

John Green

John Green is making a name for himself. He's written three teen novels, and each one has received glowing reviews from the most respected review journals. How does he do it? Here, Mackin's Lori Tracy chats with John about how he got started, why his books are so popular, and how his humor and incredible insight into the teenage mind have catapulted him to success.



From worms to words

Lori: Okay, I have to ask. Did you really want to be an earthworm scientist as a kid?

John: Yes, I did. I like digging my hands in the dirt. I've always liked the idea of being good at science and math, but I'm not good at them. All the earthworms in my earthworm farm died. I can't keep my plants alive. I have no talent with anything organic, but I thought it would be a fun job.

L: Were you an avid reader as a child?

J: Yes. It's a similar thing — I always liked the *idea* of reading a lot. But, there were some books that I would read over and over. "Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen, "Huck Finn," adventure novels. When I read a book I loved, I loved it for a long time, and it stuck in my memory. I wasn't one of those voracious readers who read hundreds of books a year.

L: So when did the joy of writing enter your life?

J: I knew I wanted to be a writer by the time I was 12 or so, but I certainly never thought it was

a realistic career goal. When you're eight, it's perfectly acceptable to think you want to be an astronaut when you grow up. But at some point, you realize there are maybe 74 astronauts in the world, and that it's statistically improbable you'll be among them. I always thought being a writer was analogous to being an astronaut; but in point of fact, it's not — not at all.

You know from *Compendium*. It's a publication with hundreds of books in it, and those are just the best of the best. All those books are written by somebody. It turns out that writing was a much more realistic career goal than I thought it was. For a long time, even when my first novel was published, I never thought I would do this full-time for a living. I feel very fortunate now. At some point, presumably, that will end, but you want to ride that as long as you can.

When life is serious, laugh more

L: It took you four years to write "Looking for Alaska" (2005), and a little less for "Abundance of Katherines" (2006). How long did it take to write your new book "Paper Towns?"

J: About two-and-a-half years — still shorter, but still longer than it ought to be. They say you're supposed to publish a book every year, but it's a time-consuming process for me. I can write a draft in a few months, but the revision process is not easy. Probably between the first draft of "Paper Towns" and the finished manuscript, about 80 percent was abandoned and rewritten — and that's pretty par-for-the-course for me. Three books in now, I have to accept that's my process. I might envy my colleagues who write a book every year they can be proud of, but that's just not going to be me.

L: "Looking for Alaska" seems to be a dark book. "Abundance of Katherines" seems to be a much lighter book. How did this influence "Paper Towns," which seems to be a mix of both moods?

J: I've always really liked books that never stopped being funny, yet are very serious. I wanted to try to write a book like that — funny all the way through, but also one that acknowledged the seriousness of the story. A serious story about people who are engaged in difficult moments of their lives — I think that's what life is like.

I worked at a children's hospital, and some of the funniest things I ever heard I heard there. But, it was not a funny place.

I wanted to try to reflect that in "Alaska." The first half does, but the second half is pretty, okay, very dark. It was nice to be able to write a book that stayed serious but didn't leave behind the humor.

L: What do you want a teen reader to think or feel after reading "Paper Towns?"

J: I want them to feel like the choice between an ordinary and an extraordinary life is a more difficult choice than one would first think. Also, I want them to feel like they've been taken on a crazy ride, and that they know and care about these kids as well as they know and care about their friends.

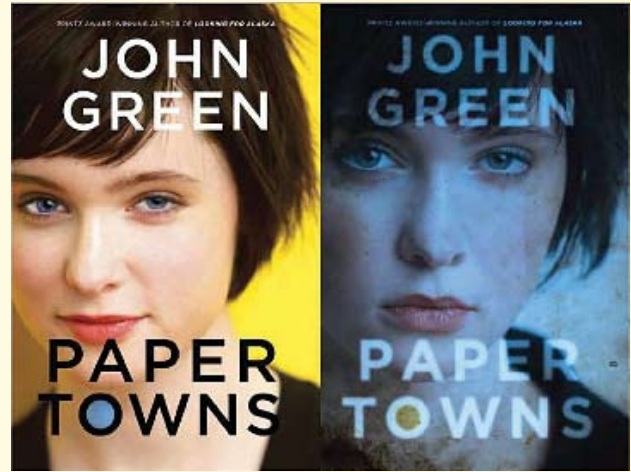
One of the big arguments in the novel is that there's a limit to the human imagination, or to what extent we're able to imagine what

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it's like to be other people or for other people to be with us.

The story is only interesting if you feel like you're inside one or more of the characters enough for the mistakes to be there.

L: So ... there's a lot of swearing in your books. How do you go from being a chaplain, someone who studied religion, to writing books with lots of swearing? [NOTE: John worked for six months as a chaplain in a children's hospital after college.]



J: Yeah, if you've ever been in a roomful of children's hospital chaplains, you will rarely hear more swearing. I don't think there's anything incompatible with "explicit language" and "family values" or "Christian values." The real questions at the core of the human experience have absolutely nothing to do with whether or not in the course of your discussion you use the word "sh_ _."

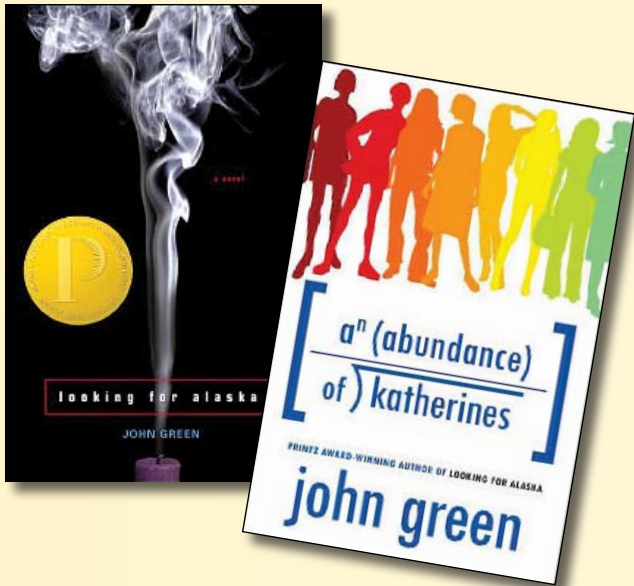
Write where it hits you

L: Do you have any weird habits/superstitions when you're in the midst of writing?

J: I'm pretty superstitious about keyboards actually. I use a different keyboard for each book. I'm not really superstitious about anything else. I've written on planes, trains and automobiles. I've written in airports and bookstores and restaurants, in coffee shops, in my basement, in my attic, in my office. Sometimes I write with music on, sometimes with music off.

I actually try to break my superstitions whenever possible, because it's irrational. For a long time I believed, when I first started

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writing, that I couldn't write well if I wasn't smoking cigarettes — which is a very dangerous thing to believe, of course! As it turns out, the exact opposite was true. I couldn't write well if I did smoke cigarettes.

“Looking for Alaska” didn't get any good until I quit smoking.

L: So you can just start writing wherever it hits you?

J: Yes. I have to sit still for a minute and collect myself, and I like to read whatever it is I've been writing. So I try to get in the voice and edit what I wrote last time around just to make it sound better.

L: How many hours a week would you say you're writing?

J: It's a good question. I never really know what constitutes writing! Is reading what I'm writing considered writing? I don't know. I probably spend 20 hours a week writing or looking at something I've written, then another 20-25 hours a week running the business of being an author — e-mailing, travel

scheduling and blogging. I spend about 20 hours every week doing the video blogging. It's important and a big part of my life, so I wouldn't want to lose that.

L: Why did you decide to write for a young-adult audience as opposed to middle school or adult? Is it because your high school years are the most vivid memories for you?

J: Well, I think that's probably part of it, but I also think there are two main reasons I like writing for teens. First, I really like the audience. It's really interesting to be able to have a conversation — which is what a good novel ought to be — with people at this moment, people who are forming

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their values, when everything important is happening for the first time, and the stakes are so high.

Second, I like creating those kinds of characters. I like writing about people who are learning what it means to be a person and what is appropriate behavior. They're not asking questions in the somewhat jaded ways we're asking them now. They're asking them because those questions have literally never

occurred to them before. The newness and excitement of that really interests me.

Writer. Blogger. Comedian?

L: Do you ever, even though you only have a few books under your belt, look back on your first book and think you should've done anything differently?

J: It's only been three or four years, but I don't think I would change anything. I never say I wish I could change this or that, because I feel I did the best I could do with those stories with those people at that time and that place. Going back to it now would not make a better book.

L: You worked at Booklist years ago and really enjoyed it. If you found out tomorrow you couldn't be a writer anymore, what would you do?

J: Hmm, something lucrative. No, I would become a professional video blogger. I would just make videos. I would work with that community. It's similar in a way because you get to have a collaborative conversation with people, like you do with writing.

L: I've seen a few of your video clips on the Internet, and they're hilarious. Maybe you should do stand-up comedy?

J: Yeah, well maybe, but I get nervous in front of audiences. The nice thing with the videos is I forget anyone is ever watching them. I can be the person I always wanted to be. I can be funny; it's a great outlet for me.

L: Do you have an idea what your next book is going to be yet?

J: Sort of. I don't know if this will ever be a book, but it's called *The Sequel*. It's a sequel to a novel, but the novel doesn't exist — it's a sequel to a fictional novel. The girl in the book, in the sequel, was a character in the previous novel. Then when the book ended, everyone in the book ceased to exist, but this girl did not. That's the story.

Everyone who can attest to her existence doesn't exist. What do you do then?

That actually sometimes happens, not to you or me hopefully, but to immigrants perhaps — if they don't have papers. Our definition of personhood is wrapped up in the fact that other people can attest to the fact that you're a person, and that you have papers that show you're a person. This is my driver's license.

L: Like your birth certificate. Here's proof that you were born.

J: Exactly! What a strange thing it is to have a birth certificate to get things done. The fact that you're alive is your birth certificate. That's good! I'm going to put that in the book!

L: For all the aspiring writers in school right now, do you have any recommendations for them?

J: Yes. Well, there are two things I would say:

1. Read a lot. Reading is the only real apprenticeship we have as writers.

2. Tell stories to friends and try to pay attention to when they get bored.

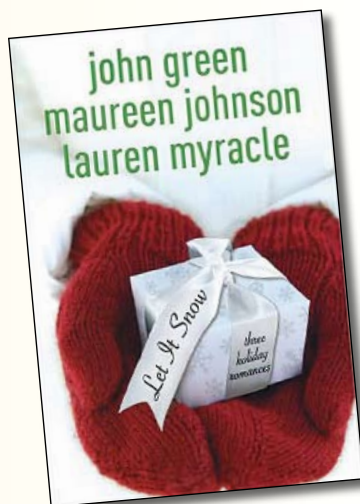
All we did in high school was sit on the couch and tell stories and try to get each other to laugh. I learned a lot about telling stories just by listening to my friends, who were great storytellers. Then, I would tell my stories and try to notice when they got bored.

John Green is the author of "Paper Towns," "Abundance of Katherine's" and "Looking for Alaska." He also co-authored "Let It Snow" with Maureen Johnson and Lauren Myracle.

His website, sparksflyup.com, includes more information about each of his books and a very entertaining blog.

Look for John Green's new books on page 62:

- **Paper Towns**
- **Let It Snow: Three Holiday Stories**



FAVORITE BOOKS

Classics

"All the Kings Men"
"Catcher in the Rye"
"Huck Finn"

Contemporary

"The Book Thief" by Markus Zusak, "The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing" by M.T. Anderson, "Infinite Jest" by David Foster Wallace, "The Virgin Suicides" and "Middlesex" by Jeffrey Eugenides, "On Boxing" by Joyce Carol Oates, and anything by Toni Morrison.

JUST A MAN IN THE 'BURBS

John Green lives in suburban Indianapolis with his wife, Sarah, who is a museum curator at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. He enjoys mowing the lawn on Saturdays, although he wonders why we spend so much time on something that doesn't give anything back to us.

When he's not writing, he likes to, what else, read a lot. He also enjoys looking at art (thanks to his wife) and watching soccer on TV.

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BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE
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