

Looking For Alaska
John Green
Dutton Juvenile
Young Adult Novel
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A Journey of Discovery

By: Marni L

Growing up is hard, and sometimes teens are forever changed by the experiences in their lives. For many teenagers, life is viewed as directly related to relatively small events. Huge emotions can be experienced by simple things such as a bad grade, not being asked to prom, or having acne. A teenager may feel that their life is over if a boyfriend or girlfriend breaks up with them. Occasionally, however, a profound experience such as the death of a friend or close relative can bring the realization that previous encounters and perceptions are not as important as they were originally perceived. It is this realization that helps one to grow and gain a more mature vision of the world. This is the premise of *Looking for Alaska* by John Green.

John Green has written an extraordinary novel about adolescent high school students and the life changing experiences they are faced with. Green has produced several novels that relate to young adults and the choices they make. The novel, *Looking for Alaska*, was his first novel ever published, which also won the Michael L. Printz award in 2005. His success is well deserved.

Green attended Indian Springs School, a boarding school outside of Birmingham, Alabama. While he was there, a student died in a situation that was similar to the death of Alaska, and was the basis for her character. Other aspects of the novel are also similar to events in his past including Takumi's fox hat, and the processed swans. Green also stated that he had

performed several pranks while attending school, and that certain faculty members at Indian Springs were the motivation for some of the teachers at Culver Creek.

Readers are first introduced to the main character, Miles, who transfers to a boarding school in Alabama, which is the setting for the novel. Miles had always felt like a social outcast who did not have a lot of friends, but he meets several in the novel, including his roommate Chip (the Colonel), who later nicknames him Pudge, and Alaska, who is a gorgeous, but wild girl who is very energetic. “Even in the dark, I could see her eyes-fierce emeralds. She had the kind of eyes that predisposed you to supporting her every endeavor.” Other characters include Takumi, a Japanese student and Lara. Miles and his friends play several pranks in school involving other students they call the Weekday warriors, and the dean, also known as the Eagle. The significant event in the novel is the sudden death of Alaska in a car accident, which was caused by depression and alcohol or suicide. Miles changes as a result of this death and understands that sometimes things happen that aren't one's fault and out of one's control. He also realizes that previous perceptions of the world are not really so important.

A major strength of *Looking for Alaska* is Green's strong characterization, which helps the reader identify with the characters. When Miles examines himself in the mirror, he points out his skinny body as well as the absence of fat or muscle and feels embarrassed about his body. He wonders if something could be done about the mirror. Miles also doubts himself and wonders if his journey to find “the Great Perhaps” was all a mistake. Further, when Chip (the Colonel) is described as a scholarship kid with a free ride, who had difficulties with his parents, who got divorced in his sophomore year, he is shown as doing whatever he wants to do.

A weakness of the novel is that Green fails to show the dramatic change in his lead character as a result of his experience with Alaska's death. Yet, Green feels that teenagers think that they are indestructible and do not learn the lesson of understanding one's mortality and the importance of appreciating life as a result of this understanding. "We think that we are invincible because we are."

I strongly recommend *Looking for Alaska* since it is a story with characters that many teenage high school students will enjoy and readily identify with. Experiences such as smoking, drinking, committing pranks, early relationships, and sexual tension are issues that many teenagers have to cope with during high school. The reader's ability to connect with the characters and the plot helps to make this novel an excellent read.