**Looking for Alaska**

Written by John Green

More from the Author: <https://www.johngreenbooks.com/>

Book Talk by Samuel Hoffman

**About the Author**

John Green is an award winning, New York Times best selling author of primarily Young Adult fiction, as well as an accomplished YouTube content creator. He was born in Indiana, but soon moved to Michigan, then Alabama where he spent most of his young adulthood. He would go on to graduate from Kenyon College with a double major in English and Religious Studies. He was bullied as a kid, and his teenage life was miserable, a fact that he is very willing to share. To escape the bullying, he moved to Indian Springs School, a boarding school outside Birmingham, Alabama. His experiences, and the people he met at Indian Springs, would go on to inspire the setting and characters of his first book, *Looking for Alaska.* He is well known for his books *An Abundance of Katherines*, *Paper Towns*, *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (co-written with David Levithan), *The Fault In Our Stars*, *Turtles All The Way Down*, and *The Anthropocene Reviewed* (a collection of essays.)

**Synopsis**

*Looking for Alaska* centers around Miles Halter, nicknamed “Pudge.” The Novel is split in half, hinging on the death of the titular character, Alaska Young. Alaska is an unpredictable, beautiful girl who captures the heart of Miles, and becomes a close confidant of his throughout the first half of the book. Miles is obsessed with famous last words and their meanings, and he attends a boarding school called Culver Creek Prep to seek out a “Great Perhaps,” inspired by Francois Rabelais’ final words. Miles grows closer to Alaska, and after her death in the middle of the book, he searches for answers and meaning. He navigates what he calls “the labyrinth of suffering” until he finds his answers and comes to terms with his grief.

**Quotes**

--“Imagining the future is a kind of nostalgia. (...) You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you'll escape it one day, and how awesome it will be, and imagining that future keeps you going, but you never do it. You just use the future to escape the present” (54).

Here, Alaska is mumbling to herself having almost kissed Miles. This quote revolves around one of the primary themes of this novel, hope. Hope, in this case, is imagining the future like it is a nostalgic past, and it is quite easy to get blinded by hope. Hope means that you are not living in the present, for better or for worse, and that is not what Alaska wants to do. She does not want to be hopeful; she wants to live right here and right now.

**--**“He was gone, and I did not have time to tell him what I had just now realized: that I forgave him, and that she forgave us, and that we had to forgive to survive in the labyrinth. There were so many of us who would have to live with things done and things left undone that day. Things that did not go right, things that seemed okay at the time because we could not see the future. If only we could see the endless string of consequences that result from our smallest actions. But we can’t know better until knowing better is useless” (218).

In this quote, Miles has finally come to terms with his grief. Throughout the novel, Miles has navigated the labyrinth of suffering, and found his meaning. Here he forgives his friend Takumi, initially blaming him for not stopping Alaska as she drove away drunk, a crime he also committed the very same night of Alaska’s death. He forgives his friend because he realizes that Alaska would have forgiven all of them. And, in the end, Miles comes to terms with the fact that he loved Alaska, not the real girl, but a fantasy of her created within his own head.

--“We are all going, I thought, and it applies to turtles and turtlenecks, Alaska the girl and Alaska the place, because nothing can last, not even the earth itself. The Buddha said that suffering was caused by desire, we'd learned, and that the cessation of desire meant the cessation of suffering. When you stopped wishing things wouldn't fall apart, you'd stop suffering when they did” (196)

The search for answers, the search for meaning is the primary theme of this novel. Miles searches for meaning while suffering from his grief, navigating his labyrinth. Here Miles is realizing what he needs to do to overcome his grief. He needs to let go of hope, because is the desire for a better future, and when you cease desiring things, you cease suffering from things. Like Alaska, he needs to live in the here and now.

**In the Classroom**

*Looking for Alaska* by John Green falls into line with many of the books mentioned in Chapter 5 of *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story.* This chapter is on books about death and loss, which is what the plot of *Looking for Alaska* revolves around. Everyone dies, we are all mortals, so death and loss are things that we will struggle with throughout the rest of our lives. Miles experiences the death of close friend Alaska, and his struggle with her death takes up the latter half of the book. The novel is separated into two sections, the “before” and the “after.” This split is inspired by our real world pre-9/11, post-9/11 view of society, another example of loss changing things in our world. For students, it is important to analyze how people deal with grief, and for those dealing with a loss, it is important to give them paths to take out of their grief. This novel is targeting teens for its audience, as the events contained within are more relatable to a high school audience.

Teaching Ideas

1. Have students write down and share memorable last words that they know and share a few of your own. Miles is fascinated by last words, and last words are a morbid look into the minds of those that are dying. Last words can be anything from humorous or curiously dark, and it is important to discuss and explore the importance of these words.
2. Loss is a definitive event in peoples lives, there is a clear before and after period. Have students compare the characters and their representation in the “before” section and the “after” section. What other events, fictional or in real life, have a definitive “before” and “after?”
3. The labyrinth of suffering is what Miles calls the exploration of his grief. He says that the labyrinth of suffering is a natural part of being human, and it does not necessarily have to come from grief or loss, but any hardship one might face in the reality of life. Let students discuss what might be at the center of their personal labyrinths.

Why Should Teens Read This Novel?

1. Teens should read this book because dealing with loss is a central theme, and the search for meaning is an action many teens can relate to. Everyone dies, some sooner than others, and figuring out why, and what it means is important to teen readers.
2. Teens should read this book because it represents realistic relationships that are not so black and white, or cookie cutter perfect. The characters are amongst a spider web of relationships, friendships, and acquaintanceships that they can hardly navigate themselves, and this might be very relatable to teen readers.
3. Teens should read this book because it presents a very realistic love of fantasy. Miles loves Alaska not because of who she is, but who he imagines she is. This is a very real problem among teen relationships, and even later relationships.

**Text Complexity**

Lexile Range: 850 L (Grades 8-9)

New Dale-Chall Readability Index - Grade level: Grades 7 – 8

ATOS Level: 6.5

Note: I used the Kindle version page numbers for my quotes. If the page numbers are off, that is why.