story present because the reader is always playing 'catch-up' with Lizzie, who only reveals information in a piecemeal manner. There are some instances where this wall is broken, however, such as the girls' mother's letter in the epilogue, which provides a different viewpoint perspective without breaking the established first person perspective.

In terms of pacing, the novel unfolds quite slowly, and the climax at the end is quite low-key: it feels almost like an inevitable outcome. This suggests that the book's focus is more a thematic one and less a plot-oriented one.



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Characters:

Cloned triplets: 16, almost 17 (in January):

Their names are all (truncated, partial) variations on Elizabeth. However, the 'Original' is called Beth, which itself is notable for its being a truncated form.

Lizzie: Enjoys creative writing, Spanish, dancing, worries about her identity/future. She is the black sheep of the family given her creative interests; her push for her own identity precipitates much of the book's action. She is very trusting and easily hurt.

Ella: Good at maths, dramatic by nature, good in a crisis.

Betsey: some OCD habits, supportive (she raises the idea of dating for Lizzie's benefit). She's the mediator of the trio, and tends to act in a more mature manner than the others – she's always pointing out that the girls are *almost* 17.

The girls' mother: although not their DNA donor, she grew and gave birth to the triplets. A scientist who specialises in genetics research, she claims to be now using her degree to be an ER doctor. She is depicted by Lizzie as cold and unemotional, bringing the scientific method to everything that she does, although Lizzie recalls a happier past.

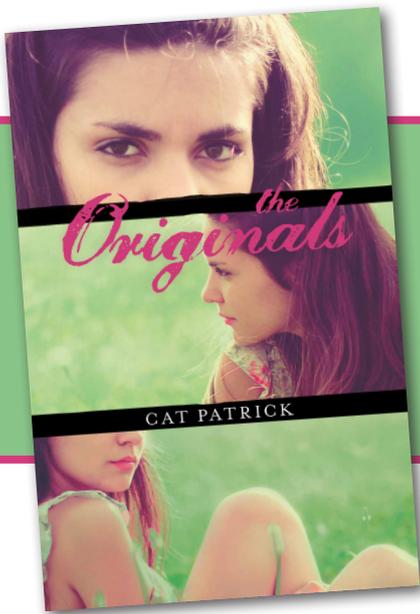
Sean Kelly: a boy in Lizzie's creative writing class. Lizzie develops a crush on him, and the two pursue a relationship. Sean is an amateur photographer, and it's perhaps this keen eye that helps him see the truth about Lizzie and her sisters. Sean is kind and caring, and is deeply concerned about the treatment of the girls by their mother.

Before reading:

The Originals is a high-concept book that deals with a number of ethical and moral issues that encourage a personal response from a reader. Some topics for discussion might include:

Cloning

- What is the place of cloning in society?
- Should the cloning of people be allowed? Under what circumstances?
- Is it different to clone a person rather than, say, a cell, a plant, or an animal? Why is this?
- Who should be allowed to conduct cloning experiments? Should these sorts of experiments be kept from the public?



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Human rights

- In *The Originals* three girls are forced to live under an assumed identity for what their mother says is their own safety. Is this situation acceptable?
- What kind of rights should cloned humans have? Should cloned humans have the same rights as other people?

Identity

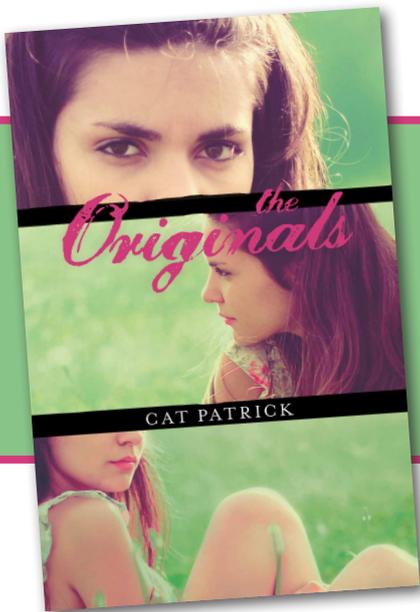
- The sisters in *The Originals* often refer to themselves as each one third of a person. If clones are copies of the same genetic material, are they separate people?
- How are clones and twins or triplets different? Do they share an identity? Why do you think that we often hear stories about twins who are 'opposites' in terms of personality and interests?

While reading:

Throughout the text the three sisters refer to Beth as the 'Original'. Why do you think that the book is called *The Originals*?

We get an ongoing sense of the girls' sense of inferiority over being clones. This identity complex pervades Lizzie's every interaction. Quotes for discussion:

- Page 17: 'I wonder whether the kids at school would consider clones unnatural; wonder what they'd think if they knew the truth.'
- Page 24: Sean uses a 'ghost meter' app on his phone: 'There's a ghost in the hallway,' he jokes. This could be applied to Lizzie and her 'part' identity. Notably, on the same page Lizzie chooses a Twix (a chocolate bar that divides in two and is often shared) from the vending machine.
- Page 36: 'How can a third of a person compete with one, whole Grayson?'
- Page 42: Lizzie flinches when Sean calls her 'Beth', which is how she thinks of the 'Original'. Why is this?
- Page 53: 'Looking right into the brown eyes that I always felt I inherited despite being made from someone else's DNA.'
- Page 77: 'I've never felt so unsure of who I am, which is pretty messed up coming from someone who's already broken in three pieces anyway.'
- Page 114: 'A copy's never as good as the original,' says Ella.
- Page 150: Ella says to Betsey: 'stop saying things like we have the same germs. We're not the same person! We may have matching DNA, but we don't like the same things. We don't make the same choices. We don't have the same dreams. We're our own people.'



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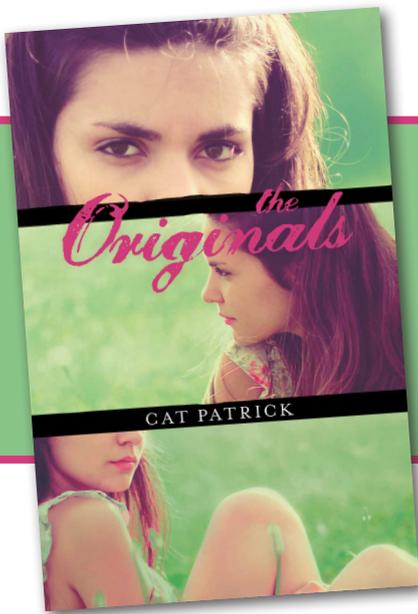
While reading:

Has the girls' mother's secrecy and fear-mongering added an additional veneer of stigma to the girls' already threatened sense of identity? Quotes for discussion:

- Page 1: 'One of Mom's major concerns is us standing out – and therefore being found out.'
- Page 13: 'First I want to say that we're lucky that it's taken this long for noticeable differences to crop up...but now, it's grown obvious to me that Lizzie is developing more right-brain tendencies,' says the girls' mother. Why does she say that their being alike until now considered 'lucky'?
- Page 14: 'I called the school and told them you had a migraine today...I talked them into letting you retake the quiz.' The girls are very clearly on a path dictated by their mother. This is true in particular of Lizzie: her 'imperfections' are being covered up by her more science-minded siblings, who fit better into their mother's mindset of who they should be. Is their mother attempting to mould them into an image of herself?
- Page 198: 'I was created in a lab from a dead girl's DNA. I was created *illegally*, and because of that, I am destined to be hidden.'

There are a number of instances that show us how Lizzie values individuality and being different:

- Page 5: 'Betsey never outgrew her affinity for country music and it's one of the things I love about her, because it's one of the ways she's different.'
- Page 25: 'For the first time in my life, someone noticed. He noticed *me*.'
- Page 28: Lizzie is surprised to be better at something (creative writing) than Ella.
- Page 71: 'You can call me Lizzie,' says Lizzie to Sean. Lizzie is asserting her identity here – and in a way she's usurping the other girls. Do you think that this is fair of her?
- Page 131: 'You guys always get the wrong kind of [deodorant],' says Lizzie. Differences in the small things.
- Page 186: the breakup with Dave: the girls' life seems to be streamlining into one that's run by Lizzie. Lizzie is going out during the evenings, and now she's the one with the boyfriend as well. Do you think that Lizzie seems to be battling to be the main clone – to become an 'Original' in her own right?
- Page 261: Ella: 'She said we're going to go back to living as triplets.' Lizzie: 'It's what I knew was coming...but it feels like a lacklustre victory. It feels like doing philanthropy for school credit – like someone forced you to do it.' How much is independence something that should be fought for and won?
- Page 265: 'Student government, chemistry, trigonometry, psychology, Spanish, dance and creative writing are all mine to love or loathe, to pass or fail.'



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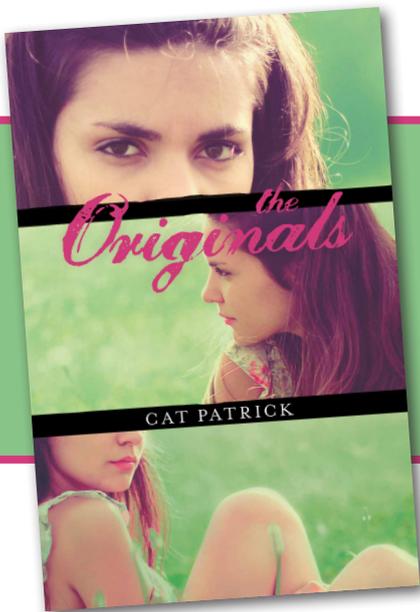
While reading:

The girls want their own identities, and want to be able to live as triplets rather than as one person (or even as clones). How would life as a triplet be different from living as a clone? Quotes for discussion:

- Page 16: When Lizzie says she and her sisters aren't normal, Betsey retorts: 'we're normal; we just happened to be cloned instead of made the regular way.'
- Page 16: 'Anyone else would see the same kid wearing different outfits and expressions, but really [in the photographs] it's different people...somewhere there's a photo of the Original, the baby who died.'
- Page 39: Ella: 'Just what if we could go back to pretending to be triplets like when we were little? What if we could live normally again?'
- Page 62: 'Ultimately, Ella won big – getting closer to a life of her own – and I just flat-out lost.'
- Page 88: 'As I'm trying to figure [Dave] out it hits me: He hasn't figured *himself* out yet.' Do you think that the girls are more aware of their own identities because they've spent all their lives negotiating them and thinking about them?
- Page 226: 'We look like we fit in, but jealous of Sean's family, left alone by my own, I've never felt more like an outcast in my life.'

The girls' mother is incredibly controlling. In addition to forcing them to live as one person, she organises their schedules, and strongly influences their friendship and relationship opportunities. She says that it's for their own good and safety, and seems to believe this, but her behaviour is so troubling that it's the sort of thing that would invite the interest of child protection services. Quotes for discussion:

- Page 75: The girls' mother says: 'In life, we make choices, and then we live with them. You said you're growing up, now start acting like it. Live with the choice you made.' And yet, this whole situation has arisen out of *her* actions.
- Page 54: 'Everyone thinks there's only one Elizabeth, so obviously you can only date one boy. I'm not sure how to make it fair...this is a little more important than bedroom assignments.' She then goes on to pick up a pencil that Lizzie says 'she'd probably been using for the crossword'. This interaction highlights how the girls' mother takes a scientific, quantitative approach to everything. She sees dating as akin to a puzzle/crossword with a set solution easily obtained by weighing pluses and minuses.
- Page 76: The girls' mother: 'The people who paid us to create you only wanted one. The *best* one. I had to take you. I had to do it.' Lizzie's response: 'You implanted the embryos in your womb like the Virgin Mary of Science and gave up your whole life to raise us. Well, thanks. I mean living a third of a life is almost as good as having a real one.' How does the girls' mother come across here? Do you sympathise with her? What does Lizzie mean when she says 'The Virgin Mary of Science'?



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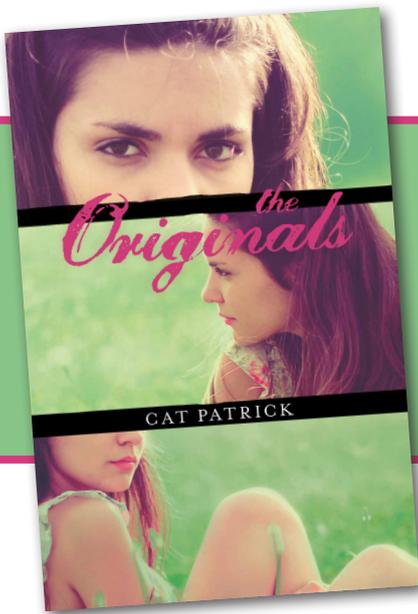
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While reading:

- Page 80: 'I wake up completely focused on and unsettled by the possibility of Mom having secrets – and what they could be.' Page 98: 'Why would [Mom] tell us so much about how we were created but lie about the fact that the Original was dead?' Lizzie finds it hard to fathom that their mother might not have their best interests at heart. Do you think that she's too innocent and trusting of her mother?
- Page 145: 'Your mom is borderline abusive, you get that, right?...I think you have Stockholm syndrome,' says Sean.
- Page 194: 'I want you to be safe,' says Sean. 'At first, it was just the schedule. Then the dating. Now you actually can't leave the house. I'm afraid for you; I'm afraid of what's next.'
- Page 209: 'It's like we're her...project...she knows about us...she probably knows everything.' I let the thought sink in, and after a few seconds, I start to feel okay with it. She knows and she's let it go on. She must have a reason: Maybe it's that deep down, she does want me to be happy.'
- Page 241: 'You three are my children, but you're also my job. When I took you from the clients all those years ago, it was maternal, yes – I wanted to protect you – but it was also a professional decision...I am still and will probably forever be a geneticist.' The girls' mother is expected to be a mother first and a scientist second. Do you think that this would be the case if she were their dad and not their mother?
- Page 267: '...in a way I feel like Mom wronged me the most.'

At turns we see conflict between the three girls, but also an impressive ability to work together. Quotes for discussion:

- Page 19-20: Lizzie and Alison discuss their dance routine. Lizzie is able to figure it out quickly thanks to her years of working as part of a team.
- Page 140: 'It's one of those perfect ringlets that I think looks good on everyone else, especially Ella. But this curly mane has never felt right on me,' says Lizzie. Interestingly, although there's a lot of conflict between Lizzie and Ella, there's not as much between Lizzie and Betsey. Why do you think this is? Is it because their personalities are so different? Or is it that Betsey's 'evening shift' role means that she doesn't overlap/clash as much with Lizzie's life?



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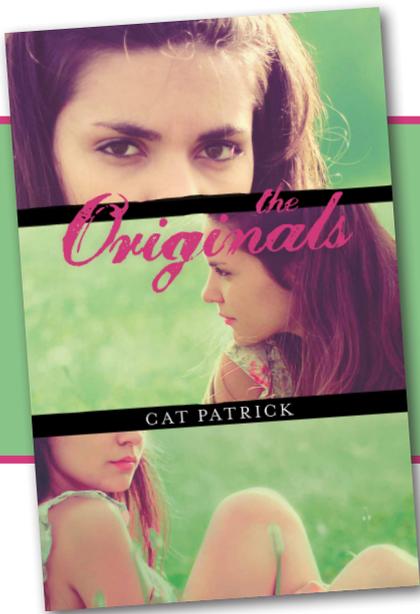
While reading:

Personal tastes, interests and physical attraction seem to be things that are unique to an individual. One key way that the author shows that the girls are different people is to have Ella and Lizzie fall for other people. Quotes for discussion:

- Page 83: 'Those same words from Sean's lips would give me shivers; from Dave, it's a line. How many songs have been dedicated to how many girls in this pristine Lexus?' Would Ella feel exactly the same if she were in a car with Sean? This scene is coloured by the fact that it's seen from Lizzie's perspective.
- Page 86: date with Dave: 'I consider that I might be messing this up by being too...*me*. *What would Ella do?*' Again we see how emotions and romance are highly personal. Do you think that it's possible to falsify a romantic interest in someone? What do you think about the girls' mother's decision to encourage Lizzie and Betsey to have to pretend to be interested in Dave?
- On page 124 Sean says: 'I'm glad to know you aren't crazy...I thought you might have had split personalities or something...because you and Ella are so [different]'. Do you think that the girls' secret would have been found out eventually even if they had tried to remain living as one person? How would you have responded if you found out that one of your friends was actually three people pretending to be one person?

Other points for discussion:

- Dave can't tell the girls apart, but Sean can, and so can their mother...and Grayson. What does this say about these different characters? Do you think that you would be able to pick something like this about one of your friends if you don't know that you should be looking for it?
- Do you think that Lizzie tells Sean the girls' secret because she's in love with him, or because she thinks that he will understand and won't spread the secret? On page 111 she talks about needing to tell Sean the truth in order to get her life back. Is this about Sean? Or is Sean being used as a way to precipitate this independence?
- At the end, Sean gives Lizzie a heart bracelet. What is the symbolism of this when considered alongside the heart pendant that the girls' mother made them take turns wearing? Similarly, what about the symbolism of the bird pendant the girls' mother gives Lizzie?
- Towards the end of the book, the girls' mother writes them a letter describing them as the 'Originals'; she also gives Lizzie the aforementioned bird pendant. Do you think that she is trying to atone for her actions? Do you forgive her? Do you think that the girls do?



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Extended discussion/Classroom activities:

What is the value of a person? A recurring theme in the book is the quantification of the value of a person. Is it possible to measure the true value of a person?

Hidden identities. Lizzie might fail her trigonometry test in the first chapter, but in reality she's passing tests every day: identity tests. Can you think of any other groups of people who might have had to hide their identities from other people? How/why have people done this in the past – and how/why might they do so today?

Become someone else: have students pair up and attempt to impersonate each other. Students will need to understand their partner's interests, tastes, and background, as well as things like speech and gestural habits. How hard is it to imitate someone else? What are the things that are the most difficult to imitate? Why is this?

Questioning the status quo. On page 117 Lizzie says: 'I think you get used to things. I think you just go with your reality.' What are the dangers of failing to speak out against perceived wrongs? Do you think that people should question whether something is right or wrong? The girls tend to defer to their mother because she's an adult, but as we see, this doesn't mean that she necessarily knows what's right, or is motivated by unselfish means. Do you think that young people have the tendency to defer to adults just because they're adults?

Alternative ending. Imagine that the girls had decided to continue living life as one person. Do you think that this could ever have worked in the long run? How would they manage situations such as university, relationships, work and children?

Human illegality: 'I was created in a lab from a dead girl's DNA,' says Lizzie. 'I was created *illegally*, and because of that, I am destined to be hidden.' Can a human being ever be 'illegal'?

Related reading:

Theodore Sturgeon's *More than Human*

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

HG Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau*

Christopher Priest's *The Prestige*

Moon (film)