Q. Chip (i.e., the Colonel), says, “Everybody’s got a talent.” What’s yours?
A. I’m an expert on what I can respect, but I suppose I am good at finding and remembering trivia. I’m not sure whether that qualifies as a talent, but it is the closest I’ve got.

Q. Miles’ teacher Dr. Hyde tells him to “be present.” What does that mean to you?
A. You’re finding a different way to ask the existentialist question: ‘What shall I do with my life?’ I think you should regard your paranoia with a fuller answer. I have 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 and lectured and scolded the hell out of all his students and licked you next class if you didn’t do better. I also cared deeply about Dr. Alaska, my English professor. Donald Rogers and my English professor. If I really had both of a Dr. Hyde there, I think I’d live from three classes to the others, but particularly from Rogers.

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 Rogers was an excellent teacher. He was obviously smarter than me, and he found religion strange, so I came to find it interesting. Religion came up itself with the same existentialist questions that I find interesting and I think I probably reached the same conclusions in the practice of the religion in question. 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 would avoid 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, “Complacency.” It was complicated 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 complacency. I’m not embarrassed by my faith, and I’m 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. I did learn to take religion seriously, and in much the same way that Miles does. Donald Rogers was an excellent teacher. He was obviously smarter than me, and he found religion strange, so I came to find it interesting. Religion came up itself with the same existentialist questions that I find interesting and I think I probably reached the same conclusions in the practice of the religion in question. 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 would avoid 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, “Complacency.” It was complicated 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 complacency. I’m not embarrassed by my faith, and I’m not embarrassed by my doubt.

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 might die, and it scared me a little. But now I think dying would affect me pretty overall invincibility, if that makes sense. It’s like what Mohammed Ali said after his fight with Joe Frazier. After the fight, which Ali won, Ali said that he thought of time that Frazier hit him. “I’ve had killed me,” Ali said, “I sure wouldn’t have backed up and won the fight, I would have been the first dead heavyweight champion of the world.” I think as a teenager, I do think that a little more often now. I still think people are invincible, but I don’t care what you call it.

Q. Because “b oss and mischief” play significant parts in Looking for Alaska, has the book been challenged?
A. No, I never even occurred to me that it might be a problem while I was writing. I got nervous when the book came closer to publication, though, because I have to give full credit to my editor, Julie Strauss-Gold. She was absolutely infatuated about refusing to censor the novel, even when I wasn’t.

Q. The character of Alaska tells Miles, “The only real geniuses are artists.” Do you agree? And who are the real geniuses?
A. I was born into Bolivar’s labyrinth, and I must believe in the hope of Bolivars’ Great Perhaps. Would you expand on that? And are there ever truly any last words?

Q. The Dutch title of Alaska is Het Grote Misschien, which means ‘The Great Perhaps.’ But if you type it into Babel Fish, it translates to ‘The Big Maybe.’ What does that mean to you?
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A. I think that the one thing that made a difference was that Miles made a new circle of friends: his roommate Chip, a scholarship student whom everyone calls “The Colonel,” a tall, shyly funny Japanese-American rapper; and sweet-spirited, Romanian-born Lara, who has trouble pronouncing the letter “r.” But most importantly he meets Alaska, a beautiful girl who “had eyes that traversed miles.” A character of Alaska tells Miles, “The only real geniuses are artists.” We agree. And who are the real geniuses?

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CRITICAL REACTIONS

John Green's brilliant first novel received the most distinguished prizes in young adult literature, the Michael L. Printz Award, which is awarded to the best book for young adults, the Newbery Medal, and the Youth Media Award, which honors the best new children's literature. This novel vividly explores a number of thematic concerns that are currently an essential element of young adult literature. It is based on a true story about a boy who becomes the target of a national media campaign due to his life-threatening illness.

Some questions for discussion

1. Discuss the book's unusual structure. Why do you suppose Green chose this strategy for telling his story?
2. Miles tells his 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? (If so, which one?)
3. The Colonel says, "Everybody's got a talking stick." Do you agree?
4. Miles's teacher Dr. Hyde tells Miles to "be present." What does this mean?
5. John 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 whose existence is about to end. 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 whose existence is about to end.

CRITICAL REACTIONS

This reader's guide was prepared by Michael Cart, reviews and category editor of School Library Journal, and features substantial excerpts from printed reviews and comments by reviewers. In addition, the guide provides an overview of the novel's thematic content, and offers a collection of related questions for discussion, with answers supplied by the author.

1. What's the difference between writing fiction and writing? 
2. How was this novel written? 
3. In what way is this novel autobiographical? 
4. What was the catalyst for this novel? 
5. What do you think "The Great Perhaps" means? 
6. What do you think of Alaska's "I'm not trying to make you feel your pain."? 
7. Miles writes, "Teenagers think they are invincible." Do you agree? Why or why not? 
8. What do you think of the novel's unusual structure? 
9. Has this novel changed the way you regard human suffering? And death? 
10. Does the Colonel's voice ring true to you? 

Speaking with John Green

John Green was a gifted and talented young writer who died of cancer in 2016. His books have been translated into over 40 languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. He was known for his innovative and thought-provoking writing style, and his ability to connect with young readers on a deep level. In this interview, Green discusses the themes and ideas that inspired his work, as well as the challenges he faced in writing for a teenage audience.

A. I'd been working on the book with very limited success for about 18 months before September 11, 2001. And then in the weeks after I left the hospital.

Q. What was the catalyst for this novel?

A. Yes. From the very beginning, I wanted to write a book about teenagers who 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. 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 prep school in Alaska. And the physical setting of Alaska is very, very similar to the physical place that I attended boarding school. Generally, the book is probably more autobiographical than I usually acknowledge. But it's very much a work of fiction. The facts, I can assure you, were ignored.

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Q. How do 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 down in my apartment in Chicago watching the news for 24 hours a day. My parents kept saying that it was a defining moment of our generation of Americas, that we would all remember the world in terms of before 9/11 and after. And I thought about how life is usually measured by that. Does the book have the same structure? Yes. The book has the same structure. But the things that are important to me about the book are that the thing that drives the book is the moment that drives the book. And that's the moment that drives the book. And that's the moment that drives the book.