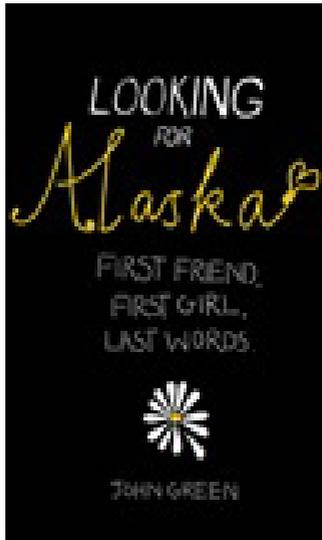


TEACHING NOTES



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Looking for Alaska

by John Green

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Teaching Notes

Prepared by Pam Saunders

Plot Summary

Sixteen year old Miles' twin passions are reading biographies and collecting the last words of the famous. Deciding to search for, in the last words of the great Francois Rabelais, the 'great perhaps', Miles leaves his family in Florida and moves to Alabama to complete his final two years of school at Culver Creek Preparatory School.

Miles is befriended by his gifted roommate, the Colonel, and included in the Colonel's group of friends, among them Alaska, vibrant, sexy and dynamic, but also deeply depressed. Alaska is not only brilliant at devising pranks, but drinks and has sex.

When Miles falls for (and lusts after) Alaska, she becomes critical to his story. Slowly the reader builds a picture of the main characters as each reveals their story. When Alaska dies in a car crash, her favourite last line from Simon Bolivar, "*How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?*" takes on a poignant meaning. The story changes as Miles and the Colonel come to terms with the loss of a friend who was central to their lives. Only by discovering the real cause of Alaska's death can they overcome their guilt at surviving her.

Awards

Winner of the Michael L Printz Award (2006); ALA Best Book for Young Adults; Finalist Los Angeles Times Book Prize (2005); A New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age; A Booklist Editors Choice (2005); School Library Journal Best Book of the Year (2005), Winner of the silver Inky Award (2007)

Note

The book contains sexual references, excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, drug taking and swearing. As such it is recommended for 14+ students.

This book has been challenged for its suitability for younger teenagers and the issue of censorship could be explored whilst reading.

About the author

John Green lives in Indianapolis, Indiana. Until recently he lived in New York, but grew up in Florida before moving to boarding school in Alabama. Prior to becoming a writer he worked as a book reviewer and a writer for the radio. *Looking for Alaska* is his first novel published in 2005. His most recent novel, due in 2008, is *Paper Towns*.

John believes to be a writer you should be a reader too. He is religious and considered being a minister, he worked in a children's hospital as a Chaplin, which is where he "*started to think about writing a story in which teenagers experience loss and a consuming guilt that cannot be easily assuaged.*"

He writes a blog at <http://www.sparksflyup.com> where he claims that he "*likes sushi and country music and Nintendo*" He also claims to lie.

Themes

Meaning of life, belonging, forgiveness, death and dying, friendship, religion, grief and healing.

Style and Structure

The book is told from Miles' point of view in two distinct parts. The first half of the book is labelled *Before* and is a countdown of days from "One hundred and Thirty-six days Before" to "One Day Before". The second part of the book is labelled *After* and is a counting up of days from "The Day After" to "One Hundred and Thirty-Six Days After". Thus, there is a clear climax midway through the book; Alaska's death.

This style leads to a continual sense of foreboding as the story moves slowly and inevitably toward the climax. The last day also includes a letter from Takumi to Miles and the Colonel, and a final religion essay by Miles, in response to Alaska's desire to escape the labyrinth. The author also adds "Some Last Words on Last Words".

Setting

Culver Creek Preparatory School, a boarding school in Alabama, a southern state of USA.

Characters

Miles Halter ('Pudge')

Main character, narrator, sixteen years old. Miles is a bit bland and bored. Lonely and with no real life he leaves for his father's boarding school in an attempt to escape and pursue and find "the Great Perhaps".

Obsessed with famous people's last words (as apparently is the author), Miles reads biographies and could be described as a bit of a geek or a sensible "good kid"; as least until he comes under the influence of the Colonel and Alaska.

Chip Martin ('the Colonel')

The Colonel is a clever and proud, financially poor, scholarship student who intensely dislikes the rich pupils who board Monday-Friday only, referred to as 'weekday warriors'. He learns lists of countries and capital cities to combat boredom and overcome stress. A prankster, friend and roommate to Miles.

Alaska Young

Alaska is sexy, funny, beautiful, intelligent and rebellious. She is moody and torments herself with guilt for her lack of lack of initiative at the moment of her mother's death. She loves practical jokes, and a natural ally of Miles.

Takumi Hikohito

Quiet, funny, Japanese-American whiz kid student, skilled at rapping.

Lara

Sweet, lovely, gentle Romanian born student who has trouble pronouncing the letter "I", girlfriend of Miles.

Dr Hyde

Teacher of World Religion, and '*ancient*', according to the Colonel. He has trouble breathing but is passionate about his subject and his classes. His classes ensure the book has many opportunities for philosophical and religious debates and thoughts.

Mr Starnes ('The Eagle')

Dean of Students, lives in the midst of the dorms and has the power to smell a cigarette from "*like five miles*" according to the Colonel.

Quotes Central to the Novel

"*I go to seek a Great Perhaps.*" Last words of Francois Rabelais

Francois Rabelais (1494 -1553) was a famous French renaissance novelist, physician and humanist. He wrote in a comic and satirical style.

"*How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?*" Last words of Simón Bolívar

Simon Bolivar (1783 – 1830) was one of South America's greatest generals. He won independence for Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela from Spain.

Background (Pre-reading with Class) Context

Establish a common understanding of the US education system especially in contrast to Australia's. Students' prior knowledge may be based on television shows, movies, other novels or actual meeting of US students. Students should also be aware of the differences between Florida, where Miles lived with his parents, and Alabama, where the school is located. (Briefly identify on a map.)

Some terms used in the book:

- Preparatory School: usually a private secondary school, with high fees and an emphasis on training students for entry to college
- College: tertiary education institution, equivalent to Australian tertiary institutions and Universities. Entry is based on marks from both Year 11 and Year 12, plus general applications. Most colleges charge high fees but also offer some limited scholarships for students who need assistance.
- Culver Creek Preparatory: an imaginary school with two types of students, those that board and live on campus, Monday to Friday. Usually these students are more affluent and return home for weekends, thus nicknamed, the "Weekend Warriors". The other students are those who live further away, or chose to remain on campus for the full semester, the "non- Warriors". The main characters are non-Warriors.
- Florida: a state in the south east region of USA. It has a humid/subtropical climate, is the fourth largest state in terms of population, popular with retirees and tourists due to its sun and beaches.
- Alabama: Although geographically next door to Florida, it is a more traditionally "southern state". Located squarely within the Bible belt, it is less affluent and has a smaller population, ranking 23rd.
- Alaska: is a US state in the far northwest. It is sparsely populated. It is not significant in the geography of the book only that its name is shared with one of the main characters.
- In the US the driving age is 16, the drinking age is 21.

Activities and General Discussion based on the first half of the book: *Before*

1. What does the author's technique of dividing the book into *Before* and *After* rather than chapters add to the novel? How does it make you feel before you even begin to read? Why does the author use this technique?

2. The premise for Miles leaving his family is; *'I go to seek a Great Perhaps'* (pg 11). What does this tell us about the attitude Miles has prior to going to Culver Creek? Is this the only reason he is going?
3. Does Miles' attitude mean he is more open to new experiences and friendship? He is almost instantly adopted by the Colonel, discuss how do you choose friends or how they choose you? Would you be friends with Alaska? Would she be friends with you?
4. Within the first twenty pages we are introduced to a wide variety of well known people and events from history: *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Francois Rabelais, John F Kennedy, Henrik Ibsen, Robert Frost etc. For example, on page 18 Miles in discussion with Chip says:

" I know a lot of people's last words"" I like Henrik Ibsen's. He was a playwright"

...."Yeah I know who he was" said Chip

5. What does this tell us about the characters?
6. Numerous times in the book the author uses the writing devise of a list, firstly on page 21 where we are introduced to Alaska *'the Colonel explained to me that (1) this was Alaska's room, and that (2) she had a single room'* and again on page 26 when Miles starts smoking; *'I became a smoker because (1) I was on an Adirondack swing by myself, and (2) I had cigarettes and (3)'* Then again on page 94. Why does listing the facts work in these situations? What does it tell the reader?
7. By page 27 we learn that Alaska, like Miles, also knows some famous last words and her favourite is:

"He – that's Simon Bolivar – 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?'"Beautiful last words, but I didn't quite understand. "So what's the labyrinth?" I asked her."

What does the class think the labyrinth is? And what is *"the Great Perhaps"* ?

8. In the first half of the book the reader gets to know the characters and their diversity. On page 109 Miles is dwelling on this and says *'If people were rain, I was drizzle and she (Alaska) was a hurricane.'* List the characters and brainstorm words to describe them. What are some of the quotes that best reflect their personality, what would they write about themselves on a Facebook page?

Activities and General Discussion Points Post Reading: After

1. Due to Green's unusual structure of grouping the book into *Before* and *After* and the subsequent countdown/up of days the reader is set for a grand climax or event. Discuss how the death of Alaska changes the other characters. Does it change how the other characters then understand the world?
2. Discuss events that have changed the world, such as, 9/11, the birth of Jesus. Write your own personal "before" and "after" story, or do a personal reflection on events which have changed the direction of your life.
3. In 136 days Miles life completely changes. Is our attitude important? If Alaska had a different attitude would she still be alive?
4. Miles comments about Chip (pg 63):

"I wanted to be one of those people who have streaks to maintain, who scorch the ground with their intensity. But for now, at least I knew such people, and they needed me, just like comets need tails."
5. The book is written from Miles point of view, how might it have been different if written from the 'comets' view, e.g. the Colonel or Alaska?
6. How did you feel after you found out Alaska had died? Did you miss her vibrant personality? Search YouTube for Liane Graham's song performance that she wrote as a response to Alaska. How did Alaska enrich the other characters lives?
7. What is suffering? Did Alaska suffer? Did her friends suffer after her death, or were they grieving? Is there a difference? Consider in this discussion Miles's quoting Buddha (pg 233):

"suffering was caused by desire ... and the cessation of desire meant the cessation of suffering."

8. Was Alaska's death an accident? Or was it suicide? Debate this issue.
9. Could Alaska's friends have intervened to prevent her death? Use the following quotes from Alaska to assist discussion:

"Y'all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die." (pg57)

"I may die young", she said, but at least I'll die smart."
(pg66)

"Pudge, what you must understand about me is that I am a deeply unhappy person." (pg X)

and these from Miles:

"I thought: This would not be a bad way to go. I thought: Straight and fast. Maybe she just decided at the last second."
(pg 253)

"I would never know her well enough to know her thoughts in those last minutes, would never know if she left us on purpose." (page 259)

10. The author makes Religion, as a subject, interesting and serious for the students at Culver Creek, discuss the authors background and reasons for this. Does knowing that the author was a school Chaplin and is a religious person change your views on this? Do you think the writing of *Looking for Alaska* was influenced by the author being a religious person?
11. Culver Creek has a lot of unofficial rules; "thou shall not rat", "thou shall play pranks", is there a certain honour or loyalty in obeying these rules? Was Alasaka dishonourable or disloyal? Does she die with honour?
12. It is often said that teenagers think they are invincible and Miles (pg 126) also claims:

"The Great Perhaps was upon us and we were invincible. The plan had faults, but we did not".

13. Do teenagers feel indestructible? Is Alaska's risk taking behavior a way of dealing with the pressure of growing up?
14. Research teen depression, suicide and support services available within your state. Present findings to the class. The Colonel and Miles (pg 198) also research warning signs of suicide, compare your findings with their research.
15. What is a prank? Are they 'harmless fun'? What about the first prank of which Miles is the victim? Year 12's in Australia have traditional 'muck up' days at the end of the year. What are some of the memorable ones students have heard of, what makes a great prank? Why does the author include them in the book?
16. What is the significance of the payphone? It is first mentioned on page 14, when Miles states "*my parents had requested I be placed in a room near one of Culver Creek's five payphones.*" List all the references to the pay phone and discuss its role in the novel. (Note, the author clarifies the absence of mobiles, or cell phone on page 48.)
17. After reading Takumi's letter (pg 258) to the Colonel and Miles, Miles states, "*There were so many of us who would have to live with things done and things left undone that day.*" (pg 259) Compare the Colonel, Takumi and Miles's acceptance of the past and their inability to change it with Alaska's experience of dealing with her mother's death.
18. How does Miles final essay in response to Alaska's question make you feel? Is it an appropriate ending of the book? What do you think happens to Miles and the Colonel in the future? Reference may be made to this quote from the Colonel (pg 257) "*After all this time, it still seems to me like straight and fast is the only way out – but I choose the labyrinth. The labyrinth blows, but I choose it.*"

Last Lines

1. Research the last lines of famous Australians.
2. Create your own ideal last line.
3. What ideally would Dr Hyde's last line be? Alternative, discussion, Dr Hyde "*Everything that comes together falls apart*" (pg x) would this be an appropriate last line for Dr Hyde, what does it mean?

4. Do you agree with Miles?

"...a lot of times, people die how they live. And so last words tell me a lot about who people were, and why they became the sort of people biographies get written about..."

Cover Design

Since 2005, *Looking for Alaska* has been printed and translated in numerous countries, research the various covers and rank them according to (1) best reflect the books theme, (2) appeal to teenage readers, (3) most popular in your class. Why do publishers change the cover for different countries?

Additional Books students may enjoy:

How I live Now by Meg Rosoff

I am the Messenger by Markus Zurak

Paper Towns by John Green

Go Ask Alice by Anon

Surrender by Sonya Hartnett

Before I Die by Jenny Downham

