

Q. Chip (i.e., the Colonel) says, “Everybody’s got a talent.” What’s yours?

A. I’m a pretty ordinary person in most respects, but I suppose I am good at finding and remembering trivia. I’m not sure whether that qualifies as a talent, but it’s the closest I’ve got.

Q. Miles’ teacher Dr. Hyde tells him to “be present.” What does that mean to you?

A. It means listening. Listening is a very rare skill, and in these noisy times, it is more and more valuable.

Q. Did you have a teacher like Dr. Hyde?

A. You’re finding a different way to ask the autobiography question! I feel like I should reward your perseverance with a fuller answer. I had several teachers who inspired me the way Dr. Hyde inspires Miles. But as a character, he is based on three particular teachers. In high school, I had a history teacher named Dr. Cooper. He lectured a lot and scared the hell out of his students and kicked you out of class if you didn’t listen—but also cared deeply about us. And then in college, my religion professor Donald Rogan and my writing professor P. F. Kluge both had a lot of Dr. Hyde in them. I stole lines from all three teachers, but particularly from Rogan.

Q. Miles learns to take religion seriously. Did you? And, if so, do you still take it seriously?

A. I did learn to take religion seriously, and in much the same way that Miles does: Donald Rogan was an excellent teacher. He was obviously smarter than me, and he found religion interesting, so I came to find it interesting also. Religion concerns itself with the same existential questions that I find interesting and important. I think I probably prefer the study of religion to the practice of it, though.

That said, I do consider myself religious now. In high school, I had a classmate who attended a Southern Baptist church, and he was a nice guy, but he would always ask me questions about religion that I felt invaded my privacy. One time, he asked me, “How is your relationship with God, John?” I thought about it for a while, and then finally I said, “Complicated.”

It was complicated then, and after studying religion in college and working as a chaplain at a children’s hospital and seriously considering a career as a minister, it remains complicated. I’m not embarrassed by my faith, and I’m also not embarrassed by my doubt.

Q. How did your time as a chaplain at a children’s hospital influence your development as a writer?

A. All the fiction I’ve written since working at that hospital has in some way echoed some feeling or experience or question that arose while I was at the hospital. In many ways, it was a before-and-after moment in my own life.

Q. The character of Alaska tells Miles, “The only real geniuses are artists.” Do you agree? And who are some people whom you regard as geniuses?

A. There’s a lot of my high-school self in the character Alaska, and I suspect I would have agreed with that statement as a teenager. But I think there are mathematical and scientific geniuses, too. I think genius is rare, but I don’t think it discriminates. I’m also not convinced that a person just is or is not a genius. I think that genius can come and go. Mark Twain wrote my favorite American novel, but he also wrote the awful *Joan of Arc*. Georg Cantor invented set theory and revolutionized our understanding of infinity, but he also thought Sir Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare’s plays. It’s a nebulous thing, genius. Unless you are Shakespeare.

continued

Q. Miles writes, “Teenagers think they are invincible.” Did you when you were a teen? Do you, now, as an adult?

A. I was aware as a teenager of the fact that I might die, and it scared me a little. But I never felt like dying would affect my overall invincibility, if that makes sense. It’s a little like what Muhammad Ali said after his third fight with Joe Frazier. After the fight, which Ali won, Ali said that he thought at times that Frazier might kill him. “If he had killed me,” Ali said, “I would have gotten back up and won the fight. I would have been the first dead heavyweight champion of the world.” I felt like that as a teenager. I feel a little more fragile now. I still think people are invincible, but I’d rather not find out for sure.

Q. Because “booze and mischief” play significant parts in *Looking for Alaska*, the book has been challenged. Were you ever tempted to censor yourself when you were writing the novel?

A. No. It never even occurred to me that it might be a problem while I was writing it. I got nervous when the book came closer to publication, though. I have to give full credit to my editor, Julie Strauss-Gabel. She was absolutely steadfast about refusing to censor the novel, even when I wasn’t.

My friend David Levithan once said of gay writers, “We are political novelists who do not wish to be political.” I feel a bit of that when it comes to banning books from classrooms and libraries. I don’t want to have to fight that fight, but I won’t shirk the responsibility I feel to my books and my readers. Teachers have been trained to teach, and they know how to teach, and we need to fight to let them teach—whether it’s *Catcher in the Rye* (or *Alaska*, for that matter) in an English class or evolution in a Biology class.

Q. And finally: In the “Some Last Words on Last Words” section at the end of *Looking for Alaska*, you write, “I was born into Bolivar’s labyrinth, and so I must believe in the hope of Rabelais’ Great Perhaps.” Would you expand on this? And are there ever any truly last words?

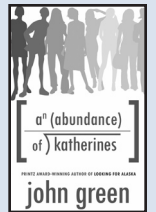
A. The Dutch title of *Alaska* is *Het Grote Misschien*, which means The Great Perhaps. But if you type it into Babel Fish, it translates *Het Grote Misschien* as “The Big Maybe.” I’m undecided as to whether there are ever any truly last words. That’s the big maybe.

As for the quote cited above, I mean that I believe in hope, in what is sometimes called “radical hope.” I believe there is hope for us all, even amid the suffering—and maybe even inside the suffering. And that’s why I write fiction, probably. It’s my attempt to keep that fragile strand of radical hope, to build a fire in the darkness.

For more about John Green see:
Ilene Cooper. “Books by Booklist Authors: John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*.” Booklist. March 1, 2005
John Green. “Writers and Readers: Becoming a YA Writer.” Booklist. March 1, 2006

Don’t miss John Green’s website: www.sparksflyup.com

Books by John Green	
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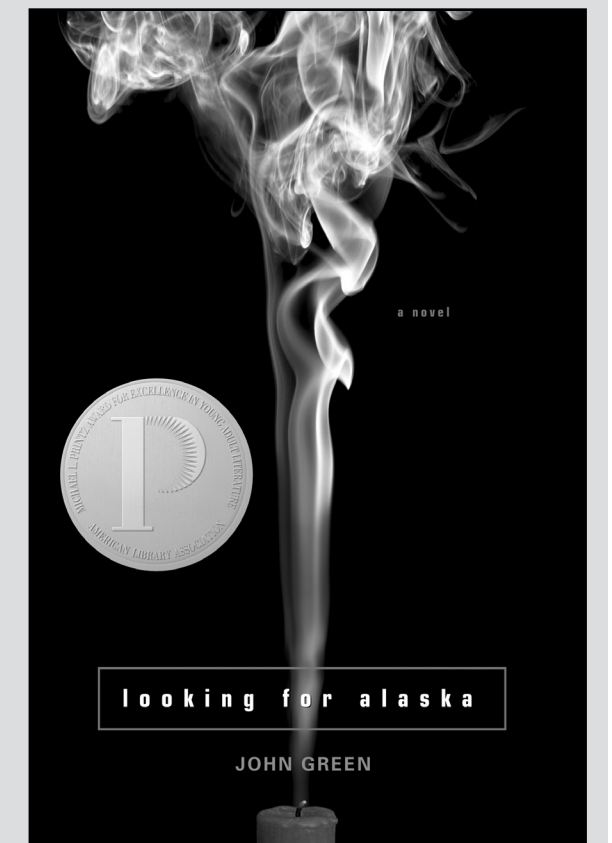
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A READER’S GUIDE TO **LOOKING FOR ALASKA** BY JOHN GREEN

ABOUT THE STORY

Everybody has a talent. Miles Halter’s is knowing the last words of a lot of different people—people like the author Rabelais, whose enigmatic last words “I go to seek a Great Perhaps” inspire the sixteen-year-old to leave his family home in Florida and enroll in Culver Creek, a co-ed boarding school in Alabama. There he makes a new circle of friends: his roommate Chip, a scholarship student whom everyone calls “The Colonel;” Takumi, a slyly funny Japanese-American rapper; and sweet-spirited, Romanian-born Lara, who has trouble pronouncing the letter “i.” But most importantly he meets Alaska, a beautiful girl who “had eyes that predisposed you to supporting her every endeavor.” Miles quickly falls in love with this reckless, quirky, endlessly intriguing girl. An omnivorous reader, Alaska introduces him to a new set of last words — those of South American liberator Simón Bolívar — that pose an intriguing question, “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?” It’s a question that takes on a deeper, more poignant resonance when an unthinkable tragedy invites Miles to examine the meanings of life . . . and death.



CRITICAL REACTIONS

John Green's brilliant first novel received the most distinguished prize in young adult literature, the Michael L. Printz Award, which is presented to the best YA book of the year, "best" being defined solely in terms of literary merit. The selection committee agreed with reviewers who have praised the book both for its rich characterization and also its thought-provoking, discussion-stimulating examination of such large questions as the search for meaning, the omnipresence of suffering in human existence, and life's endless opportunities for ambiguity, surprise, love, and loss.

Beautifully written in Miles's often funny, increasingly passionate, first-person voice, *Looking For Alaska* captures the essence of adolescent experience in language that is both artful and authentic. As for "artful," it turns out that Miles is not only a collector of last words but also a coiner of memorable similes and metaphors; a few examples: "The words made the whole thing horribly uncomfortable, like watching your grandparents kiss;" "Sunlight feels warm and rough against your skin like a kiss on the cheek from your dad;" and "If people were rain, I was drizzle and she was a hurricane."

The "authentic" part is equally essential to the book's success but perhaps a bit more problematic to some adults. When Miles first meets Alaska, she tells him that she and the Colonel have "a shared interest in booze and mischief." They also have colorful vocabularies; at one point the Colonel says to Miles, "I can't be mad at you, you harmless skinny bastard." Most of the characters also drop an occasional "f bomb;" and other Anglo-Saxonisms adorn their everyday speech. In other words, the characters talk like real teenagers when adults aren't in the room—but with more art and less expletives. As for mischief, countless cigarettes are smoked (these are teenagers away from the discipline of home, after all) and a scene involving Miles, Lara, and fellatio has excited some controversy but surely all it really does is to underscore the essential sweetness and innocence of these two wonderfully engaging characters. And as for booze: yes, quite a lot of alcohol does get consumed, especially by Alaska. But this serves to underscore the deep unhappiness at the core of her being and it also serves as the engine of her ultimate undoing. It's hard to imagine an adolescent reader coming away from this book thinking it's somehow smart and sophisticated to drink large quantities of alcohol. Here's the thing: there is nothing (I repeat, NOTHING) gratuitous in this book. Everything in it serves to define character, give style to voice, and develop theme.

And speaking of theme: the richness of its treatment is another of the singular strengths of this remarkable novel. Green's use of last words to introduce and develop Miles's memorable musings on life and death is not only a wonderfully original device but also an irresistible invitation to readers to search for the meaning of existence in the observations of those confronting its putative end.

Looking For Alaska is a sophisticated literary novel that is at the cutting edge of the new young adult literature that addresses the lives and concerns of older teenagers and young adults in their twenties. Indeed, it belongs in the same category as such established classics as John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (substituting *Alaska* for Holden Caulfield!). It also invites favorable comparison with more recent adult novels focusing on the prep school experience, books like Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and Marisha Pessl's *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*. Its thematic examination of philosophical (and metaphysical) issues also invites comparison with Yann Martel's Booker Prize-winning *Life of Pi*. Using *Looking For Alaska* in the classroom in context with one or more of these "adult" novels would provide an interesting and rewarding teachable opportunity.

Other critical reaction

★ "Like Phineas in John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, Green draws Alaska so lovingly, in self-loathing darkness as well as energetic light, that readers mourn her loss along with her friends." —*School Library Journal*, starred review

"Green . . . has a writer's voice, so self-assured and honest that one is startled to learn that this novel is his first." —*VOYA*

"Readers will only hope that this is not the last word from this promising new author." —*Publishers Weekly*

"The spirit of Holden Caulfield lives on." —*Kliatt*

This reader's guide was prepared by Michael Cart, *Booklist* columnist, reviewer, former president of Young Adult Library Services Association, and former chair of the Michael L. Printz committee.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the book's unusual structure. Why do you suppose Green chose this strategy for telling his story? How else might he have structured the same material?
2. Miles tells the story in his own first-person voice. How might the book differ if it had been told in Alaska's voice or the Colonel's? Or in the voice of an omniscient narrator?
3. The Colonel says "Everybody's got a talent." Do you?
4. Miles's teacher Dr. Hyde tells him to "be present." What does this mean?
5. John Green worked for a time as a chaplain in a children's hospital. How do you think that influenced the writing of LOOKING FOR ALASKA?
6. What do you think "The Great Perhaps" means?
7. And how about Bolivar's "labyrinth?"
8. In the "Some last words on last words" section at the end of the book, Green writes, "I was born into Bolivar's labyrinth, and so I must believe in the hope of Rabelais' Great Perhaps." What do you think he means by this?
9. Has this novel changed the way you regard human suffering? And death?
10. One of the characters, Dr. Hyde says, "Everything that comes together falls apart." Do you think the author agrees? How does he deal with this Zen belief in his novel?
11. Alaska loves these two lines from the poet W. C. Auden: "You shall love your crooked neighbor / With your crooked heart." What do these lines mean to you and why do you think Alaska likes them so much?
12. Miles writes, "Teenagers think they are invincible." Do you agree? Why or why not?
13. Was it necessary for Alaska to die?
14. This novel is filled with wonderful characters. Who is your favorite? Why? Do you know any people like these characters?
15. Can you imagine Miles and the Colonel as adults? What might they be like? What professions do you suppose they might choose?

SPEAKING WITH JOHN GREEN

Q. What's the difference between writing fiction and lying?

A. To begin with, when you tell a lie, you generally do not admit upfront that it's a lie. Like, if I am lying to you about who stole the cookie from the cookie jar, I am not going to preface it by saying, "While I am about to convince you that John Doe stole the cookie from the cookie jar, the cookie was actually stolen by me." But when you write fiction, as with *Looking for Alaska*, it says "a novel" right on the cover. Before a reader has even opened the book, the writer has acknowledged that this is a story, and that the story does not faithfully recount events that actually occurred.

The other big difference, I would argue, is that lies are attempts to hide the truth by willfully denying facts. Fiction, on the other hand, is an attempt to reveal the truth by ignoring facts. To paraphrase William Faulkner, I am much more interested in the truth than in the facts. One of the challenges in writing *Alaska* was learning not to overvalue facts. When I first started writing the book, I kept thinking I ought to include things that happened because they had happened. It took years before I was able to let go of the facts and focus on writing a true novel.

Q. In that vein, just how autobiographical is *Looking for Alaska*?

A. I have always danced around this question, and I think I'm going to continue dancing around it now. Like Miles, I grew up in Florida and attended a boarding school in Alabama. And the physical setting of *Alaska* is very, very similar to the physical place I attended boarding school. Generally, the book is probably more autobiographical than I usually acknowledge. But it is very much a work of fiction. The facts, I can assure you, were ignored.

Q. What was the catalyst for this novel?

A. In the study of religion, there is this word theodicy, which refers to the question of why a God who is both loving and all-powerful would allow there to be such unequal suffering in the world. In college, when I started to study religion, that was the question that interested me most.

So in some ways, that was the catalyst for the novel. After I graduated from college, I worked for a while at a children's hospital, where I encountered the same problem in stark, awful reality. It was in the hospital that I started to think about writing a story in which teenagers experience loss and a consuming guilt that cannot be easily assuaged. I started writing it just a few months after I left the hospital.

Q. Did you write it with a specific audience in mind?

A. Yes. From the very beginning, I wrote the book for high-school students.

Q. How did you come up with the book's unusual structure?

A. I'd been working on the book with very limited success for about 18 months before September 11, 2001. And then in the days after 9/11, I was alone in my apartment in Chicago watching the commercial-free news 24 hours a day. On TV, people kept saying that this was a defining moment for my generation of Americans, that we would all remember the world in terms of before 9/11 and after it. And I thought about how time is usually measured that way: Christians date from before and after the birth of Christ. Muslims date from before and after the hijrah. We look back to the most important moment in our history, and that becomes the dividing line between what we were and what we are now. So I wanted to reflect on the way we measure and think of time. And also, for the characters in *Alaska*, there is a moment that changes their lives forever, and that redefines their understanding of the world. I wanted the importance of that moment to be central to the novel's structure.