

PORTRAITS OF THE MODERN AMERICAN TEENAGER
IN THE NOVELS OF JOHN GREEN

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For my daughter, Echo, to prove that you can do anything.

And for my parents, who helped me do this thing.

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ABSTRACT

John Green, in his novels, repeatedly cycles back to several central themes related to being a young person, resulting in the creation of a unique paradigm for adolescence embodied by what I have dubbed the “John Green Teenager.” These teens are witty, introspective, and well-read. They explore their identities and ask big questions about things like suffering, justice, and love. Their interests are varied and multi-dimensional, such as Augustus Waters’s equal enjoyment of basketball, video games, and reading in *The Fault in Our Stars*, or popular girl Margo Roth Spiegelman’s surprisingly extensive and diverse collection of vinyl records in *Paper Towns*. In the aftermath of a 20th-century popular culture sea change which effectively segmented the adolescent population into neat piles of jocks, nerds, and cheerleaders, the John Green Teenager defies conventional categorization.

Utilizing theories of developmental psychology, particularly the theories of Erik Erikson, as well as cultural analysis, to provide a critical context, this dissertation endeavors to examine all of Green’s published novels from a variety of thematic viewpoints, such as identity formation, sexual development, and spirituality. The ultimate goal is to interpret Green’s understanding of modern American adolescence and to establish a paradigm for the John Green Teenager.

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INTRODUCTION

In John Green's novel *Paper Towns* (2008), Quentin's parents are both child psychologists. One morning, he comes downstairs to hear them talking about the dream his dad had had the night before. In the dream, his dad had shown up to a college Hebrew class in which the lectures and tests were all in gibberish, but he had been the only one to notice and had felt anxious and confused. Quentin's mom immediately psychoanalyzes it, as is her wont: "'It's a metaphor for adolescence,' my mom piped up. 'Writing in a language—adulthood—you can't comprehend, using an alphabet—mature social interaction—you can't recognize'" (86). Her analogy is an astute summary of the confusion and self-consciousness often associated with the modern (or postmodern) viewpoint of adolescence as a transitional period of development, an idea frequently explored in young adult literature. In his novels, John Green repeatedly cycles back to several central themes related to being a young person, resulting in the creation of a unique paradigm for adolescence embodied by what I have dubbed the "John Green Teenager." These teens are witty, introspective, and well read. They explore their identities and ask big questions about things like suffering, justice, and love. Their interests are varied and multi-dimensional, such as Augustus Waters's equal enjoyment of basketball, video games, and reading or popular girl Margo Roth Spiegelman's surprisingly extensive and diverse collection of vinyl records. In the aftermath of a 20th-century popular culture sea change which effectively segmented the adolescent population into neat piles of jocks, nerds, and cheerleaders, the John Green Teenager defies conventional categorization.

The Evolution of “Adolescence”

In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*

(2000), Roberta Trites at one point wonders about the purpose of adolescent literature: “Is it possible that . . . the ultimate purpose of adolescent literature is to teach adolescents to quit being adolescents?” (82-83). If so, we must assume that adolescence is merely a step on the path toward becoming what we are meant to be—adults. Is adulthood the final destination? How do we tell when we’ve arrived? Is it a matter of living a precise number of years? Is it a matter of physical development? Is it determined by psychological maturity? What happens if we arrive much later than our peers or not at all? Does that mean we are incomplete until then? Scholars and psychologists who specialize in adolescence and human development still debate these questions.

The first published use of the word “teenager” appeared in the magazine *Popular Science* in 1944, but the concept had travelled a long road to get there. A period of physical and psychological development sandwiched between childhood and adulthood is a natural assumption for modern American youth, but that has not always been the case. New England Puritans in the 1600s conceived of childhood development as having three phases: infancy, childhood, and then youth (which lasted between seven or eight to mid-twenties) (Mintz 23). Then, as John Neubauer explains in *The Fin-de-Siecle Culture of Adolescence* (1991), the novels of the eighteenth century portray adolescent years that are only marginally significant to a youth’s development, or acknowledgement of that phase is absent entirely. Furthermore, Neubauer notes that the problems of young characters in eighteenth-century novels—characters such as Samuel Richardson’s Pamela and Clarissa, Tobias Smollett’s Roderick Random, and Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones—differ from

those of typical modern adolescents in that they involve the struggles of overcoming the circumstances of birth and class and making a good match, whereas modern adolescents struggle with fitting in at high school and deciding what to major in at college.

A shift in the wind came in the late 1700s with the emergence of John Locke's idea of children/childhood as blank slates, followed by the popularity of the Romantic child, which Neubauer calls the "antecedent of adolescence" (Neubauer 77). In the 1800s, gender roles became much more defined, and the lines between girls and boys became much clearer. Steven Mintz, in *Huck's Raft: The History of Childhood in America* (2004), notes that the idea of "girlhood" gained a new meaning as "a period of relative freedom before entrance into the responsibilities of mature womanhood and motherhood" (84). These responsibilities were domestic in nature, as opposed to the expectation that boys would enter into a career, often following in their father's footsteps.

The nineteenth century saw several significant pieces of legislation which helped to shape and define the adolescent phase. In 1824 in New York, the first legislation defining the phrase "juvenile delinquent" described the age cutoff as "under 21, the common-law division between children and adulthood" (Savage 9), and the 1867 Reform Act in Britain, which heightened the women's suffrage campaign, also brought more attention to the "significance of girls and how they were socially defined and positioned" (Driscoll 37). By 1890, the U.S. census divided ages up into five-year increments, whereas earlier versions had only two age divisions: over and under sixteen (Chinn 13). Finally, in 1893, the Criminal Law Amendment Act in Britain raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, providing a "less specific intermediary state" between childhood and adulthood (Driscoll 46).

Social historian Sarah Chinn explains that the cultural response to adolescence, particularly in the United States but also in Great Britain, became to regulate young peoples' environments and activities in an effort to control and more closely monitor their behavior and to preserve their innocence. One way to do so was to develop more extensive activities and organizations. In 1844, the YMCA was founded in London and arrived in America shortly after. Organizations like the YMCA were significant because teenagers, though their age group was beginning to be set apart, did not yet attend school regularly. In the 1890s, only 6% of the United States' seventeen-year-olds earned a high school diploma (Palladino xv), a trend which began to change with the turn of the 20th century. A marked increase in high school attendance by upper working and middle classes after 1900 set those teenage years apart as a specific age or phase of development and contributed to the "feelings of age group solidarity" (Chinn 3) that would come to define the adolescent experience. In the early 1900s, Neubauer argues, educational institutions allowed the adolescent subculture to crystallize, even though those educational spaces remained under adult control. Students' shared experiences made them loyal to each other and set them apart from the adults in authority over them. To represent this cultural development, teachers were often portrayed in literature and other fiction as contentious or ridiculous, and classrooms and schools provided educational value mainly as facilitators of socialization, not an insignificant responsibility. As the 20th century progressed, an increase in attendance at public high schools contributed greatly to the teenage culture. In 1936, 65% of American teens were enrolled in high school, and that number had risen to 80% by the 1940s (Palladino 5). That is a drastic increase from the 6% who had attended regularly just a few decades before. In *The Rise and Fall of the*

American Teenager (1999), Thomas Hine notes, “By enrolling both young men and women, the high school gave teenagers control over their own social life, something that parents controlled before everyone went to high school. Without high school, there are no teenagers” (139). Indeed, particularly in America, public high school became synonymous with teenage life and culture.

Another significant milestone came in 1904 with the publication of G. Stanley Hall’s study, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*. The text helped “redefine adolescence for the twentieth century” (Driscoll 53) and, according to Neubauer, addresses the conflict between aesthetic and purposive values as well as the adolescent imagination and eros and sexuality. Additionally, Sarah Chinn suggests that what these newly-defined adolescents really wanted was to amuse themselves and to have fun, which is perhaps the most defining characteristic of the American teenager. The 20th-century fin-de-siècle focus on adolescent recreation and amusement was a significant shift from the mid-nineteenth-century pressures to practice self-denial and self-restraint.

After WWI, advancements in entertainment technology, such the cinema, caused increased opportunities for mischief for teenagers and increased anxiety in parents. For many teens, going to the movies was “communal, providing a fertile environment for adolescent bonding and sexual experimentation” (Chinn 22). From the 1920s-1940s, magazines such as *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, and *Teen* became “widely available as a distinct genre” (Driscoll 75), catering specifically to a female adolescent readership and facilitating their extracurricular education. As Grace Palladino explains in *Teenagers: An American History* (1996), this increased focus on adolescent entertainment shifted the

locus of adolescent social life away from the family unit and marked the beginning of the period in which “active high school students did little more than eat and sleep at home” (8). By the 1940s, teen culture and the insatiable appetite for high school movies, music, fashions and fads had overwhelmingly and permanently changed the way advertisers viewed teenage consumption, a trend that continues today. Adults, particularly those poised to profit, began to conceptualize high school-aged students as “teenagers on the prowl for a good time, not earnest adolescents in training for adulthood” (Palladino 53).

Patricia Hersch, in *A Tribe Apart: A Journey Into the Heart of Adolescence* (1998), explains that in 1992, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development reported: “40 percent of adolescents’ waking hours are spent in ‘discretionary activities - not committed to other activities [such as eating, school, homework, chores, or working for pay]’” (21). Hersch also notes that the majority of that discretionary time was spent alone and without adult supervision. In the mid-1990s, traditional junior high schools changed to middle schools “in recognition that early adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time for developing at-risk behaviors, and youngsters need greater support and nurturing than junior high schools traditionally have given them” (Hersch 39). This generation that ushered in the new millennium was defined by rapidly advancing technology, including the prevalence of video games and the dawn of the Internet. Technology created “a world without boundaries” which offered adolescents a “dizzying array of lifestyle choices, at the same time that home and community fail to provide a balancing sense of security” (Hersch 19). Adolescents have created their own culture that is increasingly distant from the rest of culture. This distance has led Hersch to argue that

adolescents need adults to be involved to model behavior and guide them through temptation. They also need strong emotional and social support from their communities.

After WWII, people began thinking of adolescence in mostly psychoanalytic terms (Hine 33). Famed psychologist Erik Erikson, in the 1950s and 1960s, proposed his eight stages of psychosocial development. He was heavily influenced by Freud, but whereas Freud's theories are based on the id, Erikson's are based on the ego, the social element of our personalities, so he believed that human development is determined by various social crises that we must overcome to move from stage to stage (McLeod n.p.). His fifth stage, from ages 12-18, is adolescence, which he characterizes as Identity vs. Role Confusion: "Failure to establish a sense of identity within society ('I don't know what I want to be when I grow up') can lead to role confusion. Role confusion involves the individual not being sure about themselves or their place in society" (MacLeod). A little later, in the early 1980s, Lawrence Kohlberg proposed his Levels of Moral Development which are further divided into three stages: the Preconventional, Conventional, and Postconventional/Autonomous, or Principled Level. W. C. Crain, in *Theories of Development* (1985), comments that "adolescents are typically situated between the Conventional and Postconventional levels because they are grappling with conformity and independence" (qtd. in Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame 16). Then, in 1997, psychologist Francis Ianni studied approximately 300 adolescents over the course of ten years, and he concluded that most teenagers experience the adolescent phase of development as synchronized periods, "each structured by the various socializing environments" (Graff 17), unlike adults who, having gained some distance from their own experience, consider adolescence as a unified whole. These examples of adolescent

psychological theory are, of course, only a few of the many ways that psychologists have constructed the concept of adolescence since the 1950s.

Taking inspiration from adolescent literary theorists Robert Petrone, Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, and Mark A. Lewis's Youth Lens method of literary criticism¹, I maintain that, rather than being determined chronologically or physically or even psychologically, adolescence is constructed socially. More specifically, rather than merely being influenced by social categories like gender, ethnicity, and class (categories which numerous critics have addressed in the context of adolescent development), adolescence is, according to the Youth Lens perspective, a "denaturalized social category" (507) unto itself which "very little scholarship" (507) has explored. The Youth Lens method assumes four main precepts: Adolescence Is a Social Construct, Adolescence Is Not a Universal Experience, Conceptions of Adolescence Have Consequences, and Adolescence Is a Symbolic Placeholder. By "social construct," Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis mean that "how adolescence and youth are understood is always contingent on and constituted through social arrangements and systems of reasoning available within particular historical moments and contexts" (509). Essentially, the period of years known as "adolescence" is man-made, and therefore, arguably, artificial and/or irrelevant. By recognizing adolescence as socially constructed, the Youth Lens "works against essentializing young people as adolescents and against locating young people's experiences as primarily constitutive within biological imperatives or seemingly natural psychological processes" (509). Leaning heavily on the work of Nancy

¹ The term "Youth Lens" was coined by Robert Petrone, Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, and Mark A. Lewis in 2015 to describe a way of reading YA lit through a particular analytical lens which they developed. For a full description of their method, read their article in the *Journal of Literacy Research*.

Lesko in *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (2001), the proponents of the Youth Lens explain a major consequence of treating socially constructed adolescence as a stop on the road to adulthood:

[It] places young people in an “expectant” temporal mode in which youth are almost always “waiting passively for the future” (Lesko 123) and unable to “actively master one’s environment and secure [an] ‘identity’” (123). [Lesko] reveals how the “identity crisis,” which has become known as a natural aspect of being a teenager, can be understood as something that is socially produced. Excluded from and/or denied serious responsibilities, middle-class youth appear to be “stuck in time:” socially confined to a holding cell where they are always in a state of “becoming” and never “being,” which has the potential to create a state of “crisis” in individuals. (510)

Furthermore, the conception of adolescence as an incomplete stage of development privileges the adult perspective and experience. As Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis note, “An emphasis on adult and age-based normativity notes how YAL aims toward achievements characterizing adulthood or toward reinforcing the superior and more knowledgeable position of adults in relation to youth” (512). Additionally, the authors also address Maria Nikolajeva’s Theory of Aetonormativity, as put forth in *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (2010), claiming that “behind every disempowered teen narrator is an empowered adult author conveying ideology about the superiority of adult norms. Novels may feature strong protagonists, but when things get especially difficult, it often takes the wisdom or power of an adult to rectify the situation

so that an adult-centered normativity marks all writing for and about youth” (Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis 512). Therefore, as the field of YA literary criticism continues to progress and deepen, it will be the task of scholars who decide to utilize the Youth Lens theory to scrutinize young adult literature to uncover the ways texts represent adolescence, including its milestones and challenges.

Biography of John Green

In *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), fictional author Peter Van Houten expresses his opinion about the role of the author in literary criticism: “But to be perfectly frank, this childish idea that the author of a novel has some special insight into the characters in the novel . . . it’s ridiculous. That novel was composed of scratches on a page, dear. The characters inhabiting it have no life outside of those scratches” (191-192). One of John Green’s oft-repeated mantras is “Books belong to their readers,” which he sometimes shortens to BBTTR, and he frequently, exhaustingly encourages fans not to focus too much on authorial intent when interpreting any works of literature, not just his own.² In fact, in a private YouTube live stream for Crash Course Patreon patrons in May of 2017, Green revealed that the character of Van Houten is meant to be a caricature of himself “as horrible as I might be or someday become or something.” Even still, there are details of Green’s life which merit examination in conjunction with analysis of his novels.

² Although Green has held this stance for the entirety of his career, he did post a video on his YouTube channel on December 5, 2017, in which he admits that he recognizes the problems inherent in such a hands-off view of authorship. He explains, “It’s a little bit disingenuous to pretend that the author isn’t present in the book at all, especially in our personality-driven culture, and especially if the author has chosen to have a public life by, for instance, participating in an eleven-year-long video blog conversation” (“On the Movies”).

Settings and geographic locations seem to be particularly important to Green, both in his fiction and in his real life, and he frequently sets his novels in cities where he has lived. For instance, he was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, and even though his family only lived there for three more weeks, he eventually moved back there as an adult. His two most recent novels, *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) and *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017), take place primarily in Indianapolis, and many local landmarks feature prominently, such as the White River, “The Ruins” at Holiday Park, and the “Funky Bones” public art installation. Green’s novel *Paper Towns* (2008) takes place mostly in Orlando, Florida, where he grew up and spent his childhood with his parents and younger brother, Hank. Biographer Eric Braun describes their progressive household: “John’s parents taught him to have empathy and to help others. They also taught him to think for himself and to contemplate philosophical topics, such as the meaning of life and what it meant to be a good person. John, his parents, and his brother often debated these topics at the dinner table” (11). In spite of his supportive family, Green was not a particularly happy child. In *John Green: Teen Whisperer* (2015), Kathleen Deakin, Laura A. Brown, and James Blasingame explain that he was awkward and eccentric, sweet and sensitive, and without a lot of friends. He was bullied by the tough kids in middle school and the rich kids in high school (3). Green himself recognizes how those early experiences have influenced him as a writer: “I had the social disconnection to be a writer. . . . You need to be an observer. I think that stuff started in Orlando” (Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame 3). Green left his home in Orlando to attend high school at Indian Springs, a private boarding school in Alabama. Christine Poolos notes, “At Indian Springs, it was not unusual to be smart and to want to know things. In a way, it was cool to be a nerd” (12). Green’s

memories of the school eventually served as the inspiration for Culver Creek, the fictional boarding school setting in Green's first novel *Looking for Alaska* (2005). After college, Green moved to Chicago and began working for *Booklist* magazine, a job which introduced him to the field of YA literature as well as his eventual mentor and editor Ilene Cooper, who encouraged him to write a novel about his time in boarding school, an idea he had been toying with. Braun explains, "Green's early attempts at the novel were difficult, mostly because he struggled to make up fiction—instead, he mostly told stories about what really happened to him and his friends at Indian Springs" (Braun 17). Those stories eventually turned into his first novel, so he paid the city back by featuring it in two of his follow-up novels—Colin in *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006) is from Chicago, and *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (2008) takes place in the city and its surrounding suburbs. Green definitely seems to adhere to the old adage: "Write what you know."

An aspect of Green's personal life which he has openly discussed and which features prominently in his novels is his spirituality. He attended Kenyon College in Ohio where he double majored in English and religious studies. His plan was to be a writer (Braun 14). Poolos observes: "If Indian Springs was an opportunity for young John Green to find like-minded people and form deep friendships, Kenyon was the place that allowed him to grow and find himself" (15). He had been raised as an Episcopalian and surrounded by spirituality, but his time at Kenyon inspired an academic interest in religious studies. He told Goodreads.com, "It was 1999, and I was interested in interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims" (qtd. in Poolos 16). By the time he graduated college in 2000, his plan had become to pursue Episcopalian priesthood. He was accepted and enrolled in the University of Chicago's divinity school, but first he had

to participate in a preliminary step of the ordination process called discernment, intended to “mak[e] sure a person understands what is involved in pursuing the ministry. An early step in the discernment process is called clinical pastoral education. This means a candidate must gain practical experience working as a chaplain” (Poolos 22, 24). Green’s chaplaincy was for a children’s hospital in Ohio for five months, where his job was to counsel families of children who were terminally ill or who had died (Braun 15). The experience was emotionally traumatic and caused him ultimately to decide not to become a minister. He explained the exact case that inspired his decision in a story for *NPR’s All Things Considered*: a father, whom he calls “Nick,” had brought in his toddler daughter who was clearly not going to survive. Green prayed with him but came to suspect that the injury had not been an accident. Indeed, Nick ended up confessing to causing his daughter’s injuries, and Green told *NPR* about how it shook his faith and changed his life plans:

I abandoned my dream of ordained ministry shortly after reading about Nick’s confession in the newspaper. I hated Nick, and while good chaplains can faint, maybe, they cannot hate . . . Until I met Nick, I always had faith in the possibility of redemption, but no one could save Nick, and I didn’t want him to be redeemed. I wanted, and want, Nick to suffer. If I could wish him peace, I could probably be a good chaplain. (Poolos 25)

After this epiphany, Green withdrew his enrollment from divinity school and put his plans for the priesthood permanently behind him. However, his background in grief counseling and his experiences working with terminally ill children added meaning and depth to novels like *Looking for Alaska* and *The Fault in Our Stars*, and his research on

the intersection of Christianity and Islam inspired and informed the Muslim character Hassan in *An Abundance of Katherines*.

Green had been struggling for years to write a novel inspired by his time as the children's hospital chaplain but could never quite get it out (Braun 30-31). Then, in 2009, at a Harry Potter convention called LeakyCon, he met a funny, witty teenage girl named Esther Grace Earl with whom he struck up a friendship. She also happened to have terminal thyroid cancer and died in August 2010. Getting to know her and then feeling anger at her death was the kickstart Green needed to write his "kids with cancer" novel once and for all. Green is often asked if the character Hazel from *The Fault in Our Stars* is supposed to be a fictional variation of Esther, and he is always quick to clarify that Esther merely inspired him to write the novel but that her story is her own (Poolos 60). Green told Goodreads.com:

I was so angry, so furious with the world that these terrible things could happen, and they weren't even rare or uncommon, and I think in the end for the first ten years or so I never could write it because I was just too angry, and I wasn't able to capture the complexity of the world. I wanted the book to be funny. I wanted the book to be unsentimental. After meeting Esther, I felt very differently about whether a short life could be a rich life. (Chang n.p.)

The Fault in Our Stars was published on January 10, 2012, and debuted at the top of the *New York Times* Best Seller list. This novel was much more commercially successful than Green's previous works and gained him global attention.

Green was an anxious child, and his struggles with anxiety and depression would later result in an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder diagnosis, an event which has caused him to be open and outspoken about mental illness. When he was 24, Green endured a painful break-up and went into a serious bout of depression. At his parents' urging, and with the support of *Booklist*, he took a two-week leave of absence and went home to Orlando where he went to daily therapy sessions, got better medication, and began to work on his first novel in earnest. He also credits the movie *Harvey* (1950) starring Jimmy Stewart with improving his outlook and state of mind during this time. "At the end of the two weeks, he returned to Chicago with a changed perspective on his life" (Poolos 27). Green's novel *Turtles All the Way Down* features a protagonist who also lives with OCD, though it does not manifest in the same ways as Green's. Aza Holmes has to go to therapy, take medication, and endure the misunderstanding and frustration of her family and friends. In a speech in Nashville, Tennessee, in October of 2017, while promoting the novel, Green told the audience that while *Turtles All the Way Down* is not autobiographical, it *is* very personal.

John Green Scholarship

Although Green has had world-wide commercial success as well as critical acclaim, he has had comparatively little scholarly attention. Various biography collections, such as *Young Adult Authors* (2017) and *Current Biographies* (2017), contain entries about Green which are typically a few pages. Additionally, literary analysis texts frequently mention Green or include brief discussions of his novels without devoting entire chapters to the topic, such as Kathy Latrobe and Judy Drury's *Critical Approaches*

to *Young Adult Literature* (2009) and Kathryn James's *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature* (2009), which both include short sections about *Looking for Alaska*. However, there have been only three book-length works published about Green, all of which came out in 2015. Two of them are biographies, and the third offers a more in-depth textual analysis of Green's novels. Eric Braun's *John Green: Star Author, Vlogbrother, and Nerdfighter* is a thin (48 pages from cover to cover) biography with large font and a picture on almost every page. The information in it, while sparse, is clearly stated and accessible to readers unaccustomed to reading biographies, but it appears to be aimed at a juvenile readership much younger than Green's teenage fans. Christine Poolos's biography, simply entitled *John Green*, is part of Rosen Publishing's All about the Author series and is more substantial (112 pages), but it is similarly full of pictures and aimed at a younger audience. The more scholarly of the three books is Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame's *John Green: Teen Whisperer*. As part of Rowman & Littlefield's Studies in Young Adult Literature series, it is targeted more towards high school libraries than college ones, with an audience expected to be comprised of adolescents and undergraduate education majors. The authors themselves are all education professors, as opposed to literary scholars, from various American universities. Besides its smaller font and lack of pictures, it contains chapters about Green's life and career as well as a chapter dedicated to each of his novels. The tone and contents of the chapters are inconsistent, making it clear that different authors wrote them; some chapters contain critical analysis while others focus mainly on plot summary and character profiles. Chapter 2, "The Pen Is Mightier . . .," about Green's writing style and overall themes, and Chapter 3, "Navigating the Labyrinth," about *Looking for Alaska*, offer the

most insight for a critical analysis of Green's works. "The Pen *Is* Mightier . . ." discusses Green as a storyteller and situates his work within the adolescent psychological landscape, citing developmental theorists such as Erikson and Kohlberg. The chapter also examines how Green's novels both rely on and contribute to ideas about adolescent identity development. The next several chapters are each dedicated to analyzing one of Green's novels, but the first one, "Navigating the Labyrinth," about *Looking for Alaska* offers the most in-depth analysis of them all in that it ventures beyond the boundaries of plot and character and offers an insightful discussion of the depictions of different kinds of intimacy in the novel.

In addition to the three books discussed above, there have been countless periodical publications about Green in newspapers, magazines, and blogs, only a few of which have scholarly applications. Most published pieces about Green are either interviews, book reviews, movie reviews, or articles which coincide with the release of one of his novels, or they are cultural interest pieces about his internet success outside of being an author. There are, however, a few notable articles and interviews which form a scholarly conversation about his novels. Mark A. Lewis, Robert Petrone, and Sophia Tiana Sarigianides, the developers of the Youth Lens interpretive approach discussed above, apply their method to Green's first novel in their 2016 article "Acting Adolescent?: Critical Examinations of the Youth-Adult Binary in *Feed* and *Looking for Alaska*," published in *The ALAN Review*. The authors focus primarily on the youth/adult interactions in the novel and how the result of those interactions "both supports and subverts dominant understandings of youth and adolescence" (47). Around the same time, Jennifer Burek Pierce published "Your Story Matters: NerdCon Honors the

Diversity of Storytelling” in *American Libraries Magazine*, and while her focus is not necessarily on Green’s novels, she still has some pertinent observations about Green’s approach to storytelling, such as his insistence that “all stories matter” (82) and that their power should be taken seriously. One of the many interviews with Green that stands out is Jayme K. Barkdoll and Lisa Scherff’s “‘Literature Is not a Cold, Dead Place’: An Interview with John Green,” published in *The English Journal* in 2008, before Green had achieved the widespread, mainstream fame which came with *The Fault in Our Stars* in 2012. In the interview, Green talks candidly and at length about teenage morality and the responsibility he feels authors writing for teens have. Additionally, Clare Malone and Amelia Thomson-Deveaux’s “In the Outsiders’ Club” is a piece in the Summer 2014 issue of *The American Prospect* in which Malone and Thomson-Deveaux exchange a back-and-forth about *The Fault in Our Stars* and Green’s online community of fans. They discuss Hazel and Augustus’s relationship in the novel as a metaphor for the adolescent transition into adulthood, and they note the heartbreak Hazel experiences when imagining her mother’s grief after her only child has died. While the article is not, strictly speaking, scholarly analysis, it does offer insightful commentary about, among other things, Green’s approach to adolescent grief in the novel. Most recently, shortly after the release of *Turtles All the Way Down*, Green gave a lengthy and insightful interview to Terry Gross for his *NPR* program *Fresh Air* in October 2017. In the interview, Green discusses his own life-long struggles with mental illness, gives insight into the dizzying thought processes of *Turtles All the Way Down*’s narrator, Aza, and talks about how Aza’s thought spirals have altered her understanding of the meaning of self. He also reveals how becoming a parent has shifted his perspective of adolescence to that of the worried,

loving parents in his novels, but he still loves writing about teenagers because they are asking big questions and experiencing so many things for the first time.

Lastly, there are also a few master's theses which are at least in part about Green. The earliest one is Molly M. Carman's 2009 University of Arkansas thesis, "The Compassionate Imagination in *Paper Towns* and *King Dork*." As the abstract explains, her project is about the teenage problem novel and "seeks to explain the primary problem of the problem novel—youth alienation—and to describe how today's problem novels are depicting their characters' process of reconciliation with society" (ii). The "problem" she identifies in *Paper Towns* is adolescent loneliness and the search for connection. She focuses her discussion of Green's novel primarily on the character of Margo Roth Spiegelman, a listless teenage girl who defies social categorization and is unsatisfied with the predetermined path society has laid out before her—school, job, marriage, house, kids, death. Carman suggests that Margo lacks purpose because of her rejection of human intimacy and community and is, therefore, unable to transition effectively into adulthood.

Barb Dean's 2012 University of Northern British Columbia thesis, "Before and After: Spirit in the Act of Reading: An Exploration of John Green's *Looking for Alaska*," examines adolescent spiritual development in Green's first novel. Under the umbrella of Reader Response Theory, Dean uses *Looking for Alaska* as a sample with which to analyze the "intangible mystery of the spirit" as a "vital dynamic in reading" (ii), and she also notes the profound lack of scholarship addressing adolescent spirituality (independent of an organized religion) in YA lit. Her discussion understandably focuses on the character of Dr. Hyde and the World Religions class he teaches that all of the teenage protagonists attend. His students revere him as somewhat of a deity, or at the

very least very wise, and the curriculum of his class provides a structural backdrop for the whole novel. Dean further suggests that Hyde, as well as Alaska, also provides the reader with a metaphorical image of modern religious discourse: “In *Alaska*, Dr. Hyde exemplifies old age and the rigidity of traditional religion in Alabama, whereas Alaska epitomizes youth and the spiritual questioning that is connected to the North. . . . Together they metaphorically bridge the tensions that have led to the avoidance of anything that might be deemed spiritual in the public domain” (39). The recurring theme of the course, which Dean discusses at length, unintentionally becomes the question of universal suffering and how adolescents in particular cope with loss.

In 2014, Matthew I. Johnson’s University of Wyoming thesis, “Young Adult Novels about Death and Dying: Arguments for Reading about Terminal Illness and Suicide,” essentially serves as a defense of YA books about death and makes a case for why they are beneficial to adolescent readers. As examples, Johnson offers Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* and Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why*. His analysis leans heavily on Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s study *On Death and Dying* about patients dying of terminal cancer and other diseases. Kubler-Ross’s study is now famous for being the catalyst which lead to her development of the stages of grief—shock, denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance. Johnson’s primary argument about *The Fault in Our Stars* is that adolescent readers do not need to be facing the uncertain future created by a terminal illness in order to appreciate and benefit from Hazel’s and Augustus’s points of view. Because adolescence is already fraught with anxiety and uncertainty, one interpretation of the cancer in the novel is as a metaphor for a looming, scary future stretching out in front of a teenager who simply wants to live a life that matters.

The most recent graduate student work on Green is a thesis containing only a chapter about him: Samantha Dunn's 2016 Iowa State University thesis, "Fandom and Fiction: Adolescent Literature and Online Communities." Dunn's thesis, like Dean's, also exists under the umbrella of Reader Response Theory and is primarily an examination of how online fan communities and notoriety influence modern authors of adolescent literature, namely Lois Lowry, J. K. Rowling, and John Green. Her discussion of Green contains very little textual analysis, focusing instead on his persona as a well-known Internet celebrity who is also an author. Her most valuable contribution to the literary scholarly conversation is her observations about Green's poignant treatment of growing up in his novels and his ability to inspire his readers to live examined lives.

In light of both the extreme commercial and critical success that he has enjoyed, there is still much fertile soil to plow in the field of John Green scholarship. The vast majority of publications about him are usually fairly short (2-3 pages) and either are commercial in nature (rather than scholarly) or are about his life as an Internet persona. There are far too few published critical analyses of his novels and even fewer book-length studies of his work as an author. Utilizing theories of developmental psychology, as well as cultural analysis, to provide a critical context, this dissertation will endeavor to examine all of Green's published novels from a variety of thematic viewpoints. The ultimate goal is to interpret Green's understanding of modern American adolescence and to establish a paradigm for the John Green Teenager.

Chapter I, "Personhood and the Sense of Self," leaning heavily on Erikson's stages of development, explores various representations of adolescent identity development in Green's novels. The topics explored include the questions "Who am I?"

and “What is my purpose?” as well as a consideration of the role of community and social connection to an adolescent’s formation of a sense of self. Chapter II, “Imagining the Future,” considers the liminal existence of the modern adolescent—no longer a child but not yet an adult. Because teenagers exist in a transitional holding pattern of sorts, their primary function in society is to imagine what their future lives as adults will be like and to plan for adulthood while they wait for it to arrive. This chapter will examine how the teenagers in Green’s novels experience and cope with the impulse to imagine and plan for their future. Chapter III, “Memory and Community Preservation through the Storytelling Tradition,” discusses how Green’s teenagers contribute to the preservation of cultural memory through their participation in the storytelling tradition, a responsibility historically reserved for the elders of a community. They tell stories to form communal bonds, they listen to stories to carry on traditions and memories from previous generations, and they honor and preserve the dead through shared memories and stories. Chapter IV, “Physical and Sexual Development,” examines Green’s treatment of adolescent sexuality in his novels. Nearly all of Green’s novels address sexuality in some form, and this chapter discusses how Green’s teenagers feel about their developing bodies as well as how they navigate various sexual encounters, including kissing, oral sex, and intercourse. Additionally, the concept of innocence has a complicated history, so the chapter begins by tracking its evolution and discussing how and if it still applies to modern adolescents. Finally, Chapter V, “Religious and Spiritual Development,” after noting the subtle nuances of the terms “religion” and “spirituality,” explores the various depictions of adolescent spirituality in Green’s novels. Green’s teenagers are deeply thoughtful, and they ponder concepts like the personhood and character of God and what

awaits a person after death. Also notable is how Green's teenagers from typically conflicting faith traditions and backgrounds (Jewish, Muslim, Atheist, etc.) are able to coexist in relationships of mutual respect.

Summaries of Green's Novels

Looking for Alaska

Miles "Pudge" Halter leaves his home in Orlando, Florida, his junior year of high school to attend Culver Creek boarding school in Alabama (a fictional stand-in for Green's real-life Alabama boarding school Indian Springs). He is an unpopular, intelligent underachiever who is obsessed with the last words of famous people. He is quickly absorbed into a close group of friends which includes his short, stocky roommate whom everyone calls "The Colonel," an Asian student named Takumi, and a "hot" girl full of *joie de vivre* named Alaska. Miles is immediately enamored with Alaska, but she has an older, long-distance boyfriend, so he settles for being her "buddy" instead. The novel takes place over the course of one school year during which Miles and his friends sneak out to smoke and drink in the woods, bond with each other over shared experiences, and receive an education that has little to do with their actual classes. Midway through the novel, on a night when Miles and Alaska drunkenly cross the boundaries of friendship and kiss for the first time, Alaska unexpectedly leaves campus in the middle of the night and is killed in a car accident which may or may not be self-inflicted. For the rest of the novel, Miles and the remaining friends in his circle mourn Alaska while simultaneously investigating her death in search of answers that they never

truly find. The story is a celebration of friendship and adolescence, as well as a contemplation of suffering and loss.

An Abundance of Katherines

Colin Singleton is a former child prodigy who had become mildly famous for winning the *Kranial Kids* quiz show. Now, no longer a child, he is merely a somewhat strange guy who has memorized mountains of useless facts. The day after his high school graduation, he is dumped by his girlfriend Katherine, who is in fact the nineteenth girl named Katherine that he has dated. The pain of losing yet another Katherine combined with the anxiety of growing out of his child prodigy identity causes him to have a bit of an existential crisis, so he and his best friend Hassan, “a rather fat, hirsute guy of Lebanese descent” (8) and also a relatively devout Muslim, decide to leave Chicago and go on a summer road trip to destinations unknown. They end up in Gutshot, Tennessee, where they are unexpectedly hired by a local tampon string factory owner named Hollis. She wants them to accompany her daughter Lindsey Lee Wells to interview citizens of the town—most of whom work or used to work for the factory—to record their stories for posterity. Lindsey is witty and friendly with aspirations of becoming a nurse, and Colin and Hassan instantly connect with her. Unfortunately, she has a boyfriend, whose name also happens to be Colin, who is the embodiment of the quintessential jock stereotype. Colin and Hassan stay with Lindsey and Hollis at their large, pink mansion for the summer while the boys fulfill the duties of their job. In his free time, Colin begins to

think back analytically about all of the Katherines in his past, and he starts to develop an equation to track visually the trajectory of each failed relationship. His hope is that if he can get it to work, then he will be able not only to map out the paths of past relationships but also to predict the future outcomes of current relationships. He dubs his equation the Theorem and becomes convinced that it is his key to mattering, his way to make a mark on the world. Instead, through the process of gathering the stories from the town, forming a bond with Lindsey, and coming to terms with his own identity and purpose, he realizes he does not need the Theorem to give his life meaning.

Let it Snow: Three Holiday Romances—“A Cheertastic Christmas Miracle”

A historic Christmas Eve snowstorm covers Gracetown in several feet of snow, stranding a southbound train in a snowbank near a Waffle House. Among the passengers on the train is a group of cheerleaders heading to a cheer competition in Florida. When they burst into the mostly deserted Waffle House to wait out the storm, they make the dreams of the teenage boys working there come true. The workers all agree to allow only one more carful of people in the door to share in the glory, and each guy calls his friends and tells them to hurry there as fast as they can and to bring the game Twister. An epic, hilarious race through the icy streets ensues, the narrative focus of which is a group of friends named JP, Tobin (the narrator of the story), and the Duke (a friend of theirs who happens to be a girl). During the course of the night, the Duke's unrequited love for Tobin comes to the surface, and the story ends as a romance.

Paper Towns

Quentin “Q” Jacobson grew up in an Orlando suburb next door to Margo Roth Spiegelman. When they were kids, Q and Margo found a dead body in the park, but since then, they have grown up and grown apart in popularity status, causing them to move in different social circles in their high school. One night, out of the blue, Margo shows up at Q’s bedroom window and recruits him to come with her on an elaborately planned night of pranks aimed at her cheating boyfriend and phony friends. They end their adventure by sneaking into Seaworld in the small hours of the morning, and as they finally head home, Q is convinced that he and Margo will now be friends again and hang out at school. However, the next day, Margo has disappeared, and Q realizes that Margo had planned their adventure as her last hurrah before leaving town for good. Q notices a poster on her window shade that leads him to a record in her record collection which in turn leads him to a book of Walt Whitman poetry. He begins to suspect that she has left clues for him to find her, so he follows them one by one and discovers an abandoned strip mall where she had obviously spent some time. Following more clues, he discovers that she is hiding out in the tiny town of Agloe, New York, so he and his friends skip their graduation ceremony to embark on a road trip to try to find her. When they finally do find her, they discover that the clues Q had discovered were just coincidences, not messages for him, and that she really had not wanted to be found. Q is naturally surprised and disappointed, but he realizes that the time and effort he spent looking for Margo had not been a waste. It takes this final disappointment to make him realize that what he had assumed was a search for Margo had really been a search for himself. This is one of those times when, according to the cliché, the journey really is more important than the destination.

Will Grayson, Will Grayson

Co-written with fellow YA-author David Levithan, the novel follows the separate lives of two strangers, both high school boys near Chicago coincidentally named Will Grayson. Levithan's will³—whose chapters are written entirely in lowercase, partly to mimic online text speak and partly to distinguish them in tone from Green's chapters—is an angsty, closeted homosexual. Green's Will is an average teenage boy whose most distinguishing feature is that he is best friends with a very large, very flamboyant, very out-of-the-closet homosexual named Tiny Cooper. Will, Tiny, and their friend Jane, whom Will later ends up dating, are the core members of their school's Gay Strait Alliance. The two stories play out side-by-side in alternating chapters before the two separate narratives intersect midway through the novel when Will and will coincidentally meet each other while on a night out in the city. Tiny serves as the linchpin connecting the two stories when he and will spark a romance. Indeed, once the two stories intersect, the narrative focus switches to Tiny as he is writing and staging a high school production of an over-the-top musical version of his life story. The musical features a caricature of Will as Tiny's best friend, and seeing himself through Tiny's eyes causes Will to make discoveries about his own identity.

The Fault in Our Stars

The novel is narrated by a teenage girl named Hazel Grace Lancaster who has thyroid cancer that has metastasized in her lungs. She is living on what she calls

³ Throughout the text, I will use capitalized "Will" to refer to Green's Will and lowercase "will" to refer to Levithan's Will since Levithan's chapters are entirely in lowercase text. Green himself uses this system for distinguishing between the Wills on his website johnngreenbooks.com.

“purchased time” (26) due to a miraculous result from an experimental medication, but she still needs the assistance of an oxygen tank to breathe. At a support group for teens with cancer, she meets Augustus Waters, a former high school basketball star who now has an amputated leg but is otherwise in remission from his cancer. They seem to have few common interests beyond a penchant for witty banter, but they form a bond when Hazel introduces Augustus to her favorite book, *An Imperial Affliction* by Peter Van Houten, a 600-page, thinly veiled fictional homage to David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. The book is about a girl with cancer, and it frustratingly ends in the middle of a sentence. To impress Hazel, Augustus reads the book and becomes as obsessed with it as she is. Together, they track down the reclusive author in Amsterdam, and Augustus cashes in his “cancer kid wish” to get them a trip to go see him. Meeting him turns out to be a massive disappointment because he is a slouchy, angry drunk who treats them despicably, but the trip is not a waste because the pair still falls in love despite their tenuous futures. Their romance is tragically short-lived because Augustus experiences a recurrence of his cancer and lives only a little while longer after they return home. Though heartbreaking, the novel ultimately reveals that a short life can still be a meaningful one.

Turtles All the Way Down

The novel is narrated by Aza Holmes, a teenage girl in Indianapolis who, along with her best friend Daisy, becomes an amateur detective when local billionaire Russell Pickett’s corrupt business dealings are exposed, and he becomes a fugitive on the run with a one-hundred-thousand-dollar reward being offered for his capture. His son, Davis,

also happens to be Aza's childhood friend. Aza and Daisy contrive an excuse to visit Davis and his little brother Noah at their lavish mansion, where Aza and Davis rekindle their lost friendship and eventually a new romance. Davis, paranoid that Aza is only interested in his money, impulsively decides to give her the reward money himself so that he can be sure of her true feelings for him. She splits the money with Daisy, and their new windfall makes paying for college more than a distant dream. Aza and Daisy still work to unravel the Pickett mystery, and they eventually uncover evidence which proves that Pickett committed suicide. The events of the plot are arguably secondary, however, because much of the novel takes place inside of Aza's mind as she struggles to resist the tightening, debilitating spiral of her own intrusive thoughts. She suffers from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and lives in constant terror of contamination while also constantly questioning if she is actually "real" and how she can be sure. Her mental illness prevents her from maintaining close relationships, and after a car accident lands her in the hospital, she has a severe mental break which culminates in her eating handfuls of foam hand sanitizer from the wall-mounted dispenser in her room. She begins to take her medical care seriously, and though she realizes that she will deal with her condition for the rest of her life, the novel ends with hopeful optimism that she will indeed survive and have a meaningful life.

CHAPTER I: PERSONHOOD AND THE SENSE OF SELF

Introduction

In *John Green: Teen Whisperer*, Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame astutely observe that “one of the transcendent characteristics of young adult literature is its ability to capture the adolescent’s search for identity. Identity is often revealed through the protagonist’s exposure to and struggle with situating himself or herself in social and moral situations” (16). For Roberta Trites, in *Disturbing the Universe* (2000), adolescence is dominated by a quest for power: “Identity politics matter most in adolescent literature, however, in terms of how an adolescent’s self-identifications position her within her culture. How an adolescent defines herself in terms of race, gender, and class often determines her access to power in her specific situation” (47). As previously discussed, adolescents occupy a liminal, transitional space which society has created for them, in which they have left childhood behind but have not yet fully entered into adulthood. Besides thinking about their futures, teenagers’ priority during this critical developmental stage is to figure out who they are, to hone the nuances of their personalities, and to solidify their worldviews. In *Childhood and Society* (1950), Erikson explains that, in the adolescence stage, teenage individuals feel the impulse to determine their orientation in the larger “social” world, a process which “thrusts the adolescent into a struggle between identity and role confusion. Ego identity represents the more positive aspect of adolescence, where the adolescent is establishing his or her ‘self,’ whereas role confusion occurs when the development of self appears contradictory with the role one must play” (Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame 16-17). Then, in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*

(1968), Erikson elaborates that, during adolescence, teens are searching for “a new sense of continuity and sameness” (114) as they try to pinpoint their identities. Teenagers are pulled between the duties that society has taught them they should fulfill as citizens-in-training and the impulse to strike out on their own to make their unique mark on the world. Many adolescents experience role confusion and discomfort during this rocky negotiation of self.

John Green’s teenagers embody Erikson’s search for identity and “a new sense of continuity and sameness” in the fragmented postmodern society in which they find themselves. In their article “In the Outsiders’ Club,” Clare Malone and Amelia Thomson-Deveaux exchange a back-and-forth about *The Fault in Our Stars* and Green’s online community of fans in which they observe, “For years he has channeled an outsider’s empathizing ethos to fans” (78). With this statement, Malone and Thomson-Deveaux have recognized a certain quality for which Green is frequently praised by critics—his uncanny insight into the adolescent psyche. That insight has influenced his writing voice and has informed his treatment of the nuances of adolescent identity development in his novels. Dr. Hyde, the World Religions professor in Green’s first novel *Looking for Alaska*, introduces a particular theme of personhood to his students which carries throughout the rest of Green’s novels: “I must talk, and you must listen, for we are engaged in the most important pursuit in history: the search for meaning. What is the nature of being a person? What is the best way to go about being a person? How did we come to be, and what will become of us when we are no longer? In short: What are the rules of this game, and how might we best play it?” (32). Hyde is asking these questions in the context of religious exploration, but the search for meaning he describes is also the

plight of the adolescent struggling to find his identity. Since the turn of the 20th century, psychologists have been closely observing childhood and formulating theories of growth and development, but, for my purposes, Erikson's model of identity development is the most useful for a psychological analysis of adolescent literature.

Erikson's Ego Identity

In the 1950s and 1960s, Erik Erikson became heavily influential in the field of psychoanalysis, primarily for his theory of identity development. His description of the challenges faced during the adolescent stage of development (ages 12-18) was particularly instrumental in forming many of the common practices of adolescent psychology, indeed in shaping the modern view of adolescent identity. The following passage from *Identity and the Life Cycle: A Reissue* (1980) illustrates Erikson's suggestion about the social aspect of adolescence, which is my focus: "Societies offer, as individuals require, a more or less sanctioned intermediary period between childhood and adulthood, *institutionalized moratoria*, during which a lasting pattern of 'inner identity' is scheduled for relative completion" (Erikson 110, emphasis in original). Erikson recognized that the transitional period of adolescence that enjoys a position of cultural privilege is, among other things, a product of society.

An important discussion in the field of developmental psychology is the effort to distinguish between the terms "identity" and "self." In his chapter on identity formation in *The Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (2009), James E. Côté provides some context for the difficulty psychologists have when discussing these terms, and he also outlines the importance of Erikson's ideas to the discussion. In his assessment of the status of

conceptualizations of identity and self in the field of adolescent psychology, Côté explains that two main areas of study have emerged—“ego psychology in the case of identity and self psychology in the instance of the self” (266)—each of which is “characterized by academic enclaves and disputed territories, with different researchers sometimes using the same terminology to refer to clearly different phenomena” (266). The fact that some researchers use the two terms interchangeably certainly muddies the waters, but distinct differences have emerged, and proponents of ego psychology tend to distinguish the terms more effectively. In studies specifically about identity, the term *identity* “refers to the *sameness and continuity* of the person’s psychological functioning, interpersonal behavior, and commitments to roles, values, and beliefs” (Côté 267, emphasis in original). Côté uses an “Eriksonian viewpoint, which dominates the identity field” (267) to summarize and clarify the fundamental character of identity using three key aspects:

Process—ego identity: the sense, and behavioral demonstration, of continuity in functioning over time and across contexts . . .

Content—social roles (self-constructed or based on others’ expectations), personal identifications, and shared values (including personal variants in beliefs and attitudes), which form the basis of enduring commitments that are internalized as being “part” of the person.

Structure—the organization of roles, identifications, and values into stable configurations . . . ; these configurations vary in terms of how open or closed they are to change, as they provide the filters through which information about the world is synthesized. (Côté 267)

In studies about the self, the term *self* is “defined in terms of consciousness, reflective awareness, and stimulated self-regulation (impulse control and other forms of conformity)” (Côté 267), a definition which Côté admits is anything but simple. Indeed, a straightforward, agreed-upon definition of the self seems to be non-existent among experts in the field, but Côté, using the same aspects he used above to explain identity, offers the following characterization of the self based on the language about the self found in studies of adolescence:

Process—an ongoing monitoring and reflected appraisal of how one is perceived by others, culminating in an “interior sense-of-being” that can be enduring and unified.

Content—self-concepts pertaining to various spheres [of] social functioning, such as family, school, and peer group.

Structure—the salience hierarchy of self-concepts into a configuration based on reflected appraisals and cultural expectations concerning independence from, and interdependence with, others. (Côté 267)

Côté notes that self psychology, as opposed to Erikson’s ego (identity) psychology, “has placed more emphasis on the *maintenance* of self-structures and identities, than on identity *formation* and the *development* of self during adolescence” (268, emphasis in original). Furthermore, one of Erikson’s most influential ideas about adolescent psychology is his suggestion that the primary psychosocial task of this stage “involves developing a viable sense of identity that links childhood with adulthood by consolidating identifications rooted in childhood into a coherent adult identity” (269). Since *developing* an identity and sense of self is more applicable to the experience of adolescence than

maintaining one's identity, the Eriksonian model is most appropriate for the analysis of adolescent psychology in literature.

Who Am I?

Maria Nikolajeva, in *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature* (2014)¹, in the chapter, "Knowledge of Self," argues that "the most important knowledge readers acquire from fiction is the knowledge and understanding of themselves While enhanced self-knowledge is beneficial for anyone, it is of overall importance in childhood and adolescence when identity is still in the making" (141). She then elaborates that "childhood and adolescence are periods of identity formation. Adolescence especially is a dynamic and turbulent phase of human life, and it is perhaps young adult fiction that has the strongest potential to offer readers somewhat accurate portrayals of selfhood" (141). Those portrayals of selfhood often manifest as an uncertain time in which adolescents are searching for Erikson's "sense of sameness and continuity" as they develop their identities. Nikolajeva discusses some of the factors which impede these so-called "accurate portrayals of selfhood" in young adult fiction, namely the incoherent turbulence of the adolescent mind, which would be unreadable if represented authentically, and the fabrication of an adolescent narrative voice by an adult author. She then cautions against conflating access to a first-person narrator's interior self with the reader's own self-knowledge or with the author's self. She notes, "Moreover, we are

¹ Nikolajeva's ideas are based on influential studies in the field of cognitive science, namely George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Mark Turner's *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (1991), and Reuven Tsur's *Towards a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (1992).

dealing with an adult author's (re)construction of a young person's selfhood. One would assume that self-knowledge is privileged knowledge as compared to knowledge of other people, but let us remember that in fiction both are constructed" (142). She asserts that because of these reasons, "The vast majority of personal narratives in children's literature do not even attempt at self-reflection" (143), and those that do try to represent adolescent interiority do so with "egocentric speech," or talking to oneself, which is "of little significance for knowledge of self" (143). I find this grim assessment of adolescent literature rather troubling, and I would argue that Green is one of many YA authors who are exceptions.²

In an interview with *Horn Book's* Roger Sutton in 2010, Patty Campbell, adolescent literature scholar and longtime columnist for the magazine, when asked about how she would define the central theme of YA lit, summed up the adolescent identity crisis with the following question: "Who am I, and what am I going to do about it?" (110-111, qtd. in Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame 36). Green began exploring answers to these questions with his very first novel, as Miles, Alaska, and the rest of the students spend the school year in their World Religions class studying what various faith traditions believe about the purpose and plan for human life. They also try to figure out their own place in the world as teenagers whose identities are still in development. In the preface to their interview with Green for *The English Journal* in 2008, Jayme K. Barkdoll and Lisa Scherff refer to *Looking for Alaska* as a "gloriously modern coming-of-age story" which provides readers with an "authentic and unique window into the lives of teenagers

² Nikolajeva offers no actual examples to support her assertion, but in addition to Green, I would also put forth Maureen Johnson, Gayle Foreman, David Levithan, and Gene Luen Yang as just a few examples of YA authors who authentically represent adolescents' interior lives.

struggling to make sense of themselves and the world around them” (67). That process of making sense of oneself and the larger world is the quintessential function of adolescence, and the results of the search are what comprise a person’s identity and helps him/her to hopefully avoid Erikson’s role confusion.

Furthermore, Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe that “Adolescence is a time of emotional vulnerability. Teens simultaneously fear being different from everyone else and failing to be unique” (70). This emotional vulnerability and fear influence teens’ perception of themselves and, therefore, influence the decisions they make as they develop their identities. Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame also note that *Looking for Alaska* “invites teenagers to reflect upon their choices, their limits, and their identity” (23). The search for identity is particularly poignant with the title character Alaska, starting when her parents had let her pick her own name as a present for her seventh birthday. She picks “Alaska” because that remote and seemingly mysterious geographic location represented what she wanted her life to be like, and the word “Alaska,” which comes from an Aleut word meaning “that which the sea breaks against” (53), represented the resilience and strength she wanted to possess. Alaska, very literally, had been able to pick her own identity once she had felt like she knew who she was and what she wanted, a process that is typically experienced more figuratively in adolescence. Green states in the FAQ section about *Looking for Alaska* on his website: “I liked the name Alaska because it’s grand and mysterious and far away, part of our country but a mythologized part, in much the same way that Alaska herself is (disastrously) mythologized by her classmates.” The unusual story of her naming brings a heightened awareness to the

significance of a young person's identity and, more importantly, to the necessity of adolescent agency in identity formation.

One of the ways adolescent identities are performed in many of Green's novels is through the characters' nicknames—Pudge, The Colonel, Radar, etc.—some of which are self-assigned and some that are assigned by others. By applying their Youth Lens method of literary analysis (discussed in the Introduction) to *Looking for Alaska*, Lewis, Petrone, and Sarigianides determine that the novel “establishes adolescence as a performance of identities informed by external expectations, relationships, and circumstances rather than as an intrinsic and normative set of imperatives” (47). A teenager's adopted nickname is part of a performance based on social roles and expectations, and all of Green's novels include characters who are known in their friend group by a name other than the one they were given at birth. In the FAQ section about *Alaska* on his website, Green discusses his use of nicknames: “It's a way of writing about the relationship between the identities we're given (our names) and the ones we choose or adopt as we come of age (nicknames). Most of the nicknames in my books are nicknames that are given to, and accepted by, a character in his or her adolescence. Taking a nickname is a way of establishing identity and claiming some sovereignty over one's self.” He goes on to explain that the relationship between a person's given identity and his adopted identity is particularly interesting to him because it illustrates the way that adolescents vacillate between their biological families and their chosen network of friends. An added dimension to this issue is those nicknames in his novels that are assigned against someone's will or without the character's knowledge, such as “Bloody Ben” in *Paper Towns* or TOC (The Other Colin) in *An Abundance of Katherines*. These are examples of

identities being given to adolescents by their peers, and the recipients do not recognize the legitimacy of those assigned identities or accept them as valid. In either case, the presence of a nickname in one of Green's novels represents the fluctuating nature of the adolescent search for identity.³

The adolescent search for identity in *An Abundance of Katherines* takes on an added theme of personal authenticity. Colin, Lindsey, and Hassan experience epiphanies about themselves, about their core natures, as they struggle to reconcile their authentic identities with who they thought they were. As Lindsey and Colin's friendship grows more intimate, Lindsey takes Colin to an out-of-the-way cave she considers to be her secret place since she has never shown it to anyone before; it has been where she goes to hide and think for several years. She and Colin sit in the dark and talk more about themselves. The darkness of the cave and the fact that they have only known each other a short time seems to imbue them with a certain bravery that loosens their lips. Colin asks, "Do you ever wonder whether people would like you more or less if they could see inside you? I mean, I've always felt like the Katherines dump me right when they start to see what I look like from the inside If people could see me the way I see myself—if they could live in my memories—would anyone, *anyone*, love me? (149, emphasis in original). Throughout the novel, Colin struggles with feeling like a fraud, like his one identifying characteristic—child prodigy—is a farce. His confession to Lindsey in the cave is a crack in his façade. He is simultaneously grasping at something authentic and

³ For further insight into the use of nicknames in adolescence, consult Thomas V. Busse's "Nickname Usage in an American High School" (1983) and Donna Starks and Kerry Taylor-Leech's "A Research Project on Nicknames and Adolescent Identities" (2011).

also terrified of the implications of letting someone see his true self. As it turns out, Lindsey has a similar view of herself:

“I’m full of shit. I’m never myself. I’ve got a Southern accent around the oldsters; I’m a nerd for graphs and deep thoughts around you; I’m Miss Bubbly Pretty Princess with [The Other] Colin. I’m nothing. The thing about chameleoning your way through life is that it gets to where nothing is real. *Your* problem is—how did you say it—that you’re not significant?”

“Don’t matter. I don’t matter.”

“Right, matter. Well, but at least you can get to the part where you don’t matter. Things about you, and things about [The Other] Colin, and things about Hassan and Katrina, are either true or they aren’t true. Katrina *is* bubbly. Hassan *is* hilarious. But I’m not like that. I’m what I need to be at any moment to stay above the ground but below the radar. The only sentence that begins with ‘I’ that’s true of me is *I’m full of shit.*” (150, emphasis in original)

Her confession reveals the adolescent tendency to feel alone in their struggle toward individuality, to feel as though everyone else has life figured out while they are lost, to feel like no one understands what they are going through. In the FAQ section about *An Abundance of Katherines* on his website, Green explains, “Lindsey’s life feels very performed and she feels this distance between how she thinks of herself and how she acts. . . . And when you acknowledge that there is nothing repulsive or unforgivable or shameful about yourself, it becomes easier to be that authentic person and feel like you’re living a less performed life.” At this point in the novel, Lindsey feels just as inauthentic

as Colin, and her self-assessment, intentionally or not, equates personal awareness with a certain complexity, a certain paranoia about one's purpose. She describes her boyfriend, The Other Colin, as "completely himself" (149) and perfectly fine with it, a quality presented as evidence of his mental simplicity. Hers and Colin's self-awareness apparently come with complications.

Colin is not finished making unsettling discoveries about himself. His work on his Theorem to predict the outcome of romantic relationships is founded on his assumption that he is a serial Dumpee, and he has a sort of crisis when he cannot make the graph work out for one of his ex-girlfriends, Katherine III, with whom he had a 12-day relationship in the fourth grade. So, he decides simply to call her and ask if there is some detail he is missing. She reveals that *he* had actually broken up with *her*, a fact he has completely forgotten and which further rocks his view of himself. He muses that he has always known two reliable things about himself—that he is a child prodigy and a Dumpee. His status as the former has been in recent peril, and his phone call to Katherine III shatters the latter: "Just as almost no true sentence beginning with *I* could be spoken by Lindsey, Colin was watching all the things he'd thought were true about himself, all his *I* sentences, fall away. Suddenly, there was not just one missing piece, but thousands of them" (166). For Colin, his brief time in Gutshot, Tennessee, working for Hollis collecting the town's stories, is a symbol of Erikson's *institutionalized moratoria*, the socially sanctioned intermediary time set aside for adolescents to search for community and to solidify their identities. Colin spends the novel in flux and questioning who he is, and he ultimately needs to face those missing pieces and let them go in order to come out whole on the other side.

In the cave, Lindsey reveals her impression that Hassan is “true,” that his personality is easily classified with a dominant characteristic, “hilarious.” She envies his simplicity and clarity. However, Hassan turns out to be more complex than he seems and ends up having his own epiphany about himself and what he sees as his defining characteristic:

“And I’m a not-doer. Like, I’m lazy, but I’m also good at not-doing things I’m not supposed to do. I never drank or did drugs or hooked up with girls or beat people up or stole anything. . . . But I’ve never been a *doer*. I never *did* anything that helped anybody. Even the religious things that involve doing, I don’t do. I don’t do *zakat* [giving to the poor]. I don’t do Ramadan. I’m a total non-doer. I’m just sucking food and water and money out of the world, and all I’m giving back is, ‘Hey, I’m really good at nothing. Look at all the bad things I’m not doing! Now I’m going to tell you some jokes!’” (195-196, emphasis in original)

At the end of his own *institutionalized moratoria* in *Gutshot*, Hassan understands himself, perhaps for the first time, and vows to change what he has discovered is his driving impulse. Instead of continuing with a passive, “not-doing” identity, he vows to become a doer, and his first act of doing is to register for college, which Colin has been pestering him to do since the beginning of the novel.

The impulse to pinpoint identity continues into Green’s next two novels, *Paper Towns* and *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, but it turns outward, as both Q and Will come to ultimate, reluctant self-awareness by first focusing on the identity of another. Green has repeatedly mentioned on his Vlogbrothers YouTube channel and on his website that the

main theme of *Paper Towns* is our human tendency not to imagine each other complexly and the problems that causes, a theme discussed more fully later in this chapter, but at the beginning of the novel, Q thinks he understands who Margo is, and the language he uses to describe her elevates her, unfairly, to an almost mythical status:

You can't divorce Margo the person from Margo the body. You can't see one without seeing the other. You looked at Margo's eyes and you saw both the blueness and the Margo-ness. In the end, you could not say that Margo Roth Spiegelman was fat, or that she was skinny, any more than you can say that the Eiffel Tower is or is not lonely. Margo's beauty was a kind of sealed vessel of protection—uncracked and uncrackable. (50)

Green explains in the FAQ section about *Paper Towns* on his website: “So that journey—from imagining the other as a sealed vessel to imagining the other as a cracked one—is kind of the journey of adolescence, the journey toward empathy. Intent is irrelevant there. The thing stands on its own.” At the beginning of the novel, Q’s description of Margo as a sealed vessel that could be cracked if she were less than perfect dehumanizes her and reveals his lack of empathy and insight into her humanity. He does not realize how one-dimensionally he is seeing Margo until he finds her at the very end of the novel.

Margo’s last name Spiegelman is German for “mirror maker” or a person who makes or sells mirrors. Green explains in the FAQ section about *Paper Towns* on his website that he chose that particular name for Margo specifically because she functions as a mirror in the novel; when various characters look at her, what they see in her is really a reflection of some aspect of themselves. *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* continues the mirror/reflection idea from *Paper Towns* when Will comments on the quality of Jane’s

fake ID photo: “This is a great picture of you. This is what you look like. . . . Like, you can’t know what you look like, right? Whenever you see yourself in the mirror, you know you’re looking at you, so you can’t help but pose a little. So you never *really* know. But this—that’s what you look like” (53-54, emphasis in original). The confidence with which Will discusses Jane’s true self, or what he perceives it to be, is reminiscent of Q’s tone when talking about Margo in *Paper Towns*, but his comment about the unreliability of truly knowing oneself from a mirror reflection retrospectively complicates Margo’s role as the mirror in which the other characters truly see themselves. Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame suggest that “*Will Grayson, Will Grayson* is mostly about teens searching for and celebrating their identities” (36), an assertion which is perhaps a slight reduction of what the novel accomplishes but has truth to it nonetheless, although the “celebrating” comes mostly from Tiny Cooper, a theme discussed in a later chapter. Because of Tiny’s larger-than-life presence, it is easy to get drawn into his narrative orbit, but his identity or sense of self is never in question in the novel—he is not the central character of this novel. Will is the one who begins the novel lost and must make discoveries and admissions about himself to grow. Like Hassan in *An Abundance of Katherines*, Will describes himself in the negative, focusing on what he is not: “Not that smart. Not that hot. Not that nice. Not that funny. That’s me: I’m not that” (192). This rather negative self-assessment speaks to the adolescent anxiety about mattering and being “special” that is also present in Green’s previous novels, specifically with Colin, Lindsey, and Hassan in *An Abundance of Katherines* and Margo in *Paper Towns*. Like them, Will, with Tiny’s and Jane’s help, must confront the inauthenticity in his priorities in order to mature past them.

Green, however, still had more to say about adolescent identity formation because the concern about embracing one's true self is explored even further and with different stakes in his next novel *The Fault in Our Stars*. In their support group, the cancer survivors introduce themselves each week by stating their name, their diagnosis, and how they are doing that day. Hazel has gotten so accustomed to identifying herself with her disease that when Augustus asks her, "So what's your story?" she immediately starts with, "I was diagnosed when—" (32). He interrupts her because that is not what he had asked: "No, not your cancer story. *Your* story. Interests, hobbies, passions, weird fetishes, etcetera" (32, emphasis in original). Hazel is fully stumped, so Augustus elaborates: "Don't tell me you're one of those people who becomes their disease. I know so many people like that. It's disheartening. Like, cancer is in the growth business, right? The taking-people-over business. But surely you haven't let it succeed prematurely" (32). Hazel realizes he might be right: "It occurred to me that perhaps I had. I struggled with how to pitch myself to Augustus Waters, which enthusiasms to embrace, and in the silence that followed it occurred to me that I wasn't very interesting" (32-33). Green confirms in the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website that "just because Hazel is sick and dying or whatever, she is still a teenager, and more generally she is still human and developing emotionally at the standard human rate, and not at some wildly increased rate of development that's only available to you if you have incurable cancer or whatever." Augustus's question about her identity outside of cancer is a challenge to the notion that a sick person's identity *is* his or her sickness. Whereas Hazel has fallen into the habit of thinking of herself as a "Professional Sick Person" (38), as opposed to a person who is sick, Augustus has resisted such a reduction. Undaunted by

Hazel's seeming lack of imagination about herself, he starts asking her exploratory questions about her interests, guiding her into this new way of thinking about herself as a valuable individual beyond her disease. He marvels, "You are so busy being you that you have no idea how utterly unprecedented you are" (123).

Augustus's view of individuality and identity in the midst of illness inspires Hazel, but his words eventually turn him, if only temporarily, into a hypocrite. In Amsterdam, he reveals to Hazel that his cancer is back in full force throughout his body, but when she starts using words like "fight" and "battle" and "war," he dismisses the notion: "What am I at war with? My cancer. And what is my cancer? My cancer is me. The tumors are made of me. They're made of me as surely as my brain and my heart are made of me. It is a civil war, Hazel Grace, with a predetermined winner" (216). In his despair, he is talking like something he had chastised Hazel for in the beginning—a person who becomes his cancer and has no identity beyond it. Being a healthy adolescent in the process of forming an identity is already a challenging stage of development because of the normal physical and chemical changes taking place, so adding a terminal illness to an already-complex set of variables understandably complicates the process. Augustus had been diagnosed with cancer as a teenager, so when it becomes clear that the cancer will shortly take over his body, he experiences a sort of existential crisis. He cannot mentally separate his "self" from the tumors. Through Augustus's attitude in this particular moment, Green is commenting on the vulnerability of the teenage identity. However, because Augustus's justified despair is short-lived, a momentary weakness, Green is also championing the resilience of adolescence, even in the face of a tragically shortened life. Thomson-Deveaux notes, "The book is unusual because Green realizes

that as teen cancer patients who have to squeeze their lives into less than two decades, Hazel and Gus get to ask big questions with conviction” (Malone and Thomson-Deveaux 78). Typical teens on Erikson’s developmental path toward adulthood ask questions like “Who am I?” or “What is my purpose?” but Hazel and Augustus’s big question is essentially “Can a short life still be a meaningful life?”

A dominant theme of Green’s next novel, *Turtles All the Way Down*, is the question of what exactly constitutes the self. Because the narrator has a mental illness, she is hyper attuned to the contents of her mind and is preoccupied with her thoughts. One thought that consistently preoccupies Aza’s thoughts is the reality that about half of the cells in the human body are foreign microbes that are not actually part of the body, just living there, which leads Aza to wonder, “If half the cells inside of you are not you, doesn’t that challenge the whole notion of *me* as a singular pronoun, let alone as the author of my fate?” (5, emphasis in original). She does not feel in control of her identity, in large part because she cannot confidently define a concept as infinite as “me.” As a symptom of her illness, Aza is plagued by recurring thoughts which her therapist calls “invasives” but which she herself calls “intrusives.” She feels as if these thoughts come from outside of her own mind and that she has no control over them. The intrusive thoughts themselves are not particularly uncommon; however, for someone with Aza’s mental condition, an intrusive “can kind of take over, crowding out all the other thoughts until it’s the only one you’re able to have, the thought you’re perpetually either thinking or distracting yourself from” (45). Aza’s frequent intrusives make her question their origin, and, as her therapist has coached her, Aza tells herself, “I am not my thoughts,” which causes her to realize that “deep down you’re not exactly sure what that makes you”

(46). On *The Interview Show with Mark Bazer* (2018), Green explained Aza's mindset: "If you can't choose what you think about over a long period of time, that really sort of destabilizes what exactly people mean when they talk about *you*. Like, if you're not responsible for or being able to choose your thoughts, then, like, are you not possibly a passenger in this consciousness that you are stuck inside of?" Green describes that thought as "somewhat terrifying," both for Aza and for himself. In Aza's way of thinking, if half of her cells do not belong to her, and if she is not her thoughts, then what is it that can be identified as "her"? She tells Davis, "I is the hardest word to define," to which he adds, "Maybe you are what you can't not be" (79).

Aza receives medical help to manage her intrusive thoughts and to control the symptoms of her OCD, but her therapy and medication often complicate her identity confusion. She is supposed to take a pill every day, but she usually avoids it, explaining, "If taking a pill makes you different, like, if it changes the way-down you . . . that's just a screwed-up idea, you know? Who's deciding what me means—me or the employees of the factory that makes Lexapro?" (88). She is worried about losing control over her identity, whatever it may consist of, so she has convinced herself that staying off of her medication, while it might keep her sick, will also keep her "her." Aza's therapist, Dr. Singh, tells her at one point that she is being cruel to herself, a statement which causes Aza to ponder the nature of what the self actually is: "How can you be anything to *your* self? I mean, if you can be something to your self, then your self isn't, like singular" (87, emphasis in original). Dr. Singh admits that perhaps the self is a set of pluralities that are integrated, like the separate colors of light which come together to form a rainbow. This analogy is both accurate and helpful to Aza, but she still later confesses her deep-down

suspicion: “I think I might be a fiction” (165). She then elaborates: “Is there a way-down-deep me who is an actual, real person . . .? Or am I only a set of circumstances?” (165). She explains that she cannot control her thoughts, so those must not be really hers, and she does not control if her body sweats or gets cancer, so it is not hers either. Instead, “outside forces” (166) make those decisions for her, and she concludes that she must be “a story they’re telling” (166); she cannot be confident that she is “strictly speaking, real” (166). In an interview with Terry Gross for *NPR*, Green explained the line of questioning that Aza’s thought process creates: “If these thoughts feel like they’re coming from outside of me and I’m forced to have them and I can’t choose my thoughts, then who exactly am I, you know? Like, who’s running the ship here? Am I really the captain of my consciousness, or is there some outside force that’s shaping this for me?” Aza is fortunately able to get help working through her questions through therapy. Dr. Singh insightfully likens her feelings of being imprisoned inside of herself to the character Molly Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, who at one point speaks to the author, saying, “O Jamesy let me up out of this” (Green 166). When Dr. Singh insists that Aza continues to belong to herself even when her thoughts do not, Aza counters with Descartes’s famous “I think therefore I am” (166) statement. The well-read therapist clarifies for her that Descartes’s full philosophy also includes doubt: “Descartes wanted to know if you could really know that anything was real, but he believed his ability to doubt reality proved that, while *it* might not be real, he was. You are as real as anyone, and your doubts make you more real, not less” (166-167, emphasis in original). Dr. Singh has offered Aza an alternative idea to cling to. If Aza cannot trust her medication, her thoughts, or even the

cells of her body to constitute the “real her,” then she can find solace in her questions and doubts.

When Aza is in the hospital after her car accident, she becomes fully separated from her intrusive thoughts and has a heated argument with them inside of her mind: “I HATE BEING STUCK INSIDE YOU *you are me* I am not *you are we* I am not” (228). All of her questions, doubts, and spiraling reasoning about what makes up a self have completely disconnected the separate parts of her mind. The intrusive voice convinces her, in spite of her desperate begging and severe pain from a lacerated liver, to drag herself across the room, IV cart and all, to stuff handfuls of foam hand sanitizer into her mouth from the dispenser on the wall. The inner conflict and the way it is written make the scene look like Aza is under attack and being force fed poison against her will. In his interview with Mark Bazer, Green explains, “I desperately wanted to find some kind of form or expression for this way of thinking for what it feels like to have the notion of yourself so undermined as if it’s all built upon sand.” The two selves inside of Aza eventually begin to echo each other’s statements in a torturous cycle: “stop please God stop *you’ll never be free of this* you’ll never be free of this *you’ll never get your self back* you’ll never get your self back *do you want to die of this* do you want to die of this *because you will* you will *you will* you will *you will* you will” (228-229). It becomes more and more difficult, both for Aza and the reader, to distinguish between the two selves and to identify who the “real” Aza is. As a teenager, Aza is already in a vulnerable stage of identity development, so her mental illness, coupled with her lack of responsible self-care, has escalated the normal anxiety associated with adolescence to a dangerous level that will require a lifetime of medication and therapy to reconcile. Fortunately,

Green does not leave Aza in that vulnerable place. The novel ends with an older, future Aza looking back on the younger “her” and reassuring her that she will be ok, that she will eventually have children, that she will have good days and bad days. One of the last lines of the novel offers a tentatively hopeful future for Aza: “I, a singular proper pronoun, would go on, if always in a conditional tense” (285).

What is my Purpose?

Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe of Green that “His characters are honest but often lost in the unforgiving social world of youth. . . . Green’s characters reflect the teenage search for power in a world that typically usurps and suppresses their effectiveness” (15). As I have established, the majority of Green’s teenagers are searching for their identities, but the search does not end with discovery. They must also question their purpose in the larger world. In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin Singleton’s one defining characteristic is that he had won a TV quiz show tournament as a boy and had been labeled a child prodigy. Indeed, the first line of the novel contains the phrase “noted child prodigy Colin Singleton” (3), associating him from the start with his early accomplishments. However, he has not accomplished anything particularly impressive since then and is headed toward an identity crisis as he graduates high school. He is rapidly leaving childhood behind, making it difficult to be a *child* prodigy. He is worried that his superintelligence as a child has not grown up with him and that he is now merely a slightly-smarter-than-average-teenager. As he soaks in his bathtub at the beginning of the novel, he observes that he “looked like a mostly grown person playing at being a kid” (3). He means it literally, but it is also an accurate symbol of his stunted self-

identity and lack of purpose. In a flashback to an encounter with Katherine XIX, the final Katherine, right after graduation, she confirms the notion of him playing at being a kid: “You’re just—you spend all your time worrying about losing your edge or getting dumped or whatever and you’re never for a second grateful. You’re the valedictorian. You’re going to a great school next year, for free. So maybe you’re not a child prodigy. That’s *good*. At least you’re not a *child* anymore. Or, you’re not supposed to be, anyway” (37, emphasis in original). A dominant theme of the novel is the development of an identity that will transition with a person from childhood into adulthood, and in the flashback passage just quoted, Katherine is trying to help Colin recognize the reality of his developmental delay so that he can move past it, but he is not ready. He is unable to grow up, so to speak, because he had not yet had his *institutionalized moratoria* in Gutshot where he finds purpose.

Colin decides that his purpose, what will make him special, is to develop his idea that the progression of all romantic relationships can be mathematically plotted on a graph, given the proper variables. More importantly, once his equation is perfected, he believes that it will be able to predict the eventual outcome of current and future relationships not just his own but for everyone. The potential for him to be responsible for something so momentous and groundbreaking fills him with inspiration and confidence: “But now Colin would fill his own hole *and* make people stand up and take notice of him. He would stay special, use his talent to do something more interesting and important than anagramming and translating Latin. . . . and he would make the world safer for Dumpees everywhere. *He would matter*” (49, emphasis mine). He is convinced that his only chance to matter, to find a momentous purpose for his life beyond

childhood, is to accomplish something big and one-of-a-kind. It is not enough for him simply to be good or to follow the expected path. He had been special in childhood, so his only choice is to be special in adulthood, a unique manifestation of Erikson's role confusion in that it is technically a rejection of his expected role in society.

Lindsey seems to feel the opposite of Colin about having a purpose. She tells him, "Because personally I think mattering is a piss-poor idea. I just want to fly under the radar, because when you start to make yourself into a big deal, that's when you get shot down. The bigger a deal you are, the worse your life is. Look at, like, the miserable lives of famous people" (94). Her statement has the tone of someone protesting too much and is a little too insistent to be believable. She has the ambition and intelligence to be a doctor—she refers to herself as a "paramedic in training" (34) when she is treating Colin after a fall—but she is stagnating in her small hometown, working at the family convenience store and making out with her beautiful, vacuous boyfriend. Like many adolescents facing the looming transition into adulthood, Lindsey is afraid. She is afraid to want something big in case she does not get it. Essentially, she is in a rut and hiding from her purpose when Colin shows up. He is so passionate about pursuing his own purpose, his Theorem, that his ambition is infectious, and since Lindsey is hiding from her own future, she adopts Colin's as her own. When Colin gets stuck on his Theorem and considers abandoning it, Lindsey asks to take a look at it before he burns the notebook in frustration. Even though she is not anything close to a mathematician, examining Colin's notes inspires her and awakens an ambition and the beginnings of a purpose she had not known she had:

Looking at your notes, I kept wanting to find a way to improve on your Theorem. I had this total hard-on for fixing it and proving to you that relationships *could* be seen as a pattern. . . . And then the Theorem wouldn't be yours, it'd be ours, and I could—okay, this sounds retarded. But anyway, I guess I do want to matter a little—to be known outside Gutshot, or I wouldn't have thought so much about it. Maybe I just want to be big-time without leaving here. (121, emphasis in original)

Colin's focus on his Theorem motivates Lindsey to do something significant with her own life, but her helping him is essentially a way to piggyback onto his ambition instead of finding her own. She eventually comes to a realization about Colin's need to accomplish something big, and she admonishes him: "I was thinking about your mattering business. I feel like, like, how you matter is defined by the things that matter to you. You matter as much as the things that matter to you" (200). She is technically speaking to Colin, but her realization seems to be addressed to herself as well, and through her, Green is making a more general comment about the adolescent drive to find a purpose and the self-centeredness which often accompanies it.

Colin eventually has an epiphany that his Theorem will never be able to predict the future because the human variable is too uncertain. This realization inspires him to abandon his Theorem and, more significantly, his obsession with being important, or at least his previously held notions of a worthwhile purpose. In an otherwise mundane moment as Colin, Lindsey, and Hassan get in their car to go to Hardee's, Colin observes, "Nothing was happening, really, but the moment was thick with mattering" (214). Green's choice to juxtapose the words "nothing" and "mattering" here is a reinforcement

of Lyndsey's and Colin's realizations that people, over deeds or things, are what truly matter in the pursuit of a purpose. After they leave Hardee's, they get on the interstate and decide to just keep driving. Colin's musings about his new-found identity and purpose offer the final thoughts of the novel:

As the staggered lines rushed past him, he thought about the space between what we remember and what happened, the space between what we predict and what will happen. And in that space, Colin thought, there was room enough to reinvent himself—room enough to make himself into something other than a prodigy, to remake his story better and different—room enough to be reborn again and again. . . . There was room enough to be anyone—anyone except whom he'd already been, for if Colin had learned one thing from Gutshot, it's that you can't stop the future from coming. (214)

This realization marks a significant paradigm shift for Colin; he is still thinking about mattering, but the word means something completely different to him now. As his *institutionalized moratorium* in Gutshot is coming to an end, so is his unhealthy grip on his childhood purpose.

Like Colin, Margo in *Paper Towns* has her own musings about what it means to matter. The narrative perspective of the novel is Q's, but Margo's journey most clearly illustrates the adolescent search for purpose. Q, in the small hours of the morning on his and Margo's night of pranks, observes that the city of Orlando looks beautiful from their vantage point at the top of the SunTrust Building downtown. Margo, however, calls the beauty fake and offers an alternative perspective:

It's a paper town. I mean look at it, Q: look at all the houses that were built to fall apart. All those paper people living in their paper houses, burning the future to stay warm. All the paper kids drinking beer some bum bought for them at the paper convenience store. Everyone demented with the mania of owning things. All the things paper-thin and paper-frail. And all the people, too. I've lived here for eighteen years and I have never once in my life come across anyone who cares about anything that matters. (57-58)

Margo has become disillusioned with the city of her birth and childhood. It is strangling her, and she feels the impulse to break away from all of her responsibilities and everything that is expected of her and just be free. Her rejection of her city is the first symbolic suggestion in the novel of her transition into adulthood. As she looks out over what is purported to be a landscape of progress and success, all she perceives are weak (paper) people doing what is expected of them—underage kids bumming beer and adults spending their money on houses and possessions. The view actually disgusts her, and she soundly rejects that path for herself. In Eriksonian terms, she too is experiencing the adolescent struggle between ego identity and role confusion; she is attempting to form her identity while simultaneously rejecting her expected social role.

The next morning after her night out with Q, Margo follows through with her plans and disappears. Q eventually, after a complicated scavenger hunt, tracks her down in the tiny town of Agloe, New York. As Green discusses in a Vlogbrothers YouTube video on December 23, 2014, entitled “Agloe, New York,” Agloe is a real-life mapmaking anomaly referred to as a paper town that Margo had read about as a child.

Mapmakers used to add non-existent town or street names to maps as copyright traps; if another mapmaker came out with a map that had the made-up paper town name on it, then it was proof that the map was copied. What is unique about Agloe is that it actually became real. It was just a fictional spot on a map first, but then someone put a general store at a crossroads where the paper town should be and called it Agloe General Store, creating a physical space to represent the previously fictional one. Q asks Margo why she chose Agloe to run away to, and she cynically responds, “A paper town for a paper girl” (293). Margo then elaborates on her previous observations about Orlando being a paper town. She has since realized that *she* had been the one made out of paper:

I was the flimsy-foldable person, not everyone else. And here’s the thing about it. People love the idea of a paper girl. They always have. And the worst thing is that I loved it, too. I cultivated it, you know? Because it’s kind of great, being an idea that everybody likes. But I could never be the idea to myself, not all the way. And Agloe is a place where a paper creation became real. A dot on the map became a real place, more real than the people who created the dot could ever have imagined. I thought maybe the paper cutout of a girl could start becoming real here also. (293-294)

In Margo’s search for inner meaning, her decisions are extreme, and her struggle to find her sense of self and establish her identity is an overly heightened and radical representation of the natural process adolescents go through in their path toward adulthood. Many teens are probably tempted to abandon everything and everyone they know to run away on a soul-searching quest, but few rarely do it. However, Margo’s

extreme behavior and perspective is consistent with her role in the novel as a mythologized figure, the mirror maker, who reflects people's perceptions back on themselves. In the FAQ section about *Paper Towns* on his website, Green notes that "the way people think of her is not at all the way she thinks of herself, and the interior life people imagine her having is wildly different from her actual interior life." Q had thought of her as an uncrackable vessel, but she sees herself as paper, so her radical solution is to take her paper self to a paper town that became real, hoping it would help her become real as well.

The authors of *John Green: Teen Whisperer* suggest that *Paper Towns* "is about connections—the internal and external connections we make as we grow and develop" (52). They suggest that the progression of these connections during the course of the novel symbolizes the adolescent's journey toward discovery of self. The novel is divided into three sections—"The Strings," "The Grass," and "The Vessel." The theme of The Strings is "the many often-fragile, tenuous connections young people make with others" (52), as symbolized by the introduction of the close group of friends and by Q's night with Margo—which means something different to him than it does to her—right before she leaves town forever. The next section, The Grass, portrays "a different facet of adolescents' search for identity, one in which teens essentially lose themselves in another. Erikson [in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*] explains, 'To keep themselves together they temporarily overidentify with the heroes of cliques and crowds to the point of an apparent complete loss of individuality'" (55). In this part of the novel, Q becomes obsessed with his search for Margo, the previous Queen Bee of their school whom he has mythologized in his mind. He is delusional about their connection to each other and, as Deakin, Brown,

and Blasingame observe, he “begins to lose his connections to others in an effort to keep his connections to Margo, even in the smallest of ways” (55). The final section of the novel is called *The Vessel*, in which “Green focuses on the characters as individuals. They are finally beginning to see each other for who they really are. In the adolescent’s search for self, this is the final phase: to finally break free and stand alone” (57). Q’s identity for so long had been wrapped up in his search for Margo and his fantasy about their connection, so when that fantasy is ultimately destroyed when he finally finds her, his identity must evolve to stand on its own. After their trip, the identities of his friends change as well, with Radar finally letting his girlfriend Angela come see his parents’ huge collection of Black Santas for the first time and with band geek Ben dating the hot girl in school, two archetypes which rarely mix. All of the friends’ identities grow, change, and solidify in the last section of the novel, including Q’s and Margo’s. As the *Teen Whisperer* authors observe, “In the end, Q’s search for Margo becomes his own search for identity, and when he finds her, he ultimately finds himself” (58). Margo fulfills her role as mirror maker when all of her friends gaze into her face in the end and see themselves.

Imagining Others Complexly

Molly Carman, in her 2009 University of Arkansas master’s thesis, “The Compassionate Imagination in *Paper Towns* and *King Dork*,” observed: “Youth cultures (and subcultures) tend to see the world in dichotomous terms: sell outs v. drop-outs, self v. other, innocent v. corrupt, young v. old, individual v. mass. . . . However, such a simplistic position eventually impoverishes the individual” (2). Green has repeatedly

discussed in various places online that the main theme of *Paper Towns* is our human tendency not to imagine each other complexly and the problems that creates. When Q finds a marked-up copy of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in Margo's room and spends all of his spare time reading it, he becomes frustrated that he cannot seem to make Margo's presence in the text coalesce into some sort of coherent order. Q assumes that understanding the copy of Whitman will lead to understanding Margo herself, but by inaccurately conflating the two—Margo and "Song of Myself"—he ultimately does Margo a disservice. He is not imagining her complexly, as an individual, but more as a mythic figure akin to a complicated work of classic American poetry. After noticing a highlighted passage which says, "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (Part 52), Q fears that Margo is contemplating suicide, so he decides to show her copy of the poem to his English teacher, Dr. Holden, who suggests that he is reading the poetry shallowly, but "shallow" also accurately applies to how Q "reads" Margo. He skims for the parts he wants to find and, therefore, completely misunderstands her as a whole. He admits as much: "Mostly I just read the parts she highlighted. I'm reading it to try to understand Margo, not to try to understand Whitman" (161). Dr. Holden reacts encouragingly to this statement: "I think that is precisely what Whitman would have wanted. For you to see 'Song of Myself' not just as a poem but as a way into understanding another. . . . But a poem can't do its work if you only read snippets of it" (161-162). Unfortunately, snippets of Margo are all he has.

Q is desperate to gain some sort of insight into Margo's inner identity. When he finds where Margo had recently been hiding out in the abandoned strip mall, he remarks

how lonely and “so very *unMargo*” (169) it is. But then he realizes that Margo herself is often *unMargo*. He admits that he *does* know certain things about her, like how she smells and how she acts in front of other people and what kinds of snacks she likes and that she is smart and funny and “just generally *more* than the rest of us” (170, emphasis in original). But those are not the things that make up a “self.” Not really. Her true “self” is private and unknown to Q. He admits: “I didn’t know why she owned thousands of records but never told anyone she even liked music. I didn’t know what she did at night with the shades down, with the door locked, in the sealed privacy of her room. . . . I needed to discover what Margo was like when she wasn’t being Margo” (170).

This distinction between a public self and a private one is a crucial part of the identity development process, particularly in adolescence when teenagers seek out more and more privacy, and that distinction is also important to recognize in the process of imagining someone complexly. However, one must ask why Q feels like he “needs” to know Margo’s in such an intimate way. His lack of information about her private self seems appropriate, and his desire to know that part of her seems like a serious breach and makes the reader at least a little bit uncomfortable. Earlier, his English teacher had been lecturing about Captain Ahab’s obsession with the white whale in *Moby Dick*, and this moment in which Q inappropriately determines to know Margo’s private self is a reflection of that same manic fervor. Green states in the FAQ section about *Paper Towns* on his website: “I wanted to make that connection in part so that it would be very clear that Q’s obsession with Margo is inherently objectifying. He’s not seeing her as a person. He’s seeing her as Ahab saw the whale.” Clearly, Margo is, indeed, Q’s white whale.

Q begins to read “Song of Myself” in earnest, and reading it makes him think about all of the various ways he had “seen and miss-seen Margo” (173). His thought process then leads him to connect the symbolism of the grass in the poem to Margo. He says, “I realized that the most important question was *who* I was looking for. If ‘What is the grass?’ has such a complicated answer, I thought, so, too, must ‘Who is Margo Roth Spiegelman?’” (173, emphasis in original). It is telling that, after all of his obsessing and searching, it takes him so long to ask that question.

Since she is not physically there, the only way Q can answer that question is with his imagination. And if he were honest with himself, he would realize that actually having her there would ruin his fantasy since the “real” Margo would never live up to his imagination. Radar tells him, “You know your problem, Quentin? You keep expecting people not to be themselves” (194). Radar is now the second person, after Dr. Holden, to accuse Q of reading shallowly and misimagining. At dinner one night, Q’s childhood psychologist parents have a conversation that, unbeknownst to them, leads their son to an epiphany about his investigation into Margo:

“The longer I do my job,” [his dad] said, “the more I realize that humans lack good mirrors. It’s so hard for anyone to show us how we look, and so hard for us to show anyone how we feel.”

“That is really lovely,” my mom said. . . . “But isn’t it also that on some fundamental level we find it difficult to understand that other people are human beings in the same way that we are? We idealize them as gods or dismiss them as animals.” (198)

In this one casual dinner conversation, they conveniently wrap up the overarching theme of the novel in a neat package with a nice bow.⁴ Q has, indeed, idealized Margo as a god in his quest to find her and, in the process, has failed to recognize her humanity. As Q listens to his parents' musings, he starts applying their theories to his own situation. "I was learning something about her and about windows and mirrors. . . . Margo Roth Spiegelman was a person, too. And I had never quite thought of her that way, not really; it was a failure of all of my previous imaginings" (199). This realization marks a significant milestone in Q's path toward maturity and, because the realization is about Margo the mirror maker, it also helps him clarify a characteristic about his own identity as being misguidedly tied up with hers. Q starts to understand that he has been mistaken in the grandiose delusions he had had about Margo's identity, and because she is the mirror maker, those mistakes and resultant realizations are reflected back on himself and his own identity as well.

To pass the time on their long road trip to find Margo, Q and Radar play a game called *That Guy is a Gigolo*, in which they invent stories about the people in traffic beside them. The activity reminds Q of how they all had speculated about Margo as well: "There are so many people. It is easy to forget how full the world is of people, full to bursting, and each of them imaginable and consistently misimagined" (258). Radar has been thinking along the same lines, because his thoughts seem to mirror Q's. He notes that the significant thing about the game is that "in the end it reveals a lot more about the

⁴ The parents in Green's novels are generally known for being supportive and insightful, almost to a fantastical level when compared to parents, those that are present, in many YA novels. Indeed, as Roberta Trites (2000) suggests, "The role of parents in adolescent literature is one of the defining characteristics of the genre" (55). However, that is a subject I will save for another project.

person doing the imagining than it does about the person being imagined” (258). On his journey to find Margo, Q has learned that an individual’s identity is intrinsically tied up with his connections to others, and their identities in turn are shaped by him. Carmen notes, “It is through intimacy and community that we are affirmed as individuals, because when we are in relationships, we can see how we matter as people, to other people. Without these relationships, though, we are reduced to numbers and statistics. We are mere occupiers of houses, tax payers, consumers, interchangeable with anyone else” (9). In the FAQ section about *Katherines* on his website (though the thought also applies to *Paper Towns*), Green seems to concur, stating, “At some point in adolescence, you realize that you are not the center of the universe, which is a bummer of a thing to discover. But it’s only through this discovery that you can build the kind of deep and lasting and sustaining relationships with peers that are so central to adulthood.” Margo has mostly shunned such relationships and connections, except for her little sister, which is perhaps why she feels so untethered and why her identity is so difficult for others, and herself, to pin down.

When they finally find Margo holed up in an abandoned building, living like a vagrant, grimy, and writing furiously in her notebook, the imagined fantasy versions of Margo that the various friends had concocted are well and truly dissolved, and the spell they had been under is broken. Radar comments, “I never knew you until I got to know you through your clues” and then adds, “I like the clues more than I like you,” to which she responds, “What the hell is he talking about?” (283). It is as Q feared; he has imagined her wrongly. She is just a girl, and not a particularly mythic one at that. She calls him out, screaming, “You’re not even pissed at me, Q! You’re pissed at this idea of

me you keep inside your brain from when we were little!” (284-285), and she is at least partly right, but he feels that his anger is justified because of all of the worry and heartache she had put not only him but also her family through. Carmen adds, “Whether the response to the Other is revulsion or fascination (or both), the perception of the Other is ultimately a projection of the Self. The viewer always sees what he wants to see, or expects to see” (17). All of Margo’s friends’ expectations had been inaccurate, and their disappointment with her, according to Carmen’s thinking, is also disappointment with themselves.

Margo and Q start to compare notes about their journeys, Q explaining how he found her, Margo explaining how her plan to leave only included leaving him clues to the abandoned minimall as a neat hideout since she wouldn’t be using it anymore. She had meant to take Q to break into SeaWorld after graduation to “liberate” (292) him and then to leave town. As it turns out, Q had not been the only one failing to imagine someone complexly. Margo admits: “‘And then you surprise me,’ she says. ‘You had been a paper boy to me all these years—two dimensions as a character on the page⁵ and two different, but still flat, dimensions as a person. But that night you turned out to be real’” (292). Perhaps her surprise had come from the fact that Q had proven himself to be real to her while she still considered herself to be paper, which was likely an unsettling realization. Carmen concludes that Margo “knows herself just well enough to know that she needs a period of self-study before she tries to engage with a community. . . . She no longer wants to be a reflection of everyone else’s desires and expectations, so she seeks solitude, where

⁵ This is a reference to her journal, in which she had periodically written fantastical fictional stories featuring Q as the hero.

she will be forced to confront herself” (38-39). Q’s search for Margo, the resultant road trip, and the culminating, and disappointing, confrontation with Margo has changed him and has helped him come to terms with his sense of self. Margo, however, is still experiencing Erikson’s conflict between identity and role confusion and needs more time.

The Side Effect

Malone has noted that “Green’s writing is highly stylized. No matter which character speaks, there’s a tone, a surface cynicism pricked by bone-deep ruminations on life, death, and what it all means” (Malone and Thomson-Deveaux 78). This quality of Green’s writing, particularly the contemplation of life and death, are particularly meaningful in *The Fault in Our Stars*, which Hazel begins as a teenager with tunnel vision about her identity as a cancer survivor. She feels connected to Anna, the main character of her favorite book, who has an idea about the personhood of people with cancer that resonates with Hazel. Hazel explains, “Throughout the book, she refers to herself as *the side effect*, which is just totally correct. Cancer kids are essentially side effects of the relentless mutation that made the diversity of life on earth possible” (49, emphasis in original). On a cellular level, cancer is a mutation, and if a person with cancer thinks of herself *as* her cancer, then, following this line of reasoning, she would think of herself as a mutation. Hazel, at least at the beginning of the novel, feels deeply connected to Anna and her views of her identity as a person with cancer.

In the airport on the way to Amsterdam, Hazel reflects on how much a person with cancer’s sense of self is wrapped up in his or her physical being. She herself, as a teen already hyperaware of her developing body, has the added challenge of a body that

regularly betrays her. Additionally, whereas “normal” teens are frequently and irrationally self-conscious and imagine that everyone is staring at them and judging them, terminally ill teens really do get extra stares and attention in public. At the gate about to board the plane, Hazel observes: “That was the worst part about having cancer, sometimes: The physical evidence of the disease separates you from other people. We were irreconcilably other” (144). Other than his limp, Augustus is able to hide the physical evidence of his disease more easily than Hazel with her permanent oxygen tank and nose cannulas. Matthew Johnson insightfully elaborates upon the idea of being a side effect as Hazel experiences it: “Being a side effect means personhood is secondary to the cancer living inside the body and slowly taking over. As long as they are alive, kids with cancer will always be attached to that label, and the cancer will be the most well-known part of their being. . . . [Hazel] feels who she is and what she wants are inferior to the cancer inside her” (57). For both Hazel and Augustus, their cancer has irrevocably changed who they are on a fundamental level. Augustus used to be a basketball star before losing his leg, and Hazel admits that her personality has been shaped by her illness. Because of her cancer, she had decided to get her GED instead of finishing high school, and being sick also turned her into a self-proclaimed “homebody” (146). Because she had been diagnosed with a terminal illness at such a young age, during a critical phase of her identity development, it had had a profound effect on her sense of self.

In addition to shaping everything about her own identity, Hazel has also projected her cancer onto the identities of those around her, particularly her mother. She has a memory of being in the ICU, before going on the new medicine that had saved her, on the verge of what everyone assumed was certain death. While lying in the bed, she hears her

mom sob a confession to her dad, “I won’t be a mom anymore” (117). This memory has burrowed deep into her subconscious, becoming a part of her identity. Furthermore, it has burdened her with the perception that her parents’ identities as “parents” are reliant upon her survival, and the pressure of that responsibility haunts her. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green explains: “The central thing that Hazel has to realize at the end of the book is that she has been wrong all along about how she imagines her relationships with people she loves. . . . Hazel has to realize that her mom was wrong when she said, ‘I won’t be a mother anymore.’” She has been imagining herself as a burden to her loved ones and as a side effect of cancer because of something her mother said in moment of extreme grief and most likely did not really mean. One of the things Hazel’s brief romance with Augustus leads her to realize by the end of the novel is that her cancer is not her identity, that she is not responsible for anyone else’s identity, and that she is not a side effect.

Conclusion

As Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe, “The teenage protagonist, then, represents more than a character on the page. He or she represents the journey toward identity, a search for sense of self. And if the adolescent is embarking on a similar journey, Green’s characters provide insight with which the adolescent readily can identify” (17). Green’s teenagers, like most teenagers, struggle to locate and face head-on their interior selves while establishing their individual identities independent of their biological connections. According to Erikson, this process is characterized by a search for community and continuity as they try to reconcile their conflicting impulses into a

coherent sense of self. Like Colin, Lindsey, and Hassan, they often feel like imposters in their own skin, and like Margo, they often feel tempted to shun the roles society has planned for them. For teens like Hazel and Augustus, whose adult lives are not guaranteed, they must work harder than most to establish their identities outside of their illness and to find meaning and purpose in a shorter life. When asked in his interview with Barkdoll and Scherff why he always chose to write for and about teenagers, Green confessed: “Also, and this is just a gut-feeling thing, writing for teens makes me feel less useless” (68). Like his characters, and like many adults as well, he is on a quest to add purpose to his existence, and writing about the adolescent experience seems to be at least part of his answer to the question, “Who am I, and what am I going to do about it?”

CHAPTER II: IMAGINING THE FUTURE

Introduction

Adolescence is a time for making plans, a time for imagining the future. As scholars such as G. Stanley Hall have established, teenagers exist in a sort of liminal, transitional holding pattern—no longer children but not yet adults—forced to imagine what they might want their futures to look like while they wait for them to come. A particular challenge of adolescence is the socially constructed and culturally enforced impulse to imagine the future and to plan for inevitable adulthood. With the development of the idea of adolescence around the turn of the 20th century and the emergence of public high schools in the 1930s (particularly in America), the teenage years became set apart as a liminal time in which youth, who were no longer children but not yet adults, hovering between innocence and experience, were given the singular social responsibility of imagining what adulthood would be like and to make grand, romantic plans for their futures. The result was the cult of the teenager in the 1950s and 1960s and the subsequent angst and identity crises mentioned earlier in the Introduction to this dissertation. With more time to spend on discretionary activities—40% of waking hours, according to Patricia Hersh (21)—modern teenagers have the opportunity to think about and plan for their futures. As high school students, they are urged by adult society to decide what college they would like to attend, to figure out what career path they would like to pursue, and to participate in the appropriate extracurricular activities that will look good on a college application. While they are in the transitional phase of adolescence, teenagers' role in society is to plan for quickly approaching adulthood. John Green

continuously revisits these ideas in his novels. Not only are his teenagers concerned about their futures, as they are culturally mandated to be, but more significantly, Green's novels are frequently about teenagers who are tragically separated, either through death or disillusionment, from the futures they had imagined and hoped for themselves. The result is a body of work which presents a nuanced portrait of adolescence, a representation which imbues the John Green Teenager with a heightened level of authenticity.

Growing Up Is a Process

Adolescence, as a stage of development, has been examined as a physiological manifestation and as a psychological state of mind, but it is also, or more so, a product of demarcation. As Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis note, the history of American adolescence “is rooted in the meanings attached to a specific age group, as well as to a history steeped in stage-based ideas stemming from developmental psychology” (512), such as Erikson's stages of development. Elsewhere, in their article about *Looking for Alaska*, they discuss the development of the idea of adolescence as a “cultural construct” (Lewis, Petrone, and Sarigianides 43) as opposed to a naturally occurring stage of physical and/or psychological development with predictable, expected symptoms and behaviors. The authors also challenge the popular notion that adolescents are somehow “incomplete people” (43) who are in the process of developing into adults and are, therefore, inferior to adults. Further, the perception of “sharp demarcations between these life categories” (44) is an artificial product of our culture. In other words, stages of development are still in place, but rather than being based on physiological or psychological phenomena, they are created and fixed in place by cultural norms. Trites,

in *Disturbing the Universe* (2000), notes that such a conception of adolescence was not possible within YA literature “until the postmodern era influenced authors to explore what it means if we define people as socially constructed subjects rather than as self-contained individuals bound by their identities” (16). Conceptualizing adolescents as social constructs removes some of the more restrictive boundaries of developmental theories and allows for a more fluid analysis of teens’ social roles. However, as William Ayers, in his introduction to *Re/constructing “the Adolescent”*: *Sign, Symbol, and Body* (2005), warns, “The social construction of adolescence is unstable, ambiguous, contingent” (ix). He notes that puberty, while a scientifically established developmental phase, is surrounded by cultural fictions and myths which can dominate ideas about adolescence.

In *Rethinking Youth* (1997), Johanna Wyn and Rob White observe that a general consensus of research over the last 40 years is that adolescents, whatever their characteristics may be, belong to a separate and important social category of the population: “non-adults” (8). They also note that, beginning in the 1980s, “youth” as a concept began to be conceived as a process, which means that “the focus on youth is not on the inherent characteristics of young people themselves, but on the construction of youth through social processes (such as schooling, families or the labour market)” (8-9). Attending high school until the age of 18 while simultaneously having less parental supervision and more spending money from part-time jobs has created an atmosphere of pseudo adulthood in which teenagers have a certain measure of freedom and limited responsibilities. Posed another way, Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe that “Adolescents are stuck between authority and autonomy” (19). They lack the full

autonomy of adulthood, instead experiencing a sort of monitored trial period in which their parents and other adult authority figures both guide their decisions and restrict their actions. The adults' purpose is to shepherd the adolescents into full adulthood, a plan which youth often resist. Furthermore, Wyn and White also explain that the term "youth" traditionally only has had meaning as a concept within its relationship to the concept of "adult," or in other words, "If youth is a state of 'becoming,' adulthood is the 'arrival'" (11). As youth, their time is supposed to be spent in "preparation for future (real) life—adulthood" (Wyn and White 13). This idea of teenagers as unfinished adults is the same as the "incomplete people" (43) notion challenged by Lewis, Petrone, and Sarigianides and also often by YA lit in general.

An adolescent's transition into adulthood is usually marked by certain rites of passage or completed tasks, and a significant way in which the John Green Teenager imagines the future is by experiencing anxiety about these expected milestones. Michael Mitterauer, in *A History of Youth* (1993), notes that youth as a transitional period into adulthood can be traced back to the 17th century, with milestones including leaving home, getting a job, and getting married, but he also notes that this particular set of milestones at that time applied almost exclusively to males. Similarly, modern adolescence, as Wyn and White observe, "is assumed to involve a number of developmental tasks which must be completed appropriately or the young person will not develop into a fully mature adult" (12). Green's teenagers feel the pressure placed on them by society to cross certain checkpoints, and many of them react with anxiety, like Colin in *An Abundance of Katherines*, or flat-out refusal, like Margo in *Paper Towns*. Samantha Dunn, in her 2016 Iowa State University Master's thesis about Green's online fandom, has noted that "John

Green understands how to create responses from teens regarding the hopes and fears associated with growing up” (28). Perhaps Green has such an understanding because of his own experiences in adolescence. In a 2012 TEDx Talk in Indianapolis, Green discussed his early negative perception of the expected adolescent path. He remembers being a bad student growing up because of his opinion that “education was just a series of hurdles that had been erected before me, and I had to jump over in order to achieve adulthood.” He recalls the seeming arbitrariness of these hurdles and decided to simply avoid them. The pressure he felt to jump over them so as not to ruin his future created a negative impression in his young mind about what adulthood meant. He explains:

I didn't want a good job. As far as I could tell at 11 or 12 years old, like, people with good jobs woke up very early in the morning, and the men who had good jobs, one of the first things they did was tie a strangulation item of clothing around their necks. They literally put nooses on themselves, and then they went off to their jobs, whatever they were. That's not a recipe for a happy life. These people—in my symbol-obsessed 12-year-old imagination—these people who are strangling themselves as one of the first things they do each morning, they can't possibly be happy. Why would I want to jump over all of these hurdles and have that be the end? That's a terrible end.

Even at the beginning of adolescence, Green recognized the socially constructed pattern he was expected to fit into, and like many of his eventual teenage characters, he resisted. As he explains later in the speech, as he got older, his outlook improved as he formed connections with people along his path who were like him and who convinced him that

“There were more things that might happen, more futures I might have.” In the FAQ section about *An Abundance of Katherines* on his website, he suggests: “I think in some ways that’s what adolescence is—the emerging knowledge that you are not alone, both in exciting and in disappointing ways.” By “disappointing,” he means that adolescence is when teens discover that they are on the same path as everyone else, which destroys the childish notion of being “special.” Green’s teenage characters, like his own adolescent self, experience both the excitement and the disappointment of adolescence as they navigate the socially constructed path laid out before them.

This theme of imagining the future is most evident in *Looking for Alaska*, *An Abundance of Katherines*, *Paper Towns*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*, but even in his novels where the expected path of adolescence is not the dominant theme, there are still isolated scenes which contribute to the larger, recurring pattern in his novels. For example, in *Will Grayson*, Will’s dad calls him into the living room, the place where Important Discussions are had, to ask him seriously about his “plans” (75). Will responds with a question of his own: “You mean, like, get into college and get a job and get married and give you grandchildren and stay off drugs and live happily ever after?” (75). His dad is amused but still presses the college issue, revealing that he and Will’s mother have already pinpointed an ideal medical program for him to pursue at Northwestern in which he can be in his residency by the time he is twenty-five and still be close to home and “whatever whatever whatever” (76). In *Beyond Conformity or Rebellion: Youth and Authority in America*, Gary Schwartz describes the pitfall of placing too much pressure on adolescents regarding their future:

Suburban families generally place a strong emphasis on education, but education is usually emphasized as a way to get a job, which sends a message to students that the whole point of education is work, and the whole point of work is making money, and the point of making money is to live in a big house in the suburbs. Students feel like they are just part of “the machine,” as if they are worth more to the economy than to any community. They describe their schools as prisons, because they feel that in school, their lives are predetermined. (252)

Will is definitely feeling this pressure, and he confesses to his father that he will probably wait until the next year to worry about college, even though his parents have ideas about how he could spend the next several years of his life. His dad replies, “It’s never too early to plan” (76), thus summing up the cultural responsibility of the adolescent, and Will ultimately has no desire to buck the system. He recognizes that he is being pushed down an expected path, but Green presents him as an example of a teenager who is too apathetic to protest. Similarly, in *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza, rather than resisting her expected path, embraces it and even yearns for it. She is a junior in high school, so she naturally begins to research colleges, and her options are significantly broadened by the reward money she receives from Davis. Even with her mental illness and necessity to be near her therapist, she cannot help but succumb to the adolescent impulse to imagine and plan for her future. She says, “It was so fun to imagine the possibilities—West Coast or East Coast? City or country? I felt like I might end up anywhere, and imagining all the futures I might have, all the Azas I might become, was a glorious and welcome vacation from living with the me I currently was” (138). Later, Aza says that she “read and reread

that college guide and imagined the array of futures it promised” (193). Her mental illness has caused the adults in her life to treat her future differently than a typical teenager, and her resistance comes in the form of pursuing the status quo, as unrealistic as it might be for her. These scenes from *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson* and *Turtles All the Way Down* illustrate a recurring theme of adolescent anticipation prevalent in Green’s novels, each of which approaches the idea from a different angle. Miles in *Looking for Alaska* is restless, Alaska’s anticipated future is abruptly cancelled by her death, Colin in *An Abundance of Katherines* is obsessed with making his future matter, Margo in *Paper Towns* decides to boycott her adolescent duty to practice for adulthood, and Hazel and Augustus in *The Fault in Our Stars* grapple with what it means to be an adolescent when a terminal illness takes away the potential futures they are supposed to be anticipating.

The “Great Perhaps” in *Looking for Alaska*

Before leaving to go to boarding school, Miles stands in the doorway of his living room and declares, “So this guy . . . Francois Rabelais. He was this poet. And his last words were ‘I go to seek a Great Perhaps.’ That’s why I’m going. So I don’t have to wait until I die to start seeking a Great Perhaps” (5). Miles is obsessed with collecting and memorizing the last words of famous people, partly because, as Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame point out, he is “fascinated with the indelible marks people leave on the world” (24). On the cusp of moving away from home for the first time, he is feeling the adolescent impulse to perpetually anticipate, to imagine a great future for himself. He says, “I thought of the Great Perhaps and the things that might happen and the people I might meet and who my roommate might be” (8). Miles does not have a concrete

passion, such as Colin's Theorem in *Paper Towns*; he just knows that he wants *something* to happen to him *now* rather than waiting around for adulthood. In the FAQ section about *Looking for Alaska* on his website, Green admits: "Pudge is privileged in many ways And I think it's fair to assume that if Pudge hadn't come from this relatively privileged background, he wouldn't've found himself at the Creek. He would've had to find a different way to seek his Great Perhaps." Green recognizes that Miles's solution to adolescent restlessness—and as an extension, Green's own personal solution since his adolescent path was so similar—is only possible because he is white, male, American, and from a family with enough resources to pay private boarding school tuition fees. The drive he feels to get started on his future, however, connects him to adolescents from other backgrounds, and Green, in the above quote, is confident that there are numerous paths leading to a Great Perhaps.

Although Miles is the narrator and represents the reader's point of view, it is the title character, Alaska Young, who is the real force of nature in the novel and arguably the focus of the narrative. Miles explains, "If people were rain, I was drizzle and she was a hurricane" (88). She blows onto the scene with her blue nail polish and short shorts, smacking her gum energetically, and loudly recounting her summer adventures, which include a story about a guy grabbing her boob. As a character type, she is the personification of adolescent potential. When Miles visits her dorm room for the first time, he discovers that it contains dozens of books, all different kinds, that she has collected from garage sales since she was a kid. He asks her if she's read all of them, and she laughingly replies, "Oh God no. I've maybe read a third of 'em. But I'm *going to* read them all. I call it my Life's Library. . . . But there is so much to do: cigarettes to

smoke, sex to have, swings to swing on. I'll have more time for reading when I'm old and boring" (20). Alaska's Life's Library, with all of its unread pages, is a metaphor for the possibilities of her future. Like all teenagers, she has plans for her adult life. Later on, she admits to Miles specifically what those plans are: "Like after college, know what I want to do? Teach disabled kids. I'm a good teacher, right? . . . Like maybe kids with autism" (54). This turns out to be a surprisingly normal life goal for someone who is otherwise so much larger than life; however, her next statements embody the adolescent plight of being stuck in limbo between the past and the future:

Jesus, I'm not going to be one of those people who sits around talking about what they're gonna do. I'm just going to do it. 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)

The labyrinth she is referring to is from Simon Bolivar's last words in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), Alaska's favorite book: "He . . . was shaken by the overwhelming revelation that the headlong race between his misfortunes and his dreams was at that moment reaching the finish line. The rest was darkness. 'Damn it,' he sighed. 'How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!'" (18-19). The image of the labyrinth becomes a theme in the novel and is used by the core group of characters as a symbol for the repetitive rat race of ordinary, mundane existence. Miles asks Alaska what the labyrinth is, and she replies, "That's the mystery, isn't it? Is the labyrinth living or dying? Which is he trying to escape—the world or the end of it?" (19). As a

particularly poignant metaphor for adolescence, the labyrinth represents the complicated grid of social cues and restrictions that teenagers must navigate, and there is usually only one or two possible, pre-determined paths to lead them successfully out of it.

Additionally, another idea Alaska introduces in that passage, that “Imagining the future is a kind of nostalgia,” has become an oft-quoted phrase among readers of the novel, as evidenced by hundreds of posts featuring the quote on social media websites such as *Tumblr*, *Reddit*, and *Pinterest*. More than once in videos on his Vlogbrothers YouTube channel, Green has credited his wife, Sarah, with coming up with the idea during a conversation on their first date, and the insightfulness of it stuck with him. The realization that looking toward the future is actually a way of looking wistfully backwards removes the mystery from the future and rejects the notion that teenagers must wait for their future to happen *to* them and challenges them to break out of the cycle, out of the labyrinth.

Alaska’s rejection of the status quo causes Miles to reflect on his own experience with imagining his future. When he had left his home in Florida, he did not have as specific of an idea about his adult life as Alaska seems to have, but rather he had known that there had to be something more and better. Lewis, Patrone, and Sarigianides assert that “*Looking for Alaska* demonstrates how adolescent behaviors have as much to do with adult expectations of them as they do with any ‘natural’ need for rebellion or opposition” (47). In this line of thinking, the teens in *Alaska* are not instinctually rebellious but instead are questioning and pushing back against what they feel is expected of them. Miles had left Florida because leaving home in the middle of high school had been unexpected, and he ultimately decides that, while his imagined future so far had not been

wholly accurate, he is still grateful to have imagined it: “I had imagined that life at the Creek would be a bit more exciting than it was—in reality, there’d been more homework than adventure—but if I hadn’t imagined it, I would never have gotten to the Creek at all” (54). He did not keep his imagined plans stuck in his imagination, stuck in Florida, in the labyrinth, never doing what he said he was going to do, something which he has in common with Alaska and which strengthens their bond. He understands her frustration with the expected cycle and perhaps envies her resolve to break out and be more.

In addition to Alaska’s character being the embodiment of future, adult potential, the very structure of the novel itself also hints at the adolescent position of perpetually looking forward to some nebulous future. The book does not contain conventional chapters but is instead divided up into two sections—“Before” and “After”—each of which contains periodic section breaks counting down the days until some event and building suspense and dread, as in “one hundred twenty-two days before,” and then tracking the progression of days after the event, as in “thirteen days after.” The event in question turns out to be Alaska’s death from drunk driving, possibly self-inflicted. In the FAQ section about *Looking for Alaska* on his website, Green reveals the narrative significance of this structure: “The event that we’re counting down to and away from is the defining moment of these people’s lives (at least so far) and it reshapes their relationship to the world so completely that it also reshapes their understanding of time.” The Before-and-After structure represents the teenage characters’ instinctual drive to look forward, to count down to some eventuality; only this time that process is interrupted by the tragedy of Alaska’s death. At this point, the first part of the book labeled “Before” ends, and the second part called “After” begins. With this transition, the book suddenly

switches from anticipating something in the future to contemplating something in the past. Alaska herself suddenly switches from possibility to past tense.

If Alaska represents future potential in the “Before” section, then she is the personification of squandered potential in the “After” section. After being killed in a car accident, her future is snuffed out, and all of her plans and imaginings have dissolved. When Miles realizes that he could have stopped her from driving drunk, from leaving the safety of campus, he is overcome with guilt and blames himself not only for her death but also for reverting her planned future back to the realm of imagination. Later on in the FAQ section about *Alaska* on his website, Green explains why he chose to kill his title character in the middle of the novel, as opposed to the end: “I wanted the reader to have to battle against that feeling of pointlessness and to find some hope in a life that includes unresolved and unresolvable grief.” He wanted the reader to have enough time to get to know and care about Alaska but also enough time after her death to experience Miles’s and the Colonel’s grief journey. Before Alaska’s death, Green paints a hopeful picture of her potential adult life: going to whatever college she chooses, reading all of her books, becoming a teacher. The books in her Life’s Library that in the Before represented Alaska’s intentions and plans are now in the After a symbol of her stolen future and potential.

Regardless of teenagers’ potential and their plans for a future, sometimes experiences of suffering and loss derail those plans. The evidence that emerges from Alaska’s accident seems to suggest that her death had been a suicide, a suggestion which her friends refuse to accept. After all, she had had plans. The officer who had been at the scene of the accident notes yet another example of her lost future: “I remember [seeing in

her backseat] them brochures from colleges—places in Maine and Ohio and Texas—I thought t’ myself that girl must be from Culver Crick and that was mighty sad, see a girl like that lookin’ t’ go t’ college. That’s a goddamned shame” (163). What could cause a person like Alaska, with all of her bravado, confidence, and potential, to take her own life? The boys eventually figure out that, before rushing out of the dorm drunk, Alaska had realized that she had forgotten to go put flowers on her mother’s grave on the anniversary of her death the day before. The horror and guilt of her realization prevents her from seeing past that moment and is enough to override her plans for her future. The authors of *Teen Whisperer* observe that, “In essence, this is a novel about loss and grief, about who gets to grieve more, and about how we fill the void left by loss. More importantly, though, it is a novel that while it leaves the reader pondering these notions, also leaves the assurance that ambiguity is the natural order of things” (28). Alaska has never been able to fill the void left by the loss of her mother years before, and that loss has affected her outlook on her own future. The novel never definitively declares Alaska’s death a suicide, and it ultimately does not matter. Miles’s final thought of the novel suggests Alaska’s legacy: “For she had embodied the Great Perhaps—she had proved to me that it was worth it to leave behind my minor life for grander maybes, and now she was gone and with her my faith in perhaps. . . . You left me Perhapsless, stuck in your goddamned labyrinth” (172). With this melancholic ending, Green does not offer the reader much reassurance that Miles will ever make it out of the labyrinth. The grief of his loss has permanently altered his course and has left him directionless.

“I Want to Matter” in *An Abundance of Katherines*

In the FAQ section about *An Abundance of Katherines* on his website, Green discusses a big idea he was grappling with while writing the novel:

I’m really interested in why we are all so obsessed with mattering—why people in our historical moment are so fixated on fame and notoriety and leaving a legacy. [. . .] Also, at some point in your adolescence you become aware that you are not quite so special as you’ve been led to believe, and this is a pretty difficult thing to reconcile, and I wanted to write about a young man who was experiencing that in the most extreme way possible.

In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin has reached the point in his adolescent development that Green is referencing above. He is beginning to realize that he may not be as special as he once thought he was, an impression exacerbated by his status as a child prodigy. In the grips of post-breakup despair and adolescent ennui, he laments, “I’m just—I’m just a failure. What if this is it? What if ten years from now I’m sitting in a fugging cubicle crunching numbers and memorizing baseball statistics so I can kick ass in my fantasy league . . . and I never do anything significant and I’m just a complete waste?” (9). Like any other teen, he is imagining his future adulthood, and rather than a feeling of nostalgia or even hopeful anticipation, he instead feels only fear and despondence. Faced with the dilemma of what he should do with his summer before starting college, he and his best friend Hassan decide to go on a meandering road trip to nowhere in particular. Whereas Miles in *Looking for Alaska* had left his home with a determined purpose and plan, Colin and Hassan are aimless and intentionally

directionless. Colin seems always to have been preoccupied with making his mark on the world and with becoming someone who matters. He remembers that in elementary school, “His single consolation was that one day, he would matter. He’d be famous. And none of them ever would” (20). As an older teen on the cusp of adulthood, he is paranoid that he has not made the tenuous leap from child prodigy to adult genius, a transition many child prodigies fail to achieve. Green here is using the comparatively rare plight of the aging child prodigy as a stand-in for the more general transition from adolescence into adulthood.

Throughout the novel, as with *Alaska*, there is much discussion of the concept of “potential.” Colin’s dad tells him he needs to work harder than ever or else he risks wasting his potential, to which Colin deadpans, “Technically . . . I think I might have already wasted it” (12). Colin deflects his dad’s nagging and focuses instead on Hassan’s future. Hassan’s reluctance to register for college confuses and frustrates Colin. He sees it as a wasteful squandering of God-given potential. He asks, “What is the point of being alive if you don’t at least try to do something remarkable? How very odd, to believe God gave you life, and yet not think that life asks more of you than watching TV” (33). Regarding this particular subject, Colin acts toward Hassan how a parent might act toward a listless teenager, as if he had given up on his own chances of achieving greatness and is now focusing his energy on his son’s potential. Hassan resents the subject and rebuffs Colin’s nagging several times throughout the novel until the end when he finally gives in and registers for one class to see how he will like it. Colin does not want to think about his suspicion that his own potential is going to waste, so he temporarily and unhealthily adopts Hassan’s future as a distraction.

Despite being a washed-up child prodigy obsessed with mattering, Colin, as an adolescent, still participates in his cultural duty of imagining his future. He and his most recent girlfriend used to plan for their future together beyond high school, and the sudden cancellation of those plans has him feeling disoriented and nostalgic: “We used to talk about going to Paris. I mean, I don’t even want to go to Paris, but I just keep imagining how excited she’d be at the Louvre. We’d go to great restaurants and maybe drink red wine. We even looked for hotels on the Web” (23-24). All of Colin’s plans are intertwined with another person and her future, so when she breaks up with him, his future dissolves with the relationship. Colin, throughout the novel, is plagued by his memories of Katherine and what it was like to be with her, wholly as one unit, and he mourns the loss like a death: “He missed it all. He thought of being with her in college, having the freedom to sleep over whenever they wanted, both of them at Northwestern together. He missed that, too, and it hadn’t even happened. *He missed his imagined future*” (105, emphasis mine). His plans are snuffed out similar to Alaska’s, but instead of being taken away by the loss of life, they are taken away by the loss of a relationship, which can be similarly disorienting.

Colin is desperately searching for something which will allow him to transition into adulthood without following the pre-determined path laid out before him by his parents. His hope is that his Theorem will serve the dual purpose of allowing him to see into the future of potential relationships without being blindsided and, more importantly, will ensure that he is remembered, that he matters. In reality, the Theorem and the road trip with Hassan are distractions—albeit, necessary ones—which help him to temporarily avoid adulthood and his “real” future. In the end, his romance with Lindsey Lee Wells

breaks him out of his cycle of Katherines and causes him to abandon his Theorem, both obsessions which are healthy losses. The novel ends much like it had begun, with the now three friends—Colin, Hassan, and Lindsey—heading down the interstate to destinations unknown and unplanned, untethered to any plans for their futures. After all, as Lindsey’s mom Hollis tells her, “The world ain’t gonna stay like you imagine it, sweetheart” (194).

“Forever is Composed of Nows” in *Paper Towns*

Green’s third novel, *Paper Towns*, once again contemplates the idea that adolescents have a societal duty to plan for their future in an acceptable, predetermined way, this time posing the hypothetical question, “Well, what if we just, like, don’t?” Of the two main characters at the heart of the narrative who both have definite plans for their adult lives, one has taken the predictable, conventional path, and the other is in open, defiant opposition of what is expected. When Margo Roth Spiegelman shows up at Q’s window to recruit him as her getaway driver during her whirlwind night of elaborate revenge pranks on her friends, he balks, claiming that his future at Duke University will be at stake if he gets in trouble with the law. He is willing to have an adventure with her “but not at the expense of, like, [his] future” (32). Margo does not find his obsession with his future “even remotely interesting” (33) and then elaborates: “College: getting in or not getting in. Trouble: getting in or not getting in. School: getting A’s or getting D’s. Career: having or not having. House: big or small, owning or renting. Money: having or not having. It’s all so boring” (33). If a teenager’s job is to imagine and plan for the future, Margo is soundly rejecting that role. Some teens have the privilege of imagining

their future taken from them through illness or death, like Alaska in *Looking for Alaska*, and some postpone it out of fear or insecurity, like Hassan in *An Abundance of Katherines*, but Margo rejects it outright because it does not stimulate her.

Margo's identity as an unconventional planner turns up over and over throughout the novel. She challenges Q even further when she reminds him that worrying about future adulthood is only a comparatively recent responsibility of adolescence, basically a result of longer life expectancy in the modern era. Regarding the time before the cultural emergence of adolescence, Margo explains:

There was no planning for retirement. There was no planning for a career. There was no *planning*. Not time for planning. Not time for a future. But then the life spans started getting longer, and people started having more and more future, and so they spent more time thinking about it. About the future. And now life has *become* the future. Every moment of your life is lived for the future—you go to high school so you can go to college so you can get a good job so you can get a nice house so you can afford to send your kids to college so they can get a good job so they can get a nice house so they can afford to send their kids to college. (33-34, emphasis in original)

The history Margo is referencing is a time before the concept of adolescence was developed. When modern society carved out the teenage years as an in-between time beyond childhood but not yet to adulthood, it created the planning phase. It created the time to plan for the future and tasked teenagers with it as their primary cultural responsibility. On the last day of school, when Q is feeling particularly nostalgic, he

starts thinking about how intricately and for how long Margo planned her escape. He uses the phrase “Margo’s way of imagining herself into her fate” (227) to describe her obsessive notetaking and her preoccupation with maps and guidebooks. Before she ever goes anywhere physically, she has already travelled there in her imagination, much like the passage she underlines in “Song of Myself” in which Whitman discusses traversing continents while sitting with his palms on the grass. Her escape planning is her unique version of what all teenagers experience when they imagine what adulthood will be like and try to plan for it. However, whereas most adolescents ultimately accept the future presented to them, Margo takes one look at conventional adulthood and runs intently in the opposite direction.

At the end of their adventurous night of pranks, Margo tries to convince Q to break into SeaWorld with her by mocking his participation in and attachment to the roles dictated to him as an American adolescent: “Q, you’re going to go to Duke. You’re going to be a very successful lawyer-or-something and get married and have babies and live your whole little life, and then you’re going to die” (70). Her description is belittling—calling his hypothetical career an “or-something” and referring to his life as “little”—which reveals her disdain for an adolescent’s expected path into adulthood. Her argument is convincing, and he eventually agrees to go along with her insane (to him) plan, thus straying from his safe path for the first time. But while Q is exhilarated by being somewhere he is not supposed to be, Margo is a bit underwhelmed by the empty park, finding it boring when all of the shops and attractions are closed. Her disappointment in the anticlimactic culmination of her plan is a metaphor for the point in time when teenagers eventually transition into the future they have spent years planning for and are

often disenchanted by what real adulthood looks like. As a result of Margo's particularly pessimistic outlook regarding what adulthood has to offer, Q's friend Ben sums up her future options: "She's the kind of person who either dies tragically at twenty-seven, like Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, or else grows up to win, like, the first-ever Nobel Prize for Awesome" (91). Neither of these fates offers Margo a realistic future that she can look forward to or plan for, the former because she would die in her prime, the latter because it is a fantasy. Q and his friends are incapable of associating her with anything mundane, and Margo herself just the night before had shunned such a fate.

On his whirlwind road trip to find Margo in New York, Q at one point muses that he feels "Young. Goofy. Infinite" (254). His youth offers him the privilege of his future laid out before him, infinite with possibilities. At the end of the road trip, when Q eventually does find Margo, she is not the person he had been expecting, the person he had romanticized and had put on a pedestal in his imagination. Instead, she is upset about being found and resents the suggestion that she should come home. Q tries to convince her to return to Orlando with him, move back in with her family, and get a summer job before going to college, but that is not the future she has imagined for herself: "'I'd get sucked right back in,' she says, 'and I'd never get out. It's not just the gossip and the parties and all that crap, but the whole allure of a life rightly lived—college and job and husband and babies and all that bullshit'" (295). Q had been harboring the hope that Margo's rebellion had been just a phase, a game she had been playing for attention, and that once he found her she would come home with him, but she stubbornly maintains her insistence on rejecting society's path for her. Q, in the midst of his profound disappointment, has a realization: "The thing is I *do* believe in college, and jobs, and

maybe even babies one day. I believe in the future. Maybe it's a character flaw, but for me it's a congenital one" (295). He decides to try one more time. He asks her, "Aren't you worried about, like, *forever*?" to which she replies with a nod to Emily Dickinson, "Forever is comprised of nows" (296, emphasis in original). Margo has no faith in the future, so she has decided to put her faith in the present. Q does not answer Margo, but he thinks to himself, "I think the future deserves our faith. But it is hard to argue with Emily Dickinson" (296). As they lie in the grass staring at the sky, Margo concludes, "Nothing ever happens like you imagine it will," to which Q counters, "But then again, if you don't imagine, nothing ever happens at all" (299). Q makes the decision then and there to embrace his predictable future as an alternative to an unpredictable one. He concludes, "And maybe by imagining these futures we can make them real, and maybe not, but either way we must imagine them" (304).

The "Grenade" in *The Fault in Our Stars*

As Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe, "Adolescence can be a time of feeling powerless, and nothing evokes the feeling more than having a terminal illness" (73). Teens in a cancer support group do not have the same privilege, or obligation, to plan for their future the way typically developing teens do. With their chances of surviving into adulthood drastically decreased and relapses always around the corner, their primary responsibility is taking care of themselves and facing each day as it comes. Matthew I. Johnson notes that, "In the case of [terminally ill] adolescents, their lives are cut short and it feels like the future everyone else is promised has been denied or taken away" (47). Indeed, the support group's mantra in *The Fault in Our Stars* echoes their

calling: “LIVING OUR BEST LIFE TODAY” (14). Whereas typical teens’ developmental function is to reflect nostalgically on their childhood while imagining what their adulthood will be like, a terminally ill teen must focus on surviving until tomorrow. Their ability to imagine the future has been taken from them.

Hazel and Augustus’ tentative, hesitant interactions when they first start their romance reveal the effects of having an uncertain future to imagine and plan for. When Augustus replies to Hazel’s suggestion that he get hand controls for his car with, “Maybe someday,” Hazel notices, “He sighed in a way that made me wonder whether he was confident about the existence of *someday*” (23, emphasis in original). He is not confident that imagining “someday” is a luxury afforded him, so he cannot avoid a wistful response when Hazel mentions planning for the future, even regarding something as mundane as augmenting his car. She then explains in a narrative aside that cancer kids have their own code for talking about the future, which usually consists of asking if the person is in school as a way of determining how far along their cancer has progressed. Rather than the typical small talk about where they want to go to college or where they would like to travel, cancer kids casually try to assess how long each other will be alive.

Hazel and Augustus eventually bond over their favorite novel, *An Imperial Affliction*, and more specifically, the futures of the characters once the novel ends. When Augustus expresses his exasperation with how the novel ends in the middle of a sentence, Hazel feels the need to defend it: “That’s part of what I like about the book in some ways. It portrays death truthfully. You die in the middle of the sentence” (67). The readers of *An Imperial Affliction* never find out what happens to Anna or her mother or her mother’s boyfriend, the Dutch Tulip Man. Those characters’ potential futures are abruptly cut off

without warning, much like, as Hazel notes, death abruptly cuts off everything that a person might be in the future. Hazel admits that she has repeatedly written to Peter Van Houten, the author of *An Imperial Affliction*, to ask him what happens, but he has never responded. Unfortunately, when Hazel and Augustus eventually get in touch with Van Houten, he crushes both of their hopes with the news that, no, he has not written a sequel, is not currently writing a sequel, and, furthermore, is not planning ever to write anything again. In Amsterdam, Hazel presses him for answers to her questions about what happens to the characters after the novel ends, and he adamantly claims that absolutely nothing happens to them because they are fictitious creations which cease to exist once the novel has ended. Hazel refuses to accept that answer: “No, I understand that, but it’s impossible not to imagine a future for them. You are the most qualified person to imagine that future” (192). Hazel, in her own life, cheats death daily by not succumbing to the cancer trying to snuff out her future, so she refuses to accept that she cannot do the same when it comes to her favorite book. As a teenager, she is culturally required to imagine the future—Van Houten calls it one of her “childish whims” (192)—and as a cancer kid, she is even more hyperaware and sensitive when someone’s future is cut short.

When Hazel’s relationship with Augustus starts to become more romantic and serious, her instinct is to flinch back, to withdraw, to pull away. She spends over an hour pouring through all of the old posts on Augustus’s deceased ex-girlfriend’s social media. Looking at the photos, many of which also contain Augustus, causes Hazel to see her own future. She imagines a future in which *she* is the dying girlfriend of a long-suffering Augustus, a scenario which makes her decide to put a stop to it before it really gets

started. She feels like she is taking control of her future in the only way available to her.

She explains her train of thought to her concerned parents:

I'm like. Like. I'm like a *grenade*, Mom. I'm a grenade and at some point I'm going to blow up and I would like to minimize the casualties, okay? . . . I just want to stay away from people and read books and think and be with you guys because there's nothing I can do about hurting you; you're too invested, so just please let me do that, okay? I'm not depressed. I don't need to get out more. And I can't be a regular teenager, because I'm a grenade. (99, emphasis in original)

Hazel does not consider herself to be a “regular teenager” because her imagined future involves her loved ones mourning her death rather than her travelling the conventional path of college, career, husband, and babies. The way she plans for her future is to cut herself off from personal relationships so as to minimize the emotional damage of her eventual death. She decides to text Augustus to explain that she does not want to pursue a relationship with him. She says, “When I try to look at you like that, all I see is what I'm going to put you through” (101). Unlike Margo, Hazel *wants* to be able to plan for a long, normal, predictable future, but her adolescent privileges of imagining and planning for her future are stolen, or at the very least tainted, by her illness.

Hazel and Augustus, while out to dinner in Amsterdam, reveal yet another way that a teen with cancer plans for the future. Augustus is wearing a very nice suit, and when Hazel teases him that it must be his funeral suit, she is more accurate than she realizes. Whereas Hazel's cancer diagnosis had been a death sentence, and all of her treatments are “in pursuit of extending [her] life” (166) rather than curing her, Augustus's

particular cancer has an 85% cure rate. Even still, he was going to lose his leg and have a chance of not surviving, so he had wanted to take precautions:

“So I went through this whole thing about wanting to be ready. We bought a plot in Crown Hill, and I walked around with my dad one day and picked out a spot. And I had my whole funeral planned out and everything, and then right before the surgery, I asked my parents if I could buy a suit, like a really nice suit, just in case I bit it. Anyway, I’ve never had occasion to wear it. Until tonight.”

“So it’s your death suit.”

“Correct. Don’t you have a death outfit?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s a dress I bought for my fifteenth birthday party. But I don’t wear it on dates.” (166-167)

When teens like Hazel and Augustus imagine their futures, rather than college, marriage, and kids, they are thinking about desirable grave plots, funeral plans, and attractive death outfits. Thus, the impulse to imagine their future is still there; it just takes a different form.

When they return home from Amsterdam, after Augustus’s health has deteriorated even further to the point of his needing a wheelchair, Augustus and Hazel go back to an art park where they had had a picnic earlier in the novel. As they are staring at a large skeleton sculpture called *Funky Bones*, which perpetually has kids climbing and jumping all over it, Augustus observes, “Last time, I imagined myself as the kid. This time, the skeleton” (233). The adolescent privilege, or even responsibility, of imagining the future has been taken from him. His future is a lifeless, bleached skeleton, a skeleton which is

literally being trampled by the youthful, energetic members of the next generation. After a dangerous incident with an infected G-tube, Augustus is able to come home from the hospital “finally and irrevocably robbed of his ambitions” (248). Like Colin in *An Abundance of Katherines* and Margo in *Paper Towns*, Augustus Waters had wanted to matter. He had wanted to live a life less ordinary, and he had had romantic ideals about what that meant. He tells Hazel, “It’s kid’s stuff, but I always thought my obituary would be in all the newspapers, that I’d have a story worth telling. I always had this secret suspicion that I was special” (240). As Augustus’s life is coming to an early end, he experiences bitterness about his lost future. Even teenagers without a terminal illness feel a sense of urgency to do something important with their lives, but Augustus’s time has run out, and he experiences a moment of dissatisfaction with what he has accomplished. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green reveals that “one of the things the characters in this novel have to grapple with is the reality of temporariness. What Augustus in particular must reconcile himself to is that being temporary does not mean being unimportant or meaningless.” Hazel helps to remind him that he is a complete person, not incomplete, not in the process of becoming something more important, that who he is and what he has done is enough.

At Augustus’s funeral, Hazel is confronted not only with Augustus’s lost future but also with her own dismal options for adulthood. Their fellow support group member and friend, Isaac, tells about the time when Augustus, right after Isaac had gotten his eyes cut out, had burst into Isaac’s room shouting about how he had some wonderful news: “You are going to live a good and long life filled with great and terrible moments that you cannot even imagine yet!” (272). Telling this story at the funeral is particularly

poignant in that Augustus's wonderful news had not ended up being true for himself. He had been trying to remind Isaac how much he still had to look forward to, to remind him about his sacred adolescent responsibility to try to imagine what wonders the future holds, a privilege ultimately taken from Augustus himself. Later, while the funeral is happening around her, Hazel comes to a realization about the future. She notes that there seem to be only two options for adulthood: "There were Peter Van Houtens—miserable creatures who scoured the earth in search of something to hurt. And then there were people like my parents, who walked around zombically, doing whatever they had to do to keep walking around" (277). This assessment is rather bleak, and Hazel concludes, "Neither of these futures struck me as particularly desirable" (278). Hazel has gotten so used to the idea that she has no future to imagine and plan for that when she does attempt to do so, she is cynical about her options. So, Augustus has lost his privilege of imagining the future, Isaac *thinks* he has lost his future with the loss of his sight, and Hazel, who should have lost her future long ago but is still holding on, is now disillusioned with what adulthood has to offer.

As an alternative to the bleak option for adulthood which Van Houten represents, Hazel discovers that she had perhaps been mistaken about her parents. Her mom has been taking online college classes in pursuit of a master's degree in social work, dispelling Hazel's big fear that her parents will not have an existence without her. Hazel had failed to imagine her parents, particularly her mother, complexly, and her mother's plans for the future—going to college, starting a fulfilling career, etc.—have been delayed by her responsibilities to her terminally ill child. In "In the Outsiders' Club," Thomson-Deveaux pinpoints what she deems to be the true tragedy of the novel—the moment in the hospital

when Hazel's mom worries aloud that she won't be a mom anymore if Hazel dies.

Thomson-Devaux then observes, "[Hazel] carries her mother's words around with her, knowing that when she does die, she's going to take a part of her parents with her. . . .

More than the love story, Hazel's relationship with her parents is the tragedy that animates *The Fault in Our Stars*" (Malone and Thomson-Deveaux 81). As Hazel drills her mom for more information about her degree and her plans, the emerging details are juxtaposed in the scene with Hazel's plan for her own future—she threatens to haunt them if they do not stay together and have a good life. Since she likely does not have a future to imagine, Hazel instead worries about and plans for her parents' futures, a reversal of the typical parent/teen paradigm. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green discusses Hazel's fears about her parents: "Hazel is very concerned about the way that her illness hurts her parents, and she is very concerned that her death will devastate or incapacitate them, which is why it means so much to Hazel when she finds out that her mom is planning to have a life even when she is gone." An example of a way Hazel copes with this fear is by transferring it onto her extreme desire to know what happens to Anna's mother in *An Imperial Affliction*. If she can confirm with Van Houten that Anna's mom will be all right, then she can be reassured that her own mother will also be all right after losing a child.

Toward the end of the novel, Hazel starts to reminisce about what she has lost, saying "I missed the future" (305). She had known that she would likely never grow old with Augustus, but she had been convinced that she would be the one to die first. Still, she had not been able to resist the temptation to imagine their future together, and she misses the fantasy. Hazel discovers that Augustus had written her a eulogy during his

final days; it comprises the final passage in Green’s novel, bringing Green’s thoughts about death and purpose to a point. After remarking that all humans, himself included, desperately want to matter, to leave a mark, Augustus explains: “The marks humans leave are too often scars” (311). This statement seems to be a direct critique of the adolescent impulse to make their lives matter. Augustus laments that many of the marks people manage to make on the world, rather than being edifying additions to the future, actually take something irreplaceable away. He then notes that Hazel is different than everyone else in this regard. She is different because she “knows the truth: We’re as likely to hurt the universe as we are to help it, and we’re not likely to do either. . . . The real heroes anyway aren’t the people doing things; the real heroes are the people NOTICING things, paying attention” (312). Augustus admires Hazel for her ability to resist preoccupation with influencing the future in favor of noticing the present. He remembers being in the hospital: “[I] tried to imagine the world without us and for about one second I was a good enough person to hope she died so she would never know that I was going, too. But then I wanted more time so we could fall in love. I got my wish. I left my scar” (313). In this eulogy, Augustus insightfully reveals why Hazel’s perspective on mattering is so much healthier than his. Dying young has convinced him that scrabbling to do something significant and memorable with one’s life, a common adolescent desire, is ultimately selfish and unfulfilling.

Hazel and Augustus have had to cope with a milestone that is not on any of the developmental timelines—premature death. The authors of *Teen Whisperer* add that “Coping with death is hard at any age, but for adolescents, engaging with the reality of the death of a loved one can be a giant hurdle between childhood and adulthood”

(Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame 78). Enduring adolescence is difficult enough without also wondering if you will even literally survive it. However, at least for Hazel and Augustus, Johnson offers some solace: “When Gus dies, Hazel cries. So do many readers. His life matters. In the unwritten pages that follow the novel’s end, when Hazel dies, others will cry because her life matters. Adolescent readers will understand that just like the lives of these fictional characters they have come to love, their lives matter too” (58). As Johnson suggests, Augustus’s life *does* matter. It matters because he had experienced love, because he is remembered and mourned, not because of any success he achieved or any possession he collected. His life, though short and unostentatious, was still deeply meaningful.¹

Conclusion

Regarding *Looking for Alaska*, Lewis, Petrone, and Sarigianides observe that, by showcasing a variety of youth/adult relationships, the novel “demonstrates ideas about and experiences of adolescence as context-dependent—how these youth characters take up or embody being an adolescent varies, depending upon their relations with adults and the expectations and roles available within those relationships” (48). This observation remains true when their Youth Lens perspective is extended to Green’s other novels as well. His teenagers feel pressure from parents, teachers, and adult society in general to

¹ Critics are in disagreement about the merit of books featuring terminally ill children and adolescents. While many, like Johnson, find them inspirational and, in general, positively influential, others oppose them on the grounds that they unhealthily romanticize death. For more information on the latter perspective, consult Tanith Carey’s “The ‘Sick-Lit’ Books Aimed at Children: It’s a Disturbing New Publishing Phenomenon. Tales of Teenage Cancer, Self-Harm, and Suicide . . .” and Dena Little’s “The Controversy over ‘Sick Lit’”.

make a plan for their future and to follow a prescribed path. Additionally, they take from their relationships with adults a collection of models for their own potential, still-imaginary futures as adults themselves. As the authors of *Teen Whisperer* observe: “Green goes deeper, down to the place where teens live, which is all about seeing past the adult obsession with financial or social status, down to what really counts: what will make my life worth living?” (Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame 87). Green’s teenagers want to matter, but they also have different ideas about what that word means. In his first novel, *Looking for Alaska*, Green begins a career-spanning examination of the socially constructed adolescent impulse to imagine the future, which he continually approaches from different perspectives in his works. Some of his teenagers, such as Q in *Paper Towns*, embrace the predictable path, and some, such as Colin in *An Abundance of Katherines*, eventually transcend the need to have an impactful adulthood, but others, such as Hazel and Augustus in *The Fault in Our Stars*, face the prospect of no future to imagine due to illness or death. For them, in the words of Emily Dickenson, “Forever is composed of nows.”

CHAPTER III: MEMORY AND COMMUNITY PRESERVATION THROUGH THE STORYTELLING TRADITION

Introduction

Long before stories began to be written down, then mass produced, commodified, and widely circulated thanks to the printing press, they were preserved primarily in the memories of the members of a community and shared orally. For many cultures, their stories are a matter of pride, and storytelling ability is a valued skill. Stories are a way for cultural knowledge to be passed from one generation to the next in a community, perpetuating that people's spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions, and rites of passage as well as preserving the memories of the community, connecting members of the group to each other, and forming strong interpersonal bonds. Additionally, as Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss note in *Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom* (2005), "Storytelling is the oldest form of education. People around the world have always told tales as a way of passing down their cultural beliefs, traditions, and history to future generations. Why? Stories are at the core of all that makes us human" (1). Regardless of the title of Hamilton and Weiss's book, in the oral storytelling tradition, the burden of protecting and passing on a community's stories is born almost exclusively by the elderly members of the community. An elder's many lived years command respect, and when younger members of the group do participate in the storytelling ritual, it is often as children in the role of listener and recipient of wisdom.

More recently, educators, librarians, and healthcare professionals have recognized the benefits of storytelling on adolescent participants. Numerous studies and articles have

been published over the last few decades which examine teenage storytelling, but there is a marked difference in their purpose than when the storyteller is an elder, or even an adult. Adolescent storytelling is generally studied in terms of its pedagogical applications (see, for example, Angay-Crowder, Choi, and Yi; Dreon, Kerper, and Landis; Malin; and Skinner and Haywood) or as a form of therapy for teens dealing with abuse, mental disorders, illness, or social discrimination (see Goodman and Newman; Slivinski and Slivinski; and Sawyer and Willis). Scholars like Carol A. Doll et al. are concerned with the value of storytelling for the teenagers who participate in it, seeking to establish whether or not “storytelling had a positive effect on the self-esteem of young adults” (n.p.). When storytelling is used as an educational or therapeutic tool, the emphasis is on what storytelling can *do* for the adolescent storytellers. What can it teach them or help them deal with in a healthy way? Those are important considerations, to be sure, but they are also somewhat tied to youth. Besides certain specialty programs in which marginalized segments of the adult population, such as prisoners, veterans, or terminally ill patients, are taught storytelling techniques as therapy, the elders of a community, for hundreds (thousands?) of years have approached their role as preservers of cultural knowledge with the mindset of what their storytelling can do for their community rather than what the act of storytelling can do for them.

John Green believes in the importance of storytelling, and his teenage characters participate in the oral tradition in various meaningful ways. In the Author’s Note at the beginning of *The Fault in Our Stars*, he states: “This book is a work of fiction. I made it up. Neither novels nor their readers benefit from attempts to divine whether any facts hide inside a story. Such efforts attack the very idea that made-up stories can matter,

which is sort of the foundational assumption of our species” (n.p.). Green here is establishing fiction storytelling as culturally significant and one of the ways community knowledge and memory are preserved, reminding the reader that just because something is fiction does not mean that it is not also true. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green offers the following comment in an effort to elaborate on the ideas in the novel’s Author’s Note:

I was arguing that made-up stories can matter, that they matter to us in the real everyday world just as much (and in many cases more than) the real people we know and the real things we do. Made-up stories matter for precisely the same reason that anything matters: because we decide they matter, because we imbue them with meaning. Chimpanzees, while they are very smart and interesting creatures, cannot tell each other stories about war heroes fighting sirens and a cyclops to get home. They cannot use such stories to shape their values and their relationships and their worldviews. We can, and do, and this engagement with constructed narrative is (imho) a big part of what makes us human. (n.p.)

When Green talks about using stories to shape worldviews and to be human, he is fully including teenagers in that process. The adolescent characters in his novels do not participate in the oral storytelling tradition with training wheels on as an exercise in school. They are concerned about cultural memory and posterity, and they use stories to form connections and contribute to the preservation of community knowledge.

Storytelling to Form Connections

Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe that “What connects most with the reader in [*Looking for Alaska*] is the candid honesty with which Green juxtaposes the awkwardness and wisdom of the adolescent” (24). Indeed, the characters in the novel do tend to vacillate between awkward and wise, both of which are presented with vulnerability and a certain, perhaps romanticized, transparency that allows the group of friends to form strong bonds. In a key scene, they use oral storytelling organically (as opposed to in a classroom as part of a mandatory activity) to share significant memories and to strengthen their connections to each other. Alaska invents a drinking game called Best Day/Worst Day, which the friends play while sitting around a fire after skipping school and camping out. “Everybody tells the story of their best day. The best storyteller doesn’t have to drink. Then everybody tells the story of their worst day, and the best storyteller doesn’t have to drink. Then we keep going, second best day, second worst day, until one of y’all quits” (114). Miles goes first and claims that his best day is that day. Then Alaska takes her turn: “Best day of my life was January 9, 1997. I was eight years old, and my mom and I went to the zoo on a class trip. I liked the bears. She liked the monkeys. Best day ever. End of story” (115). This memory is both very specific and also seemingly insignificant, which the group attributes to Alaska’s general eccentricity. Their friend Lara from Romania goes next and explains that her best day was the day she came to America with her family. Then Takumi says, “I lose. Because the best day of my life was the day I lost my virginity. And if you think I’m going to tell you that story, you’re gonna have to get me drunker than this” (116). The Colonel’s story is last and is declared the clear winner. More importantly, it is an example of the teenage preoccupation with

wistfully imagining the future, an adolescent literary trope which is often present in Green's works and is explored at length in Chapter II. The Colonel reveals:

Best day of my life hasn't happened yet. But I know it. I see it every day. The best day of my life is the day I buy my mom a huge fucking house. And not just like out in the woods, but in the middle of Mountain Brook, with all the Weekday Warriors' parents. With all y'all's parents. And I'm not buying it with a mortgage either. I'm buying it with cash money, and I'm driving my mom there, and I'm going to open her side of the car door and she'll get out and look at this house—this house is like picket fence and two stories and everything, you know—and I'm going to hand her the keys to her house and I'll say, 'Thanks.' Man, she helped fill out my application to this place. And she let me come here, and that's no easy thing when you come from where we do, to let your son go away to school. So that's the best day of my life. (116)

The Colonel's story is vulnerable and raw, and it reveals something personal to his listeners. Now that they have heard his story, they are connected to him and to each other more fully than they were before they began the "game." They now own a piece of his family memory and share the responsibility of bearing witness to it and preserving it.

After the Colonel finishes his Best Day story, the group then switches over to the Worst Day half of the game. The Colonel goes first this time and tells about the day his father had left and had never come back. He had later found out that his father had cheated on his mom and had beaten her. For Miles's turn, he tells about being bullied in middle school, and Lara claims that her worst day was the same as her best day because

of the responsibility put upon her as the only English speaker in her family. Takumi's worst day was when his grandmother had died in Japan two days before he was supposed to go spend the summer with her for the first time ever. Alaska goes last and wins the round:

The day after my mom took me to the zoo where she liked the monkeys and I liked the bears, it was a Friday. I came home from school. She gave me a hug and told me to go do my homework in my room so I could watch TV later. I went into my room, and she sat down at the kitchen table, I guess, and then she screamed, and I ran out, and she had fallen over. She was lying on the floor, holding her head and jerking, and I thought she had fallen asleep and that whatever had hurt didn't hurt anymore. So I just sat there on the floor with her until my dad got home an hour later, and he's screaming, 'Why didn't you call 911?' and trying to give her CPR, but by then she was plenty dead. Aneurysm. Worst day. I win. You drink. (119)

Alaska's seemingly innocuous story from the first half of the game is suddenly and horrifyingly more meaningful, and the shocked response from the group suggests that she has just revealed something to them that she has never talked about before. Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell insightfully note that "Sometimes witnessing a story can become a moment of transformation" (50), which is undoubtedly the case for Alaska and her friends. This storytelling experience binds the group together and reveals things about each of them to the others and to themselves. Significantly, it takes place in the section called "two days before," which turns out to be two days before Alaska's fatal car

accident. The storytelling game is the last time they are all together forming connections as friends.

In the Q & A section included in the back of Green's next book, *An Abundance of Katherines*, he offers some advice to teens, which includes, "And the third thing, which I think is absolutely vital, is to tell stories and listen closely to the stories you're being told" (235). Whereas the characters in *Looking for Alaska* come to storytelling rather organically and informally, an approach which strengthens their friendship connections naturally and unexpectedly, the protagonist of *An Abundance of Katherines* is decidedly bad at telling stories and, therefore, finds it difficult to form meaningful connections with people. In Green's 2007 Printz Honor Speech, he explains that "Colin is at a social disadvantage partly because, while he can mold language in all kinds of useless, nonnarrative ways, he cannot turn language into a good story" (15). Furthermore, as Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe, "To help readers develop an understanding of the importance of stories, Green ironically makes the protagonist Colin—a super brainiac—completely inept at storytelling. . . . Colin does not understand how to put all of his experiences into a cohesive, meaningful narrative that others can understand" (42). He has memorized piles of names, facts, and capitals, and he can expertly anagram any word thrown at him, but he cannot zoom out to see the ideas behind all of the words and to form connections between those ideas and use them to connect to others.

Lindsey recognizes right away that Colin is bad at telling stories, and she tries to coach him:

Here's the thing about storytelling: you need a beginning, and a middle, and an end. Your stories have no plots. They're like, here's something I

was thinking and then the next thing I was thinking and then et cetera. You can't get away with rambling. You're Colin Singleton, Beginning Storyteller, so you've got to stick to a straight plot. And you need a good, strong moral. Or a theme or whatever. And the other thing is romance and adventure. You've got to put some of those in. (94)

Lindsey's advice to Colin is a rather myopic way of looking at narrative, partly because she does not think Colin is ready for any storytelling techniques more advanced than basic, and partly because she herself is not yet able to recognize the potential of alternative forms of narrative. Colin responds to her by explaining that his Theorem will be his way of telling a good story, "Each graph with a beginning and a middle and an end" (95). She counters by asserting, "There's no romance in geometry," to which he simply says, "Just you wait" (95). He is confident that, because he is and always has been special, he will be able to find a special way to tell good stories and to form connections through the predictability of his Theorem. Once Colin starts to make progress with his Theorem and begins to draw Lindsey into the process, tempting her with how satisfying it feels to make a graph work out accurately, he gets her to admit that his Theorem is worthwhile, or as she expresses it, "just a cool-ass way to tell stories. I mean, I hate math. But this is cool" (108). Even though Lindsey is on her way toward accepting his alternative storytelling style, Colin still recognizes the value of her advice. After he eventually tells her a little bit about his break-up with Katherine XIX, she grudgingly admits that he is improving: "The thing about your stories . . . is that they still don't have any morals, and you can't do a good girl voice, and you don't really talk enough about *everyone else*—the story's still about you. But anyway, I can imagine this Katherine now,

a little bit” (144, emphasis in original). Each time Colin opens up and tells a story from his past, he gets a little better at it. As his storytelling technique improves, Lindsey is able to access his memories and to share in his past, a phenomenon which forms a connection between them.

In *Storytelling Rights: The Uses of Oral and Written Texts by Urban Adolescents* (1986), Amy Shuman asserts that “Stories categorize experience,” a statement which is “an alternative to statements that stories replay, duplicate, or recapitulate experience. . . . If anything, stories give the appearance of order to experience rather than vice versa” (20). This idea is a challenge to the tendency of scholars to assign experience a sort of objectivity that invests it with reality. By contrast, stories are often considered subjective and unreal, a classification which Shuman finds inaccurate and unfortunate. Colin’s attempts to categorize his experiences by using math to tell “cool-ass stories” illustrate Shuman’s ideas that stories are more than just re-creations of past memories. In the FAQ section about *An Abundance of Katherines* on his website, Green comments on Colin’s journey toward finding connection through storytelling: “I wanted to write a story about story (I’m kind of obsessed with stories and what they do/why they matter; see also, TFiOS [*The Fault in Our Stars*]), and I wanted to write about a character for whom understanding the importance and nature of narrative is a matter of legitimately high stakes—so his kind of a brain was a natural fit for the theme,” and he also explains, “This is something Colin struggles with very openly, but in a way all the characters in the novel are dealing with the problem of story—or at least the problem of collecting and sharing their stories in a way that will make people listen and pay attention.” With the phrase “his kind of brain,” Green is referring to Colin’s addiction to patterns and memorization,

qualities not typically associated with an effective storyteller, or even a friend, but Lindsey recognizes their value. She explains to Colin her understanding of the storytelling impulse as more of an instinctual way to remember her past: “That’s how I remember things, anyway. I remember stories. I connect the dots and then out of that comes a story. And the dots that don’t fit into the story just slide away, maybe” (202). She then uses the metaphor of assigning shapes and patterns to the seemingly “random mess” (202) of stars in the sky to form constellations. She says, “But you want to see shapes; you want to see stories, so you pick them out of the sky. Hassan told me once you think like that, too—that you see connections everywhere—so you’re a natural born storyteller, it turns out” (202). In that moment, as she is in the middle of trying to put words to her view of storytelling, she realizes that Colin’s obsession with patterns and his Theorem are just versions of her own system of sorting her memories into stories. They are both seeking a way to categorize their memories and to form connections.

After once and for all going through the litany of all of the Katherines in chronological order for Lindsey’s benefit, Colin remarks, “And the moral of the story is that you don’t remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened” (207-208). In Green’s 2007 Printz Honor Speech, he singles out the above passage as being particularly poignant:

Colin Singleton, the washed-up child prodigy at the book’s center, has a lot of information at his disposal. But his brain is still human; it still prefers lies that make sense to true stories that don’t. There is a moment toward the end of *An Abundance of Katherines* where Colin Singleton says, “You don’t remember what happens (sic). What you remember

becomes what happened.” The stories we tell do not shape history. They are history. (15)

Thanks to Lindsey’s lessons, Colin is finally learning how to preserve his history in a meaningful way and also to share it effectively with others. Once Colin finishes his Katherine’s story, Lindsey responds with amazement that he had actually just told a good story, and he realizes, “Something about telling that story made my gut grow back together” (208). Throughout the novel, he had been referring to the hole in his gut left by the absence of Katherine XIX, and finally figuring out how to tell his story not only forms a connection with Lindsey but also heals him from the inside out.

Toward the end of the novel, Colin reflects on Lindsey’s storytelling lessons and the connections formed between the two of them—at first platonic and then evolving into romantic—by the stories they had told each other. He starts to realize that sharing stories with others not only creates interpersonal connections and fosters healing but is also the true way that anyone can really matter, the main thing he had been chasing with his Theorem all along: “And he found himself thinking that maybe stories don’t just make us matter to each other—maybe they’re also the only way to the infinite mattering he’d been after for so long” (213). Excited by the implications of this idea, he thinks, “*Because like say I tell someone about my feral hog hunt. Even if it’s a dumb story, telling it changes me. An infinitesimal change. And that infinitesimal change ripples outward—ever smaller but everlasting. I will get forgotten, but the stories will last. And so we all matter—maybe less than a lot, but always more than none*” (213, emphasis in original), or as Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame interpret it, “In the telling of his story, Colin realizes that even if he matters, the future will forget him at some point, but the stories will remain” (43).

Perhaps he had been so anxious to establish his significance by perfecting the Theorem because he had not known how to tell stories any other way, and he had instinctually understood that our stories are what grant us immortality. Colin ultimately concludes, “And it wasn’t only the remembered stories that mattered. That was the true meaning of the K-3 anomaly: Having the correct graph from the start proved not that the Theorem was accurate, but that there’s a place in the brain for knowing what cannot be remembered” (213). In his 2007 Printz Honor Speech, Green reveals that he agrees with Colin’s assessment: “We are supersaturated with narratives—none of them terribly reliable—and many of those narratives are competing against each other. In the end, the narratives that triumph are not necessarily the most factual or the most interesting. The stories that win are the ones that make sense, the ones that strike us as touching or revealing. It is the good stories that win” (15). The way a story wins is by being told, retold, and remembered. Throughout the course of the novel, Colin has learned to abandon the most factual stories (the ones told by his Theorem) in favor of ones that are more honestly revealing (the ones Lindsey teaches him to tell). Regarding Green’s use of storytelling in the novel, Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe, “In *An Abundance of Katherines*, John Green shows himself to be the ultimate storyteller. He takes us through the story of Colin Singleton, and through Colin’s story he emphasizes the overall importance of stories in our lives” (42). Indeed, as Colin comes to accept that he needs to be able to tell stories in order to form connections with others and to matter to the larger pool of cultural memory, the reader also walks away from the novel with the same resolve.

Green continues the theme of adolescents who are seeking connection through storytelling and memory sharing in his next two novels as well. Q and his group of friends in *Paper Towns* strengthen their bond and also initiate new members by reciting their old stories and memories to each other. They decide to have a party at Radar's house when his parents go out of town, but it is not the typical rager that high school students are known to throw. Instead, they crowd together in a large group on Radar's sectional couch, the cooler of beer untouched in the corner. Q remarks, "They were telling stories about one another. I'd heard most of them before—band camp stories and Ben Starling stories and first kiss stories—but Lacey hadn't heard any of them, and anyway, they were still entertaining" (214). By telling their stories both to initiate a new member and to reinforce their own memories, the group of teens is participating in a social ritual as old as language itself. Later, on their road trip to find Margo, when they are almost at the end, Q and Lacey start reciting details about their friend to Ben and Radar to sort of bring her to life and to remind themselves of their goal. Q explains, "I just want to remember her. One last time, I want to remember her while still hoping to see her again" (278). Earlier in the novel, Q had remarked about Margo that "Maybe she deserved to be forgotten. But at any rate, I couldn't forget her" (164). By sharing old memories of her with people who do not know her well, Q and Lacey are initiating Ben and Radar into the group of Margo's friends and admirers while also attempting to preserve her as she had been before she had run away.

A significant part of the plot of *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson* is devoted to the production of Tiny Cooper's autobiographical stage musical *Tiny Dancer*. Telling his story is important to him as a chance to be a source of both education and inspiration.

When Will, motivated by mortification at his representation in the play, tries to convince him to call it off, Tiny replies matter-of-factly, “Sorry, Grayson, but I can’t do it. *Tiny Dancer* is bigger than you or me, or any of us” (81). He is speaking to a larger cultural impulse to tell our stories, and the desire for our stories to be heard seems to be magnified in adolescence. Tiny later renames his musical *Hold Me Closer* after an epiphany makes him realize that the play’s being all about him was holding it back. He embarks on a Redbull-fueled, all-night rewrite and makes the new theme of the musical all about love. He is physically and psychologically a mess for days while the story pushes itself out. When the musical finally debuts to a packed house in the school’s auditorium, Will and Jane watch from the wings, and Will is overcome by how accurately Tiny has recreated various touching moments from their childhood together: “I can’t stop laughing, but more than that, I can’t believe how well he remembers it all, how good—for all of our bad—we’ve always been to each other” (290). There are lines of dialogue that Will has forgotten and only remembers when watching the actor playing him perform them on the stage. He has the singular experience of having his memories acted out for him in song and dance, and viewing them is as therapeutic for him as writing the scenes was for Tiny. The musical—Tiny’s writing it and Will’s watching it—reifies their connection through their stories and memories. Additionally, when Jane and Will watch the play, they are given access to past experiences and memories which strengthen their understanding and connection to Will and Tiny, respectively. Green has mentioned on the weekly podcast he records with his brother called *Dear Hank and John* that teenagers crave connections and seek them out (“#87: The Future is Gonna Rule”), and the teenagers in his novels repeatedly do so through shared memories and storytelling.

Memory Preservation in Death

A significant aspect of the storytelling tradition is memory. Storytellers protect and perpetuate both their own memories and the memories of their communities, and good storytelling typically goes hand in hand with a good memory. Maria Nikolajeva, in *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature* (2014), ponders the function of memory in YA literature, and her discussion includes the ways that interpreting depictions of memory in a text can both be affected by and have an effect on young readers, particularly novice readers. She explains that novice readers' "memory mechanisms are not yet fully developed, and their scope of stored memories, lived and mediated, is limited" (146). Nikolajeva's solution for overcoming these limitations is, basically, to practice. That is, novice readers can enhance their abilities to interpret and store their memories by reading fiction. She suggests, "Fiction can potentially enhance both their memory skills as such and their understanding of how memory works; fiction can offer them vicarious experience of memory, remembering and forgetting" (146). She does admit, however, that the method is not flawless: "Yet there is a restriction on what fiction can represent, since memory, like emotions, is an elusive phenomenon" (146). I would argue that never is memory a more elusive phenomenon than when trying to recall the little details of someone who has died. Perhaps already-limited novice readers who are also dealing with memories that are frustratingly dimmed by death more than anyone need meaningful examples in fiction of teens grappling with the same struggle. Green's teenagers, particularly in his first novel *Looking for Alaska* and also in *The Fault in Our Stars*, face the responsibility of being the memory keepers and preservers of lives taken early by death, and his readers, many of them novice and most of whom either have or

will face the same responsibility, need characters like Miles and Hazel to help them overcome their own limitations.

After Alaska's death in *Looking for Alaska*, the storytelling bond established in the first half of the novel allows for a shift in focus in the second half toward memory preservation, a much more private affair. Miles and the Colonel go into Alaska's room to go through her things after she dies, and Miles has a profound experience with his memories of her. He recalls:

I hadn't thought of her smell since she died. But when the Colonel opened the door, I caught the edge of her scent: wet dirt and grass and cigarette smoke, and beneath that the vestiges of vanilla-scented skin lotion. She flooded into my present, and only tact kept me from burying my face in the dirty laundry overflowing the hamper by her dresser. It looked as I remembered It looked as I knew it would, but the smell, unmistakably her, shocked me. I stood in the middle of the room, my eyes shut, inhaling slowly through my nose, the vanilla and the uncut autumn grass, but with each slow breath, the smell faded as I became accustomed to it, and soon she was gone again. (153-154)

A common axiom is that scent is the strongest sense tied to memory, and like Proust and his madeleines, Miles is transported back in time when he experiences a strong, sensory connection to Alaska when confronted with her scent. Even more than the appearance of her room and its contents, the smell of her lotion and cigarettes is what holds her essence for Miles and brings Alaska back to life, if only momentarily. Alas, the effect is

temporary, and as his physical senses grow accustomed to the smells, the power of the memory fades, hinting at the elusive nature of memory mentioned by Nikolajeva above.

Unlike the use of the corporate togetherness of storytelling to form interpersonal connections, which the group of friends had done around the fire just two days earlier, memory preservation after a death is often, at least for Miles, more personal and private. He is desperate to cling to every morsel of Alaska he has left, and he is selfish with each detail. Therefore, he chooses not to tell the Colonel about his and Alaska's secret stash of booze buried by the soccer field. He explains, "I kept it for myself like a keepsake, as if sharing the memory might lead to its dissipation" (155). Overexposure to her scent has already caused it to fade, so he, perhaps irrationally, fears the same effect if he allows anyone else to have access to his private memories. Ultimately, however, his greedy hoarding of selected personal memories creates a skewed, inaccurate version of Alaska which would be a disservice to her memory if preserved as is, and it strains his bond with the Colonel, almost ruining their friendship. When Miles and the Colonel are investigating Alaska's death, Miles is hesitant to admit that she might have committed suicide because that does not fit with the romanticized image he has of her in his head and makes her into an "awful, selfish bitch" (165). The Colonel calls him out: "Christ, Pudge. Do you even remember the person she actually *was*? Do you remember how she *could* be a selfish bitch? That was part of her, and you used to know it. It's like now you only care about the Alaska you made up" (165, emphasis in original). The Colonel, of course, is correct, and Miles wonders to himself if, for Alaska's sake, he should "hope for a time when she would be a distant memory—recalled only on the anniversary of her death, or maybe a couple of weeks after, remembering only after having forgotten. I

knew that I would know more dead people. The bodies pile up. Could there be space in my memory for each of them, or would I forget a little of Alaska every day for the rest of my life?" (172). Miles, like everyone who loses a loved one, dreads with panic the arrival of the day when he does not think of her every day, and if the Colonel is correct, the Alaska he *is* remembering is a farce anyway.

Miles eventually comes to accept that the idealized composite of Alaska he has in his memory is not accurate because he had not known her, not really. The more he investigates her death, the more he realizes that there are details about her that he either does not remember or had never learned while she was alive. He decides that it is not too late:

And so I never knew you, did I? I can't remember, because I never knew. . . I tried to imagine her in that chair, but I could not remember whether she crossed her legs. I could still see her smiling at me with half of *Mona Lisa's* smirk, but I couldn't picture her hands well enough to see her holding a cigarette. I needed, I decided, to really know her, because I needed more to remember. Before I could begin the shameful process of forgetting the how and the why of her living and dying, I needed to learn it. (173)

Miles' acceptance of the elusiveness of his memories and the responsibility he has to Alaska to preserve her memory accurately, if not entirely flatteringly, is an important step in the development of his understanding about how memory preservation should function and, as Nikolajeva suggests, will help novice readers overcome their own limited experience with memory. Frustratingly, though, or perhaps refreshingly, the novel does

not end with Miles reaching full maturity as a preserver of memories. He writes in his notebook, “*Someday no one will remember that she ever existed, . . . or that I did*” (196, emphasis in original), a sentiment echoed later by Q in *An Abundance of Katherines* and Hazel in *The Fault in Our Stars*. He then elaborates, “Because memories fall apart, too. And then you’re left with nothing, left not even with a ghost but with its shadow. In the beginning, she had haunted me, haunted my dreams, but even now, just weeks later, she was slipping away, falling apart in my memory and everyone else’s, dying again” (196). Our final image of Miles is not at all optimistic, but it is arguably a more accurate portrait of grief, particularly the hopelessness of a young person dealing with loss for the first time. His final thought here is a compliment to Green’s readers, an indication that he believes they can both understand and appreciate accurate depictions of flawed individuals enduring the cycle of grief.

Seven years after *Looking for Alaska*, Green was still exploring, in *The Fault in Our Stars*, the ways that adolescents perceive the weighty implications of death and also their ideas about the responsibility of memory preservation to honor the dead. A key difference, however, is that, whereas the characters in *Looking for Alaska* are suddenly and unexpectedly confronted with the death of a friend and must scramble to cling to her memory in the midst of their grief, Hazel and Augustus (and their families) are prepared for the likelihood of an early death and have had time to consider the nature of their legacy. At the beginning of the novel, Hazel and Augustus have contrasting ideas about what happens to us after we die; Augustus is decidedly optimistic, assured in his belief in some kind of afterlife (a topic discussed more fully in Chapter V), while Hazel is nihilistic, or what some might simply call realistic. When they first meet in support

group, the leader Patrick asks Augustus what he fears, and Augustus answers, “Oblivion” (12). Hazel answers him with the bleakness that only a terminally ill teen can:

“There will come a time,” I said, “when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything. There will be no one left to remember Aristotle or Cleopatra, let alone you. Everything that we did and built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten and all of this”—I gestured encompassingly—“will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon and maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was a time before organisms experienced consciousness, and there will be a time after. And if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that’s what everyone else does.” (12-13)

Hazel has clearly been pondering the transience of human existence for some time, and her solution, at least at the beginning of the novel, is to embrace the oblivion she assumes all human beings face after death. Her extreme nihilism is likely an overcompensation for the fact that she, in truth, shares in Augustus’s fear of oblivion and is coping with it by normalizing it.

After the pair begin their tentative romance, Augustus writes to Hazel’s favorite author, the reclusive Peter Van Houten, to tell him about his own and Hazel’s tragically doomed love story, to explain about her reluctance to start a relationship with him because she does not want to cause him future pain, and to ask for advice. Van Houten’s

reply, among other things, offers some salient observations about death and memory, drawing a comparison between Augustus's words about Hazel and Shakespeare's "Sonnet 55": "It's a fine poem but a deceitful one: We do indeed remember Shakespeare's powerful rhyme, but what do we remember about the person it commemorates? Nothing. . . You do not immortalize the lost by writing about them. Language buries, but does not resurrect" (112). He then offers his most important advice to Augustus about what he considers to be the responsibility of the living to preserve not only the dead but also the other living: "But here's the rub: The dead are visible only in the terrible lidless eye of memory. The living, that heaven, retain the ability to surprise and to disappoint. Your Hazel is alive, Waters" (112-113). Van Houten here is trying to remind Augustus, in his signature cynical way, that Hazel is not dead yet and, therefore, still has the ability to disappoint him. He is being glib, but his point about the "terrible lidless eye of memory" is still poignant. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green comments further on the Shakespearean connection: "Our usual way of honoring the dead—by freezing them in time and mythologizing them, by building the marble statues Shakespeare rails against in that sonnet—that's not Hazel and Augustus's way of honoring the dead." Hazel has similar sentiments while reading through the thousands of tribute posts online to the memory of Augustus's dead girlfriend Caroline. She ponders the notion that the dead live on in our memories, and she does not seem fully comfortable with the idea. After all, the possibility that the living are able to preserve the memory of the dead challenges her previous acceptance of humanity's eventual oblivion. However, meeting and falling in love with Augustus begins to change

her and to convince her that someone can, indeed, matter in death, even if it is just in the memory of one other person.

One way that Hazel's complicated relationship with memory and legacy manifests is in her perception of personal artifacts. One afternoon, Hazel goes out into her backyard and her neglected childhood swing set, surrounded by weeds, triggers a memory: "That swing set was still back there, weeds growing out of the little ditch I'd created from kicking myself higher as a little kid. I remembered Dad bringing home the kit from Toys 'R' Us and building it in the backyard with a neighbor. He'd insisted on swinging on it first to test it, and the thing damn near broke" (120). She later explains to Augustus, "It's not like I had some utterly poignant, well-lit memory of a healthy father pushing a healthy child and the child saying *higher higher higher* or some other metaphorically resonant moment" (122, emphasis in original). Instead, "The swing set was just sitting there, abandoned, the two little swings hanging still and sad from a grayed plank of wood, the outline of the seats like a kid's drawing of a smile" (122). The memory affects her emotionally, and when Augustus senses that she is sad and crying on the phone, he decides to come over. He agrees that it is "one sad goddamned swing set" (122), and he helps her write an advertisement to give it away to a good home, which reads:

One swing set, well worn but structurally sound, seeks new home. Make memories with your kid or kids so that someday he or she or they will look into the backyard and feel the ache of sentimentality as desperately as I did this afternoon. It's all fragile and fleeting, dear reader, but with this swing set, your child(ren) will be introduced to the ups and downs of human life gently and safely, and may also learn the most important lesson

of all: No matter how hard you kick, not matter how high you get, you can't go all the way around. (124)

They are clearly having a bit of fun with the overly flowery and lofty wording of this ad, but their feelings about the cycle of death and remembering still shine through. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green explains: “I guess I intended the swing set as a metaphor for childhood. Several times Hazel tries to go back to it but for various reasons can't. Then finally Gus helps her realize that she needs to get it out of her backyard.” Getting the so-called “metaphor for childhood” out of her sight seems counterintuitive to the preservation of memory, but for Hazel, the thought of other children being pushed by their parents on the swing until they create memories and form an emotional attachment before passing the swing set on to someone else is a hopeful indication that her own memory residue will remain with the artifact, even if it is buried under the layers of memories from all of the owners to come.

In *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story* (2010), Pahl and Roswell offer the findings of their study about how various cultures use physical objects to store memories and to tell stories. Their opening idea is particularly applicable to Hazel's swing set: “Memories of objects are powerful pulls on identity. . . . [An object] is an embodiment of a lived experience. It may not have value in the outside world, but within everyday lives, it symbolizes and represents relationships and events that matter. . . . These objects are special, and they tell stories” (1). The swing set certainly has little value in the outside world—they give it away for free—but it is still powerful as an embodiment of Hazel's lived experience or, more accurately, her romanticized version of a childhood she never actually had. It still represents a relationship with her dad that

matters to her, and it still tells a story. Pahl and Roswell also suggest, “Stories can evoke lost objects. . . . When people move across borders, objects come to stand for ‘who they are’—their identities. These objects remain powerful in their memories, which are evoked in their stories” (8). Pahl, the identified narrator of this particular section, is specifically talking about people who must migrate for one reason or the other and leave meaningful objects behind, but the borders she mentions can also be symbolic, such as Hazel’s movement across the border from healthy to sick. The lonely swing set has, in her mind, come to symbolize her lack of vitality and also a childhood spent too weak to participate in play. Pahl and Roswell explain that objects “carry emotional resonance” which “infuse stories” (10), and for Hazel, the emotional resonance and the stories evoked by the swing set are complicated, at best. Regardless, whichever emotion happens to be connected to an object, the process for Pahl and Roswell is all about the storytelling opportunities: “Artifacts hold diverse memories and heritages. They can create opportunities for a richer type of storytelling” (41). Later, after Augustus has entered the final stage of his illness, he and Hazel sit in her backyard, and he wishes that they still had Hazel’s childhood swing set. He deadpans, “Yeah. My nostalgia is so extreme that I am capable of missing a swing my butt never actually touched” (236). Hazel suggests that “Nostalgia is a side effect of cancer,” but he replies, “Nah, nostalgia is a side effect of dying” (236).

On the plane to Amsterdam, Hazel and Augustus have a conversation about remembering people who have died. Hazel wonders how many people have ever died, and Augustus confesses that he has actually researched the topic. He explains, “I was wondering if everybody could be remembered. Like, if we got organized, and assigned a

certain number of corpses to each living person, would there be enough living people to remember all the dead people?” (152). As it turns out, yes, it is entirely possible because there are approximately fourteen dead people for every currently living person. If we coordinated, every person who ever died could be remembered by someone. But, as Augustus explains, it does not happen that way: “Sure, anyone can name fourteen dead people. But we’re disorganized mourners, so a lot of people end up remembering Shakespeare, and no one ends up remembering the person he wrote Sonnet Fifty-five about” (152). The underlying sentiment, of course, for teens suffering from terminal illness is that they will fall into the category of dead people who are forgotten. While in Amsterdam, Hazel and Augustus visit the Anne Frank House museum. In the ledger of Dutch victims of the Holocaust, Hazel notices that under Anne’s name there are four Aron Franks, none of whom is remembered by posterity. Surely remembering her conversation with Augustus about humans being unorganized mourners, she vows to remember those four Aron Franks.

Unfortunately, sometimes when the living dutifully remember the dead, their good intentions are fraught with problematic nuance. Augustus confesses to Hazel that his dead girlfriend Caroline had actually been a very unpleasant person, primarily due to her brain tumor, but it is not exactly acceptable to admit that about a dead person. He tries to explain his complex point of view: “The thing is you sound like a bastard if you don’t romanticize them, but the truth is . . . complicated, I guess. Like, you are familiar with the trope of the stoic and determined cancer victim who heroically fights her cancer with inhuman strength and never complains or stops smiling even at the very end, etcetera?” (173). Hazel does indeed understand exactly the point he is trying to make and

phrases it in her own unique way: “They are kindhearted and generous souls whose every breath is an Inspiration to Us All. They’re so strong! We admire them so!” to which Augustus adds, “Right, but really, I mean aside from us obviously, cancer kids are not statistically more likely to be awesome or compassionate or perseverant or whatever” (173). According to Augustus, cancer kids seem to get a guaranteed pass to the Remembered Fondly Zone, regardless of how memorable their lives actually were. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green elaborates on this phenomenon:

I am really bothered by the idea that people in pain who are being wrenched from existence should be perpetually cheerful and compassionate about it. More generally, I wrote this book partly because I was tired of reading stories in which dying or chronically sick people served no purpose in the world except to teach the rest of us to be Grateful For Every Moment or whatever. Making the lives of the dying about the betterment of the social order for the well really offends me, because it implies that the dying are already dead, and that their lives have less intrinsic meaning than other lives.

Like Peter van Houten in his letter to Augustus, Green is emphasizing the fact that the dying are not dead yet, which means they are still making new memories and telling stories. When we attempt to immortalize and preserve their memories while they are still alive, we pervert the process and end up with inauthentic memories and, therefore, inauthentic stories.

As the end approaches, while Augustus is still alive, Hazel muses, “You have a choice in this world, I believe, about how to tell sad stories” (209). Her choice at that particular moment is to choose the funny route as she and Augustus make fun of Van Houten’s drunkenness to avoid their disappointment, but after Augustus dies, Hazel’s dry humor turns bitter, if only temporarily, when she is confronted with the cruel nature of shared memory. She recalls, “In the last weeks, we’d been reduced to spending our time together in recollection, but that was not nothing: The pleasure of remembering had been taken from me, because there was no longer anyone to remember with. It felt like losing your co-rememberer meant losing the memory itself, as if the things we’d done were less real and important than they had been hours before” (262). Hazel feels the loss of Augustus so acutely because they had formed a strong bond through shared stories and memories, and after Augustus’s death, Hazel has to switch roles from being a “co-rememberer” to a memory preserver, a much less pleasurable use of memory, as Hazel notes, but an important responsibility nonetheless.

Community Preservation through Oral History

In a 2003 article in *Educational Researcher*, David Gruenewald discusses how important it is for individuals to tell their stories within their communities, and when people in a group link their stories with each other’s, they knit the community together. Furthermore, Pahl and Roswell insist that “By telling different kinds of stories in community contexts, communities themselves can change through the collective representation of these stories” (62). This responsibility is traditionally assumed to be the purview of the elder members of a community, whose memories are long and whose

stories are plentiful and colorful, but the teenagers in *An Abundance of Katherines* illustrate how adolescents can participate in the oral storytelling tradition as it contributes to the preservation of a community's memory and identity.

While in Gutshot, Lindsey's mom Hollis decides to hire Colin and Hassan to do a job for her for the summer. As the owner of a large factory which employs most of the town, she feels responsible for preserving the spirit of the town. She explains her project to them: "What we're doing . . . is we're putting together an oral history of Gutshot, for future generations. I've been pulling people off the line to do interviews for a couple of weeks, but I ain't gotta now that you're here" (73). Hollis clearly recognizes the importance of preserving cultural memory, so much so that she is willing to let her employees use time on the clock to tell their stories to be recorded for posterity, and she also is paying Colin and Hassan \$500 a week to gather the oral histories for her. Hollis sees the two outsiders' arrival in Gutshot as a solution to a roadblock she has been encountering: "The downfall of this whole operation so far has been gossip—everybody chattering 'bout what everyone else says or doesn't say. But y'all don't have a reason in the world to talk about whether or not Ellie Mae liked her husband when she married him in 1937. . . . But steer them toward real *history*, if you can. I'm doing this for my grandkids, not for a gossip fest" (74, emphasis in original). As newcomers to the community, Q and Hassan have no previously established storytelling bond or shared memory with the people they are interviewing, so the storytellers recognize the need for their stories to be more thorough and focused. Also, because the boys are still teenagers, the older members of the community acknowledge them as the natural, traditional

recipients of stories and, therefore, they share their memories with them freely in keeping with their calling to pass the community's memories on to the younger generations.

While on their first interview assignment with an old man named Starnes, Colin describes his house as smelling like “cobwebs or hazy memories,” and the smell, like Miles in Alaska's room after she dies, takes him back “viscerally” (76) to Katherine XIX's basement and a strong memory that he cannot push back down. Starnes, reminiscent of the narrator in Faulkner's “A Rose for Emily,” is the personification of the memory of the town. He represents the community elders who know everyone and who typically hold all of the stories. He is alarmed to find out that Lindsey, who has lived in Gutshot her whole life, does not even know how the town got its name¹. As one of the oldest residents, he seems to feel a stewardship over the memory of the town and a responsibility to pass it on to the newest generation seated in front of him. As they continue interviewing members of the town, they begin, as Gruenewald discusses, to link the stories and knit the memory of the community together. Hollis eventually explains her deeper motivations for hiring the boys to record the oral history of the town: “A generation from now there might not be a factory and I want your kids and their kids to know what it was like, what *we* were like” (194, emphasis in original). Her statement is a message not only to Colin, Lindsey, and Hassan, but it is also a plea to the adolescent readers of the novel to bear witness to the stories of their communities and to play an active role in their preservation.

¹ As it turns out, the name has to do with the town's reputation for hosting illicit prize fighting when it was illegal.

Conclusion

In his 2007 Printz Honor Speech, John Green reveals what he believes to be his calling, or at least one of them, as a YA literature author: “I believe that authors—particularly those of us writing for teenagers—have a responsibility to tell stories that are both good and—for lack of a better word—moral” (15). Providing adolescent readers with good stories to read is crucial to their becoming good storytellers themselves. He continues, “The teenagers we work with and work for are in the process of forming their values. As participants in that process, we owe them good stories—but we also owe them more than that. We owe them what we know—or hope we know—of the truth” (15). Green, as I have shown, has repeatedly returned in his novels to the idea of teenagers as memory keepers and participants in the various aspects of the storytelling tradition, whether it be to form interpersonal bonds with their peers, to preserve a loved one’s memory in death, or to help record the oral history of a community.

Indeed, Green has peopled his novels with teenagers who take memory preservation seriously and who both tell and appreciate good stories, but his work in this area extends beyond the page. In 2015 and again in 2016, he and his brother organized a storytelling conference called NerdCon: Stories, an offshoot of their larger annual NerdCon conference, in which dozens of authors and creators and hundreds of attendees came together to participate in workshops and sessions devoted to stories. The conference’s website outlines their philosophy with an almost reverent admiration for the importance of stories to human existence:

From the moment we could speak, we’ve been telling each other stories.

And since then, our stories have defined and created us. Every human society that wants to behave different first has to change the stories they tell. The story was—and remains—the key to the marvel of human progress. Stories in songs, in books, on the stage, around the campfire. Stories drove the evolution of human language and fostered the massive burst of creation that accompanied it. We celebrate our culture all the time, but we don't do a great job of just praising the institution of the story.

Jennifer Burek Pierce, who attended the first NerdCon Stories, recalls her experience at the conference in an article in *American Libraries Magazine*. She recalls that Hank Green expressed his belief in the importance of storytelling in his opening address: “Stories and each other are the most valuable things we have,” and she adds that “NerdCon’s fundamental assumption was that all stories matter and that there are many ways to tell them” (82). Also at the conference, Green himself “discussed stories as a release from the ‘absolutely exhausting and infuriating’ challenges of ‘real stress and overwhelmingness.’ He said, ‘Because stories have that power, we have to be responsible in how we use them’” (82). If the droves of young readers who attend his conferences, watch his YouTube videos, and, more importantly, read his books are any indication, he takes that responsibility very seriously.

CHAPTER IV: PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Michael Cart, in *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature* (1996), describes adolescents as “adults in training wheels” (4), but what exactly is it that they are training to do? Many scholars and developmental experts, such as Erik Erikson, would suggest that at least part of what they are training for is their role as sexual beings. As previously discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation, Erikson’s adolescent stage of development—Identity vs. Role Confusion (ages 12-18)—is a crucial phase in which teens establish their identities and transition into adulthood. Not only do their new identities define where they belong as adult members of society, but this is also the stage during which teens explore and establish their sexual roles as well. This process involves discovering changes in their bodies, navigating interpersonal romantic relationships with others, and sometimes becoming physically intimate with others, on a scale from hand-holding to kissing to intercourse and all points in between. Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame note, “Through years of research both on behavior and brain development, adolescent psychologists have come to place particular emphasis on the teen years as a time of exploration, autonomy seeking, and risk taking” (70), activities which often manifest sexually. Trites suggests that for adolescents, sexuality is one of the ways they use to form connections:

Adolescents use their sexuality to attract other people, to dominate other people, to submit to other people, to enjoy other people, to manipulate other people, to communicate with other people—in short, sexuality is a

way for them to engage the Other. Discovering their sexuality is powerful to adolescents because it represents a new forum in which to interact with the Other. . . . Perhaps this is why experiencing sex serves as a rite of passage for so many teenagers. The experience of sexuality may indeed mark a new level of discursive consciousness for adolescents struggling to understand the distinction between themselves and the Others who constitute the society in which they must live. (*Disturbing the Universe* 115)

Unfortunately, this rite of passage makes many adults, particularly parents, nervous and uncomfortable. They would rather remain blissfully unaware of their teens' developing bodies and emerging sexualities, so, as Trites laments, many YA novels "share the same ideological message that sex is more to be feared than celebrated. As a result, adolescent literature is as often an ideological tool used to curb teenagers' libido as it is some sort of depiction of what adolescents' sexuality actually is" (*Disturbing the Universe* 85). She continues by explaining that adolescent participation in sexual activities has been traditionally treated in YA novels as a problem in need of correction in that teenagers are thought to be too underdeveloped and naïve to be able to handle the emotional weight of physical intimacy. "Such novels tend to be heavy-handed in their moralism and demonstrate relatively clearly the effect of adult authors asserting authority over adolescent readers" (Trites 85), and they often contain some manner of lesson for the teen reader to learn.

Fortunately, the trend Trites identifies has dissipated in recent years, with novels such as Amy Spaulding's *Kissing Ted Callahan (And Other Guys)* (2015), Miranda

Kenneally's *Jesse's Girl* (2015), Lindsey Rosin's *Cherry* (2016), and anything by David Levithan, among many others, being celebrated as sex-positive examples of adolescent sexuality. Lydia Kokkola, in *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants* (2013), notes that studying "the ways in which adolescent sexuality is presented in works intended for young readers reflects changes in the ways society negotiates adolescence, and that the emergence of a 'radical' adolescent fiction depicting sexually active adolescents signals an underlying shift in how the social categories of childhood, adolescence and adulthood are conceived" (9). I would argue that John Green belongs in this conversation. National Public Radio journalist Neda Ulaby mentioned *The Fault in Our Stars* in an April 2016 segment on NPR's *All Things Considered* as an example of a positive depiction of adolescent sexual consent, but Maggie Crum, writing for *Huffpost* in 2015, claimed that "John Green's moralistic and enjoyable novels lightly brush over the topic" (n.p.), even though his first book was the subject of a school board censorship case after being banned from the curriculum because of explicit content (which I discuss more fully later in this chapter). Green repeatedly explores adolescent love, affection, and sexuality in his novels, sometimes with humor and always with a frankness which reveals his respect for his teen readers' experiences. An example of this particular combination of humor and frankness is Colin Singleton's preoccupation with tracking romantic relationships in *An Abundance of Katherines*. Colin has a theory that there are two kinds of people: Dumpers and Dumpees. Throughout the novel, he works on expanding this theory into an equation that can accurately plot on a graph the trajectory of every relationship in existence. He is inspired to do this by the fact that he is both a perpetual Dumpee and is obsessed with discovering his big life purpose, his

“eureka moment” (3) as he calls it. He hopes that perfecting his relationship equation will make his mark on the world and fulfill his waning potential as a child prodigy. Green’s narrator, with cynical dark humor, claims, “Dating, after all, only ends one way: poorly. If you think about it, and Colin often did, all romantic relationships end in either (1) breakup, (2) divorce, or (3) death” (16). Green himself famously has proclaimed—bragged?—that he has been dumped fifty-three times (Poolos 32), which might explain his interest in thoughtful depictions of adolescent romance, but more significantly, as he told *The Guardian* in 2013, “I’m tired of adults telling teenagers that they aren’t smart, that they can’t read critically, that they aren’t thoughtful” (Patrick n.p.). This chapter will examine the ways that Green treats adolescent romance, affection, and sexuality in his novels.

The Evolution of Adolescent Innocence

The concept of the innocent Romantic child—a pure blank slate who is closer to God and nature—is now a familiar aspect of analyzing children’s literature that can be traced back to philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and poets such as William Blake and William Wordsworth. However, with the full emergence of adolescence in the 20th century, the preoccupation with sexual innocence eventually was extended to teenagers as well as children. Lydia Kokkola notes that the term “young adult” was originally coined around 1820 “to denote people in their twenties who were leaving higher education and beginning their careers and families” (10), but the individuals referenced by the term gradually got younger and younger until “young adult” became synonymous with “teenager” or “adolescent.” Anne Higgonet, in *Pictures of*

Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood (1998), suggests, “Absolute distinctions between child and adult leave [teenagers] stranded on a very uncomfortable boundary. How can children possibly become adults from one instant to the next? The English and American cultures which above all others have glorified the ideal of childhood innocence deal badly with adolescence” (194). Because they exist on a developmental spectrum, teenagers often physically enter the realm of sexuality before they are psychologically ready and before society considers it acceptable. Unfortunately, rather than recognizing and accepting the reality of teens who are physically able to reproduce and preparing them for the responsibilities that come with that ability, adults instead have traditionally opted to reject the reality of sexually active teens and instead label their desires as “inappropriate” because, as Kokkola notes, “they mark the end of childhood before the youngster is ready for an independent life. The simplest way to express how inappropriate these desires are is to scold the desiring teen for failing to behave like a child” (27). She also observes that, though it was not always the case, the concepts of childhood and innocence are “tightly linked” (22). However, she also notes that “children and adolescents play no part in forming the myth of childhood innocence, yet they are constantly judged by adults according to their ability (or inability) to conform to these conventions” (22). Kimberly Reynolds, in *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (2007), agrees: “In Western culture at least, entry into adulthood involves subscribing to the cultural myth of childhood” (91). Kokkola suggests that “this is so, not least because it is only by subscribing to the one (childhood) that the other (adulthood) can exist: as concepts, they

exist only in relation to one another” (22). The unfortunate side effect is that adolescence is, often uncomfortably, sandwiched in between.

One lens through which to view the relationship between childhood and adulthood is that of appropriate knowledge. In *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Neil Postman introduces the idea of the knowledge gap, a concept which suggests that the separation of what children and adults know, the different types of knowledge they have, is what creates childhood and that technology is primarily responsible for this gap. Regarding sexuality, Postman insists that part of being an adult is the responsibility of keeping certain knowledge secret from children and that children need to be sheltered from “adult secrets, particularly sexual secrets” (9). Postman’s perspective certainly calls to mind the Romantic emphasis on childhood innocence, but knowledge in itself is only one factor. As Kokkola notes, “In the context of sexuality, however, the difference between experience and knowledge is significant; one can *know* a great deal, but this is not the same as *experience*” (29, emphasis in original). She applies this difference between knowing and experiencing sex to the reading of adolescent literature containing sexual scenes or themes. She reiterates that the text can increase only the reader’s cognitive knowledge of and attitudes about sexuality, not his/her physical experience with the fulfillment of carnal desire. Echoing Trites’s view of adolescence as a negotiation of power between teens and adults, Kokkola adds, “The sexually provocative adolescent is perceived as presenting herself as ‘knowing’ adult secrets and thus entitled to share adult power” (40). Adolescents who possess such knowledge and power are a threat to many parents and adults who have the perspective Postman describes, adults who are not ready to see teenagers as sexual beings. Referencing Marah Gubar’s

explanation in *Keywords for Children's Literature* (2011) that innocence as a concept is all about what an individual lacks (knowledge, experience, guilt, etc.), Kokkola adds, “And since innocence is about *lack*, a single absence of lack results in the loss of innocence. . . . This would account for the magical belief that a single sexual encounter can bring about the end of childhood and miraculously transform the fumbled individual into an adult” (35, emphasis in original). In other words, when a teenager no longer lacks experience, he/she is no longer innocent and, therefore, no longer a child.

Regardless of a child's or teen's knowledge or experience—both somewhat subjective measurements—a more concrete sign that the adolescent has become an adult is the onset of physical puberty, which Kokkola suggests “can easily be treated as a ‘natural’ end to childhood” and which “provides a tangible means of differentiating adults from children” (34). Lisa M. Diamond and Ritch C. Savin-Williams note in the *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (2009) that one of the earliest studies of adolescent sexuality in the 1970s introduced its findings with the plea to educators to help teenagers incorporate all aspects of their sexuality—biological, social, and psychological—into every area of their lives so that they can “realize their potential as whole human beings” (Chilman 1, qtd in Diamond and Savin-Williams 479). This was a truly revolutionary statement for 1978, especially considering that a 1994 study revealed that 80% of US adults at the time believed that teenagers having sex was either always or almost always wrong (Lauman, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels 322). These statistics are significant because, as Kokkola notes, the idea of childhood innocence is an adult creation that is “projected onto children” (36). By setting up carnal desire as the diametric opposite of childhood innocence, the onset of puberty and the emergence of sexual urges become the

“ideal target for policing the boundaries of adulthood. . . . A child who behaves in ‘knowing’ ways can be reclassified as a teenager, thereby retaining the purity of the child” (36). However, Diamond and Savin-Williams declare with optimism that the 21st century has seen a number of studies which have criticized previously negative attitudes toward adolescent sexuality and which have tended toward more of a positive approach to psychological analysis. They also note, “Boys and girls clearly understand the broader implications of different patterns of sexual behavior in the eyes of their peers, their parents, and society at large” (487). So, it seems that modern adolescents have reached a level of comfort with their sexual development that their parents have yet to reach.

The YA literature landscape is clogged with novels either attempting to warn teens about becoming sexually active too soon or trying to educate them about how to navigate the changes and urges they are experiencing. Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella, in *Reading Children’s Literature*, explain that “The rise of realistic young adult (YA) books in the 1970s ushered in a new era of frankness about social and political issues, creating a wave of censorship in reaction to this frankness” (436). While these controversial novels became popular in the 1970s and 1980s, there are notable earlier examples, such as Ann Head’s *Mr. and Mrs. BoJo Jones* (1967) and Paul Zindel’s *My Darling, My Hamburger* (1969). Kokkola discusses the common use of the term “problem novel” to describe this particular genre and declares the label to be “derogatory” because “sex is very often the ‘problem’ requiring resolution and it swiftly became one of the most popular topics within this genre” (16). The popularity of YA books about sex has not waned, but the problematic content has evolved. For example, according to the American Library Association, half of the Top Ten Challenged Books of

2016 were challenged because of LGBT subject matter. The continued existence of so many books featuring teenagers experimenting with their sexuality is evidence that adults are concerned about the information and guidance teens are getting about sex, and while many authors punish characters who have sex too early as a warning to readers, others depict teenage sexuality as valid and meaningful. Kokkola notes, “In the context of sex education, literature offers adolescents a private place where they can learn about the sexiness of sex without asking either party to reveal much about themselves” (14), which is a particular relief for both parents and their children alike. She continues that YA literature “also offers an ideal site for indoctrination, as writers connect the sexiness of sex with images of teenagers in turmoil. . . . [B]y presenting carnal desire as a source of adolescent angst, the myth of the troubled teen can be perpetuated” (14). In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green expresses his perspective on teen romance and sexuality: “I find it really offensive when people say that the emotional experiences of teenagers are less real or less important than those of adults. I am an adult, and I used to be a teenager, and so I can tell you with some authority that my feelings then were as real as my feelings are now.” I would argue that Green’s novels do not pander to teenagers with a misplaced focus on innocence, but rather they present acceptance of the onset of carnal desire in natural, realistic ways. The sexual aspects of his novels lack the didactic tsk-tsking present in so many of their counterparts.

The Developing Teen Body

Any thorough discussion of teenage sexuality must logically begin by considering the often-overwhelming physical development which takes place during adolescence.

According to psychology professor Saul McCloud, “Erikson claims that the adolescent may feel uncomfortable about their body for a while until they can adapt and ‘grow into’ the changes. . . . During this period, they explore possibilities and begin to form their own identity based upon the outcome of their explorations” (n.p.). The awkwardness of puberty, and all that entails, has become a hallowed rite of passage, at least in Anglophone cultures, and has been portrayed countless times in popular culture with varying levels of accuracy and nostalgia. Such depictions frequently feature either an underdeveloped boy drooling over a popular “hot” girl or a homely girl carrying an unrequited torch for a popular “hot” boy. Self-consciousness is not only on display, but it is celebrated, the assumption being that every reader/viewer naturally identifies with the awkward protagonist. The universal theme of these narratives seems to be that everything will be all right because this phase is a temporary, necessary step toward becoming a fulfilled adult member of society.

The psychological importance of puberty was not invented by Hollywood, however. Elizabeth Susman and Lorah Dorn note in their chapter on puberty in the *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* that “Sigmund and Anna Freud were instrumental in advancing a perspective that merged the biological-sexual and psychological aspects of pubertal development. For Sigmund Freud, the arrival of puberty signaled the end of infantile sexual life and the beginning of normal adult sexual life” (117). As previously mentioned, teenagers’ physical changes serve as a convenient cutting-off point for childhood, but their psychological maturation does not always happen in tandem with their physical development, a disconnect that complicates considerations of their participation in sexual activity. Roberta Trites, in *Disturbing the Universe*, connects

Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque to adolescent sexuality "because of adolescents' extreme anxieties about their physical bodies" (149). This anxiety often manifests in deviant ideas and behaviors on the part of teens which are allowed by society as a normal part of the growing up process. Kokkola expands on this idea:

The rules of the game allow teenagers to behave badly, to rebel and break the rules of "adult" behaviour, to be subject to extreme mood swings, to be stressed and anxious, to wear particular kinds of clothes, listen to particular music, to roam around in groups or "gangs" and to be incapable of resisting carnal desire. In short, it is a period of carnival when the normal rules of human behaviour—with which adults and children must comply—are suspended. (2)

The assumption is that the teenager in flux will naturally grow out of such deviance once the mental and bodily chaos equalizes and subsides. In the meantime, the awkwardness of puberty must be endured.

Susman and Dorn provide an in-depth study of the timing and onset of various pubertal changes, such as menstruation and pubic hair, but, as the authors admit, the available research is overwhelmingly skewed towards female physical development. Indeed, the adolescent literature landscape seems to support their findings, with a glut of novels and other texts geared toward helping teen girls in particular adjust to their new bodies. A *Goodreads* list of "Popular Puberty Books" reveals an overwhelming dominance of books such as *The Care & Keeping of You: The Body Book for Girls* (1998) by Valorie Schaefer, *Changes in You and Me: A Book about Puberty, Mostly for Girls* (1994) by Paulette Bourgeois and Martin Wolfish, and *Body Drama: Real Girls,*

Real Bodies, Real Issues, Real Answers (2007) by Nancy Amanda Redd, as well as fictional novels such as *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) by Judy Blume, *Planet Middle School* (2011) by Nikki Grimes, and *Twelve* (2007) by Lauren Myracle. Of course, there are similar titles aimed at boys but not nearly as many. Green's novels exist within this landscape, and his teenagers definitely adhere to the expected paradigm, in that his protagonists are painfully aware of their awkward averageness. As Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe, "Adolescence means self-consciousness to the level of hyperawareness. Green's characters never fail to anguish over how they look" (70). However, their self-consciousness and anguish are not in vain; Green imbues the awkwardness in his novels with a certain importance, a recognition of the adolescent quest for purpose and meaning.

All of Green's major fiction publications leading up to *The Fault in Our Stars* feature insecure, physically unimpressive male protagonists whose insecurities are on display. Over and over, Green seems to treat the self-consciousness of the developing male body with the same attention that is more often given to adolescent female characters in YA literature. In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles is uncomfortable with the sight of his own naked body in the mirror: "I could not escape the reflection of my naked self as I leaned in to turn on the shower faucet. My skinniness always surprised me: My thin arms didn't seem to get much bigger as they moved from wrist to shoulder, my chest lacked any hint of either fat or muscle, and I felt embarrassed and wondered if something could be done about the mirror" (9). This description of Miles and his confession about feeling embarrassed is at the very beginning of the book and sets the tone both for the rest of this novel and for most of Green's oeuvre. Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame note that

Miles's "story is told through a series of awkward events and encounters, all of which are the result of this young man trying to find his way in a foreign, albeit exciting, new world" (24), a journey which is also a metaphor for the teenager's often-terrifying transition into adulthood. In Green's next novel, *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin remembers that Katherine VIII broke up with him in middle school after calling him a freak and saying he "didn't have any pubes" (204), while Colin's best friend Hassan is very large and hairy, so he is often self-conscious about his appearance. When Colin falls and cuts his head open, Hassan refuses to take his shirt off in front of Lindsey (whom they had just met) to help staunch the bleeding. Hassan later apologizes to Colin:

"Sorry I wouldn't take off my shirt."

"Man-boobs?" asked Colin.

"Yeah, well. I just feel like I should know a girl a little before I trot out the man-tits." (34)

Hassan has a witty, confident, large personality and is typically a comedic presence in the narrative, but he does reveal his vulnerability when physique is discussed. At one point, he explains to Colin that he and Lindsey's mom Hollis hit it off so swimmingly because they are both "fatties," and fatties have a special trust among them. Colin responds:

"You're not fat. You're pudgy."

"Dude, you *just* saw my man-tits when I got out of the shower."

"They're not that bad," said Colin.

"Oh, that's it! You asked for it!" Hassan pulled his T-shirt up to his collarbone and Colin glanced over at Hass's hairy chest, which featured—

okay, there's no denying it—minor breasts. An A cup, but still. (72-73, emphasis in original)

Hassan is clearly used to combating his self-consciousness with humor, which is a very John Green approach to adolescence. As Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe, “Being cool is everything, but coping with not being cool is even better. Green provides a sort of antihero coping mechanism in which characters often cope with their perceived inadequacies through a sort of self-deprecating humor” (71). That same humor is present in *Paper Towns*, in which Q describes his best friend Ben as a “small, olive-skinned creature who had hit puberty but never hit it very hard” (12). Ben also suffers with the nickname “Bloody Ben” because of a former urinary tract infection which one of the popular girls told everyone was the result of chronic masturbation. By contrast, Chuck Parson, the archetypal popular jock who gives the dweeby students a hard time, is described as a “human-shaped container of anabolic steroids” (16) whose first period class Q jokingly refers to as “The Care and Feeding of Pectoral Muscles” (17). Miles, Colin, Hassan, and many of the other male teenagers in Green’s novels use self-deprecation with varying degrees of success, but their humorously pessimistic descriptions of themselves ultimately endear them to the reader.

When those same awkward boys describe girls in Green’s novels, they often do so with a sort of reverence, as if the female form exists on some elevated, unattainable plane. For instance, when Miles meets Alaska, he is profoundly affected by her physical presence:

It was right then ... that I realized the *importance* of curves, of the thousand places where girls’ bodies ease from one place to another, from

arc of the foot to ankle to calf, from calf to hip to waist to breast to neck to ski-slope nose to forehead to shoulder to the concave arch of the back to the butt to the etc. I'd *noticed* curves before, of course, but I had never quite apprehended their significance. (19, emphasis in original)

Ten pages earlier, Miles had confessed his embarrassment at seeing his own scrawny reflection in the mirror, and his meticulous visual journey over Alaska's curves is a stark contrast. Similarly, Tobin in "A Cheertastic Christmas Miracle" practices the same adoration for the female form: "There's a certain something to the way girls walk—particularly when they aren't wearing fancy shoes or anything, when they're just wearing sneakers or whatever—something about the way their legs connect to their hips" (189). The worshipful way that both Miles and Tobin describe girls' bodies suggests an abnormal level of insight for adolescent boys and smacks more of the adult author than the teenage characters. However, these moments of maturity and respect are tempered with plenty of immaturity as well. For example, Colin and Hassan in *An Abundance of Katherines* meet some new friends when their road trip takes them to Gutshot, Tennessee, and Colin describes one of the girls, Katrina, as "tall and thoroughly Abercrombified in her tight tank top. The girl also had—how to put this politely—gigantic gazoombas. She was incredibly hot—in that popular-girl-with-bleached-teeth-and-anorexia kind of way, which was Colin's least favorite way of being hot" (52). This description of Katrina and her "gazoombas" is rather unfavorable and immature compared to the lengthy veneration of Alaska's curves and suggests that, for Green, meaningful beauty is somewhat abstract. In *Paper Towns*, the "gazoombas" mentality is multiplied exponentially. When Q goes to school the next day after his all-night pranking binge with Margo, Ben and Radar

predictably jump to conclusions when they find out about it, and they perfectly embody typical geeky high school virgins with their responses. Ben exclaims, “Oh my God, if you hooked up with her, you have to tell me every single thing that happened. You have to write me a term paper on the look and feel of Margo Roth Spiegelman’s breasts. Thirty pages, minimum!” (88). Radar says that he wants Q to provide a “photo-realistic pencil drawing,” and Ben adds that “a sculpture would also be acceptable” (88). Radar’s next request devolves the conversation even further: “I was wondering if it would be possible for you to write a sestina about Margo Roth Spiegelman’s breasts? Your six words are: *pink, round, firmness, succulent, supple, and pillowy,*” an idea that is actually rather clever until Ben interjects with “I think one of the words should be *buhbuhbuhbuh. . . .* It’s the sound my mouth makes when I’m giving a honeybunny the patented Ben Starling Speedboat” (88, emphasis in original). Q humorously teases them: “Right now, . . . although they have no idea why, thousands of girls all across America are feeling a chill of fear and disgust run down their spines” (88-89). This exchange reveals both Green’s wit and his ability to celebrate the feminine physique while simultaneously accentuating the awkwardness of teenage boys. More generally, the way boys in Green’s novels talk about girls’ bodies is all at once immature and insightful, witty and base, humorous and sincere, all of which are accurate depictions of how real teenage boys think and speak about the opposite sex at some point or another.

While the majority of voices in Green’s novels are male, his teenage girls also comment on their awkwardness and experience self-consciousness. In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin and Hassan see a picture of Lindsey when she was a few years younger, and they almost do not recognize her. Describing herself, she admits, “So I was

ugly. I was never fat, really, and I never wore headgear or had zits or anything. But I was ugly” (67). However, rather than offering this bleak assessment of her ugly duckling phase as a simple background detail of her character, Green takes the opportunity to make a more significant point about the nature of beauty itself. Lindsey ponders, “I don’t even know how ugly and pretty get decided—maybe there’s like a secret cabal of boys who meet in the locker room and decide who’s ugly and who’s hot, because as far as I can remember, there was no such thing as a hot fourth-grader” (67). She is perceiving the seemingly arbitrary innocence threshold noted by Trites, Kokkola, and others discussed above. At some point in their development, often marked by observable physical changes, young people transition from children into viable sexual partners, but Lindsey’s observation reveals how nebulous that process is, and no one seems to be immune.

The narrators of Green’s two most recent novels are teenage girls, both of whom have serious illnesses which exacerbate the already traumatic process of growing into one’s developing adolescent body. As discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation, both girls are inspired by personal details from Green’s life and provided him an outlet with which to work through his thoughts: Hazel from the *Fault in Our Stars* is a tribute to one of Green’s young fans who died from cancer, and Aza in *Turtles All the Way Down* suffers from the same mental illness as Green himself. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, although Hazel has a terminal illness which has dominated and stolen her adolescence, she still experiences the same self-consciousness shared by healthy teenagers. The first time Augustus comes to support group, he openly stares at Hazel when she walks in. She feels self-conscious about her unbrushed short hair and her medication-induced chipmunk cheeks, cankles, and skinniness. She does not feel pretty or worthy of attention from a

guy like Augustus: “Look, let me just say it: He was hot. A nonhot boy stares at you relentlessly and it is, at best, awkward and, at worst, a form of assault. But a hot boy . . . well” (9). She then admits that his staring makes her feel “rather blushy” (10). After the meeting, Hazel asks Augustus why he is looking at her, and his response reveals that she is perhaps an unreliable narrator when it comes to her descriptions of her own appearance: “Because you’re beautiful. I enjoy looking at beautiful people, and I decided a while ago not to deny myself the simpler pleasures of existence” (16). Hazel tries to contradict him, but he persists and awakens something in her that had been dormant. She inwardly confesses, “His every syllable flirted. Honestly, he kind of turned me on. I didn’t even know that guys *could* turn me on—not, like, in real life” (17, emphasis in original). Her illness has caused her to see herself not only as unattractive but as involuntarily asexual and innocent, stuck in the self-consciousness of pre-adolescence, even though she has finished high school and is taking college courses. Significantly, though, both Lindsey and Hazel feel more mature and consider themselves to have “grown up,” so to speak, once a boy has made them feel pretty, a distinctly feminine response. Aza in *Turtles All the Way Down*, because of her Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, is abnormally averse to the human body. She exclaims, “Boys are gross. . . . Everyone is gross. People and their gross bodies; it all makes me want to barf” (54). She is especially disgusted by her own body and resents having to live inside of it. After getting out of the shower, she confesses, “I hated my body. It disgusted me—its hair, its pinpricks of sweat, its scrawniness. Skin pulled over a skeleton, an animated corpse. I wanted out—out of my body, out of my thoughts, *out*—but I was stuck inside of this thing, just like all the bacteria colonizing me” (159, emphasis in original). She does not

understand how anyone could ever find her attractive, but much to her confusion, Davis likes her body. He tells her, "I like it. It's a good body" (162). Aza's skepticism is not mere modesty or humility. Because of her illness, she finds the human body disgusting and cannot understand how anyone could feel differently. She feels out of place in her own skin, a feeling only exacerbated by adolescence. Whereas Hazel's illness is physical and prevents her from seeing herself as a viable sexual partner because of her weakened, underdeveloped body, Aza's illness is mental, so her abnormal thought processes, therefore, render her incapable of conceiving of herself as a participant in physical intimacy.

Along with all of the witty anecdotes about endearingly awkward teenage boys, Green also acknowledges the double standard for women, particularly through the character of Alaska. In her role as Culver Creek's resident expert on all things related to sex and romance, Alaska takes on the responsibility of finding Miles a girlfriend and finally determines that their Russian classmate Lara is the perfect candidate. Miles only remembers Lara as the girl who had sat on his lap once in a cramped car, but he is otherwise oblivious to the signals she had apparently been sending him. Alaska explains, "You thought she was quietly discussing precalc, when she was clearly talking about having hot sex with you. Which is why you need me" (59). Even though he is not technically part of the conversation, the Colonel offers the unasked-for assessment, "She has great breasts" (59), while never looking up from the book he is reading, as if her great breasts are all the criteria needed to qualify as a suitable girlfriend. Alaska's subsequent outburst is equal parts shocking and expected from her. She shouts, "DO NOT OBJECTIFY WOMEN'S BODIES!" (60). The Colonel, unfazed, apologizes: "Sorry.

Perky breasts” (60). When Alaska exasperatingly insists that that is not any better, he replies, “Sure it is. . . . *Great* is a judgment on a woman’s body. *Perky* is merely an observation. They *are* perky. I mean, Christ” (60, emphasis in original). The Colonel is mostly being impertinent to get a rise out of Alaska, pretending to be oblivious to the fact that it had not been the vocabulary of his comment that had upset her but the fact that he had been commenting on Lara’s breasts at all. Through this exchange, Green draws attention to the false assumption in modern culture that once a girl is ready for sexual activity she is also subject to objectification.

While Miles and Alaska are on campus alone for Thanksgiving break, Alaska suggests they go “porn hunting” in the other dorm rooms while everyone is away. Miles at first is understandably embarrassed by the prospect, but Alaska is convincing: “‘We can’t love our neighbors till we know how crooked their hearts are. Don’t you like porn?’ she asked, smiling. ‘Um,’ I answered. The truth was that I hadn’t seen much porn, but the idea of looking at porn with Alaska had a certain appeal” (85). They casually search through their classmates’ rooms and find several magazines and finally a movie, *The Bitches of Madison County*. The movie opens with a shot of a man performing oral sex on a woman while they are on a bridge, and Miles notes, “No time for dialogue, I suppose” (87). It does not take long into the movie for Alaska to begin a rant about the damaging inaccuracies plied by most pornographic fare:

“They just don’t make sex look fun for women. The girl is just an object. Look! Look at that!” I was already looking, needless to say. A woman crouched on her hands and knees while a guy knelt behind her. She kept saying “Give it to me” and moaning, and though her eyes, brown and

blank, betrayed her lack of interest, I couldn't help but take mental notes. *Hands on her shoulders*, I noted. *Fast, but not too fast or it's going to be over, fast. Keep your grunting to a minimum.* As if reading my mind, she said, "God, Pudge. Never do it that hard. That would *hurt*. That looks like torture. And all she can do is just sit there and take it? This is not a *man* and a *woman*. It's a penis and a vagina. What's erotic about that? Where's the kissing?"

"Given their positions, I don't think they can kiss right now," I noted.

"That's my point. Just by virtue of how they're doing it, it's objectification. He can't even see her face! This is what can happen to us women, Pudge. That woman is someone's daughter. This is what you make us do for money." (87-88, emphasis in original)

Of course, Alaska's insistence that the woman in the film is being objectified and used as a mere orifice is true whether or not she is someone's daughter, but her indignation is still valid. The simulated sex acts in scenes like the one Miles and Alaska are watching frequently do privilege the male gaze and are designed primarily to enhance male pleasure (which is not to suggest that women do not also find enjoyment from porn). Alaska's complaints reveal a very mature point of view which worries that those types of images damage both male *and* female expectations about what real sexual encounters are like. In this particular scene, Alaska serves as Green's mouthpiece, a temporary indulgence Green allows himself in order to interject his own adult concern about the fictions perpetuated by porn. Furthermore, the damage done by unrealistic sex in porn is more severe when these inaccuracies are encountered in adolescence, a period when

teenagers experience sexual impulses and “carnal desires” for the first time and are in the process of forming their sexual identities. Referencing Roy Baumeister’s term “plasticity,” established in a 2000 article in *Psychological Bulletin*, Diamond and Savin-Williams explain that, according to Baumeister, “female sexuality is more malleable and mutable than male sexuality, more responsive to cultural, social, and interpersonal factors, more subject to change in response to external circumstances, and more variable within the life course of any particular woman” (491). Alaska, then, is right to be concerned on behalf of the woman in the scene whose sexual encounter is being depicted as an impersonal torture inflicted upon a disinterested, disembodied vagina. Additionally, Diamond and Savin-Williams note, “Girls receive powerful and consistent messages . . . that women do not want or ‘need’ sexual activity as much as men. . . . As a result, girls may progressively learn to discount their own bodily experiences of sexual desire and to dismiss their own motives for sexual contact” (490). Alaska, as a progressive, sex-positive teenage girl, is a sound rejection of the objectification of the female body and of the dismissal of female sexuality.

To commemorate Alaska’s death, Miles, Takumi, and the Colonel spearhead the junior class prank. They hire a male stripper to come to the school for Speaker Day posing as a professor specializing in adolescent sexuality. At a key point in his speech, Lara stands up on cue and demands that he take off his clothes instead of finishing his speech. He commences an erotic dance routine set to Prince’s “Get Off” after shouting, “This one’s for Alaska Young” (208). His speech, written by Miles and the Colonel, is an homage to Alaska’s empowering philosophical perspective:

I'm here today to talk with you about the fascinating subject of teenage sexuality. My research is in the field of sexual linguistics, specifically the way that young people discuss sex and related questions. So, for instance, I'm interested in why my saying the word *arm* might not make you laugh, but my saying the word *vagina* might. . . . The way young people speak about one another's bodies says a great deal about our society. In today's world, boys are much more likely to objectify girls' bodies than the other way around. Boys will say amongst themselves that so-and-so has a nice rack, while girls will more likely say that a boy is cute, a term that describes both physical and emotional characteristics. This has the effect of turning girls into mere objects, while boys are seen by girls as whole people. (207-208, emphasis in original)

While the speaker is fake, the speech is real enough, written by the boys to channel Alaska's outspoken feminism, and the fact that they are able to write it at all is a testament to Alaska's lasting influence. As an occasional stand-in for Green's adult point of view, Alaska teaches her male friends about the dangers of objectification and how to have healthy interactions with women. In fact, Alaska's, and by extension Green's, views on objectification seem to be reincarnated a few years later in the character of the Duke in "A Cheertastic Christmas Miracle." After a night of listening to Tobin and JP talk incessantly about hooking up with the cheerleaders waiting at the Waffle House, the Duke finally snaps and gives them an earful about the sexism inherent in their quest:

You know what? It's sexist. Okay? I hate to be, like, the watchdog for the ladies or whatever, but when you spend a whole night talking about doing

girls because they've got short skirts on, or how hot pom-poms are, or whatever. It's sexist, okay? Female cheerleaders wearing dainty little male-fantasy outfits—sexist! Just *assuming* they're dying to make out with you—sexist! I realize that you are, like, bursting with a constant need to rub yourself against girl flesh or whatever, but can you just try to talk about it a little less in front of me?! (191, emphasis in original)

The boys feel duly chastised by her rant which, like similar diatribes delivered by Alaska, seems to reflect the point of view of Green himself. While his male protagonists are awkward and often humorously self-deprecating, he also consistently takes the teenager's relationship with his/her body seriously.

John Green Kisses Are Real

When adolescents begin to recognize their carnal desires, their physical experimentation with a partner often begins with kissing. Every single one of Green's novels features depictions of teenagers kissing, and he seems to have a particular philosophy about what makes a kiss great—authenticity. It should be noted that there *are* rare moments of over-the-top, romanticized kissing, such as in *Looking for Alaska* when Alaska's older boyfriend Jake visits and she jumps up into his arms and wraps her legs around him while kissing him passionately. As he observes this display, Miles thinks, "I'd heard Alaska *talk* about kissing, but I'd never seen her kiss until then: As he held her by her waist, she leaned forward, her pouty lips parted, her head just slightly tilted, and enveloped his mouth with such passion that I felt I should look away but couldn't" (61, emphasis in original). This gregarious public display is atypical of Green's style, but it is

not without thematic significance, however, for as I will discuss later, Green provides this scene as a cartoonish contrast to the tender moments Miles and Alaska share further into the novel.

The teenage years are when many people get the opportunity to kiss someone, in a seriously romantic way, for the first time. A person's first kiss is cherished as a cultural rite of passage, and Green's awkward male protagonists often offer humorous "rules" for successful kissing. In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin has devised his foolproof Rejection Minimization Theorem (RMT) which basically operates from the claim that "the act of leaning in to kiss someone, or asking to kiss them, is fraught with the possibility of rejection, so the person least likely to get rejected should do the leaning in or the asking" (76), and Colin asserts that, in heterosexual pairings, the girl should always be the one to initiate a kiss. His reasoning is that boys are constantly, unless they are "actually, literally, on fire," thinking about "hooking up" (76), so if it is generally understood that a kiss will only happen if the girl wants one, then no one will ever have to deal with the rejection of an unwilling partner, and, furthermore, girls will never be kissed when they do not want to be. Unfortunately for Colin and teens everywhere, as the narrator laments, "there's nothing logical about kissing, and so his theory never worked" (76). In *Paper Towns*, the comically self-assured Ben finally gets some real action when Lacey kisses him. Predictably, all of his bragging throughout the novel has been just talk, and when he comes to his friends for advice, Q obliges: "As far as I can tell, there are two basic rules: 1. Don't bite anything without permission, and 2. The human tongue is like wasabi: it's very powerful, and should be used sparingly" (213). He does not realize that Lacey has actually been listening, and instead of being upset that they are talking about

her, she proves her worthiness to belong to their group by countering with her own comparison: “I actually think Ben’s tongue is like sunscreen. . . . It’s good for your health and should be applied liberally” (213). The boys react with humorous disgust but are clearly happy for their friend. Colin’s and Q’s guidelines are meant to be funny, but in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, Tiny strips away all of the artifice and mystery of kissing once and for all by offering his own rules. He has been pressuring Will to go out with Jane, but Will is persistently not interested while also being secretly completely interested at the same time, a contradiction which causes him significant inner turmoil. Tiny gets frustrated and goes on a rant:

What do you think this is, eighteen thirty-two? When you like someone and they like you, you fucking put your lips against their lips and then you open your mouth a little, and then just a little hint of tongue to spice things up. I mean, *God*, Grayson. Everybody’s always got their panties in a twist about how the youth of America are debaucherous, sex-crazed maniacs passing out handjobs like they were lollipops, and you can’t even kiss a girl who *definitely likes you?*” (80, emphasis in original)

Expressed that way, the whole thing seems so simple, and Tiny’s enlightened pragmatism makes Colin’s and Q’s kissing rules, and the fact that they have even thought about it to that extent, sound silly.

A typical John Green kissing scene occurs in *Looking for Alaska*. After the friends’ storytelling session around the fire, Miles and Lara get awkwardly physical. They are lying side-by-side in separate sleeping bags, their arms touching through layers of material, and Miles decides to make his move: “My plan, which struck me as very

slick, was to pull my arm out of my sleeping bag and put it into hers, and then hold her hand. It was a good plan, but when I tried to actually get my arm out of the mummy bag, I flailed around like a fish out of water, and nearly dislocated my shoulder” (121). Lara sees the humor in the awkwardness and laughs at him, but he persists, and they begin kissing. Miles recalls, “I am sure that she tasted like stale booze, but I did not notice, and I’m sure I tasted like stale booze and cigarettes, but she didn’t notice. We were kissing” (122). Tasting like stale booze and cigarettes is not classically romantic, but it *is* realistic for two teenagers who have been drinking and smoking around a fire for hours. Miles and Lara’s first physical encounter turns out to be both flawed and sweet:

She lay on top of me, and I held her small waist in my hands. I could feel her breasts against my chest, and she moved slowly on top of me, her legs straddling me. . . . [W]e kissed quietly and laughed softly with our mouths and our eyes. After so much kissing that it almost started to get boring, I whispered, “Do you want to be my girlfriend?” And she said, “Yes, please,” and smiled. We slept together in her sleeping bag, which felt a little crowded, to be honest, but was still nice. (122-123)

Green repeatedly chooses realism over romance in his novels. Or, more accurately, he reveals the romance in the realism.

In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Hassan, who has never dated anyone because of his religion, has his first kiss with Lindsey’s friend Katrina one night when he goes out cruising and playing spin the bottle with them and their friends while Colin stays back at the house to work on his Theorem. Like Miles and Lara’s sleeping bag make-out session, Hassan and Katrina’s kiss is both awkward and enjoyable: “I swear to God, her tongue

was like *licking my teeth*. . . . It was, uh, weird and wet and messy—but fun, I guess. The best part was having my hand on her face, and looking down at her and seeing her eyes closed. I guess she’s a chubby chaser or something” (129, emphasis in original). He comes home excited to tell Colin about it, but Colin is actually disappointed that Hassan would lower himself to make out with someone Colin finds shallow and ditzy, and he gives him a hard time about it, using Hassan’s religion as an excuse. Colin’s reaction, however, is petty and is a manifestation of his own still-raw heartbreak. Colin has pursued, dated, and been dumped by multiple Katherines, and Hassan has been his listening ear and shoulder to cry on. Colin’s first real kiss, with Katherine X, had been similarly awkward: “I didn’t know what to do so I sort of kept darting my tongue out from behind closed lips like I was a snake, and it didn’t take very much of that for her to want to be just friends” (204-205). When that paradigm is reversed, and Colin is relegated to the role of supportive friend, it exacerbates his foreboding that life is leaving him behind. Hassan, fortunately, recognizes what is actually bothering his friend, and after they talk it out, Colin is able to admit that his behavior had been the result of his own insecurities—which had blazed to the surface when Hassan in his story had referred to Lindsey’s boyfriend “The Other Colin” as simply “Colin”—and that he is actually excited for his friend. This incident is a significant moment in Colin’s path toward emotional maturity.

The romantically authentic kissing theme carries over into Green’s other novels as well. In “A Cheerstastic Christmas Miracle,” Tobin and the Duke, in the last few pages of the novella, finally kiss while sitting on the curb outside of the Waffle House, and it is another example of a John Green awkward-yet-real-and-amazing kiss. The Duke is in the

middle of explaining to Tobin what she really wants, and he interrupts her: “I couldn’t wait anymore, and my hand was on the back of her head, and then her lips on mine, and the cold air gone and replaced with the warmth of her mouth, soft and sweet and hash-brown-tastic, and I opened my eyes and my gloves touched the skin of her face pale from the cold, and I had never before had a first kiss with a girl I loved” (208). They are freezing, bundled up in winter gear, and have hashbrown breath, which, like stale booze and cigarettes, is not traditionally romantic but is perfect for Tobin and the Duke. This scene is mimicked in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* when Will and Jane share a passionate, no-strings-attached kiss on a city park bench while bundled up in coats, gloves, and hats:

It’s cold, and our lips are dry, noses a little wet, foreheads sweaty beneath wool hats. I can’t touch her face, even though I want to, because I’m wearing gloves. But God, when her lips come apart, everything turns warm and her sugar sweet breath is in my mouth, and I probably taste like hot dogs but I don’t care. She kisses like a sweet devouring, and I don’t know where to touch her because I want all of her. I want to touch her knees and her hips and her stomach and her back and her everything, but we’re encased in all these clothes, so we’re just two marshmallows bumping against each other, and she smiles at me while still kissing because she knows how ridiculous it is, too. (134)

The Waffle House curb is replaced by a park bench, and the hashbrown breath is replaced by hot dogs, but the experience is otherwise similar in its sincerity and sweetness. Ironically, this awkward, amazing, guileless kiss takes place outside of a porn store called Frenchy’s which Will had visited shortly before in an attempt to break in his new fake

ID, and like the ID, the entire porn store experience had been fake. Will had gone in as a joke, had used his fake ID to pretend to be someone else, and had browsed aisles full of fake penises and pictures of fake breasts. In the FAQ section about *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson* on his website, Green explains, “And it seemed to me that part of our weird obsession with romantic love is a weird attraction/repulsion to our sexuality So I thought it would be interesting and resonant to have these two guys have this aggressively unsexual and unromantic encounter in a place (a porn store) we associate so closely with sexuality.” As I will discuss below with *Looking for Alaska*, Green here is juxtaposing a false sexual experience with a true one, and the true sexual experience is unexpectedly devoid of nudity or actual sex. Green repeatedly comes back to the idea that true, meaningful sexuality, even hormonal adolescent sexuality, comes from a sort of spiritual or emotional connection rather than a purely physical one. Later, while driving home in silence, Will observes: “There’s something about the numbness in my lips after having kissed her that I want to keep and hold onto, something in it that seems *pure*, that seems like the singular truth” (137, emphasis in original). For Green, teenage romance *is* pure and true and something worth keeping and holding onto. Jane decides that she wants more than just friendship from Will, and they share another kiss, this time with more implications. Once again, this encounter features one of Green’s stripped-down, unromanticized descriptions of meaningful physical contact: “We kiss. Her hands are freezing on my face, and she tastes like coffee and the smell of onion is still stuck in my nose [from making chili], and my lips are all dry from the endless winter. And it’s awesome” (224).

Even teens with physical and mental illness, who are typically excluded from literary depictions of romantic love, experience the desire to make physical connections, and Green gives them the space to do so, with mixed results. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, after their first evening hanging out together, Hazel and Augustus have a classic end-of-first-date moment in his car: “As I pulled up outside of my house, Augustus clicked the radio off. The air thickened. He was probably thinking about kissing me, and I was definitely thinking about kissing him. Wondering if I wanted to. I’d kissed boys, but it had been awhile. Pre-Miracle. I put the car in park and looked over at him. He really was beautiful” (36). Hazel had not had any romantic experiences since her diagnosis and subsequent miraculous remission. As discussed in Chapter II, she had not imagined that a romantic future had been available to her. Her budding relationship with Augustus, however, makes her feel like her diagnosis is not synonymous with celibacy, but they do not actually share their first kiss until later in the novel when they are touring the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam:

And then we were kissing. My hand let go of the oxygen cart and I reached up for his neck, and he pulled me up by my waist onto my tiptoes. As his parted lips met mine, I started to feel breathless in a new and fascinating way. The space around us evaporated, and for a weird moment I really liked my body; this cancer-ruined thing I’d spent years dragging around suddenly seemed worth the struggle, worth the chest tubes and the PICC lines and the ceaseless bodily betrayal of the tumors. (203)

The crowd of people around them in the museum clap and cheer for them as they bow and curtsy shyly. For Hazel, kissing Augustus makes her feel normal and alive.

However, in *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza's mental illness prevents her from being able to carry out a fulfilling romantic relationship. To her surprise, her interactions with Davis make her realize that she is capable of developing feelings for someone, and she does feel attracted to him, part of her wanting very much to kiss him. Ultimately, though, Aza's intrusive thought patterns always interrupt the couple's attempts to connect physically, and Aza realizes that her desire for physical intimacy with Davis is more manageable as an abstract, idealized fantasy separate from the unappealing, messy reality. Their first kiss, like the kisses in Green's other novels, is equal parts tender and awkward. They are outside, their hands and faces are cold, and they are bundled up in several layers, but the experience is still exhilarating: "When we came up for air, I felt his hands on my waist, and he said, 'I, uh, wow.' I smirked at him. I like feeling his body against mine, one of his hands tracing my spine" (152). Like Hazel, Aza had always assumed that her illness would prevent her from experiencing physical intimacy like a typical adolescent, but this initial encounter with Davis causes her to hope that she had been wrong. In expected John Green fashion, their kiss turns endearingly awkward: "I like making out with so many layers on. Our breathing steamed up his glasses as we kissed, and he tried to take them off, but I pressed them up the bridge of his nose, and we were laughing together" (152). Unfortunately, Aza's intrusive thoughts show up in that moment to ruin her connection to Davis. The interruption is unexpected and unwanted, and she tries to stave it off as long as possible, but her efforts are futile. She explains, "And then he started kissing my neck, and a thought occurred to me: His tongue had been in my mouth. I told myself to be in this moment, to let myself feel his warmth on my skin, but now his tongue was on my neck, wet and alive and microbial" (152). She cannot

get the thought out of her head that his microbes are getting on her and mixing with her own and that they are going to be inside of her forever and permanently alter her inner self. She begins to pour sweat and has to pull away from the kiss and go to the bathroom to collect her thoughts and calm down, a need which indicates how much anxiety and stress the physical contact is causing her. She feels “disgusting” and “pathetic” (154) and convinced she will never be normal. Whereas for Hazel, kissing Augustus makes her feel normal and alive, when Aza kisses Davis, she feels wrong and disgusting. She tries to explain to her therapist what it is about kissing that bothers her so much: “Just how his tongue has its own particular microbiome and once he sticks his tongue in my mouth his bacteria become part of my microbiome for literally the rest of my life. Like, his tongue will sort of *always* be in my mouth until I’m dead, and then his tongue microbes will eat my corpse” (164, emphasis in original). In his previous novels, Green describes teenage kissing with an air of nostalgia, privileging the act as a sort of rite of passage, so Aza’s inability to participate in the ritual isolates her and accentuates her otherness. She tries to kiss Davis one more time later on in the novel, but afterwards, her intrusive thoughts spiral so far out of control that she ends up going to the bathroom and drinking hand sanitizer.

Despite Aza’s best efforts, her physical relationship with Davis is ultimately impossible. Her deteriorated mental state causes her to have a car accident which lands her in the hospital, and after her release, she makes a date to meet up with Davis for the first time in weeks. She is optimistic about seeing him, but a thought she cannot control appears in her mind unbidden and tells her, “He’s going to want to put his bacteria in

your mouth” (251). Outwardly, she makes conversation and listens to him talk while inside her head she desperately argues with herself:

Who cares if he wants his bacteria in my mouth? Kissing is nice. Kissing feels good. I want to kiss him. *But you don't want to get campylobacter. I won't. You'll be sick for weeks. Might have to take antibiotics. Stop. Then you'll get C. diff. Or you'll get Epstein-Barr from the campylobacter. Stop. That could paralyze you, all because you kissed him when you didn't even actually want to because it's fucking gross, inserting your tongue into someone else's mouth.* (251)

This torturous thought spiral only stops because Davis interrupts it to ask if she is paying attention. She tries to make it completely clear to him how serious her illness is and that she will likely never get better. She explains that if she were dying and if he kissed her good-bye, then her last thought would be about all of the eighty million foreign microbes flooding her system. Her mental condition and her inability to pursue physical intimacy when she wants it is an extreme reminder that the culturally assumed universal experiences of adolescence are not truly universal.

Since kissing is oftentimes an adolescent's initiation into becoming a sexually active being for the first time, it is expected and appropriate that Green would revisit the experience again and again in his novels. In the FAQ section about *An Abundance of Katherines* on his website, Green explains:

So we tend to imagine love monolithically, especially when we're talking about romantic love. There is this assumption that everyone's experience of romantic love is identical, . . . But in fact, romantic love is different for

every person who experiences it, because all of our brains are wired differently. . . I wanted to write about this, and even find a way to celebrate it, because I do not think it's fair only to imagine romantic love as a thing.

He is specifically talking here about Colin's unique way of overanalyzing things in *An Abundance of Katherines*, but the idea is certainly applicable to all of the representations of romantic love in his novels. Regarding kissing in particular, he does not gloss over the more unsavory aspects that sometimes accompany that activity, such as bad breath, uncomfortable limb placement, and boredom, but rather he honors all of the ways his characters experience it. He includes those apparent negatives alongside the sweet moments because both are often part of romance in the nonfictional world, and Green's treatment of adolescent romance acknowledges it as real and nonfictional.

Physical vs. Emotional Connection

As sexual beings, when we feel the impulse to make a connection with another person, we often imagine that connection manifesting as a physical bond, either through hugging, touching, kissing, intercourse, or some other physically intimate contact. This tendency is due in part to our species' instinctual desire to find a mate and more significantly to a strong cultural paradigm of equating physical intimacy with emotional intimacy. Green directly challenges this paradigm in his novels. In the FAQ section about *Looking for Alaska* on his website, he asserts: "I don't think we feel only one thing in our lives. I don't think it's as simple as either A. being in love or B. not being in love. I think our feelings for each other are really complicated and motivated by an endless

interconnected web of desires and fears.” Contributing to the complexity is the mistake that adolescents, and adults for that matter, make by misidentifying physical closeness as emotional closeness.

The mistaken conflation of physical and emotional intimacy is, in large part, a product of a culture which assigns immense developmental significance to physical connection, sometimes with damaging results. As Kokkola notes, “And to claim that teenagers’ first, often unsatisfactory or fumbled, sexual experiences can turn them into adults ‘overnight’ defies all logical reasoning. And yet the consummation of carnal desire is consistently presented as though it had the power to transform children into adults” (8). Green recognizes the problematic nature of this trend and challenges it. Discussing *Looking for Alaska* on his website, he reveals, “When you’re a teenager, you’re doing all kinds of important things for the first time, and in writing *Alaska* I wanted to deromanticize some of those firsts.” Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame note that the intimate moments in *Looking for Alaska* “convey both the inquisitive nature of adolescents and the awkwardness of youth” (28), and Green openly and intentionally juxtaposes Miles’s relationship with Lara with his relationship with Alaska to illustrate the difference between physical and emotional intimacy. As illustrated with the campfire make-out session discussed above, Miles and Lara begin their relationship physically before they ever even have a one-on-one conversation, and their connection never moves beyond the surface. In a somewhat shocking and uncomfortable scene toward the middle of the novel that is now infamous, they have an even more awkward physical encounter than the earlier sleeping bag incident. They are both inexperienced sexually and decide to experiment. They barely know each other and have very little in common other than a

physical interest in each other and mutually active hormones. As they watch *The Brady Bunch* on the dorm's rec room TV, Lara randomly blurts, "Have you ever gotten a blow job?" (126). Miles is duly shocked but tries to play it cool. Lara explains that she is asking only because she has never given one and thinks it would be interesting to try. She asks:

"Think it would be fun?"

DO I!?!?!?!?!?! "Um. Yeah. I mean, you don't have to."

"I think I want to," she said, and we kissed a little, and then. And then with me sitting watching *The Brady Bunch*, watching Marcia Marcia Marcia up to her Brady antics, Lara unbuttoned my pants and pulled my boxers down a little and pulled out my penis. (126)

Using the scientific word "penis" rather than a euphemism gives the scene a clinical, impersonal tone, and the rest of the encounter continues much in the same vein, continuously using stripped-down language. Rather than passionate or romantic, this scene is awkward and humorous and unfulfilling. He continues:

And then she wrapped her hand around it and put it in her mouth.

And waited.

We were both very still. She did not move a muscle in her body, and I did not move a muscle in mine. I knew that at this point something else was supposed to happen, but I wasn't quite sure what.

She stayed still. I could feel her nervous breath. For minutes, . . . she lay there, stock-still with my penis in her mouth, and I sat there, waiting.

And then she took it out of her mouth and looked up at me quizzically.

. . . Everything I'd learned from watching porn with Alaska suddenly exited my brain. I thought maybe she should move her head up and down, but wouldn't that choke her? So I just stayed quiet.

"Should I, like, bite?"

"Don't bite! I mean, I don't think. I think—I mean, that felt good. That was nice. I don't know if there's something else." (127)

They decide to ask Alaska for advice, and when they explain what they had done, she laughs uncontrollably until she cries. Once she recovers, she demonstrates what Lara needs to do using a tube of toothpaste, "a utilitarian product that couldn't be further removed from romance" (Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame 29). Lara and Miles go back to her room and follow Alaska's advice, which turns out to have been sound. Miles recalls, "I did exactly what Alaska said I would do, which was die a hundred little ecstatic deaths, my fists clenched, my body shaking. It was my first orgasm with a girl, and afterward, I was embarrassed and nervous, and so, clearly, was Lara, who finally broke the silence by asking, 'So, want to do some homework?'" (128). Later, after doing some homework and trying to talk to Lara about his love of last words, a subject in which she shows no real interest, Miles goes to find Alaska and the Colonel. He explains, "I didn't know how to talk to her. And I was frustrated with trying, so after a little while, I got up to go. I kissed her good-bye, I could do that, at least" (129). Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame note, "Both adolescents have engaged in a physically private encounter; however, it was devoid of any emotional engagement" (29). They had had a sexual experience, a first for both of them, but Miles realizes that their connection, if it can be called that, is only physical. In a June 30, 2008, video titled "I Am Not a Pornographer" on his YouTube

channel, Green discusses this scene as the centerpiece of an ongoing school board censorship case against the book, discussed below, in which a group of adamant parents tried to get the book banned as pornographic. He insists that this scene was meant to be unappealing and decidedly unsexy to show that meaningful romantic connection is not necessarily physical. He juxtaposes Miles and Lara's awkward encounter with the much more intense chemistry between Miles and Alaska when they are just hanging out fully clothed.

Miles and Alaska spend quite a bit of time together in the months leading up to her death, ostensibly as just friends since Alaska has an older, long-distance boyfriend, but Miles clearly wishes for more. Anytime she is near him, he is hyperaware of her presence and counts the layers of material between their skin. One afternoon, for example, he recalls: "I woke up half an hour later, when she sat down on my bed, her butt against my hip. *Her underwear, her jeans, the comforter, my corduroys, and my boxers between us*, I thought. Five layers, and yet I felt it, the nervous warmth of touching—a pale reflection of the fireworks of one mouth on another, but a reflection nonetheless" (75, emphasis in original). Then, later that evening, Alaska sidles up next to him on his couch and lays her head in his lap: "My corduroys. My boxers. Two layers. I could feel the warmth of her cheek on my thigh. There are times when it is appropriate, even preferable, to get an erection when someone's face is in close proximity to your penis. This was not one of those times" (76-77). He feels more sexually charged with Alaska's head in his fully clothed lap than he does when his penis is actually exposed in front of Lara's face and is inserted in her mouth. For Thanksgiving break, Miles and Alaska stay on campus pretty much by themselves. They lie outside, Alaska reading aloud from Kurt

Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* while they drink rum, and the sexual tension between them slowly builds:

He did not hear her words so much as the cadence of her voice. She'd obviously read the book many times before, and so she read flawlessly and confidently, and I could hear her smile in the reading of it, and the sound of that smile made me think that maybe I would like novels better if Alaska Young read them to me. After a while, she put down the book, and I felt warm but not drunk with the bottle resting between us—my chest touching the bottle and her chest touching the bottle but us not touching each other, and then she placed her hand on my leg. Her hand just above my knee, the palm flat and soft against my jeans and her index finger making slow, lazy circles that crept toward the inside of my thigh, and with one layer between us, God I wanted her. (81)

The language used in this scene is lyrical and passionate, especially when contrasted with the sterile matter-of-factness of the blow job scene. Miles feels connected to Alaska just from hearing her read aloud from a beloved book, and he madly desires her even though their skin is not in contact. Miles's emotional connection with Alaska is undeniably stronger and more sensual than his physical experimentation with Lara.

In 2008, two teachers at Depew High School in Depew, New York, wanted to incorporate *Looking for Alaska* into their eleventh-grade literature curriculums. They proposed having a permission slip for parents to sign and an alternative text for students to read if their parents opposed the frank sexual content of the novel. The controversy was covered in the *Buffalo News*, and it culminated in a school board meeting attended by

200 people, mostly students supporting Green and the book. The meeting was preceded online by the Vlogbrothers video “I Am Not a Pornographer” as well as a letter to the school board from Green in which he defended his language choices in the book and urged the board to trust the teen readers. The following is a partial transcript of the video:

I don't think there is a single halfway normal person in the world who would find a single thing in my book in any way arousing. There is one very frank sex scene. It is awkward, un-fun, disastrous, and wholly unerotic. The whole reason that scene in question exists in *Looking for Alaska* is because I wanted to draw contrast between that scene, when there's a lot of physical intimacy but it's ultimately very emotionally empty, and the scene that immediately follows it where there's not serious physical interaction but there's this intense emotional connection. The argument here is that physical intimacy can never stand in for emotional closeness, and when teenagers conflate these ideas, it inevitably fails. It doesn't take a deeply critical understanding of literature to realize that *Looking for Alaska* is arguing against vapid physical interactions, not for them.

The school board ultimately unanimously voted to allow the book into the curriculum. In response to an FAQ on his website suggesting that he remove the blow job scene to make the book more marketable, Green claims that he is proud of the book and adds, “And if people are reading the scene out of context, they aren't reading. There is no text without context. If a terrible blow job keeps Alaska from being taught in schools, that's unfortunate. . . . I'm very happy, and very grateful, and I stand by the massively unerotic

blow job.” His defense of *Alaska* reveals his assumption that teenagers are able to process complex narratives and that he takes their perspectives seriously. Blasingame, quoted in a *Washington Post* column by Valerie Strauss about schools banning YA books with questionable content, observes, “We are preparing these young people for an adult world. Books provide a safe segue to places they will soon be going in person” (qtd. in Strauss n.p.). In this view, campaigns to ban books based on isolated scenes taken out of context are misguided and potentially harmful in that they remove helpful texts from their intended readers and send the message to teens that their sexuality is dirty and inappropriate.

The night that Alaska dies, she, the Colonel, and Miles get drunk and play truth or dare. When it is Miles’s turn, Alaska dares him to “hook up” (130) with her. After all of the build-up of sexual tension, they finally make physical contact with a kiss, zero layers between them: “Our tongues dancing back and forth in each other’s mouth until there was no her mouth and my mouth but only our mouths intertwined. She tasted like cigarettes and Mountain Dew and wine and Chap Stick. . . . We lay down as we kissed, she on top of me, and I began to move beneath her” (130). The myriad tastes of Alaska’s mouth present a sensory image which recalls Miles’s stale-booze-and-cigarettes make-out session with Lara by the campfire, but whereas that kiss had been awkward, this kiss with Alaska feels perfectly natural and right because they have formed an intellectual, emotional bond first. They seem to know exactly what to do to and with each other: “A hand grabbed one of mine and she placed it on her stomach. I moved slowly on top of her and felt her arching back fluidly beneath me. . . . She moved my hand from her waist to her breast, and I felt cautiously, my fingers moving slowly under her shirt but over her

bra, tracing the outline of her breasts and then cupping one in my hand, squeezing softly” (131). That is as far as their encounter progresses, however, because Alaska brings it to an end. Before falling asleep on Miles’s chest, she whispers “I’m so sleepy. To be continued?” (131). The promise of that question fills Miles with hopeful anticipation, and in spite of Alaska’s coitus interruptus, he has never felt closer to her. He explains, “We didn’t have sex. We never got naked. I never touched her bare breast, and her hands never got lower than my hips. It didn’t matter. As she slept, I whispered, ‘I love you, Alaska Young’” (131). He feels love for her that he does not feel for Lara, even though he has had more explicitly sexual contact with Lara. In the FAQ section about *Looking for Alaska* on his website, Green points out that “The oral sex scene in *Looking for Alaska* between Lara and Pudge takes place immediately before a far less sexually intimate but far more emotionally intimate encounter between Pudge and Alaska.” He also notes that the language used during the oral sex scene is intentionally “clinical and distant and unsensual,” with the use of the word “penis” and descriptive words like “weird,” “nervous,” and “quizzically.” The language used in the kissing scene between Miles and Alaska is much more emotionally evocative and sensual. Green states: “I wanted these two scenes to present a dramatic contrast because I wanted it to be clear . . . [that] physical intimacy isn’t and can never be an effective substitute for emotional intimacy. . . . I was arguing against vapid sexual encounters in which no one has any fun and celebrating the underappreciated virtues of super-hot kissing in which everyone keeps their clothes on.” This juxtaposition in *Alaska* reveals Green’s opinion that the locus of adolescent sexuality is not merely, or even primarily, in the body but rather in the soul. As Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame note, Miles “is always physically aware of

his proximity to Alaska, and yet their encounters speak more to the emotions surrounding their relationship” (29), and they further suggest that, because Miles and Alaska develop genuine affection for each other without much physical contact, “Green dichotomizes the notion of true love with that of physical gratification” (30). This is ultimately a powerful message to the teenage readers of the novels that their sexuality does not necessarily have to be defined or expressed physically in order to be true and meaningful.

The trend of privileging emotional connections over physical ones continues in Green’s other works as well. In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin recalls how his most recent Katherine had broken up with him while they were in the middle of being physically intimate: “After they’d climbed into bed downstairs, and after she had pulled off his shirt and he hers, and after they’d kissed until his lips were numb except for tingling, she said, ‘Do you really feel sad about graduating?’” (38). Even though they are in bed together and only partially clothed, they are not on the same emotional frequency. While cuddling with him and lying on his shoulder, she sighs in a discontented way. Then, “She sat up, looking down at him. He thought of her other sighs, the better and different ones of his body moving against hers. For a long time she stared at him, and then she bit her lower lip and said, ‘Colin, maybe the problem is us’” (39). Their physical connection cannot sustain the relationship alone. Later, Hassan and Colin stumble upon Katrina and The Other Colin having sex in the graveyard, even though she is supposed to be dating Hassan, and he is supposed to be dating Lindsey: “She was facing away from them, her back arched, her butt bobbing in and out of visibility. Colin had never seen actual people having actual sex before. From his angle, it looked a little ridiculous, but he suspected it might appear different if he were in the guy’s position” (173). The encounter

is depicted as unsexy and “ridiculous” because there is no affection associated with two participants who are both being caught cheating on their significant others. Similarly, in *Paper Towns*, at the after-prom party, Q walks in on Margo’s cheating ex-boyfriend Jase making out with her friend Becca. Green once again writes a love scene in which a sexual encounter between unsavory characters, or at least characters who are not supposed to be together, is interrupted and unsatisfactory:

I could see the top two-thirds of Jase, shirtless, on top of Becca, and she had her legs wrapped around him. Nobody was naked or anything, but they were headed in that direction. . . . And then they rolled around so Becca was on top of Jason, and she was sighing as she kissed him, and she was reaching down for her shirt. “Do you think I’m hot?” she said. “God yeah, you are so hot, Margo,” Jase said. “What?!” Becca said, furious, and it became quickly clear to me that I wasn’t going to see Becca naked.

(182)

The reader might feel momentarily tempted to sympathize with Becca until the next page when Q discovers Lacey hiding in the bathroom because Becca had drunkenly announced to the whole party that Lacey had once had an STD. In the scene Q witnesses, though Jase is getting naked with Becca, he is thinking of Margo, illustrating the disconnect Green sees between physical and emotional intimacy.

In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Green also prioritizes the development of an emotional connection over a physical one, this time utilizing the snarky, dry humor—often referred to as “gallows humor”—which often accompanies terminal illness. After a support group meeting, Hazel and Augustus walk outside of the church and see their fellow group

member, Isaac, heavily making out with his tall, curvy girlfriend against the wall while Hazel and Augustus watch: “His hand reached for her boob over her shirt and pawed at it, his palm still while his fingers moved around. I wondered if that felt good. Didn’t seem like it would, but I decided to forgive Isaac on the grounds that he was going blind. The senses must feast while there is yet hunger and whatever” (19). Hazel then makes an observation about Isaac’s impending blindness, but Augustus shuts her down: “Without looking over at me, Augustus said, ‘You’re killing my vibe here, Hazel Grace. I’m trying to observe young love in its many-splendored awkwardness.’ ‘I think he’s hurting her boob,’ I said. ‘Yes, it’s difficult to ascertain whether he is trying to arouse her or perform a breast exam’” (19). Isaac’s fumbblings are, as Augustus humorously notes, rife with “many-splendored awkwardness,” and Hazel and Augustus’s ability to observe them critically suggests that they are intellectually elevated above such carnality. Their romance develops intellectually and emotionally long before they make a significant physical connection. The superiority of their connection is confirmed when Isaac’s girlfriend callously breaks up with him shortly thereafter because she just cannot deal with having a blind boyfriend. Green once again, as he has done time and again, privileges the depth and longevity of an emotional connection over the shallow quickness of physical passion.

Alternative (?) Sexual Identities and Experiences

Colin and Hassan in *An Abundance of Katherines*, like many teenage boys, tease each other to show affection, and their normal banter often includes joking implications about the other’s sexuality. After Katrina kisses Hassan, Colin confesses with mock

seriousness, “I mean, I always sort of thought you were gay” (133). They then exchange quick jabs:

“I might be gay if I had a better-looking best friend,” said Hassan.

“And I might be gay if I could locate your penis under the fat rolls.”

“Bitch, I could gain five hundred pounds and you could still see

Thunderstick hanging to my knees.” (133)

Hassan’s instinct is to make jokes about his body to compensate for his self-consciousness, and like those jokes, these japes with Colin about being gay are their way of making light of their lack of success with girls. This use of homosexuality as a source of humorous teasing, while probably an accurate depiction of the way many teenage boys interact with each other, is not necessarily representative of Green’s personal perspective. As I have already established, he takes adolescent sexuality seriously in his novels and validates teenagers’ sexual experiences, which include a variety of identities. In addition to typically developing teens with mainstream identities, Green also explores the romantic experiences of teens who are homosexual or asexual, unsure, or physically disabled.

Karen Coats, in *Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, Desire, and Subjectivity in Children*, accurately describes adolescence as “a crisis of identity” (137), and Nikolajeva observes, “Contemporary authors are acutely aware of the adolescent condition, in which unstable identity is central, and therefore attempts to understand one’s place in a larger human context become an urge” (*Reading for Learning* 155). Among the various aspects of their identity that adolescents are working to find and solidify, their sexuality is a major one. Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis’s *Youth Lens*

approach to literary analysis “attends to how characterizations of race, gender, sexuality, and other social constructs interplay with notions of adolescence. . . . [and] acutely considers how adolescence as a unique identity marker might take on different meaning when linked to other socially constructed identity markers” (515). The authors cite several scholars who “promote using [Young Adult Literature] as ‘mirror’ texts that help adolescent students in their search for identity, their place in the (adult) world, and for direction in navigating the natural turmoil of adolescence (e.g., Bowman, 2000; Kaplan, 1999; Kaywell, 2004; Sims, 1982)” (507). Furthermore, they explain how educators and scholars from various fields have explored “how understandings of adolescence/ts are grounded in discursive and performative constructions that apply labels and expectations *to* youth rather than believe that those features of youth exist intrinsically and inevitably *within* young people” (507, emphasis in original). The expectations applied to youth, as discussed earlier, usually relate to innocence and lack of carnal knowledge, but that label is more often an adult construction of adolescent identity rather than an accurate representation of adolescents’ internalized identities.

In addition to the standard uncertainty and disorientation associated with typical adolescent identity development, teens who suspect they might have a nonheterosexual identity often face a heightened level of tension. Kokkola argues that “in some senses, *all* adolescent sexual desire can be regarded as a queer desire” (99, emphasis in original) in that it has been traditionally viewed as deviant and/or abnormal. She explains that adolescents who identify with the term “queer” are “doubly marginalised [sic] in the sense that they must overcome prejudices against both their age and their orientation” (96). Nonheterosexual teens feel the tension that is naturally inherent in adolescence

more acutely because their carnal desires have the potential to be criticized as inappropriate both because the teen is too young and because he/she is desiring an unnatural partner. Steven Bruhn and Natasha Hurley, in *The Queerness of Children* (2004), note, “There is currently a dominant narrative about children: children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions. At the same time, however, children are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual” (ix). If children are assumed to be heterosexual by default, then the onset of same-sex desire is synonymous with an automatic loss of childhood innocence, an often-uncomfortable thought both for adolescents grappling with their identities and for their parents. As Kokkola notes, adolescents experimenting sexually with same-sex partners are more likely to “focus on what it means to be gay or lesbian” (96) because they are taking on a permanent identity. While sexual experimentation in novels about heterosexual teens is presented as a metaphor for the transition into adulthood, in coming out novels, “the loss of virginity in same-sex relationships results in the character pondering on their identity: they ‘become’ gay or lesbian (i.e. a particular kind of adult) through this act in an even more marked way than heterosexual adolescents ‘become’ adults through sexual desire” (Kokkola 108). In other words, same-sex experimentation carries much more significant consequences than mere entry into adulthood. As Carin Rubenstein and Philip Shaver boldly assert in their 1974 study of intimacy and loneliness, “A person can’t really experience mature love or sex until he or she has an identity to share intimately with another person” (75). Molly Carman takes this sentiment even further, stating, “Even when love and sex are not at stake, it is still impossible to have genuine and honest interactions if the people involved do not have a clear sense of who they are” (37). This

news is dire for teens, heterosexual or otherwise, whose identities are still in flux or, at the most, very new. Trites contrasts heterosexual teen romances with their nonheterosexual counterparts: “Nonheterosexual teen romances employ a different set of ideologies that are meant to empower queer teenagers. Although novels about gay males and lesbians are often more different than they are alike, they share a tendency to address how teenagers are affected when they develop their sexuality oppressed because of their orientation” (*Disturbing the Universe* 102). As discussed previously, Erikson established long ago how critical the adolescent phase of development is to a teen’s understanding of his/her sexual identity, and adding the uncertainty of a queer sexual orientation only intensifies the magnitude of what sexually developing teens experience.

Will Grayson, Will Grayson contains what is probably Green’s most sexualized character in the form of nature called Tiny Cooper. Tiny is a six-foot, six-inch mountain on the football team who is also flamboyantly gay and prone to falling in and out of love “every hour on the hour” (4). His best friend, Will Grayson, the narrator, describes him as “the world’s largest person who is really, really gay, and also the world’s gayest person who is really, really large” (3). Tiny wears his sexuality like a badge of honor and frequently proclaims his smitten status in the hallways and classrooms at school, much to the mortification of Will, who everyone assumes is Tiny’s boy toy. Tiny’s friends, however, humor him and step up to defend him when necessary because his sincerity is clear. He declares, “I know love is real because I *feel* it” (5, emphasis in original). Their support still does not prevent them from slinging jabs such as “Tiny, you being a makeout whore is *so* not good for the cause [of the Gay Straight Alliance]” (7, emphasis in original). In addition to featuring Green’s most sexualized character, the novel also

focuses more on sexuality in general than his other works. Tiny, Will, their friend Jane, and a few of the other characters belong to their school's Gay Straight Alliance, and a major portion of the plot is devoted to their planning and development of a musical that Tiny has written about himself called *Tiny Dancer*. With a flamboyantly gay, boy-crazy character at the center of the action, the tone of the dialogue naturally skews towards the sexual, with characters teasing each other about who thinks who is attractive, who should date whom, and affectionately calling each other names like "prick," "cocksucker," and "vagina lover" (46), all of which is filtered through the first-person narration of a very uncomfortable Will, whose life motto consists of two rules: Don't care about anything and shut up.

In the shadow of Tiny's flamboyance, it is easy to overlook the identity crises of the other characters, which are just as critical to their development. In a Gay Straight Alliance meeting, Tiny is surprised to find out that one of the members, Jane, is actually straight, and he decides to ask her about it. "And she nods without looking up and then mumbles, 'I mean, I think so, anyway'" (45). She is questioning her sexuality and has sought a support system in the Gay Straight Alliance, a strategy which Green presents as perfectly valid. Jane is not alone in her search; Will has also recognized something which he thinks is abnormal regarding his own sexual identity. Tiny tries to set him up with Jane, but while Will thinks she is fun and relatively cute, he does not think he is interested in her romantically. He explains:

I realize this is not, like, boyish. I realize that properly speaking guys should only think about sex and the acquisition of it, and that they should only think they should run crotch-first toward every girl who likes them

and etc. But: The part I enjoy most is not the doing, but the noticing.

Noticing the way she smells like oversugared coffee, and the difference between her smile and her photographed smile, and the way she bites her lower lip, and the pale skin of her back. I just want the pleasure of noticing these things at a safe distance—I don't want to have to acknowledge that I am noticing. I don't want to *talk* about it or *do stuff* about it. (47, emphasis in original)

Previously, Will had insisted, “I’m not asexual. I’m a relationshipal” (42), but he still has his doubts. Will is motivated to question his sexual identity because, as he confesses above, he is not afflicted with the “boyish” impulse to “run crotch-first toward every girl” (47). He understands that society expects him, as a teenage boy, to be hypersexual, but because he has not yet shown particular interest in physical intimacy, his behavior appears to be asexual. Since he does eventually begin a romantic relationship with Jane which includes physical intimacy, he is not asexual after all, but his thoughts about the appreciation of beauty without romance can still articulate an asexual point of view for asexual readers searching for such language with which to express themselves. In the FAQ section about *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson* on his website, Green explains that having an asexual protagonist in one of his novels is not outside the realm of possibility. He says, “I just wanted sexual love to be one of the kinds of love—but only one—that was celebrated in the book. Thematically, I suppose this was important to me because I think both David [Levithan] and I wanted to normalize gay sexual encounters by equalizing them with straight sexual encounters.” So, with Tiny, Will, and Jane, we have a triad of protagonists who are experimenting with and defining their own sexual

identities, a theme which complements the alternating chapters written by Levithan in which a different will grayson in a different suburb of Chicago is depressed, closeted, and coming to terms with his newly discovered homosexuality.

Will and Tiny have a brief lapse in their friendship, which Will ends by confessing to Tiny that he, in fact, loves him, loves him in the way that longtime best friends love each other, a fact he had recently come to realize. Tiny's reaction is, of course, to ask Will if he is coming out as gay to him, and Will's response seems to sum up Green's perspective on the importance of sexual identity:

NO. No no no. I don't want to *screw* you. I just *love* you. When did who you want to screw become the whole game? Since when is the person you want to screw the only person you get to love? It's so stupid, Tiny! I mean, Jesus, who even gives a fuck about sex?! People act like it's the most important thing humans do, but come on. How can our sentient fucking lives revolve around something *slugs* can do? I mean, who you want to screw and whether you screw them? Those are important questions, I guess. But they're not *that* important. You know what's important? Who would you *die* for? (259, emphasis in original)

Green discusses this scene in the FAQ section about *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson* on his website and ponders the cultural oddity in America that prevents us from saying "I love you" to anyone besides our significant romantic partners. He then insists, "But for Tiny and Will, there is a need to say it, because I don't think either of them has really accepted that they love each other until they say it. It's a hard thing to accept, that your best friend is the most important person in your life, but for many of us, it's a reality, and one to be

celebrated.” Tiny’s perspective on his friendship with Will includes a call back to *An Abundance of Katherines*: “When you date someone, you have the markers along the way, right: You kiss, you have The Talk, you say the Three Little Words, you sit on a swing set and break up. *You can plot the points on a graph.* . . . But with friendship, there’s nothing like that. Being in a relationship, that’s something you choose. Being friends, that’s just something you are” (260, emphasis mine). Green here, through Tiny, is both referring back to Colin’s Theorem in *Katherines* and questioning its limitations. Colin plots romantic relationships with points on a graph, but could his theory be applied to friendships? Colin’s Theorem is ultimately proven inadequate by the end of that novel, so Tiny’s observation could be a way to expand its possibilities. Tiny is very confidently gay, but for Will, expressing love for his very gay best friend does not make him also gay, and he is still deciding if he is some degree of asexual by the end of the novel, even though he and Jane, who is also questioning, have shared an intimate kiss. More significant than their physical contact, however, is the insight the characters gain into their respective identities.

In addition to teens with nonheterosexual identities, Green also explores, and ultimately normalizes, the sexual experiences of teens with disabilities. Hazel’s best friend Kaitlyn in *The Fault in Our Stars* is a classic example of a high school girl who likes shopping and boys, and though we only see Hazel when she’s sick, the impression given is that Hazel would be like her if she were well. When Hazel is troubled by her own hesitance to allow Augustus to be romantically affectionate with her, she calls Kaitlyn to talk about it, and Kaitlyn is excited that her shy, sick friend has a “normal” teenage girl problem. As it turns out, Kaitlyn has actually met Augustus before: “Oh, my

God. I've seen him at parties. The things I would do to that boy. I mean, not now that I know you're interested in him. But, oh, sweet holy Lord, I would ride that one-legged pony all the way around the corral. . . . Do you think you'd have to be on top?" (94).

Augustus has only one leg as a result of his bone cancer, but that does not exempt him from being an object of Kaitlyn's sexual desire. Additionally, she does not understand what is holding Hazel back. She asks, "What were we talking about. Right, you and Augustus Waters. Maybe . . . are you gay?" (95), as if being gay is the only thing Kaitlyn can think of that would prevent Hazel from wanting to be with Augustus, not her physical illness. Hazel replies, "I don't think so? I mean, I definitely like him" (95). Her answer is not exactly a resounding denial, which reveals how little thought she has given to her sexual identity, which she had previously assumed was irrelevant or nonexistent.

The first time Hazel and Augustus broach the topic of sex, Augustus uses it for humor. Hazel has just informed him that her doctors do not think she is well enough to make the trip to Amsterdam to meet Peter Van Houten that Augustus had surprised her with. She reminds him that if she had gone before consulting the doctor, she could have ended up coming home as a corpse in the cargo hold. A lighthearted flirtation follows, probably Hazel's first. Augustus jokes:

"But before that, my grand romantic gesture would have totally gotten me laid."

I laughed pretty hard, hard enough that I felt where the chest tube had been.

"You laugh because it's true," he said.

I laughed again.

“It’s true, isn’t it!”

“Probably not,” I said, and then after a moment added, “although you never know.”

He moaned in misery. “I’m gonna die a virgin,” he said.

“You’re a virgin?” I asked, surprised.

“Hazel Grace,” he said, “do you have a pen and a piece of paper?” I said I did. “Okay, please draw a circle.” I did. “Now draw a smaller circle within that circle.” I did. “The larger circle is virgins. The smaller circle is seventeen-year-old guys with one leg.”

I laughed again, and told him that having most of your social engagements occur at a children’s hospital also did not encourage promiscuity. (118-119)

As playful as the interaction is, it foreshadows more serious encounters to come. It also reveals that even teens with severe bodily injury and disease experience sexual desire and the awkwardness that comes with it at that age. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green explains that Hazel and Augustus are stuck in an “in-between space” like all teenagers, but because they are sick, their in-between space is different: “They are similar to other teenagers, but they’re also similar to old people in an important way (i.e., they are not allowed the luxury of feeling that life is a thing that will just go on forever).” He then pointedly adds, “I also wanted to acknowledge that sick and disabled people are still sexual people, and that there’s nothing wrong with their sexuality.” Back at their hotel, Hazel and Augustus decide to go to Augustus’s room together. When they exit the elevator, Augustus hesitates, and Hazel thinks it is because

he is trying to think of a way not to “hook up” (206) with her. Actually, he is nervous about her seeing his leg stump, but she interrupts him with an “Oh, get over yourself” (206). The whole encounter is punctuated with innocent moments—they crawl into his bed and get undressed under the covers where everything is still hidden from view; they are momentarily sidetracked when Hazel’s breathing tubes get tangled with her clothes; Hazel is self-conscious that her bra and underwear do not match; there are “a lot of condomy problems” (207). Perhaps the most significant aspect of their time together is how positively the passion between two teens with disabilities is depicted. He makes her feel completely comfortable about her breathing tubes, and she places her hand on his leg stump while telling him “You’re so hot” (207). He jokes, “I’m starting to think you have an amputee fetish,” to which she replies, “I have an Augustus Waters fetish” (207). Besides the complications from their disabilities, their sex is rather conventional: “The whole affair was the precise opposite of what I figured it would be: slow and patient and quiet and neither particularly painful nor particularly ecstatic. . . . No headboards were broken. No screaming. Honestly, it was probably the longest time we’d ever spent together without talking” (207-208). One of the precepts of the Youth Lens is that “*Adolescence Is Not a Universal Experience*” (509, emphasis in original). Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis argue that viewing adolescence as a universal experience is dangerous in that it “strips away context in locating and making sense of people’s experiences” (509). This statement is specifically in reference to the experiences of immigrants, working class, and other nonmainstream adolescents, which often do not reflect the “particular raced, classed, and gendered norms that undergird contemporary commonsense ideas of adolescence” (510). However, these ideas are also useful when

considering the experiences of teenagers with alternative sexualities and disabilities. Green notes in the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website that he is commonly asked about Hazel and Augustus's ability to have sex considering their physical disabilities: "First, people with all kinds of disabilities can and do have sex. Secondly, despite what I guess you are seeing in porn or in the movies, sexual intercourse does not have to be a particularly aerobic activity. . . . Thirdly, I don't know how y'all are doing it, but it's not that challenging." He is being humorous, but his answer also validates and recognizes as normal the sexual encounters between people with disabilities. Additionally, his third point normalizes adolescent sexuality in general with his casual assumption that his readers are having sex of some kind.

Conclusion

Green, in response to an interviewer's question about the sexual content in *Looking for Alaska*, observes: "People get upset about sex. I think that sexuality is an important facet of ethics. But too often sexual ethics become a stand-in for a comprehensive system of ethics. It is fine and good to say that you won't (or will) have sex before you get married, but that's not the most important question you're going to have to answer in life" (Barkdoll and Scherff 69-70). Indeed, depictions of teenagers having sex have traditionally either been met with discomfort and even anger or used as cautionary tales to instruct teen readers about the pitfalls of participating in sex too early. Kokkola sums up the seeming impasse: "Adolescents are deemed to be non-adult because they do not engage in adult behaviour, but if they do engage in adult behaviour, that behaviour is deemed deviant and therefore non-adult" (37). She also states that adults

often “privilege adulthood as a period of balanced maturity” (6), and she finds such privileging inaccurate in that all of life’s phases offer unique challenges; adulthood is not the peaceful paradise that adolescents are often promised. Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis add, “Moreover, if age-based and developmentalist expectations delineate conventional timelines for youth, nothing disrupts those timelines like depictions of youth as sexual beings” (515-516), and Trites concurs: “Realistically speaking, we live in a society that objectifies teen sexuality, at once glorifying and idealizing it while also stigmatizing and repressing it” (*Disturbing the Universe* 95). She suggests that the repressive Western ideology regarding sex that is present in many YA novels actually proves that “sexuality is a locus of power for adolescents. If it were not, adults would feel no need to regulate teenagers’ sexuality” (95-96). From his first novel on, Green has recognized the importance of respectful, candid treatment of adolescent sexuality, repeatedly privileging emotional and intellectual connections over mere physical experimentation. As Trites has proven, it is difficult to write about adolescent sexuality without resorting to didactic preaching, but Green manages it. His teenagers are awkward and self-conscious about their bodies but also honest and vulnerable (in the best way) with each other as they discover their sexual identities and seek out meaningful connections.

CHAPTER V: RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

In a 2000 article in *The Five Owls*, Gary Schmidt declared that religion is “the last taboo” (25) in the field of children’s literature, and, indeed, the topics of religion and spirituality are discussed in scholarship less frequently than other, more popular topics such as sexuality, gender identity, and psychological development. That is not to say, however, that adolescent religion and spirituality are ignored completely. Naomi Wood notes in her introduction to a special “Children’s Literature and Religion” issue of the *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* in 1999 that “religion in children’s literature functions as a mechanism of social ordering” (1). Similarly, Roberta Trites, in *Disturbing the Universe* (2000), views religion, specifically organized religion, as yet another exercise of social power: “Schools and organized religion are also institutions that work actively to mold the adolescent into appropriate degrees of power within a culture” (xii). She further observes, “Children and adolescents taught to believe in the omnipotence of an unseen patriarchal deity who must be obeyed are indeed receiving ideological training that represses them” (41). In Trites’s view, religion is one tool used by adults to manipulate adolescents into submission, but formal religious practice is not the only element to consider. The conversation about adolescent spiritual development covers a broad spectrum of ideas, from the rites of specific religions on one end to more general considerations of ethics and morality on the other. Maria Nikolajeva, in *Reading for Learning* (2014), at one point asks, “Can children’s literature be ethically neutral?” (178). She explains, “Most children’s books that pose ethical questions, explicitly or implicitly,

come with ready-made answers. In the majority of cases, there is a mouthpiece providing readers with guidance towards an ethically acceptable position” (181). The common denominator in all of these views is the suggestion that religious and spiritual themes in children’s literature represent an adult perspective and adult motives.

John Green’s spirituality is well documented in posts on his website, in Vlogbrothers YouTube videos, and in *Dear Hank and John* podcast episodes. In a blog post from September 23, 2008, Green reveals his undeniable spirituality: “I don’t talk about it very often, but I’m a religious person. In fact, before I became a writer, I wanted to be a minister. There is a certain branch of Christianity that has so effectively hijacked the word ‘Christian’ that I feel uncomfortable sometimes using it to describe myself. But I am a Christian” (qtd. in Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame 6). As previously discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation, Green worked briefly as a chaplain in a children’s hospital, during which time he made the decision to become a writer specifically for teenagers (Barkdoll and Scherff 68). His first effort, *Looking for Alaska*, earned him critical acclaim, the coveted Printz Award, and a near brush with censorship.¹ Green has, perhaps unexpectedly, referred to *Alaska* as “Christian fiction” in that it is a story “about the kind of forgiveness that happens even though it is not possible” (Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame 6). He also claims—uncomfortable as the notion might seem to literary purists—that all fiction should and does teach the reader lessons. He says, “I’m trying to preach in my books—because A. all my favorite books teach and preach without doing so professedly, and B. writing can’t be apolitical anyway” (6). He has succeeded in weaving

¹ See the previous chapter for a discussion of the school board hearing which almost resulted in *Looking for Alaska*’s being banned in Depew, New York.

a thread of spirituality throughout his novels and online presence. Thomson-Deveaux calls him “kind of a preacher for the Internet” and says, “There is something undeniably charismatic about Green’s demeanor, and his message—if not explicitly religious—inspires devotion” (Malone and Thomson-Deveaux 78). Contrary to the views of the scholars mentioned above, Green’s spirituality is more accurately described as tolerant and approachable rather than manipulative and oppressive.

Even when not explicitly thematic or narratively pertinent, Green’s religious background bleeds through into the language of his characters. Miles in *Looking for Alaska* notes, “I’d never been born again with the baptism and weeping and all that, but it couldn’t feel much better than being born again as a guy with no known past” (8). Then, after a couple of weeks of torrential downpour finally stops, Miles observes, “So this is how Noah felt. You wake up one morning and God has forgiven you and you walk around squinting all day because you’ve forgotten how sunlight feels warm and rough on your skin like a kiss on the cheek from your dad” (71). Keun, the lucky Waffle House employee whose restaurant is invaded by cheerleaders in “A Cheertastic Christmas Miracle,” calls his friends to tell them about it, and he uses religiously symbolic language to describe the “Miracle” in the title: “The good and loving Lord Almighty looked kindly upon His servant Keun and saw fit to usher fourteen Pennsylvania cheerleaders—*wearing their warm-up outfits*—into our lowly Waffle House. . . . Let me be perfectly clear: there has been a Cheertastic Christmas Miracle at the Waffle House” (129, emphasis in original). Keun’s use of reverent language here is played for humor but still reveals Green’s familiarity and comfort with this kind of speech. Similarly, in *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel wakes up in the middle of the night after she texts Augustus that she cannot

be romantic with him because of her realization that she is a grenade. What awakens her is an earth-shattering pain in her head, and on the way to the hospital, she gets existential about the pain: “The only solution was to try to unmake the world, to make it black and silent and uninhabited again, to return to the moment before the Big Bang, in the beginning when there was the Word, and to live in that vacuous uncreated space alone with the Word” (106). Hazel, Green’s most decidedly atheistic character, still reverts to biblical phraseology when in debilitating pain. Finally, Aza in *Turtles All the Way Down* uses language from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians in the Bible—“love that is kind and patient, that does not envy or boast, that beareth all things and believeth all things and endureth all things” (*Turtles* 13)—to describe her special love for her car, Harold. In none of these examples is Green specifically commenting on adolescent spirituality, but rather he is illustrating how intricately biblical language is woven into the vernacular of the general public that it often slips into secular situations.

Adolescent Spirituality

In their chapter in *The Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (2009), Pamela Ebsteyne King and Robert W. Roeser note that adolescent spirituality has been a relatively neglected topic in top-tier adolescent psychology journals, with fewer than 2% of articles since 1990 referencing the terms “religion,” “religious development,” “spirituality,” or “spiritual development” (435). “These searches document that religion and spirituality are still rare topics of inquiry in the field of developmental science” (435), but the appearance of several recent special topics issues tackling the topic in prominent developmental journals seems to indicate an increasing interest. Additionally, a few key

texts, such as Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al.'s *Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (2006) and Elizabeth M. Dowling and George M. Scarlett's *Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (2006), have legitimized the topic among developmental psychologists.

Internationally conducted studies have established two key findings about worldwide religious participation: 1) A majority of people across all cultures grant religion/spirituality a central role in their lives, and 2) among the nations of the developed world, the United States “stands out as one of the most religious” (King and Roeser 436). King and Roeser note that American adults exhibit a “great fluidity” (437) regarding religious affiliations, and they cite a Pew Forum study from 2007 which found that 28% of American adults leave the religion of their childhood either to convert to another religion or none at all. This result does not include people in Protestant religions who have switched churches or denominations, which, when included, bring the rate up to 44%. They also note that 84-87% of American youth are affiliated with some kind of religion, with 75% identifying as Christian (King and Roeser 437), but these percentages do seem to be decreasing. This large majority of religious adolescents in the United States leads King and Roeser to assume the importance of increased research endeavors analyzing “the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of adolescents” while simultaneously “allowing for the possibility in such research that in fact religion/spirituality plays little to no role in the development of some youth” (438).

A key point of distinction in this discussion is between the terms “religion” and “spirituality,” about which there has been some debate. The *Handbook of Religion and Health* (2001) defines religion as “an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and

symbols that serve (a) to facilitate individuals' closeness to the sacred or transcendent other (i.e. God, higher power, ultimate truth) and (b) to bring about an understanding of an individual's relationship and responsibility to others living together in community," while it contrastingly defines spirituality as "a personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community" (Koenig et al. 18). Schmidt adds that "the spiritual experience is one of mystery rather than certainty" (25). Essentially, the difference comes down to community—in that religion is structural and corporate while spirituality is personal, and also to deity—in that the higher power pursued by spiritual individuals is often more abstract than the named gods of various religions. Furthermore, under these definitions, a person can identify as both religious and spiritual, as the majority of people do (King and Roeser 441), but a minority of people do consider themselves merely spiritual without ties to an organized religion.

Participation in a religion has long been a consideration for developmental psychologists. Freud viewed religion as a "universal obsessional neurosis" (43) which is a carryover from the infantile attachment phase, defined by a need for love and security. Proponents of the Object Relations Theory, such as Ana-Marie Rizzuto, built upon Freud's concept of religion as an "opiate" by describing personal representations of God as "transitional objects" derived from childhood relationships with parental figures and used to ease development and to take the place of parents in providing security and comfort, especially in times of stress or change. King and Roeser note that one such time of stress and change in an individual's development is adolescence and "its suite of

biopsychosocial changes. Evidence shows that many young people in the United States and around the world report relationships with God (Gallup, 1999) and that as distance from parents increase, intimacy with God increases” (441). Another psychological conception of religion is as a coping system through which individuals assign meaning to their lives and the world. King and Roeser observe, “Religions provide individuals with meaning-enhancing capabilities in the face of unexplainable events by providing individuals with a ready set of religious attributions for such purposes—God’s grace, karma, sin, salvation, and so on” (443). Under this system, individuals give God, karma, or some other higher power credit for positive events and assume a larger purpose is in place for hardships. King and Roeser conclude, “Such a system, if proven to exist, would have significant implications for religious and spiritual development during adolescence, insofar as identity development and questions about purpose and existence become focal during these years” (444). In other words, if the existence of God were proven, then an important psychological function of adolescence—assigning meaning to the meaningless and learning to cope—would become obsolete.

Yet another way of conceptualizing religion and spirituality is as a contributing factor to cognitive development. Erik Erikson considered a person’s religious development to be intrinsically linked with his/her identity development.² In *Childhood and Society* (1950), he places much emphasis on the developmental significance of religion and spirituality. His theory of development is based on the completion of certain tasks, the accomplishment of which moves individuals on into the next phase of

² Psychologist Saul McCloud notes that Erikson’s theory of psychosocial stages of development functions more as a “descriptive overview of human social and emotional development that does not adequately explain how or why this development occurs” (n.p.) than it does as a testable theory.

development, and he viewed adolescence as a time for reexamining, revisiting, and renegotiating resolved tasks from earlier stages—such as trust vs. mistrust and autonomy vs. shame and doubt—in an effort to explore and solidify identity. Out of these renegotiations come an adolescent's opinions about faith, hope, morality, and the image of God. Continuing this idea is Fowler's Faith Development Theory, a comprehensive theory developed in 1981 by Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory James Fowler, which is a stage-structure theory³ significantly influenced by developmental theorists like Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson, in which Fowler identifies six stages of the development of faith throughout one's life, from birth through adulthood. Fowler's Stage 3, "Synthetic-Conventional Faith," occurs during adolescence. Fowler suggested that religion's role is "to give purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions" (14) and posited that religious development is directly linked to cognitive development; therefore, individuals' ability to interact with the divine is based on their ability to understand higher order thinking concepts, so adolescence is consequently a time of significant spiritual awakening.

A natural evolution of spiritual development is one's self-identity moving beyond the individual to the community. King and Roeser describe the significance of the development of a "collective religious identity":

Self-identification with a particular religious group; the meaning of that identification to the person in terms of his or her representations of self, world, life purpose, and the (prescribed) good life; the centrality of the

³ A theory of development which divides the human life cycle into separate stages based on various behaviors and attitudes.

identification to a person's overall sense of identity; and shared religious practices and the nature and number of social bonds with group members are all key substantive aspects of a *collective religious identity*.

Functionally, collective religious identities fulfill individuals' basic needs for meaning and purpose, social belonging, esteem, self-understanding, transcendence, and contribution to something greater than the self through organized cultural forms. (449, emphasis in original)

As a challenge to the limiting universality of stage-structural theories, more recent theorists have embraced the Developmental Systems Theory approach⁴, which “shifts the focus from individuals to transactions between individuals and their various embedded sociocultural contexts of development” and focuses on the “roles of plasticity, context, and developmental regulation” (King and Roeser 450). Within this approach, religious and spiritual development “is best characterized by the transactions between individuals and their various embedded contexts over time, as well as the fit of the developmental affordances of those contexts with the salient developmental needs of adolescents” (451). In 1968, Erikson posited that adolescents who have “successfully resolved the identity crisis gain a sense of fidelity—a sense of loyalty to an ideology that engages the young person in the world beyond themselves” (King and Roeser 451). This approach to spirituality moves beyond the pursuit of personal transcendence and the understanding of a higher power, instead framing it in the context of community, caring for others, and

⁴ An umbrella theory which includes scientific and philosophical approaches to development in addition to psychological ones. In 2001, Susan Oyama, Russell D. Gray, and Paul E. Griffiths outlined six themes of Developmental Systems Theory in their book *Cycles of Contingency: Developmental Systems and Evolution*.

making the world generally better. King and Roeser warn, however, that this development of corporate faith during adolescence sometimes manifests in destructive ways, such as religious cults or the Hitler Youth movement of World War II.

A key element in adolescents' spiritual development is their interpersonal relationships, though an insufficient amount of research has been conducted to explore those connections further. Mark D. Regnerus, Christian Smith, and Brad Smith note in an article in *Applied Developmental Science* in 2004 that "Social scientists know more about which American teenagers are religiously active than how they got to be that way. We know less about the social environment in which religious development occurs, apart from the parent-child relationship" (27). Regarding the importance of parents to the religious and spiritual development of teenagers, King and Roeser add, "Parents are posited to be key interpreters of religion for young people, and parental beliefs and practices are thought to provide the foundation for young people's development of their own religious beliefs and practices" (452). Furthermore, the quality and nature of parent-child relationships have been shown to influence the child's views of spirituality, but regardless of teenagers' relationships with their parents, evidence seems to insist that adolescence is a time for religious and spiritual questioning, searching, and doubting. Part of solidifying one's identity and becoming an adult is making decisions about spiritual pursuits and religious commitments, decisions which are often influenced by family, friends, and community leaders. As King and Roeser observe, "Adolescence is a particularly important time in which cultural influences in the shaping of the religious and spiritual development of young people 'show through' in the forms of rituals and ceremonies marking the transition from child to adult status in the eyes of the religious

community” (455). In Eriksonian terms, religion in particular is “an important institution in the promotion of fidelity during adolescence—defined as commitment and loyalty to an ideology” (King and Roeser 457). Because youth are already searching for meaning and striving to find their place in the world, the pursuit of spiritually meaningful relationships presents them with a stable context for their developing value system and “a structural framework of normative beliefs and values that reinforce their existing belief system” (King and Roeser 458). During this process, adolescents, such as those represented by the teenagers in Green’s novels, begin expanding their worldviews by seeking big answers to big questions.

Contemplating the Big Questions

As King and Roeser observe, “Adolescence, with its characteristic changes in thinking and feeling, is a prime time for young people to be exposed to, and engaged in, dialogue about ideas and philosophies bearing on ultimate existential questions of identity, purpose, and meaning” (469). In *Looking for Alaska*, Green treats this questioning phase with reverence and respect, assuming that both his teenage characters and readers are mature enough and intelligent enough to confront such topics as suffering, hope, and forgiveness. In the FAQ section about the novel on his website, he reveals, “If I were to teach [*Looking for Alaska*], I would ask: What is the point of death? and What is the point of literature? and In an essentially and irreparably broken world, is there cause for hope? That is not really much of a lesson plan, though.” On the contrary, these questions are the ultimate lesson plan for life.

An underlying structural thread weaving through *Alaska* is Miles's World Religions class at Culver Creek with his professor, Dr. Hyde, whom the students lovingly refer to as "the Old Man." Hyde's lesson plan involves studying three major religious traditions each year, the ones for the first year being Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. Hyde and his course are plucked from Green's own college experiences at Kenyon College. Christine Poolos explains that "Green modeled the Old Man in *Looking for Alaska* after Kenyon religion professor Don Rogan" (20), and in the FAQ section about the novel on his website, Green discusses the importance of Rogan's classes to the novel's underlying spiritual theme:

I could never have written this book without the religion classes I took in college, and the theology/philosophy/worldview/whatever at the core of the book comes directly from conversations I had with Don Rogan, my mentor and professor at Kenyon. Even in private conversations, I was never quite sure what Rogan believed, but he was very interested in formulations of what is called radical hope—the belief that hope is available to all people at all times—possibly even including the dead.

At a time when Green was formulating his own world view, Rogan's influence was invaluable, and Hyde fills a similar role for Miles. In her thesis about spirituality in *Alaska*, Barb Dean observes that Hyde emphasizes curiosity, and "by choosing to present religion within such a framework, Green links it to the search for meaning" (24). She then pinpoints the specific quality of Hyde's class which resonates with teens on a spiritual quest: "The World Religions class is the impetus that leads Pudge to move beyond, or bridge his insistence on finding answers and move slowly towards an

acceptance of what seems senseless” (26). The Old Man inspires his students to embark unselfconsciously on a search for meaning, and in the scenes set in the World Religions class, “Green offers a meaning-centred [sic], rather than a rule-centred, depiction of [various] systems of belief. In doing so, he also connects the spiritual aspect of being human, which has been the exclusive territory for ‘meaning making,’ to religion. More importantly, in taking up the search for meaning, Green thematizes the ways in which we seek the significance or purpose of life” (Dean 15). Hyde inspires Miles, an average student at best, to spend his free periods reading about religion and learning about previously foreign concepts such as the nuanced meaning of “myth” and its importance to what is and has been considered sacred by generations of people worldwide. Miles explains, “In those fifty minutes, the Old Man made me take religion seriously. I’d never been religious, but he told us that religion is important whether or not *we* believed in one, in the same way that historical events are important whether or not you personally lived through them” (33, emphasis in original). This intellectualization of religion gives the students the freedom to read deeply and widely and to question freely under the supervision of a mentor they trust.

Hyde tells the class well in advance of the end of the first semester that their final exam will consist of one question: “What is the most important question human beings must answer?” (70). He advises them to consider their question carefully and then to discuss how the three religions they have been studying would attempt to answer their question. Alaska considers focusing her essay on suffering, claiming, “Suffering is universal. It’s the one thing Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims are all worried about” (82). According to Alaska’s worldview, all human beings are just trying to survive, and

eventually escape, the labyrinth, but Alaska seems particularly attuned to the pain and suffering which transcend religious divides. As Dean observes, “Green uses the World Religions class to introduce the inescapable truth that the only way out of suffering is to enter fully into it. As Dr. Hyde tells the students, everyone, at some point in their lives, loses their way due to suffering and feels as though they are in a maze. Hyde thereby highlights the universality of suffering” (32). Miles comes to the realization that we are all on the same path headed to the same destination. He thinks, “*We are all going . . .* and it applies to turtles and turtlenecks, Alaska the girl and Alaska the place, because nothing can last, not even the earth itself” (196, emphasis in original). In honor of Alaska, and because she had been so interested in the idea of universal suffering, Hyde assigns her question as the second semester final exam: “How will you—you personally—ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?” (215). Miles has a difficult time deciding what to write, and, thankfully, the meaning of suffering is not where his search ultimately ends.

After Alaska’s death, Miles does for a while become preoccupied with suffering in an attempt to understand Alaska more fully, but the novel ends with him instead focused on hope and forgiveness. In his final exam essay, Miles explains that Alaska had felt guilty about freezing up with fear as a child and letting her mother die from an aneurism, much like the guilt Miles feels for letting Alaska leave the dorm upset and drunk, but the final hope offered by death is that mistakes like that are forgiven. He writes, “I know now that she forgives me for being dumb and scared and doing the dumb and scared thing. I know she forgives me, just as her mother forgives her. . . . I know she forgives me, just as I forgive her” (219, 221). In response to a question about the ending

of *Alaska* in the FAQ section about the novel on his website, Green ponders how the kinds of big questions we often ask can be answered meaningfully through forgiveness:

The truth is that in our lives we are all going to encounter questions that should be answered, that deserve to be answered, and yet prove unanswerable. Can we find meaning to life without those answers? Can we find a way to acknowledge the reality (and injustice) of suffering without giving in to hopelessness? Those are the questions I think Miles is confronting at the end, and I wanted to argue that through forgiveness, it is possible to live a full and hopeful life—even if our world is saturated with injustice and loss.

Being confronted with overwhelming suffering too often leads to crippling hopelessness, as it does for Alaska, but Miles, and even the Colonel to some extent, are able to transcend the suffering and move on to hope. Further down in that same section about *Alaska* on his website, Green reveals the spiritual point of view in Miles's essay: "And the argument that Pudge makes at the very end of the book, that he believes Alaska forgives him is a pretty aggressively theistic thing for Pudge to say." As previously mentioned, Green has referred to *Looking for Alaska* as "Christian fiction" in the sense that "the core Christian values—radical hope, universal forgiveness are the core values of the book's final chapter" (Malone and Thomson-Deveaux 79). Ultimate, unconditional forgiveness is, after all, the hope of the Christian Gospel, so Miles's decision to choose hope and forgiveness in the face of tragedy and pain indicates a decidedly spiritual point of view.

In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin and Hassan confront big spiritual questions about moral relativism and finding balance in religious ritual. Colin frequently uses Hassan's religion both to tease him lightheartedly and to gently goad him into action. For example, Hassan's reluctance to register for college confuses and frustrates Colin. He sees it as a wasteful squandering of God-given potential: "What is the point of being alive if you don't at least try to do something remarkable? How very odd, to believe God gave you life, and yet not think that life asks more of you than watching TV" (33). Doing "something remarkable" with his life is Colin's obsession, and he dangles Hassan's beliefs in front of his face to try to inspire his friend to adopt the same goal. Colin also teases Hassan about never having a girlfriend, but Hassan claims that he is not interested in dating any girl he is not going to marry because that would be *haram*, which is Arabic for "forbidden in Islam" (86).⁵ Colin counters that Hassan frequently does things that are considered *haram*, but Hassan seems to have a system for deciding which things are truly bad and which are negotiable. He explains, "Yeah, but the *haram* shit I do is, like, having a dog. It's not like smoking crack or talking behind people's backs or stealing or lying to my mom or fugging girls" (87). Colin deems Hassan's system to be "moral relativism," to which Hassan replies, "No it's not. I don't think God gives a shit if we have a dog or if a woman wears shorts. I think He gives a shit about whether you're a good person" (87). King and Roeser note, "Specifically, a process that shapes RSD [religious and spiritual development] during adolescence involves patterns of participation in spiritual practices" (461), i.e. prayer, meditation, fasting, and other dietary restrictions, such as Hassan's

⁵ This is the basic definition of *haram* which Green provides in a footnote in the novel, but the concept of *haram* is actually much more complicated in practice.

avoidance of actions that are considered *haram* in Islam. Hassan's navigation of the rituals of his religion, which Colin calls "moral relativism," is in fact an important aspect of adolescent spiritual development.

Consuming alcohol is also considered *haram*, so when Hassan comes home from a night out with their new Gutshot friends and admits to sharing a beer with Lindsey, Colin feels vindicated and calls him out on it:

"See, drinking is *haram*. I told you, you do *haram* shit all the time."

"Yeah, well, when in Gutshot, do as the Gutshotians do."

"Your religious commitment is an inspiration to us all," Colin deadpanned.

"Come on. Don't make me feel guilty. I split a beer with Lindsey. I didn't feel anything. It's really *getting drunk* that's *haram*, not *drinking half a beer*." (110, emphasis in original)

Hassan's defensive dismissal of his meager alcohol consumption is another instance of the moral relativism Colin mentioned earlier. In the FAQ section about *An Abundance of Katherines* on his website, Green explains: "Drinking alcohol is unambiguously haram, and by having him drink, I wanted to point out that religious faith and practice exists on a continuum: Many Muslims don't pray five times a day. Many Muslims drink alcohol. Many Jews don't keep kosher. These narrow definitions of religiosity don't hold up, at least not to Hassan." Green seems to be confirming Colin's assessment of Hassan's approach to *haram* activities as moral relativism while simultaneously defending Hassan's negotiation with his religion's requirements as a healthy, natural part of religious participation.

The significance of having a major Muslim character in a YA novel should not be overlooked. In response to a question on his website about why he chose to give Colin a Muslim best friend, Green discusses what he considers to be the important function of Hassan's character in the novel:

I wanted to write a character to counter Colin, so [sic] who was thoughtful and religious without being dogmatic. Also, I'd studied the Islamic world in college and had a number of Muslim friends in high school and college. I guess I chose to make Hassan a Muslim because I felt like I wasn't seeing enough Muslim characters in novels, and like the ones I did see were defined entirely by their faith, when in fact "Muslim" is, for most Muslims, one identity among many. (One can be a Muslim and a feminist and a nerdfighter and an American and so on.) So I wanted to write a character who was faithful, and thoughtful about his religiosity, but not someone who was dominated by it—this in contrast to Colin, who is dominated by the identity of "child prodigy."

When Hassan comes home after having his first kiss with a girl Colin does not approve of, Colin once again uses Hassan's religion as a way to criticize him, even though it is just an excuse and not the real reason Colin is upset. Colin incredulously asks, "Wait, you think the bottle [from spin the bottle] staying still in the truck was a miracle? . . . And God wouldn't lead you to kiss a girl unless you were supposed to marry her, so *God* wants you to marry the girl who believed I was a Frenchman suffering from hemorrhoidal Tourette's [referring to an earlier incident]?" (129, emphasis in original). Colin is being cruel, and Hassan, unamused, tells him, "Don't be an asshole," to which Colin snidely

responds, “I’m just surprised that Mr. High and Mighty Religious is fugging around with girls in the back of a pickup truck, that’s all” (129). Because Hassan is Muslim, he is not supposed to have a romantic relationship with anyone except for the woman he is committed to marrying. Colin has been shown thus far in the novel as approaching Hassan’s religious practices with lighthearted teasing that is simultaneously irreverent and respectful, a paradox made possible by his and Hassan’s singular personalities and friendship. Colin’s sudden serious treatment of the requirements of Islam and his criticism of Hassan’s lack of piety contradicts the symbiosis they had established as a non-practicing Jewish kid and a reasonably devout Muslim kid who are best friends. Moreover, because Colin’s criticism is so out of character, Hassan recognizes it as a placeholder for Colin’s underlying jealousy of Hassan’s new friends and frustration with his own inability to finish the Theorem, so he is not offended, nor is his confidence in his spirituality affected. On the contrary, he is demonstrating a true connection to his spirituality in that he is able to see past Colin’s insult and offer him understanding and forgiveness, an act he would likely be incapable of if not for his faith.

Besides Colin, who reminds Hassan that God gave him life and, consequently, a purpose, many of the characters in Green’s other novels also ponder the notion that some higher power is guiding their actions and giving their lives direction. In *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson*, the two Will Graysons, whose stories had been progressing side-by-side but separately, eventually do meet in person in a seedy Chicago porn store through a complete coincidence, and Levithan’s will is convinced it must “mean something” (114). Green’s Will is not so sure: “Are you suggesting that God brought two of Chicagoland’s underage Will Graysons into Frenchy’s at the same time?” (114). When will, dismissing

the God notion, still persists that there is some kind of meaning in their coincidental meeting, Will admits: “Yeah . . . It’s hard to believe in coincidence, but it’s even harder to believe in anything else” (114). His response is not a resounding denial of divine intervention, but it does reveal that he is participating in the questioning phase so crucial to adolescent spiritual development. Similarly, in *The Fault in Our Stars*, when Hazel goes to Augustus’s house for the first time, she notices that the place is heavily decorated with clichéd motivational phrases that Augustus’s parents call “Encouragements,” such as “Family is Forever” (27) and “Good Friends Are Hard to Find and Impossible to Forget” (26). Based on these decorations, his parents are clearly sentimental, but Augustus’s dad reveals that they are spiritual as well when he says, “In the darkest days, the Lord puts the best people into your life” (28). His mentioning of “the Lord” reveals his belief that divine intervention had brought Hazel and Augustus into each other’s lives for a reason. Bafflingly, there appears to be nothing overtly religious or even spiritual in another of Green’s novels, *Paper Towns*. The absence of spirituality in the novel is both significant and also confusing within the larger context of Green’s body of work because there *is* talk amongst the adolescent characters about death, suicide, and what the point of life is. As Molly Carman notes, “No one has been able to show Margo how her life can have meaning or purpose; no one has shown her how education can be edifying or enriching, or how a career can be fulfilling, or how a house can be a home” (9). Margo feels a sort of emptiness and the urge to go searching for something, sentiments which are often precursors of a spiritual awakening, but such an awakening conspicuously never comes in the novel. Green repeatedly cycles back to big questions about the meaning of life, suffering, purpose, and divine intervention in his novels, and in response to a

question about freewill in the FAQ section about *Looking for Alaska* on his website, he vows: “I can’t answer that question here. I will keep trying to write stories that poke at that question from various angles, though, and hopefully together we’ll learn more about whether the fault is in our stars or in ourselves.”

Conceptions of God

A significant aspect of adolescent spiritual development is establishing an idea of who God is and what He is capable of or, more abstractly, what characteristics are associated with a particular higher power. Green’s teenagers discuss God explicitly in a few of his novels, sometimes humorously, as in *An Abundance of Katherines*—“The following Thursday, Colin woke up to the sounds of the rooster mixed with Hassan’s prayers. . . . ‘Is there a way you could pray *less loudly*? I mean, shouldn’t God be able to hear you even if you whisper?’” (117, emphasis in original)—but more often his characters consider the personhood of God more earnestly, namely in *Looking for Alaska* and *The Fault in Our Stars*.

In *Alaska*, ideas about the characteristics of various deities are presented almost exclusively by the Old Man, Professor Hyde, in his World Religions class. In one lecture, he abruptly transitions with the statement, “Now, about this Jesus fellow” (70). Miles then recounts Hyde’s lecture about the Gospel of Mark, which Miles “hadn’t read until the day before, although I was a Christian. I guess, I’d been to church, uh, like four times. Which is more frequently than I’d been to a mosque or a synagogue” (70). Although Miles considers himself a Christian by default, Hyde’s class is the first opportunity he has taken to study the Bible or to learn information about Jesus Christ. Hyde tells them about

first-century Roman coins displaying the image of Emperor Augustus with the inscription, “*Filius Dei*. The Son of God” (70). He then explains the significance of this detail:

We are speaking . . . of a time in which gods had sons. It was not so unusual to be a son of God. The miracle, at least in that time and in that place, was that *Jesus*—a peasant, a Jew, a nobody in an empire ruled exclusively by somebodies—was the son of *that* God, the all-powerful God of Abraham and Moses. That God’s son was not an emperor. Not even a trained rabbi. A peasant and a Jew. A nobody like you. While the Buddha was special because he abandoned his wealth and noble birth to seek enlightenment, Jesus was special because he lacked wealth and noble birth, but inherited the ultimate nobility: King of Kings. (71, emphasis in original)

Hyde talks comfortably and familiarly about Jesus as a man, which is perhaps the first time some or all of the students in his class had heard Jesus discussed in such a casual manner. Toward the end of the school year, Hyde reviews the founders of the three major religions they have been studying all year—Muhammad for Islam, Jesus for Christianity, and the Buddha for Buddhism—and he concludes that these seemingly disparate faiths have a similar message: “I believe we must finally conclude that each brought a message of radical hope” (215). He then elaborates: “To seventh-century Arabia, Muhammad brought the promise that anyone could find fulfillment and everlasting life through allegiance to the one true God. The Buddha held out hope that suffering could be transcended. Jesus brought the message that the last shall be first, that even the tax

collectors and lepers—the outcasts—had cause for hope” (215-216). Rather than pit these believe systems, and their respective founders, against each other, Hyde encourages his students to examine each one on equal footing. The result is that he gives his students like Miles, who are developing their own worldviews, the necessary tools and support to come to spiritual maturity in a healthy, informed way.

In *The Fault in Our Stars*, the terminally ill teens at the novel’s center often contemplate the nature of God using morbid humor. Hazel and Augustus’s support group meets in the basement of an Episcopal church that is shaped like a cross. The place where the group sits is in the middle of the cross, right where Jesus’s heart would be if He were lying on it. Hazel says, “I noticed this because Patrick, the Support Group Leader and only person over eighteen in the room, talked about the heart of Jesus every freaking meeting, all about how we, as young cancer survivors, were sitting right in Christ’s very sacred heart and whatever” (4). Green himself is Episcopalian and, as previously discussed, had been studying to be a minister before deciding to become a writer instead. Much of *The Fault in Our Stars* is inspired by his time spent as a chaplain at a children’s hospital, and Patrick is somewhat of a good-natured, self-deprecating caricature of Green’s younger self.⁶ The group begins each meeting with the serenity prayer, and then Patrick ends the meeting with his own prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, we are gathered here in Your heart, *literally in your heart*, as cancer survivors. You and You alone know us as we know

⁶ Responding to a question on his website about which part of the novel he enjoyed writing the most, Green admits that he is fond of the early scene in which Hazel is making fun of Patrick in the support group meeting. He then explains, “I’m kind of a Patrick in real life, and I’m very conscious of it: Like, it’s super easy to make fun of me for being this hugely earnest Internet persona, and I guess I am really narcissistic because I really enjoy making fun of myself in fiction.”

ourselves. Guide us to life and the Light through our times of trial. . . . We pray that you might heal us and that we might feel Your love, and Your peace, which passes all understanding. And we remember in our hearts those whom we knew and loved who have gone home to you. (14, emphasis in original)

At this point in each meeting, he then reads a list of former group members who have lost their battle. After the first meeting Augustus attends, he and Hazel have a flippant exchange about being in the heart of Jesus. Augustus says to her by way of greeting, “We are literally in the heart of Jesus. . . . I thought we were in a church basement, but we are literally in the heart of Jesus” (16). Hazel quips back, “Someone should tell Jesus. . . . I mean, it’s gotta be dangerous, storing children with cancer in your heart” (16). Picking up on the banter, Augustus replies, “I would tell Him myself, . . . but unfortunately I am literally stuck inside of His heart, so He won’t be able to hear me” (16). Hazel finally laughs and is clearly impressed with this attractive jock’s easy ability to riff about ridiculous Christ imagery with her. Their discussion seems irreverent, a criticism Green addresses in the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website: “Setting a novel inside the heart of God’s son does not strike me as a particularly unChristian thing to do. . . . Of course the kids are always making fun of the place and claiming that Patrick’s use of the phrase Literal Heart of Jesus is a misuse of literality. . . . But then again, Hazel and Gus and Isaac themselves come to call the place the Literal Heart.” Patrick describes their meeting place as the literal heart of Jesus in an attempt to be comforting to the group members, and Hazel and Augustus *do* find comfort in it, but perhaps not in the way Patrick had intended. Poking fun at Patrick breaks the ice when

they meet and gives them something to bond over, but it also opens them up to more serious conversations about what they believe about God and heaven later on, discussed in the next section.

One of Hazel's burning, unresolved questions about *An Imperial Affliction* is whether or not the Dutch Tulip Man is a con man or really who he claims to be, and while Augustus is reading the novel, he has the same thought: "So, okay, is the tulip guy a crook? I'm getting a bad vibe from him" (51). In a letter to Peter Van Houten, Hazel asks, "Is the Dutch Tulip Man a fraud or does he really love them?" (70). Later, she phrases it, "Please just tell me if the Dutch Tulip Man is for real" (120). These questions are meant to mirror similar existential considerations of people struggling through a spiritual crisis. One could simply substitute "God" in the place of "the Dutch Tulip Man." Hazel's preoccupation with the identity of the Dutch Tulip Man is symbolic of someone trying to decide what she believes about God or another higher power. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green confirms, "The way Hazel and Gus talk about the Dutch Tulip Man reflects something about how the characters think about/imagine God: Is God (or the Dutch Tulip Man) a con man, a kind but powerless benevolence, a savior, a mirage, or what?" After finishing the book, Augustus offers his theory: "I don't think the Dutch Tulip Man is a con man, but he's also not rich like he leads them to believe" (171). This opinion is evidence of Augustus's belief that God is real but not what everyone assumes He is. Or, more accurately, Augustus conceptualizes the personhood and power of God as more nuanced and complicated than the mainstream, Western image of Him suggests. When Hazel and Augustus finally meet Peter Van Houten and ask him their questions about the characters in his book, about the

Dutch Tulip Man in particular, he responds rather harshly, “*Nothing* happens to the Dutch Tulip Man. He isn’t a con man or not a con man; he’s *God*. He’s an obvious and unambiguous metaphorical representation of *God*, and asking what becomes of him is the intellectual equivalent of asking what becomes of the disembodied eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg in *Gatsby*” (191, emphasis in original). Van Houten’s statements, as the author of the novel and the creator of the Dutch Tulip Man, seem to make the issue an open and closed case, but the aggressive insistence of his interpretation of the character belittles Hazel and Augustus’s questions and threatens to discourage them in their symbolic spiritual quest. Thankfully, his efforts to dissuade them are not successful. When they later visit the Anne Frank House museum, where Hazel notices that underneath Anne’s name in the ledger of Dutch victims of the Holocaust there are four Aron Franks, none of whom have a museum or even a historical marker, she vows to “remember and pray” (201) for them and then offers as an aside: “Maybe some people need to believe in a proper and omnipotent God to pray, but I don’t” (201).

Belief in the Afterlife

Green begins a conversation about how teenagers view the afterlife in *Looking for Alaska* and continues it seven years later in *The Fault in Our Stars*. Both novels feature teenaged characters who die and are mourned by their loved ones, a situation which lends itself to frank discussions about the existence of heaven and where our soul goes, if we even have one at all. One topic readers will not find in any of Green’s works is the existence and nature of hell or any kind of underworld. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green responds to a question about why he does not

specifically address the concept of hell in the novel: “I really haven’t known any terminally ill people who lived in fear of hell. Maybe that’s just my personal biased experience, but yeah. (Also this is definitely a personal bias: I just don’t find hell very interesting theologically.)” Instead, because Green’s ultimate position is one of hope, the characters in both of these novels focus their energy on contemplating whether heaven exists and what kind of place it is.

In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles chooses the question “What happens to us when we die?” (70) for his religion class exam essay. He chooses this question and writes this essay from an abstract, academic point of view because Alaska is still very much alive at this point in the novel, so he has not yet been faced with the reality of death. His approach to the assignment is straightforward; as Hyde had asked them to do, he compares the basic beliefs of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism concerning what happens to the soul after it leaves the physical body. He explains:

Most Christians and Muslims believe in a heaven and a hell, though there’s a lot of disagreement within both religions over what, exactly, will get you into one afterlife or the other. Buddhists are more complicated—because of the Buddha’s doctrine of *anatta*, which basically says that people don’t have eternal souls. Instead, they have a bundle of energy, and that bundle of energy is transitory, migrating from one body to another, reincarnating endlessly until it eventually reaches enlightenment. (100)

After studying these three major belief systems, he decides that people want and need the security of an afterlife because “they couldn’t bear the idea of death being a big black nothing, couldn’t bear the thought of their loved ones not existing, and couldn’t even

imagine themselves not existing. I finally decided that people believed in an afterlife because they couldn't bear not to" (100, emphasis in original). In the first World Religions class after Alaska's death, Dr. Hyde notes that the general questions they as a class have been pondering all semester about death and the afterlife are now more personal and immediate. He says, "What happens to us after we die, for instance, is no longer a question of idle philosophical interest. It is a question we must ask about our classmate. And how to live in the shadow of grief is not something nameless Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims have to explore. The questions of religious thought have become, I suspect, personal" (157). He recognizes the fact that this particular class of students, much more so than students he has taught in the past, have an extra variable to consider when pondering the big questions that he has given them. They have a real person, a friend who was alive one day and dead the next, to put a face and a name to their ideas about heaven. Rather than asking, "Where does one go after death?" they are unavoidably asking, "Where did Alaska go after she died? Where, if anywhere, is she now?" He writes Alaska's chosen question from the exam on the board: "How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?" (158). Then he continues, "Everybody who has ever lost their way in life has felt the nagging insistence of that question. At some point we all look up and realize we are lost in a maze, . . . and I don't want to forget that even when the material we study seems boring, we're trying to understand how people have answered that question" (158). Dean suggests that Green chose to use the labyrinth as a recurring metaphor in the novel because "it captures the essence of transformation" (16), which is true of the movement from death into the afterlife, yes, but it is also true of the spiritual transformation Miles and the rest of Alaska's friends undergo in Hyde's

class and after her death. They had already been contemplating big questions and seeking spiritual maturity, but her death throws them into the deep end of spiritual development without a life vest, so to speak, and they each must sink or swim in their own way.

Hyde also challenges them with Karl Marx's famous declaration, echoed by Freud, that religion is "the opiate of the masses" (*Looking for Alaska* 174). After all, as he explains, "Buddhism, particularly as it is popularly practiced, promises improvement through karma. Islam and Christianity promise eternal paradise to the faithful. And that is a powerful opiate, certainly, the hope of a better life to come" (174). He then tells the class a Sufi story about a woman named Rabe'a al-Adiwiyah who walked through her village carrying a torch and a bucket of water. When asked why, she replied that she was going to pour the water on the fires of hell and burn down the gates of heaven with the torch so that "people will not love God for want of heaven or fear of hell, but because He is God" (174). The story is an answer to the assertion that people have belief in a deity only because they need an opiate. In the aftermath and fresh pain of Alaska's death, Miles most certainly recognizes the attraction of a spiritual opiate to numb his suffering and make him feel better about what had happened to his friend, but after all of his thinking and studying and grieving, he ultimately decides that the afterlife—be it heaven, hell, reincarnation, or whatever else—matters to him. He realizes that he may never know how she had died, but he is more concerned with where she is now. He confesses his doubts: "I liked to imagine her looking down on us, still aware of us, but it seemed like a fantasy, and I never really *felt* it—just as the Colonel had said at the funeral that she wasn't there, wasn't anywhere. I couldn't honestly imagine her as anything but dead, her body rotting in Vine Station, the rest of her just a ghost alive only in our remembering"

(174, emphasis in original). His refusal to swallow the opiate whole like a giant, peaceful pill demonstrates how much he has actually learned and absorbed in the Old Man's class. He wants to think of Alaska in a "Better Place" because that would feel nice, but he has achieved enough spiritual maturity to admit that he does not feel her presence and cannot imagine her watching over them as an angel or some benevolent spirit. As an adolescent, Miles has reached the third stage of Fowler's Faith Development Theory, Synthetic-Conventional, during which individuals develop a personal religious identity. However, this stage, according to Fowler, is typically also characterized by conformity and a reluctance to ask too many worldview-threatening questions, but because of Hyde's influence, Miles challenges Fowler's theory. He wants to think about Alaska as being in heaven and be done with the suffering of grief, but because he is a John Green Teenager, he is compelled toward deeper examination. Remembering Hyde's story, Miles concludes, "Like Rabe'a, I didn't think people should believe in God because of heaven and hell. But I didn't feel a need to run around with a torch. You can't burn down a made-up place" (174).

For Hazel and Augustus in *The Fault in Our Stars*, contemplating the afterlife is never abstract or hypothetical since death is not a faraway possibility that will one day happen to them in a difficult-to-imagine, distant future. In Amsterdam, while they are at the restaurant on their date, Augustus out of nowhere asks, "Do you believe in an afterlife?" (167). Hazel's joking reply is, "I think forever is an incorrect concept" (167). Augustus presses her for a more serious answer, and they end up having a meaningful conversation about it, as only teens fast approaching an absolute answer can do. Hazel's instinctual answer is, "No," but then she revises it to say, "Well, maybe I wouldn't go so

far as no. You?” (168). Augustus, contrastingly, does not waffle: “‘Yes,’ he said, his voice full of confidence. ‘Yes, absolutely. Not like a heaven where you ride unicorns, play harps, and live in a mansion made of clouds. But yes. I believe in Something with a capital *S*. Always have’” (168). Hazel is surprised both by Augustus’s answer and by the confidence with which it is delivered. She muses, “I’d always associated belief in heaven with, frankly, a kind of intellectual disengagement. But Gus wasn’t dumb” (168).

Through Augustus, Green challenges the stereotypical association of religious faith with naiveté and low intelligence, and Hazel’s confidence in her assumptions is shaken. In the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars* on his website, Green observes, “Well, I think Augustus is pretty smart, and he does not present an atheistic worldview (or at least an inherently atheistic worldview).” Augustus further articulates his beliefs using their shared favorite novel: “I believe in that line from *An Imperial Affliction*. ‘The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes.’ That’s God, I think, the rising sun, and the light is too bright and her eyes are losing but they aren’t lost. I don’t believe we return to haunt or comfort the living or anything, but I think something becomes of us” (168). He later adds, “I mean, not to sound like my parents, but I believe humans have souls, and I believe in the conservation of souls” (168). Like Miles, Augustus has clearly thought deeply about this topic and is able to articulate his hopeful belief in Something or Somewhere after death without his belief serving merely as an opiate to numb his fear of the unknown.

Hazel’s dad, who is not openly religious, also surprises and challenges Hazel’s preconceptions when he explains his own understanding of the afterlife. While talking with her about Gus’s recurrence of his cancer, he refuses to equate defeatism with honesty, and he feels the need to defend his hopefulness to his daughter, who accuses him

of envisioning harps and mansions in the clouds. He admits, “I don’t know what I believe, Hazel. I thought being an adult meant knowing what you believe, but that has not been my experience” (223). Then, after thinking about it for a while, he continues:

You know what I believe? I remember in college I was taking a math class [in which the teacher said], “Sometimes it seems the universe wants to be noticed.” That’s what I believe. I believe the universe wants to be noticed. I think the universe is improbably biased toward consciousness, that it rewards intelligence in part because the universe enjoys its elegance being observed. And who am I, living in the middle of history, to tell the universe that it—or my observance of it—is temporary? (223).

In response to a question about this scene on his website, Green accurately calls this sentiment “aggressively theological” and admits he “stole” the idea from a friend of his whom he declines to identify. He also uses this scene to address the criticism that the novel ultimately favors a secular perspective: “I don’t think *TFiOS* [*The Fault in Our Stars*] has a necessarily secular worldview. It really depends on your reading of the book. Hazel’s dad, for instance, makes the argument that the universe is invested in consciousness, which is not a strictly atheistic thing to say and is in fact perilously close to claiming the existence of heaven.” He also notes that Hazel’s dad, like Augustus, is presented as an intelligent person, yet attributing consciousness to the universe is a perspective that would be impossible to reconcile with an atheistic worldview.

After Augustus’s death, Hazel begins to read the comments on his social media wall, most of which are from people who have not seen him in months and who, in Hazel’s estimation, know nothing about him. Hazel imagines Augustus’s response to one

comment in particular which imagines him playing basketball in heaven: “If I am playing basketball in heaven, does that imply a physical location of a heaven containing physical basketballs? Who makes the basketballs in question? Are there less fortunate souls in heaven who work in a celestial basketball factory so that I can play? Or did an omnipotent God create the basketballs out of the vacuum of space?” (265). Sarcastic humor is Hazel’s default response to help her cope with pain and grief, and imagining Augustus criticizing the vision of him playing basketball in heaven brings her comfort. At his funeral, her atheism is still fully intact as she pays her respects at the open coffin, echoing Miles’s comments about Alaska after her death: “I had—and have—absolutely no confidence that he could hear me” (270). Her annoyance with the sentimentality around her evolves into full-fledged disgust when, during the service, the minister tosses out tired clichés about Augustus’s heroism and about how much of an inspiration he had been to everyone. She fumes, “I was already starting to get pissed off at the minister when he said, ‘In heaven, Augustus will finally be healed and whole,’ implying that he had been less whole than other people due to his leglessness, and I kind of could not repress my sigh of disgust” (270). To clarify, what seems to disgust her is the *way* heaven is described by his friends online and by the minister rather than the belief in the existence of heaven in general.

At the end of the funeral, the minister prays for “Gus’s union with God,” and Hazel thinks about what she and Augustus had talked about at the restaurant in Amsterdam: “He didn’t believe in mansions and harps, but did believe in capital-S Something, and so I tried to imagine him capital-S Somewhere as we prayed, but even then I could not quite convince myself that he and I would be together again” (273). Once

again, Hazel's thoughts recall Miles from *Looking for Alaska* when he had had trouble feeling Alaska's presence or envisioning her as a spirit, but Hazel's failed attempts to accept the possibility of an afterlife are much less hopeful. Hazel goes to Augustus's house to look through his things after Isaac mentions that Augustus has supposedly been writing something for her, a sequel to *An Imperial Affliction*. When she questions his parents about it, his father responds: "He wouldn't have had time to write anything. I know you want . . . I want that, too. But the messages he leaves for us now are coming from above, Hazel.' He pointed toward the ceiling, as if Gus were hovering just above the house. Maybe he was. I don't know. I didn't feel his presence, though" (290-291). People around Hazel seem to insist on imagining Augustus looking down on them because that comforts them, but Hazel, who never took a class with Professor Hyde, cannot ultimately bring herself to openly consider the possibility of a spiritual life after this one. She and her parents go for a picnic in the park, where they sit next to some recreated Roman ruins and watch children running around screaming and playing on a playground, "figuring out how to be alive, how to navigate a world that was not built for them by navigating a playground that was" (307). As she watches them and the rest of the goings on in the park, Hazel observes: "Who am I to say that these things might not be forever? Who is Peter Van Houten to assert as fact the conjecture that our labor is temporary? All I know of heaven and all I know of death is in this park: an elegant universe in ceaseless motion, teeming with ruined ruins and screaming children" (308). For Hazel, the only heaven she can believe in is the present.

As Hazel is working through her thoughts about the afterlife at Augustus's funeral, she hears someone in the row behind her mutter, "What a load of horse crap, eh,

kid?” (271). Hazel spins around in her seat to see Peter Van Houten sitting behind her. He had come from Amsterdam when he heard of Augustus’s death. The minister announces that it is time to pray, but Hazel is in too much shock from seeing her former hero unexpectedly sitting in front of her and from hearing him express her own thoughts out loud. To snap her out of it, Van Houten whispers, “We gotta fake pray” (271). She is still angry with him for his despicable behavior in Amsterdam and for dissolving her fantasies about meeting her favorite author, so having him vocalize her own cynical thoughts is jarring both for her and for the reader. In Hazel’s car after the funeral, a penitent Van Houten reveals to Hazel that he had once had a daughter who died of leukemia when she was eight, an event which still haunts him and explains his drunken bitterness. Even more horrifying than losing a child, Van Houten, at the insistence of his daughter’s social worker, had had to be the one to bear the unthinkable burden of telling his own child that she would soon die. To help calm her fear, and perhaps as a balm for his own grief, he had told her that she did not need to worry because she would be going to heaven. He recalls:

She asked if I would be there, and I said that I would not, not yet. But eventually, she said, and I promised that yes, of course, very soon. And I told her that in the meantime we had great family up there that would take care of her. And she asked me when I would be there, and I told her soon.

Twenty-two years ago. (286-287)

He had made these promises, not because he had at all believed in a heaven where he and his daughter would be reunited and happy but because he was being merciful. The faith he had given his daughter was understandably of the numbing opiate variety that she

could accept and trust without question because of her childhood innocence. Van Houten had selflessly given his daughter that gift while ensuring a lifetime of bitterness for himself. The experience had inspired his masterpiece novel and had fundamentally altered his worldview. As discussed in Chapter II of this dissertation, Van Houten is presented as the representative of a possible future adulthood for Hazel, one she wants to avoid. When Hazel hears him give a voice to her skeptical thoughts at the funeral, and when he reveals his bitter brokenness to her through the story about his daughter, she finally understands him. She understands that he had been so harsh with her in Amsterdam because he had not wanted to encourage her to hope like he had done for his daughter and also that seeing Hazel had probably reminded him of his daughter. Van Houten's visit ultimately dispels Hazel's anger toward him and shows Hazel a chilling vision of what her future could be if she allows anger and bitterness to usher her through her grief and to dominate her ideas about spirituality.

Coexisting

On his website, in the FAQ section about *The Fault in Our Stars*, Green states: "It seems to me that different characters in the book find varying degrees of secular, religious, theistic, and atheistic ways to confront the reality and injustice of suffering, and that the book (at least if I did it right) is more an exploration of the variety of responses to suffering than an argument in favor of one over another." Although he is specifically discussing *The Fault in Our Stars*, his comments about religious and spiritual diversity are true about his other novels as well. For instance, the characters in *Looking for Alaska* respond with varying degrees of spirituality to Alaska's death—such as the Colonel's

conclusion that “The labyrinth blows, but I choose it” (216)—and each response is treated as valid. However, perhaps Green’s most progressive representation of a healthy relationship between two religiously diverse teens is the best friendship between Colin and Hassan in *An Abundance of Katherines*.

Colin’s best friend is a fat, hairy, Lebanese Muslim named Hassan who has an irreverent sense of humor. The two boys frequently tease each other lightheartedly about religion, such as Hassan’s response when Colin expresses his fear that he will be a failure in life and end up in a cubicle: “See, this is why you need to believe in God. Because I don’t even expect to have a *cube*, and I’m happier than a pig in a pile of shit” (9, emphasis in original). One of the ways Hassan jokes with Colin, a non-practicing half-Jew, is to adopt a pious tone to try to convert him, even though Hassan himself is not in actuality extremely devout. Colin’s response is usually sarcastic: “Right. Faith in God. That’s a good idea. I’d also like to believe that I could fly into outer space on the fluffy backs of giant penguins and screw Katherine XIX in zero gravity” to which Hassan, half-seriously, replies, “Singleton, you need to believe in God worse than anyone I ever met” (9). While Colin is wallowing in his grief over being dumped, Hassan claims to be perfectly happy alone because, “I got me some God” (9). When Colin remains unamused, Hassan does not give up but rather amps up the teasing: “Hassan jumped up and straddled Colin on the floor and pinned his arms down and started shouting, ‘There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet! Say it with me, *sitzpinkler! La ilaha illa-llah!*’ Colin started laughing breathlessly beneath Hassan’s weight, and Hassan laughed, too. ‘I’m trying to save your sorry ass from hell!’” (9-10). Despite their differing belief systems,

Colin and Hassan have achieved a symbiosis in their friendship that is an inspiring, and perhaps even fantastical, model of human interaction.

When the two friends leave Chicago to go on a post-graduation road trip, Hassan's religion stands out more prominently against the rural background of Bible belt Tennessee. One morning, they wake up from sleeping in their car, and Hassan, who is squished in the backseat, says, "*Kafir*—I'm paralyzed back here. Lean that shit forward. I gotta pray" (21). While Hassan kneels outside to pray facing Mecca, Colin goes inside to the bathroom where he sees some graffiti on a stall that reads, "CALL DANA FOR BLOW" (22). The juxtaposition of Hassan's devotional activity with the lewd graffiti makes the prayer seem more virtuous by comparison and also demonstrates Hassan's foreignness. Hassan is fully aware that he is in uncharted territory. He asks Colin, "Do you think the people of Gutshot, Tennessee, have ever seen an actual, living Arab?" (28). Then he dryly quips, "Shame about how we're gonna die here, though. I mean, seriously. An Arab and a half-Jew enter a store in Tennessee. It's the beginning of a joke, and the punchline is 'sodomy'" (30). He is paranoid about being a Muslim in the South, and his paranoia is fueled as much by stereotypes about Southerners as are Southerners' opinions about Muslims. The first person they meet in Tennessee introduces another religion into the mix and shatters Hassan's perceptions. He introduces himself humorously to Lindsey Lee Wells, who will become their friend: "Hassan Harbish. Sunni Muslim. Not a terrorist" to which she replies with equal humor, "Lindsey Lee Wells. Methodist. Me neither" (32). This response earns the boys' respect and lowers their defenses, clearing the path toward mutual friendship. The first night Colin and Hassan are in Gutshot, they go to Lindsey and her mom Hollis's pink mansion for dinner—as it turns out, they own a

textile factory and are wealthy. At dinner, Hollis asks Hassan if he would like to “say grace” over the meal: “‘Sure thing.’ Hassan cleared his throat. ‘*Bismillah.*’ Then he picked up his fork” (62). Colin observes, “The Arabic seemed to render everyone uncomfortable or something because no one talked for a few minutes” (62). Colin’s assumption here that the lull in conversation is a result of Hollis and Lindsey’s discomfort with Hassan’s Arabic prayer actually reveals his own discomfort. He and Hassan had previously joked about being killed and sodomized by bigoted Southerners who had never seen an Arabic person, so when Hassan speaks Arabic at the dinner table, Colin essentially braces for an inevitable negative response. His fears, however, are ultimately unfounded. Conversation does eventually resume, and Hassan and Hollis come to form a special bond in spite of their religious differences because, as Hassan puts it, they are both “fatties” (72) who understand each other.

In a transcript of Green’s speech at the ceremony where *An Abundance of Katherines* was named a Printz Honor Book, he tells a story about his former roommate of several years in Chicago, Hassan al-Rawas, the inspiration for the character Hassan in the book. During the Iraq War, Green and Hassan used to devour the news footage (Hassan was from Kuwait), and at one point when a shot of some Arabic graffiti on a boarded-up window came into view, the commentator Shepard Smith interpreted it as evidence of the “inborn rage of the Iraqi people, the hatred in their heart, and so on,” but Hassan began to laugh and revealed that the graffiti actually said, “Happy Birthday, Sir, despite the circumstances” (“Printz Award Honor Speech” 14). Green then explains:

It was then that I started thinking about writing a Muslim character who, like my friend and the other American Muslims I know, is religious

without being defined by his religiosity. It is possible in this nation to be Jewish and punk, or Christian and fond of modernist architecture, but it sometimes seems impossible to be Muslim and *anything*, because we think we know all what being a Muslim involves. And so *Katherines* started not with its main character, a washed-up child prodigy named Colin, but with Hassan. I decided then that I wanted to write a book wherein a guy's Muslimness was not his defining character trait. (14, emphasis in original)

“Muslimness” might not be Hassan’s defining character trait, but its importance should not be overlooked. As King and Roeser note, “Religion as a meaning system can also serve as a buffer against the effects of racial and ethnic discrimination on minority and immigrant youth” (445). Hassan’s belief in Allah, his prayers, and his avoidance of *haram* activities binds him to other Muslims and advances his spiritual development. If “Muslimness” does not define his identity, then it definitely influences it for the better.

Conclusion

Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame refer to Green’s novels as “new ways to minister to young people” (8), and Green’s own comments about his motivations seem to confirm their assessment. The John Green Teenagers in his novels intelligently ponder big questions about suffering, death, the nature of God, and the afterlife, and they do so in a myriad of ways, some healthier than others. Green understands the important function that considering these questions during adolescence serves in a teenager’s spiritual development, for as he notes in the FAQ section about *Looking for Alaska* on his website, “This is why philosophy and the study of religious traditions and history etc. is not some

abstract boring intellectual enterprise: It is the very stuff that makes it possible to go on and live an engaged, attentive, productive life even though the world contains so much suffering and injustice.” Put another way, as Clare Malone expresses it, “In a way, Green’s aim is to mainstream the concept of the examined life” (Malone and Thomson-Deveaux 79). Additionally, he believes this to be the case for adolescents of all faiths and philosophies—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Atheism, among others—and backgrounds—privileged, poor, product of a broken home, terminally ill, and homosexual, to name a few. Through the variety of experiences and viewpoints he presents in his novels, Green encourages all of his readers to pursue the path of spiritual development that is right for them. Perhaps the following statement in the Acknowledgements at the end of *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* most accurately sums up his philosophy: “We acknowledge that being the person God made you cannot separate you from God’s love” (313).

CONCLUSION

In *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* (1997), Peter Hollindale argues that YA literature is defined by its focus on transitions and, therefore, functions as a bridge which helps to guide adolescent readers from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence, when viewed as a transitional period, sets teenagers up as creatures who are in progress, developing, or otherwise incomplete. Furthermore, the notion of adolescents as incomplete beings logically insists that, by contrast, adults are complete, fully developed beings, a problematic idea at best. Johanna Wyn and Rob White, in *Rethinking Youth* (1997), posit that “The period of youth is significant because it is the threshold to adulthood, and it is problematic largely because *adult status itself is problematic*” (9, emphasis in original). Still, since adolescence began to be recognized as a cultural, psychological, and physiological middle stage of development around the turn of the 20th century—and then clarified and reinforced by developmental psychologists such as Erik Erikson in the Identity vs. Role Confusion phase—it has been defined by its relationship to adulthood, which is often considered to be the final phase of development. These ideas unsurprisingly influence both how teenagers view themselves and how YA authors depict them in the literature. Two central questions of Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis’s Youth Lens method of literary analysis address the latter consideration by asking, “How does the text represent adolescence/ts?” and “What role does the text play in reinforcing and/or subverting dominant ideas about adolescence?” (511). Literary analyses inspired by the Youth Lens perspective, as is this dissertation, attempt to approach the reading and interpreting of YA literature in ways which focus on “exposing and disrupting how

ideological norms tied to common ways of understanding adolescence/ts circulate within these texts” (Lewis, Petrone, and Sarigianides 44). Essentially, because the period of years known as “adolescence” is socially constructed, man-made, and therefore, arguably, artificial and/or irrelevant, YA scholars need to turn a critical eye toward how adolescence is portrayed within YA texts and how it is interpreted by readers.

In his novels, John Green creates a unique paradigm for adolescence represented by what I have termed the “John Green Teenager,” a modern youth who examines the self, who asks big questions about loss and about mattering, and who questions the suggestion of being incomplete. Green repeatedly cycles back to several central themes related to being a young person, such as identity, planning for the future, preservation of a community’s memory, sexuality, and spirituality. In the FAQ section about *Paper Towns* on his website, Green explains, “I wanted to write—as I often do—about the relationship between given identities and chosen identities. When you’re a teenager, you have to make a lot of decisions about which of your given identities you’re going to hold onto, and which you’re going to abandon.” He demonstrates time and again his understanding of the adolescent mind and how disheartening growing up can be. As Azalaments in *Turtles All the Way Down*, “I was so good at being a kid, and so terrible at being whatever I was now” (25). The confusion and anxiety associated with navigating adolescence seem to define the modern American experience, and the John Green Teenager both exemplifies the journey while simultaneously transcending it.

Topics for Further Research

Ethnic Diversity

The history of adolescence is well documented, and scholars have tracked the evolution of the concept throughout the 20th century, as discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation. However, the historical narrative of adolescence is too often Westernized, overlooking the experiences of youth in developing nations as well as the diverse characteristics of immigrant minorities. Lisa Patel, in *Youth Held at the Border: Immigration, Education, and the Politics of Inclusion* (2012), cautions against treating adolescence as a universal experience, as a “single story” (68). She explains, “In the context of schooling, assumptions about age, stage, and what is ‘developmentally appropriate’ predominate. As such, a one-size-fits-all perception spurs adults to set limitations that do not always reflect the immediate circumstances accurately” (68-69). Her work focuses on immigrant youth in America and how their experiences differ from the mainstream developmental paradigm of adolescence. Her concern is that placing too much weight on physical and psychological factors removes crucial elements of cultural context needed to understand the unique experiences of immigrant and/or minority youth and to avoid relegating them to mere stereotypes.

This dissertation does not directly address the experiences of minority youth for the simple reason that there are few minority characters in Green’s novels. This is not to say that his novels contain *no* minority characters, but the ones who are included are the friends of the main characters, rather than being main characters themselves. In Miles’s group of friends in *Looking for Alaska*, Takumi is Japanese-American, and Lara had immigrated to America from Romania with her family as a child. Their heritage is

featured primarily in the campfire storytelling scene when they have a chance to tell about their best and worst days, but they are secondary characters otherwise. In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin's best friend Hassan is of Lebanese descent and a practicing Muslim, and his spirituality is discussed in Chapter V of this dissertation. Then, in *Paper Towns*, one of Q's friends, Radar, is African-American, and a defining aspect of his personality is his parents' very large collection of Black Santa Claus paraphernalia. There are no racial minority characters in *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson* or *The Fault in Our Stars* (except for the people Hazel and Gus encounter in Amsterdam), but in *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza's best friend is Daisy Ramirez; however, her last name and her sister's name, Elena, are the only definitive clues to her Hispanic ethnicity. More research and analysis are needed to fully explore the relatively low number of minority characters in Green's novels, as well as the way he utilizes the ones who *are* present.

Class

Another area in which it is dangerous to assume a universal adolescent experience is socioeconomic class. All of Green's narrators/protagonists are middle to upper-middle class. Miles's family can afford to send him to boarding school; Colin has the luxury of taking a lengthy road trip the summer after graduation; Q lives in an Orlando suburb and has the resources to hunt for Margo; Will lives in a Chicago suburb and has parents who have planned his future in medical school; Hazel's mother has been able to be a stay-at-home mom while she takes care of Hazel's expensive medical needs; and Aza and her mother live comfortably enough for Aza to have her own car and computer. There are,

however, instances during which Green acknowledges the challenges of adolescents from a lower class. For example, in *Looking for Alaska*, Culver Creek boarding school certainly has its share of rich students who mildly bully Miles and his friends, but the Colonel is a scholarship student, meaning he is not paying tuition to attend like everyone else. At one point, his friends visit his mother in her humbly appointed mobile home, and the Colonel's dream is to one day be able to buy her a big house.

Similarly, in *Turtles All the Way Down*, Daisy, Aza, and Davis represent three strata of class distinctions. Daisy is lower class in that she lives in a small apartment, shares a room with her younger sister, and has parents who work at a laundromat and as the security guard at a museum, or in other words, labor positions. When she receives her half of Davis's reward money, she immediately spends it on a new car and computer. Aza, who is solidly middle class, chides Daisy's reckless spending and advises her instead to save it for college. Her opinion reveals her class bias in that *she* is able to save her reward money for college only because she already owns a car and a computer. Davis, the son of a billionaire, represents the upper class. He lives in an up-scale mansion, is taken care of by a staff of employees, and finds \$100,000 in cash hidden in random cereal boxes for safe keeping. The burden of Davis's class position is that he is plagued with insecurity, never truly able to be assured that anyone likes him for who he is beyond his money. Green is decidedly conscious of the effect that socioeconomic class has on a teenager's identity, and more research and analysis are needed to situate Green's treatment of this subject within the larger conversation.

High School

Because they are about teenagers, almost all of Green's novels feature high school in some way, whether it is an intricate part of the setting, as in *Looking for Alaska* and *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, or only mentioned peripherally, as in *An Abundance of Katherines* and *The Fault in Our Stars*. Since the emergence of the American public high school in the 1930s, historians like Thomas Hine have been monitoring its influence on the development of adolescence as a cultural phenomenon as well as on the general American culture at large. Occasionally, Green's teenagers make subversive observations about the educational institutions they are legally forced to attend. For instance, describing the teeming mass of teenagers in her high school cafeteria, Aza in *Turtles All the Way Down* says, "I thought about how we all believed ourselves to be the hero of some personal epic, when in fact we were basically identical organisms colonizing a vast and windowless room that smelled of Lysol and lard" (2). This description, in addition to being a sound rejection of individuality and personal identity, also offers a somewhat negative commentary on the modern American education system. Since high school is an undeniably influential aspect of adolescence and growing up, further analysis is needed to interpret the role it plays in the adolescence depicted in Green's novels.

Conclusion

In the FAQ section about *An Abundance of Katherines* on his website, Green confesses that he, like many other authors, suffers from impostor syndrome: "[T]his feeling is damn near universal. I still feel it, actually: I feel like a total imposter as a writer and as a person, and I often feel like any minute someone will notice that I am a

total phony and everyone will stop reading my books, etc.” Perhaps this self-consciousness as an author is the key to Green’s insight into the adolescent state of mind. Because of their unstable developmental position, caught temporarily between childhood and adulthood, teenagers often feel anxious that everyone around them will see through their performed exterior to the vulnerable creature underneath. Like anyone else plagued with feelings of being an imposter, Green is, of course, mistaken in his self-assessment. As an author of widely read YA literature, his influence on the evolution of modern adolescence is undeniable. As Samantha Dunn observes, “His texts become blueprints to help teens navigate and recognize injustice, sorrow, and challenges during their lives. His novels . . . do not shield adolescents from the truths of adulthood or growing up. They embrace the idea and the opportunity that adolescents have the capacity for doing great things” (33). Indeed, the John Green Teenager does do great things, asks important questions, cares about the future, and wants to matter. In the FAQ section about *Looking for Alaska* on his website, Green answers a question about what he would say to a girl like Alaska if he had the chance, but his response is a reassuring message of validation sent to teenagers everywhere: “You are helpful, and you are loved, and you are forgiven, and you are not alone.”

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