

What was the last book that you read for enjoyment, and what did you think of it?

"How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?"

I bought John Green's *Looking for Alaska* out of spite, after the Mom's for Liberty successfully banned the book in hundreds of schools. Their argument: the book was promoting pornography for children. I knew two things: A) Green's response to the controversy: "Text is meaningless without context" and "If it is pornography as the Mom's of Liberty are currently saying, can we agree it is *really bad* pornography?" - and B) It's a story about guilt and grief.

I opened the book one night, an attempt to calm my mind's racing, and ended up closing it at 2:00am - the first time in years that I have finished a book within so many hours. In the first pages, I felt disconnected. I could hardly say the characters were like me. With their rebellious, risk-taking, adrenaline filled brilliance, they are the kids every parent would warn - demand, really - you don't hang out with for fear of their "bad influence" rubbing off. From outside, it seemed they did not care enough about anything, and as someone who cares too much about everything, I feared that would amount to being substanceless. And I was wrong.

I fell in love with Alaska just like Miles did - her limitless curiosity, her comfort with adventure and the unknown, her effortless articulation with language. I feel her frantic, helpless anxiety - the sincerity in her drunken calls for help, the pounds of guilt and pain held on her chest. I shared Miles' sadness, yet content, with being an outsider, living in a world of his obscure loves. When the Colonel was frozen, paralyzed in front of a map to distract from the loss, my muscles too were locked, my mind, anywhere but *there*. *Looking for Alaska* scared me; the world it transported me too wasn't a fiction anymore, it was real. I was in it. And I was as invested in each of them as they were each other.

And then she died.

I finished *Looking for Alaska* unbeknownst to me that three days later, our school's Every 15 Minutes "experience" would begin. Peers were removed from classrooms, obituaries written by their parents were read, and a bloody, siren-surrounded car crash was put in the center of our campus. It was a way to scare us - to inform us - about the incredible consequences of driving under the influence. And the whole time, I thought about Alaska. She drunkenly drove head-on into a police cruiser, white tulips in the seat beside. In a matter of minutes, her story ended. I felt helplessly guilty: She is nothing more than words on a page, and yet, I wish I had stopped her final ones from being written. It's not fair Miles, the Colonel - and I - didn't get answers. Did she love Miles back? Why were her final, frantic words "I f***ed up"? Why did she bring her white tulips with her? Why did she write "Straight & Fast" as the answer to her question? Was it suicide?

We were angry with her for leaving us devastated, with questions that will never be answered. How dare Alaska. How dare she leave us to suffer with a lifetime of grief while she is absent from its weight. How dare the Colonel, Miles - anyone - not stop her. John Green, how dare you make me love only to lose.

But that's just it. That is love. To love is to risk, because love always ends - in loss, in death, in distance - it will end. It is terrifying to love, but a life without love is a miserable one. So, you forgive. I forgave myself for opening my heart, for loving, for sobbing over fiction. I forgave Alaska for leaving too soon, Miles for leaving his love unsaid, John Green for putting me through this hell. Because maybe that's the whole point of death; it's the only way we cherish, and the only way we forgive.

Alaska was obsessed with a question: *How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?* At 2:00am, I wrote on my mirror "We had to forgive to survive the labyrinth. - *Looking for Alaska*". Because *Looking for Alaska* isn't some really bad pornography or a simple story about foolish teenage angst, it's a story about us. It's about finding a way to love every person's intricate complexity, because there is a piece of you in everyone. It's a story about the unfound antidote for grief and the spiral of uncertainty; and it's a reminder to find it within yourself to forgive, because life is far, far too short to declare someone dead before they are.

So yeah, I guess it was pretty okay.