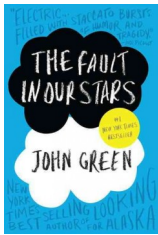


The Fault in Our Stars



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This young adult novel by the popular John Green fell into my arms at the YMCA. An exercise buddy suggested that I read it; she was turned on to it by her teenage son. The novel opens at a cancer support group in a church. Because it's set in Indianapolis some of the landmarks will be familiar. A 16 year-old girl suffering from stage IV thyroid cancer is returning at the insistence of her Mom. "Go out and meet somebody" her mom suggested and without any hope that she will, Hazel does.

Asked to speak about what she's thinking, Hazel describes how everyone on earth is going to die. It is the only end we can expect and that we have. Her speech is more philosophical and much more eloquent but totally lacking in hope. Afterwards, handsome Augustus who's on the mend from osteosarcoma - 80% chance of survival--tells her he likes what she said. Not only that but she looks like Natalie Portman. Augustus and Hazel have a mutual friend, Isaac, who is about to lose an eye from another form of cancer.

Hazel can't leave the house without her oxygen tank. Her prognosis is poor; it's not a matter of if but when. Her parents are extremely kind and protective. She overheard her mom say once that when Hazel dies, she will no longer be a mom.

If *The Fault in Our Stars* sounds depressing, amazingly it isn't. Green has created a sardonic, wise beyond her years, poetry-loving heroine with an edgy sense of humor. She finds a soul-mate in Augustus who has already lost one girlfriend to death. Hazel holds back. She doesn't want to die and be another "exploding torpedo" in his life.

Green seems to understand having a terminal disease from the inside. There's one incredible scene where Augustus demands that Isaac smash all of Gus's old basketball trophies. "Break another one", Gus screams. Later, Augustus hands a now blind Isaac eggs from a pink carton, so Isaac can target his ex-girlfriend Monica's car. "More to the right. Lower. Right on". Monica's offense: she did not call Isaac or even send a card after his eye operation.

Augustus wins Hazel Grace's heart. When things take a dive for the worst, he reminds Hazel that "The world is not a wish-granting machine". Despite this mantra, he shares with her his lifetime wish from the Genie Foundation. He takes her and her mother to Holland to meet the author of her favorite book, "An Inevitable Affliction". The author turns out to be an alcoholic: irresponsible and needlessly cruel to both Hazel and Gus. He'd promised to tell her what happened to the characters after the book ended but instead he made fun of them for having cancer and mocked Hazel's need to discover the characters future. Characters don't have a future he told her. They only live between the covers of a book.

Even though the main characters are suffering, with one even dying, this book is optimistic. Hazel and Augustus love life and are open and primed for new experiences. Together they learn that no moment should be hurried, not lived to its fullest. While treating death and illness seriously, this novel still brims with joy and humor.

For another look at a pair of teens who help each other through difficult times, try Nathalie Standiford's *How to Say Good-bye in Robot*..

Posted by Dory L. on March 20, 2013

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