

Rogue Librarians, Episode 17
Looking for Alaska (Part 1: Why It's Banned)

Welcome to the 17th episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. We would love for you to participate in our discussion. Please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians.

If you join our patreon at patreon.com/roguelibrarians, you can hear our audio perks in the mini episode that we are releasing today. We discuss some favorite books that address grief and our other favorite John Green books. In the last mini episode, we discussed other books we love that included vampires. Please join our discussion of those and other books.

We are big fans of John Green, whose book we are discussing today. What is one of your favorite things about John Green, Alanna?

This is really hard because I love so many things about John Green. But one of my favorite things is listening to him on his podcast Dear Hank and John. And when he was doing the Anthropocene Reviewed. I love his sense of humor. I love how thoughtful he is and I just get so much out of uh listening to him in those forums. So, what about you, Dorothy?

Well, I am with you on all of the above. Um but I I would have to say one of my favorite things about John is you mentioned how thoughtful he is and whenever I watch Vlog Brothers or listen to, well, definitely with the Anthropocene Reviewed. Um and you know, the Dear Hank and John is a different, if it's, it's a different vibe and I also enjoy that, but I, I really like just hearing him sort of take apart an idea and consider it and as he likes to say, you know, imagining the world complexly. So it, it's just always a treat. Um They are nonjudgmental and really think about the messages that they're putting out in the world. Uh And, you know, also their charitable stuff is fantastic. The um Partners of Health project. So, yeah, I completely agree. Yeah. What about you, Marian?

I, well, I mean, the don't forget to be awesome is obviously amazing. Um But so I, I was a little early on to John Green because um Looking for Alaska, the book we're discussing today was actually on my reading list when I was in library school. Um And so I learned about John Green

kind of before my personal children were the age of reading John Green. So when I heard uh my daughter and a friend talking about going to see John Green at one point. I was like, oh, I, I love John Green and they, they thought I was cool. So, um, being an early on John Green fan made, made me have a little bit of a coolness factor. So I've always been somewhat grateful for that because let's face it. I'm just, I'm a nerd. Um, but, um, also I love, I've seen John Green live a couple of times um talking about books and um and talking about other authors and I love how John Green is.

I mean, obviously all the things you said, but I love how he is such a fan of other authors and is always promoting other authors as well. Um I think that that's just a really cool thing about him. I love that John Green is incredibly humble. Um I love that he, you know, shares the fact that he never thinks anything is good enough, um which I think is, is something that we can all relate to. Um I just think he's so relatable that way. Um And you know, he has a tremendous sense of humor.

One of the opportunities that I had to um discuss with John Green was actually via um a phone in to a local um a local bookshop that I went to and we were all talking about how excellent the John, you know, John Green's books are and which were some of our favorites. And um and I had mentioned to the great disdain of my daughter, um who was I believe a middle schooler or possibly a freshman in high school at the time I mentioned how much I had loved listening to the audio book of Will Grayson, Will Grayson on a very long car ride. Um, and that I laughed so hard, it made me pee my pants. Um But John Green was just took it all in stride and was just so awesome about it and, and I've always remembered that and, and just loved that about him. So um just a real person. And as you all said, just a great contributor to our society and a society that needs a lot more good in it hearing, I know this part could go on forever because we're all such big fans, but just how he and Hank uh are together is, is just a joy to hear.

Well, we're going to come back to why we love his book so much in just a little bit. But before we do that, we wanted to mention a little bit more about the top challenged books from 2022 when Marian and I had the chance to talk with Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada, the 2022 to 2023 president of the American Library Association. We talked about the fact that the ALA had released their list of the top 13 most challenged books in April; there were 13 rather than 10 because of a few ties. So we thought we had mentioned those in case you hadn't seen the full list. So they were number one Gender Queer. Two, All Boys Aren't Blue. Three, The Bluest Eye.

Four, Flamer. Tied for five were Looking for Alaska and The Perks of Being a Wallflower. Seven, Lawn Boy. Eight, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian. Nine, Out of Darkness. And tied for 10th were A Court of Mist and Fury, Crank, Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl, and This Book Is Gay.

So we've already released episodes on Gender Queer, All Boys Aren't Blue, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, and Out of Darkness, the last of which included our interview with author Ashley Hope Perez. We are discussing today Looking for Alaska, and we hope to get eventually to all the books on the list and then some.

Yes. So, as Dorothy and Marian said, we are talking about Looking for Alaska by John Green. Today, we wanted to give you a trigger warning that the book discusses questions about death and suicide. We will talk about that more in our second episode on this book. But just so you have a sense of some of the issues it deals with. First published in 2005, Green's debut novel won the Michael L. Printz Award in 2006. A mini series based on the book was released on Hulu in 2019, although now you can pay to rent or buy it on other platforms. Looking for Alaska was the fourth most challenged book from 2010 to 2019 and the most challenged book in 2015. It made the news again recently for being the fifth most challenged book in 2022, as we just mentioned, and there were attempts to ban it at John Green's old school in Florida among other places.

Well, uh Amazon actually recommends the book um in terms of uh age range for those who are 14 and older. Um Common Sense Media recommends the book for 16 year olds and older. Um their reviews saying that this coming of age novel is gorgeously written, passionate, hilarious, moving, thought provoking, character driven and literary. It deserves all the awards it's won. The characters may often behave badly, but they are vividly real complex and beautifully drawn and their stories can help readers start dealing with some big topics like self discovery and loss.

Complex. That's the word that I always associate with John. OK. So for my summary, um and uh but I don't know whether I have any fans out there, but I don't like to read, just read straight summaries. So we're gonna see if we can liven it up a little bit. All right. So discontent, discontented teen or maybe just bored. Um He's a junior. Miles Halter leaves his home in Florida. To attend a boarding school in Alabama, uh which is called Culver Creek. Uh, in order to seek the great perhaps, uh which happened to be the last words of Francois Rabelais. I don't

know if I'm saying correct. Yes. But uh Miles has a thing for memorizing famous last words. So this is his idea just going out there doing something different. Um, he gets there, he's promptly dubbed Pudge. It's ironic because he's long and lean, skinny. Uh So his roommate immediately says, you know, we're gonna call you Pudge. Uh, his roommate is the Colonel. Do not call him Chip. Uh It, he, uh, and then a, ok, so they, he get there, he meets people. He's still feeling a little out of, you know, doesn't know anybody and then he is targeted in it. What I thought was pretty intense hazing incident, uh, kind of a practical joke. Uh And as a result, you know, he kind of really becomes close friends with the colonel and his friend group, which includes Alaska and Takumi, uh, because they're gonna help him get revenge and practical jokes are huge in this book. Uh It's a part of the culture at the school. Um, the book starts 100 and 36 days before an unknown event and it ends 100 and 36 days after. Do I know the significance of this number? No, I do not. Uh There's a high school, there's illicit behavior, mostly smoking and drinking made more exciting miles points out by the constant threat of expulsion. Um, there is an interesting religion class that helps them and um us navigate big thoughts about why we're here and how we cope with our existence. There's young love and there's hormones, put it all together. You get a John Green book. That's a pretty good summary. Also, I'm trying very hard not to give any spoilers.

So, yeah, we're trying to save a few spoilers for the next episode. Yeah, just in case you want to read a book between.

Exactly. Yes. And if you haven't read it, we do you think that it, it is worth your time and explain more on that in a little bit in a few minutes.

Thank you, Dorothy. That was great. So a little bit more about why this book has been challenged and banned. John Green has given several interviews and released a video in 2008 and a TikTok video in October 2022 about the attempts to ban his book. According to the ALA, Looking for Alaska was challenged last year for its LGBTQIA+ content and for being sexually explicit in previous years when it made the top 10 list, the reasons provided were sexually explicit, offensive language, drugs, alcohol and smoking and unsuited for age group. And while most of those other reasons are very clear in the book, we were surprised by the supposed LGBTQIA content because while there are a few jokes in which characters imply that others are gay, I did not notice any other content that would be considered LGBTQIA+. What about the two of you?

I, I was flabbergasted when I saw that I was, I was like, what, where? Uh, no, I didn't notice anything. Yeah. And having just reread the book because of course, I read it years ago for the first time. No, there, there's, there's really no character that identifies that way. At least not in a clearly blatant way. And um yeah, just, you know, the jokes that are typical of high school, not that we recommend those jokes because at this point that is not cool. But yeah, that, that kind of blew my mind.

Yeah, we know that those jokes are hurtful um at this point. But um they're used as, you know, they're supposed to be humorous in the book. So, yeah, there, there are no other references. So that seems like a strange reason, but the sexually explicit reason um is a little more obvious. So we thought we'd go into that in more detail.

So according to an article that was in The Independent on April 24th, 2023, which is just recently, John Green contrasts a scene um in which Miles, who's the main character, receives oral sex from a friend called Laura uh with a scene in which Miles kisses the elusive Alaska the scene involves less physical contact but far more emotional value. This, as Green has explained multiple times over the past 15 years, is the point of the two juxtaposed scenes. Um The argument here he said in his 2008 video is that physical intimacy can never stand for emotional closeness. Um Certainly what I got out of it when I read the book twice. So I'm pretty sure that readers are smart enough to get that. Um Anyway Green said that having his specific passage read out of context is especially troubling because move from its context, it can't do its work, which is to point out that the romantic encounter that Miles and Laura is a have is awkward and unfulfilling precisely because they don't have any emotional connection. Um and specifically not the emotional connection that would be needed to have a fulfilling romantic encounter. So yeah, thoughts on that y'all.

Oh I mean, John says it the best. It, I mean, it just the, the scene is both hilarious and cringy and just like everything that, that I think you would be feeling if you were in that situation, you know, for the first time. And I think I, I haven't seen a lot of that kind of thing in uh y a books that sort of real fumbling of, we don't really know how to do this thing, you know, even though we think we're ready for it. So um and then the scene with Alaska is just so poignant and, and heartbreaking and beautiful. So it definitely the juxtaposition worked for me. Yeah, for sure. And I know one of, one of the things John Green has said before about his books is that and about

his readers is that he, he gives his readers credit for having the intelligence to be able to understand and, and get what the message that he's trying to, to um put in these books. So and through these scenes. So um I think I, I always think and have thought for a long time about people's objections to things, especially things taken out of context that we need to trust our, our young people. They're, they really are smart people. Um And, and they're really aware of what's going on in the world through television and social media and movies and living in the world and observing family members and friends and so on and so forth. So, um I, I, I wish people would stop attacking the authors in the books. Yeah, but I digress which we love to do.

Uh uh John has said in an article, it's really exhausting to have people hate your book but not read it. Um Generally they're reading the scene or a few other scenes that have been highlighted on websites that are used to help these folks organize and they're not reading the novel, which is of course not about sex. Yeah, that is not a major theme in the novel. Intimacy is but sex is not. Um, friendship is yes, but sex is not. Uh, sex is not. So there's a link uh, in the show notes in case you're interested in reading some of, uh, John Green's other thoughts on, on book banning. He's really gotten to a point now, um, where he just, just, he's tired of talking about it. I think it based on, uh, I think it was a Dear Hank and John episode or possibly a Vlog Brothers where somebody had asked a question about it. And he's like, I've, I've said everything I need to say. Alanna, you want to get us started on the historical context because this book has been around for a while.

Yeah. So since 2005, when it was first published, *Looking for Alaska* has been read by many teenagers both in and outside of school. As we mentioned, one of the topics it addresses is how to handle grief after it was published. *Looking for Alaska* was and still is considered one of the best examples of an authentic reckoning with questions of life and death in a young adult book. And John Green's later book, *The Fault In Our Stars*, is another excellent example of that. I found a few academic articles on the impact of *Looking for Alaska* on teenagers. For example, in the 2018 article "Dealing with Death through Dialogue: Existentialism and *Looking for Alaska*," Katie Rybakova mentions that reading the book was cathartic for students and helped them to articulate their own grief in journal entries. Finally, in her 2019 undergraduate thesis called "Hopeful or harmful literature? Teenage suicide as described in the YA novels *Thirteen Reasons Why*, by Jay Asher, and *Looking for Alaska*, by John Green," Elin Logara states, "*Looking for Alaska* concentrates on the close relationship between life and death and the possibility to move beyond a traumatic loss. I have claimed that these hopeful messages are what most readers will

take to heart. Consequently, there are no reasons to ban or censor these novels. Instead, adults should take young readers seriously by giving them access to literature that can help them broaden their horizons and their knowledge about life. Many teenagers are harbouring existential thoughts, and the books they read must reflect this to be relevant to them. I would also like to emphasize that I think it is important to break the taboo surrounding issues like suicide and mental health problems, and that literature can be an important part of this process.” So this author states many ideas that we have expressed before on the importance of literature to help teens process their thoughts and emotions. And we're going to talk about why this novel is so important in more detail in just a sec.

Yes, we, we um with, you know, without going into the in depth discussion that we will do in our next episode. Um it's as that, uh as that quote. So, uh what put very well uh that it deals with these big important existential questions, life and death and you know, what we're doing here, uh Where do we go after all of that? Uh And it does it in a, in a moving way and in a way that I think is accessible to uh to teens. So that's, uh that's a big pro. Um And, you know, also as, as um stated in that quote, it, these are questions and concerns that teens have while they're growing up. So it addresses those concerns as well. Um For me, a big draw is just John Green's prose. Um I love his observational way of writing. Um I love to see things through the eyes of the characters. It, it just makes me stop and really consider uh small things that maybe I haven't noticed before. I remember when um my, my kid who also introduced me to John Green at least uh initially through the Vlog Brothers videos. And so when he started reading the books, he said, uh you know, I, I like that. It's John Green, but I don't so much care about the plot, which I thought was amazing because I kind of, I mean, I enjoy what he does with plot, which is very um it's, it's not tightly plotted, right? It's sort of as he has described something to get in the something for the characters to do. But uh I, I just, I, I love the way that he does it and I can hear his voice in it and I really enjoy that. Um Let's see. Uh I'm, I want to give you guys a chance here. I have one or two more uh as writing about sex goes, John Green puts everything into a thoughtful and realistic light. So the scenes are there to teach the characters and the readers something about sex and intimacy and not simply to be salacious, they're, you know, integral to the growth process that Miles goes through. So I think that's important and he does it with humor. So that's also great. Uh Anyone else have thoughts on pros?

Yeah, I, I thought that um if you're familiar with John Green's other writing, especially um his most recent book of essays, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, based on his essays from the

podcast. You can, as you said, you can really hear John Green in these, in these moments with these characters, especially Miles' obsession with people's last words. That's something that John Green apparently shares and um he sometimes shares them on the podcast. And um I, I thought that the characters were really interesting in this book. They're unique and memorable and not necessarily all likable that was really interesting to me because uh I think I'm, you know, a lot of young adult books have just more straightforward or more likable characters. And I sometimes had trouble empathizing or understanding these characters because they are so different from me and they make lots of mistakes and I think that makes them really interesting and I, I think it is helpful to not always have likable characters. And I also thought the setting was brought to life so well in this book, I uh John Green based on his own experience at a boarding school in Alabama. And it was really vividly portrayed and I could imagine all of these things that were happening. What about you, Marian?

Yeah. And I really liked the fact that um like I said, when I read this years ago, I didn't know anything about John Green. This was my introduction to John Green and I didn't read it thinking, oh, John Green has put so much of himself into this book, particularly into the character Miles. Um And so rereading it again. I really um saw John Green in the book more and I thought that was really, really awesome. Um I also really agree, I agree with you, Alanna. The characters are unique. Um and flawed, they're flawed people. Um But what human being isn't flawed and you know, whether or not I liked them all, I liked that they um particularly the Colonel and Pudge and Alaska and Takumi and Laura, they all had such compassion for each other. Um And there's a lot of, of discussion about, you know, oh, so, and so is being moody today or, you know, that's just the way she is sometimes or, you know, there the flaws are, are things that we can identify with even if we don't like them and even if we feel like we don't like the character and, and listening to the descriptions of how they, you know, they do um discover forgiveness and they, they have that capacity to forgive. I think that's, that's just a really important lesson again. And a unique John Green is to weave that importance into, you know, the existence that we all you know, are trying to, to make it through this world and we're not gonna get through unscathed, but it's, it just, it is yet another powerful message that I think is so neat because these books are obviously appealing to young adults and um as Dorothy indicated um that that her child introduced her to John Green and you know, but, but the fact that we as adults like John Green, as much as the young adults, I think that just shows you how, how much is in these books. Um how many, how many um positive and thought provoking message are messages are in these

books. Um And John Green has had um training as a minister so that comes through as well, which, which I think is really a powerful message.

Should we move on to some of the cons? What? OK. So as we mentioned, this book was written in 2005. And I thought while reading at this time that some of the language and some of the jokes were dated and would be considered offensive now. So some language like retarded and lame, and, yes, some teenagers still use those words, but I think it would be less appropriate to include those in books nowadays without some sort of critique of them. And as we mentioned, there are some homophobic jokes as well. Um So those are just used as punchlines implying that someone is gay. So I think if it were written nowadays, I, I wonder if it would be different in those ways, but most of the content is still very relatable. So it's just some of the language that I think would be changed at this point. What did the two of you think about that?

Yeah, I, I definitely agree. There were um definitely cringeworthy moments. Um And, and I think, I think you put it very well on it. It just, I think it would be interesting to hear John Green's words on this. I mean, obviously any book that's written is written in the time that it's written and then, you know, we move on and, and you know, 15 years later, we have different perspectives on on the way things should or should not be said. So, you know, it, it's a moment in time that has passed and it doesn't look so pretty today in some ways. But, but that's just sort of the nature of the beast, I guess. So, I, I don't, I don't condemn, I just, um, it's just something to be aware of and I, I know that's come up with other books. I know that that's come up with, you know, for example, um, should people still be reading To Kill A Mockingbird in School and, and that kind of thing? So, um, and that's just part of it. Mhm. Mhm.

Um, I actually have a bigger problem with, I mean, it's so integral to the book but the whole concept of the, um, culture of practical joking. Um, and it's a huge important piece of the book but I've never been someone who enjoys a practical joke. So that, that was just a little bit of a con for me, is this, um, the importance of that sort of thing because I, I just don't almost never find them funny, you know.

Same and some of them were very damaging and as you mentioned, the, the hazing incident, um, you know, the character could have died in that incident and people just brushed it off, like, oh, well, it's no big deal.

That's just, well, they didn't, they didn't know the full extent of it.

I think at first he didn't mention that part of the duct tape. But even once they knew it was sort of like, ok, we're going to get revenge but it, it wasn't, not as big a deal was made out of it as I think could have been.

Um And as you mentioned with some of the practical jokes, uh they, they were very damaging to people. So, um that and the whole, ok, you have to understand, I'm speaking as a teacher here but the whole nobody rats, I was just gonna, you know, like I have to tell my kids, I know you guys have a code but if you're worried about someone you need to tell an adult you can talk to me. Um So, and both of those things are, I'm sure that the practical joking was more than likely a real thing that happened at this boarding school. You know, you know, that, that people play jokes on each other. I think it comes up in uh another one of John Green's books too. Um, Paper Towns maybe. Yeah. Um So, you know, like if, if you're into that great, uh if you're not, he does it well, you know, that it, and it does make for some interesting scenes and, uh thought thoughtfulness about the whole thing. But, um, and I did, I did kind of enjoy that the, the big finale one. But um, but yeah, so that, that kind of a culture is just an issue for me. Sorry. Yeah.

No, I, I agree. I, and, you know, I don't know, maybe we're too sensitive and, and, you know, there's certainly a line in the book where one of the characters tells another one of the characters about a practical joke that's been played, you know, come on, grow up. You know, there's no, there's no time for crying here and you know that it, I, I don't know, I, I think about nowadays particularly where in post COVID times there's, you know, more mental health issues in our society than there ever has been discussed in the past. Um, and, and I think, I think there could be a really interesting mental health discussion about what pranks and not ratting out and you know how it affects people could come out of this book. So I like to think of what are the positives that could come out of something that could potentially be a con here.

Yeah. Well, the other con that um isn't exactly a con but it's just something for people to be aware of is that as we mentioned at the very beginning, there are some different suggested age rages depending on what you yourself or what you as a parent think that your child could handle. So there is more sexual content in this book than in some other YA books. For example, it talks about watching a porn scene in some detail. And as we mentioned, there's a scene with

a blow job that goes into a lot of detail and there are a lot of scenes in this book with the teenagers smoking and drinking and potentially getting in trouble. And um, as we already mentioned, there are questions of death and grief and, and mental health and some teenagers, especially on the younger side may not be ready for that. So just things to be aware of before you pick up this book.

Yeah, definitely. I got to love in terms of the the scene where they're watching the porn to have Alaska's feminist take on. It is uh something I think a lot of kids could use that perspective.

It just would not be realistic if you had a teen boarding school where nothing sex-related ever happened. You know, if the words were cut out, the discussions were cut out. Um, it, it just, it just wouldn't be realistic. I mean, I go back to my childhood and, you know, I, I just, I know by the time I was in the sixth grade we were, we were reading Judy Bloom's *Forever* and, you know, we had all the good parts marked, you know, and we were having slumber parties and, and reading them out loud and, you know, that's, that's part of learning life. It's, it's just part of it. All right. Well, we can get into this more in our next episode which I'm looking forward to. But for now time to, you bet it's time to close this one up.

So, uh thank you so much for joining us and we hope that you will join us next time for a close reading of *Looking for Alaska*. If you would like to leave a question or comment, please visit us at theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians. If you're enjoying this podcast, please subscribe on Apple podcast, Spotify or wherever you find your podcast. And please please please leave us a rating and review. This is how we get discovered. Um We, we really couldn't ask you enough, please leave your ratings and reviews and of course, we want to know what you're thinking so that we can um keep making the podcast better. We also wanted to give a shout out to our newest patron, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, thank you so much for helping us to continue making this podcast. We are so grateful. Um If you would also like to support us, please join our Patreon at patreon.com/roguelibrarians as a patron, you will receive bonus audio content. Um and we will give you personalized book recommendations and other great perks. Another way that you can support our podcast as well as indie bookstores across the country is by purchasing a book from our affiliate shop at [bookshop dot org slash shop slash rogue librarians](http://bookshop.org/shop/roguelibrarians). Finally, thank you to Chris for creating the beautiful music, Heather for running our Twitter page, and Lizzie for doing the audio editing. We absolutely could not do this podcast without them. And finally, thank

you from the bottom of our hearts to all of you for reading with us. Um This is a mission of love and heart and um we appreciate all of you. We're going to end today with Elizabeth's words. Books are meant to be read.