Book Talk:



- John Green

**The Author**

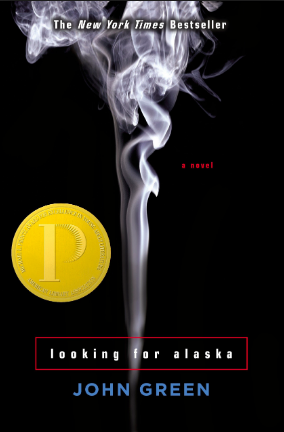
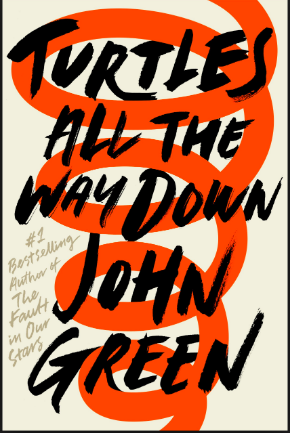
John Green is an award-winning novelist. *Looking for Alaska* is Green’s debut novel, which received a strong reception that won the “Michael L. Printz Award,” an award that recognizes best books for teens. John Green’s inspiration for the story of *Looking for Alaska* came from his own personal life and it is now being taught in some high schools, but recently is under a lot of controversy for its explicit content. Green wrote six other books winning multiple awards in teen categories. *Fault In Our Stars* and *Paper Towns*, two of Green’s other works, not only won awards, but also have been adapted into successful films. John Green’s novels are not the only things that are contributing to the field of education, but his face is also known throughout the YouTube world for his educational videos. His involvement in Mental Floss and his channel Crash Course that he co-started with his brother are not only educational but also entertaining. His video blogs uses animation, puns, and pop culture references to make learning accessible to anyone. Below are links to some of his videos to demonstrate his comical, educational videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEBOYOlROU8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xM8hvEE2dI&t=97s>

Some Popular Written Works

<http://www.johngreenbooks.com/>

**Synopsis**

*Looking for Alaska* is a story of a smart kid, Miles (mostly known as Pudge), who leaves his home to go to boarding school to seek his “great perhaps.” Pudge quickly assimilates to his new environment with other intelligent misfits: his roommate “the Colonel”, “Emcee” Takumi, and Alaska Young. By looking at their grades, the lot appears like a group of model students, but in their after-hours they are mischievous teenagers who love smoking, boozing, and pranking. Pudge quickly becomes enamored by Alaska’s enigmatic personality. However, Alaska’s charisma has a flip side; she can be moody. Alaska has a hard time putting her tragic past behind as she constantly struggles to find a way out of her metaphorical labyrinth of suffering. The story is told in two separate halves: the first half counts down to the Alaska’s tragic death, while the second half counts up the days of how Alaska’s friend mourn her death while they attempt to uncover the truth of how she died.

**Quote #1**

"”I didn't rat them out……’ ‘When Fillmore was dying, he was super hungry. But his doctor was trying to starve his fever or whatever. Fillmore wouldn't shut up about wanting to eat, though, so finally the doctor gave him a tiny teaspoon of soup. And all sarcastic, Fillmore said, 'The nourishment is palatable,' and then died. No truce.’" (23)

**Significance:** This passage reveals the light notes of the book and a bit about Pudge’s personality and how he fits in his new environment. It shows his unique quirk of memorizing people’s last words as he stands up to a bully out of loyalty to Colonel. This also reveals that Pudge and company have enemies, the wealthy Weekday Warriors. Furthermore, this shows that the school Pudge attends has different, economical classes and though they clash against each other, they follow the student’s cardinal, unspoken rule of never snitching. This scene also reveals how the Weekday Warriors are struck with fear of the level of pranking they will experience. Last words, friction with the Weekday warriors, and pranking are fun continuities of the story.

**Quote #2**

" ’You've got a lifetime to mull over the Buddhist understanding of interconnectedness.’ He spoke every sentence as if he'd written it down, memorized it, and was now reciting it. ‘But while you were looking out the window, you missed the chance to explore the equally interesting Buddhist belief in being present for every facet of your daily life, of being truly present. Be present in this class. And then, when it's over, be present out there," he said, nodding toward the lake and beyond.’ ” (24)

**Significance:** This passage is from a teacher of religion, Dr. Hyde, whose personality seems pompous as he conducts his class with great authority. Naturally, any rebellious natured teenagers who think for themselves would be quick to hate him, yet Pudge holds a level of admiration for his “genius.” This passage reveals a display of intellectualism and spiritualism the novel possesses. Though Pudge and his friends are masters of mischief, they are very meditative about existentialism. Not only does the passage reveal the group’s capacity for reasoning, but it also reaches the readers to contemplate these ideas with them.

**Quote #3**

“Her hand just above my knee…….. I do love you and what else matters but that and my lips parted to speak and before I could even begin to breathe out the words, she said, ‘It's not life or death, the labyrinth.’

‘Urn, okay. So what is it?’

‘Suffering," she said. "Doing wrong and having wrong things happen to you. That's the problem. Bolivar was talking about the pain, not about the living or dying. How do you get out of the labyrinth of suffering?’

‘What's wrong?’ I asked. And I felt the absence of her hand on me.

‘Nothing's wrong. But there's always suffering, Pudge. Homework or malaria or having a boyfriend who lives far away when there's a good-looking boy lying next to you. Suffering is universal. It's the one thing Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims are all worried about.’

I turned to her. ‘Oh, so maybe Dr. Hyde's class isn't total bullshit.’ And both of us lying on our sides, she smiled, our noses almost touching, my unblinking eyes on hers, her face blushing from the wine, and I opened my mouth again but this time not to speak, and she reached up and put a finger to my lips and said, ‘Shh. Shh. Don't ruin it.’ “(41-42)

**Significance:** This passage reveals important elements of the novel: Pudge’s infatuation with Alaska, Alaska’s metaphorical labyrinth of suffering she can’t escape, and the continuation of existential ideas about life, death and everything in between. The scene interweaves two significant facets of the story of how careless the life of a teenager is; laying on the grass, having no obligations, and drinking booze in the middle of the night, and how serious and deep the pain of a teenager can be.

**Quote 4**

I stood up and ran outside. ….. And here is whatever of her I had left in my mouth, here in this trash can. And then it comes again, more—and then okay, calm down, okay, seriously, she's not dead.

She's not dead. She's alive. She's alive somewhere. She's in the woods. Alaska is hiding in the woods and she's not dead, she's just hiding. She's just playing a trick on us. This is just an Alaska Young Prank Extraordinaire. It's Alaska being Alaska, funny and playful and not knowing when or how to put on the brakes (71)

**Significance:** This passage is the climax of the novel when Alaska is found dead. The way that her friends deal with her death shows the universal human experience of pain that people of any age deal with when they lose someone. Much happened between Pudge and Alaska before the moment of her death, which will make Pudge continue to contemplate whether she returned some of the same feelings or if he’s only experienced unrequited love. Pudge is experiencing denial and tries to use his power of reason to make her undead. Pudge, Colonel and Takumi experience a heavy guilt because their hands were at play in assisting her to leave. The all feel responsible for her death to let her go drive off while she was intoxicated. Then they deal with the pain in their own way but work together to piece the puzzle of her death.

**Text Complexity**

Renaissance Learning: Upper Grades (9-12)

Lexile Measure: 850L (Ages 14-18+)

Dale-Chall: 6.5 (Grades 7-8)

ATOS: 5.9 (Grades 6)

According to the Dale-Chall and ATOS test scores; *Looking for Alaska* is rated for 6th grade to 8th grade students based on the text difficulty and its readability level. However, according to Renaissance Learning and Lexile measure, which focuses on themes, characterization and plot, *Looking for Alaska* is rated for 9th grade to 12th grade students. Sex, smoking, and alcohol being strongly present in *Looking for* *Alaska* while also addressing death and suicide, may raise concerns for how appropriate this book can be at a young age, I believe *Looking for Alaska* is suitable for as early as grade 8. Though 8th grade students are at a vulnerable age and concerns already exist that they are easily influenced at this age, it would be wrong to undermine adolescents’ intellectual capacity and underestimate the level of exposure 8th grade students are surrounded with. Rather than sweeping these topics out of the classrooms, it would be wiser to expose these elements in a classroom where it can be discussed in a controlled environment under the supervision of a teacher.

**Adolescents in the Search for Meaning:**

**Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story**

*Looking for Alaska* contains a variety of themes, which includes mortality and identity. These themes fit in chapter four and five. Chapter five of *Adolescent in the Search for Meaning* deals with the subject of facing death and loss. Alaska’s death is at the center of story. Readers experience the pain and suffering described by the narrator. Some of themes are applicable to teenagers that may experience the loss of a loved one, or know a friend that may be struggling with accepting the death of someone they know. Also, *Looking for Alaska* also brings up the topic of suicide as Pudge and his friends were speculating the nature of her death. Teen suicide continues to be a problem and should be address, which can be segued with this book.

Like most teen books, *Looking for Alaska* is also a coming-of-age story, where the narrator Pudge is introduced into a new world, his boarding school, and assimilates to his new environment. The category in which it fits into *Adolescent in the Search for Meaning* falls under Chapter four, which deals with identity. Pudge falls under the peer pressure adopted new habits of drinking, smoking and breaking school rules with his new found friends, which none of these were part of his previous identity. Pudge also recognizes that the school has an apparent class social class division based on wealth.

**In the Classroom**

1. FUN ACTIVITY/ ATTENTION GETTER

* Draw ten bullet points on the board and ask them to fill in the board with some of their favorite quotes, or if they know any, last words of a famous person.
* Get students in groups and have them discuss some pranks they have done among themselves. After they five minutes, I will share my own pranks I’ve done in my younger days and let the student with the best prank story from each group, or any volunteer, share his or hers with the classroom.

1. HEAVY TOPIC CENTERING DEATH

* Share with the students some of my experiences with death from the time I worked as a firefighter.
* Tell them about the five stages of grief then get them to guess each stage in groups.
* After revealing and discussing the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) as we read the novel, ask them to identify them in the characters: Pudge and Colonel.

1. CHARACTERS BUILDING

* Alaska: Ask students to describe all the different facets of her personality

1. CONCLUSION

* Discuss the topic of suicide then bring up the topic of the Standford high school student suicide epidemic.
* Ask student whether they think Alaska committed suicide or she died from driving dangerously under the influence of alcohol. After discussing each possibility, conclude while keeping her death ambiguous.