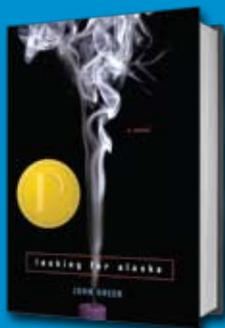


ABOUT THE BOOK



Before, Miles “Pudge” Halter is done with his safe life at home. His whole life has been one big non-event, and his obsession with famous last words has only made him crave “the Great Perhaps” even more (François Rabelais, poet). He heads off to the sometimes crazy and anything-but-boring world of Culver Creek Boarding School, and his life becomes the opposite of safe. Because down the hall is Alaska Young. The gorgeous, clever, funny, sexy, self-destructive, screwed up, and utterly fascinating Alaska Young. She is an event unto herself. She pulls Pudge into her world, launches him into the Great Perhaps, and steals his heart. Then. . . After. Nothing is ever the same.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

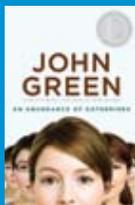


JOHN GREEN is the celebrated author of Printz Honor-winning *An Abundance of Katherines* and the Edgar Award-winning *Paper Towns*. His books have been finalists for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, received many starred reviews, and been placed on numerous state award lists.

He has been a commentator on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” and reviewed books for publications, including *The New York Times* and *Booklist*. John was also one half (with his brother, Hank) of the enormously popular video project *Brotherhood 2.0*, which has been watched more than 10 million times. John lives with his wife in Indiana. You can visit him online at sparksflyup.com or at nerdfighters.com.

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

a novel



looking for alaska

JOHN GREEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Discuss the book's unusual structure. Why do you suppose Green chose this format for telling his story? How else might he have structured the material?
- 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?
- Miles's teacher Dr. Hyde tells him to "be present." What does this mean?
- 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*?
- What do you think "the Great Perhaps" means?
- Has this novel changed the way you regard human suffering? And death?
- Alaska loves these two lines from 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?
- This novel is filled with wonderful characters. Who is your favorite? Why? Do you know any people like these characters?
- Can you imagine Miles and the Colonel as adults? What might they be like? What professions do you suppose they might choose?
- Do you think it was necessary for Alaska to die?
- 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?
- 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?

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 up front that it's a lie. Like, if I'm 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 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. In many ways, it was a before-and-after moment in my own life.