



## RIGHT TO READ

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# Still Looking for Alaska:

Exploring Female Identity Development after Trauma

*This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/publications/the-alan-review/the-alan-review-columns/>.*

**L**ooking for Alaska, John Green's 2005 Printz Award-winning book featuring life at boarding school, was the most challenged young adult (YA) novel of 2015 (Coles, 2016). The book is banned mainly for concerns centered on language and sex, especially one description of oral sex received by protagonist Miles "Pudge" Halter. However, the awkwardness of the scene is not what troubles us. The sex scene is brief and unromantic, not a passage to savor. It's a plot point that makes sense. What troubles us in *Looking for Alaska* is our perception that Miles defaults to misogynistic treatment of women while still earnestly dropping hints that he wants to understand Alaska as a person. When Miles spends Thanksgiving with his roommate, the Colonel, the Colonel's fabulous diner waitress mother, and Alaska, he yearns, "It made me hope that one day I could meet Alaska's family, too" (p. 92). Yet the book is silent on what makes female characters tick. Alaska Young serves as a silent and mysterious muse for Miles, especially in the last half of the book after she dies in a car crash. The silencing of topics of female identity shaped by trauma is a grave danger of censorship.

In this column, we seek to understand Alaska. We want to address what is underneath Alaska's sexual

risk-taking, why she seems to lack empathy, and why she acts as she does—making her unlikable for many readers. Finding Alaska requires an understanding of trauma and mental health from a systemic perspective. Marissa Fackler, graduate student and emerging English teacher, and Kris Gritter, editor of this column, appealed to counselor educators Christie Eppler of Seattle University's Couple and Family Therapy and June Hyun of Seattle Pacific University's Counselor Education programs for deeper insight into this challenged text. What follows is a conversation around several key ideas.

## Manic Pixie Dream Girls and Trauma

**Marissa:** *What bothers me about Alaska is she represents the archetype of a manic pixie dream girl (MPDG) that everyone loves to love. What's wrong with this archetype from your point of view?*

**Christie:** It is a heavy burden to be every cool thing at once. Before the MPDG, there were tropes that defined womanhood (i.e., nerd, rebel, outcast, or beauty queen). The MPDG manages to combine all those characters into one archetype—an impossible goal for anyone but a fictional character! You take the beauty queen, put clunky glasses on her (outcast), have her fight for a cause (rebel), and have her listen to obscure music and read important tomes (nerd). This is yet another unrealistic story that is set before us, distracting us from women who dare to claim what they are without labels.

**June:** Alaska's character is hidden behind the MPDG mask. Her story is not told or explored with care. No one seems to be curious about who she is underneath her mask. This may represent our society's attitudes toward adolescent girls, creating mysterious characters but labeling them as not normal. It may be easy to say she is too rebellious to deal with instead of listening to her story carefully and trying to help her.

**Kris:** *As you read Looking for Alaska as mental health workers making text-to-mental-health-world connections, what do you see in the character of Alaska Young that can help readers understand the effects of trauma on female identity development?*

**Christie:** I see Alaska as both a representation of a typically developing white, cis-gender, heterosexual adolescent and someone whose development has been marked by one of the most significant childhood traumas—the loss of a parent. Alaska is mysterious, impulsive, and moody. These are traits of many adolescents. Alaska is fearful; she keeps relationships at a distance. She may have romantic and/or friendship feelings for Miles, but she is dedicated to her off-campus boyfriend. Her relationships are literally and metaphorically distant.

The void of grief work in her childhood created a template for how she interacts with others later in her life. Miles recounts the “central moment of Alaska's life”:

When she cried and told me that she fucked everything up, I knew what she meant now. And when she said she failed everyone, I knew whom she meant. It was the everything and the everyone of her life, and so I could not help but imagine it. I imagined a scrawny eight-year-old with dirty fingers, looking down at her mother convulsing . . . And in the time between dying and death, a little Alaska sat with her mother in silence . . . She must have come to feel so powerless. . . . (p. 120)

Silence, fear, powerlessness, and attention to death are common themes in a grief story.

**June:** Observing Alaska indirectly through Miles's eyes makes me think there must be something going on beyond her hormonal changes and the

identity development of adolescence. Her behaviors of isolating herself from peers, pushing others from her social boundaries, feeling intense loneliness and sadness are typical responses of those who experience loss (Rando, 1988). Mental health researchers discuss how those who experience trauma express anger, helplessness, and fright. Expressing anger, which sometimes is displayed through rebellious or withdrawn actions, helps adolescents gain control over their life. These symptoms would be more intense for individuals who did not experience proper closure over a loss. In addition, the closeness of the relationship between Alaska and her mother would exacerbate the intensity of grief (Bugen, 1977). Research suggests that people who lose their father or mother in their childhood are more likely to be unhappy in their later life than those who did not. Even 10 years after the death, there is significant lingering unhappiness (Moor & Graaf, 2016).

**Kris:** *Alaska describes her mother's death when she describes the worst day of her life. She blames herself, as her father seems to do, as well. What insights do you have about her confession that she should have called 911 and the self-blame she inflicts upon herself?*

**June:** People who experience grief and loss feel guilty. Most of the guilt is associated with feelings that they should have spent more time with the loved one, loved him or her more, or that they should not have been angry with that person. Alaska surely felt the negative impact of knowing that her father placed the blame for her mother's death on her, not to mention his lack of support afterward. No adult told Alaska that the death was not her fault, and she did not have the chance to say a proper goodbye. No wonder she doesn't seem to practice a proper greeting with a stranger. (Remember the scene in which she meets Miles for the first time.) What I was impressed by about John Green is that he depicts the distance in all of Alaska's relationships with others—including her closest friends, Miles, the Colonel, Lara, and Takumi—throughout the text.

**Christie:** After the death of her mother, which was likely immediately after the mother's brain aneurysm, there was no one telling Alaska that her mother's death was not her fault. As a child, Alaska was only starting to grasp that death is universal and permanent. She did not yet have the words to express her grief. Her father, also grieving, did not provide a safe space where Alaska could understand that she did not cause the death, even if she did not call 911.

## Manic Pixie Dream Girls and the Male Gaze

*Marissa: Miles's first description of Alaska is "the hottest girl in human history" (p. 14). The first time they meet, she pulls down his shorts. We soon see that sexually inexperienced Miles is fascinated by her risky sexual behaviors, promiscuity, and attention seeking from men. She does not seem to have close female friends. Are these traits significant from a mental health point of view? Do you see traits in her that those of us trained in literacy but not psychology might miss?*

**Christie:** I think therapists and literary experts approach a text in a similar way; we both search for meaning. What comes into my mind is, how does this behavior make sense in context (e.g., family and life at a boarding school)? Pulling down Pudge's shorts makes sense in context to me because many traumatized children see emotions as scary and believe that it is best to keep relationships at a distance. Yanking down Pudge's shorts is a way to objectify him. Objects can be safe because they are not laden with emotions. Alaska can claim pulling down the pants is a feminist act—as a woman she is subverting male power by becoming the objectifier. For a traumatized child, it is also a way to emphasize one aspect of a relationship—the sexual—instead of cultivating a relationship built on respect and trust. Later in the novel, Miles and Alaska make out. The scene has the emotional spark that was lacking when Miles and Lara have oral sex. However, Alaska runs away, distancing herself, even as she struggles to sustain emotional connections.

*Marissa: Do you have insight into why Alaska's past trauma is fetishized by Miles, who turns it into a sexual mystery?*

**Christie:** Miles was faced with an unknowable mystery, the experience of childhood grief. He tries to make sense out of it within his development and social location. His mind's automatic response is to create a sexual story—a common narrative about females from his point of view. Miles needs to question how he can validate, be curious, and deconstruct his dominant narrative so that he can be fully himself, more than a sexualizer, thus allowing him to see Alaska as a real and complicated human. Trauma silences; it distances us from ourselves. Miles, grieving his friend, is also traumatized, and we need to extend the same compassion for his grief that we seek for Alaska.

## Supporting Women (Who Have Been Traumatized)

*Marissa: What strategies allow women to love who they are?*

**Christie:** I think the core feminist concepts of being communal and transparent allow women to love who they are. Women, humans, need communities where there is deep listening, acceptance, validation, and curiosity. They need to be vulnerable and transparent about their real selves in safe environments.

**June:** I think listening to others without judgement could create a place for women to love who they are. It is disappointing to see there are no adults who listen to Alaska. It was only when Miles, the Colonel, Takumi, Lara, and Alaska talk about the best and worst days in their lives that Alaska is able to open up and share her loss. From that point on, Miles understands Alaska a bit more and sees her mask hiding a scar that has not healed.

**Christie:** One of the central unanswered questions in the text is, "How did Alaska see herself?" (We only know her through Miles's story.) Did she see that she did the best she could when her mom died?

Alaska did not let her mom die alone. Maybe even as a young person she knew that her mom died instantly, and she trusted young intuition to be there with her fully instead of running to call 911. How did she cope after her mom died? Did her dad take care of her, or did she take care of her dad? How does she see men now having lived with her father after the death of her mother (e.g., as distant, as someone needing to be taken care of)? For Alaska and other adolescents, there is challenge in recognizing their own power while letting others nurture them into realizing their full selves. Everybody, but especially youth, needs someone to step in and comfort, provide a reality check, and validate. It is natural that one's mind goes to "should have," but that does not make the "should have" the right choice. It is okay to feel sad and scared. Someone needed to say to Alaska, "You were a child, and you were doing the best that you could." Or, "You blame yourself. What would it look like to forgive yourself?"

### Addressing Trauma in Challenged Texts

**Kris:** *As you read Looking for Alaska, what were the obvious signs for help that might be discussed in an English class? Alaska says early on, "Y'all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die" (p. 54). What other, more subtle markers do you see that imply this story might not end well for Alaska?*

**Christie:** For resilience, strong and supportive relationships are significant (Becvar, 2013). It is tempting to assess Alaska as having had strong bonds because she hangs out with Lara, Captain, Takumi, and Pudge. However, when we look closely, she is distant in nearly every relationship (e.g., her father, Captain, her off-campus boyfriend, and Miles).

When Alaska says: "I may die young . . . but at least I'll die smart" (p. 53), she seems to reveal a preoccupation with death. I think this is a significant way that Alaska's development differs from peers without a childhood grief experience. Adolescents are known for thinking they are invincible and immune to death. Alaska knows the realities of death; she is attracted to books that explore the ultimate mysteries in life: why are we here, and where do we go when we die? On my first reading,

I was surprised by the under-reaction of Alaska to the prank that destroyed her book collection. Although mercurial, Alaska did not appear bereft when her collection was destroyed.

Of course, drinking is common among adolescents, but binge drinking brings risk, and it did make me wonder about Alaska's motivation to harm herself without fully committing to suicide. Her risky behavior seems to leave open the possibility that suicide could be an unintended outcome.

**June:** If I, as a school counselor, heard Alaska saying, "You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you will escape it one day, and how awesome it will be and imagining that future keeps you going, but you never do it. You just use the future to escape the present" (p. 55), I would call her immediately to the office and contact her caregivers for further support. She sounded like she was stuck but could not figure out how to get out of her situation. What does she mean by using the future to get out of the present? Does she feel stuck in the labyrinth (that is, the present)? Is she suicidal?

Another statement—"I don't understand why I screw everything up" (p. 95)—sounds to me like another way of her crying out for help. Nothing-or-all language, extreme thoughts, and exaggerated sentences are typical dysfunctional thought processes that may be found in adolescents who experience trauma. And when she says, "It's not life or death, the labyrinth. Suffering. . . . suffering is universal" (p. 82), I hear her trying to normalize, which may help her smooth her scars and pains. A counselor's help walking along the healing path is needed.

**Kris:** *How can the language of trauma be addressed in an English language arts class?*

**Christie:** First, by talking overtly about trauma and its effects. Banning this book subverts important conversations. We know that not talking about trauma does not help children cope with trauma. Teachers can encourage people who challenge this book to see that silence does not help either the traumatized or those in a position to understand trauma. Empathetic dialogue helps heal. Along with

talking about the text using the concepts above, I think an English language arts teacher could help students write their own stories, help young people be curious. What could they add to Alaska's story? Or their own story? When I work with adolescents, I ask them to fill in the prompt, "Young women should . . ." I then ask them to consider, Who is telling them about these "shoulds"? Do they agree? They may choose to be a beauty queen or a rebel or even a MPDG, but my hope is that they will do it intentionally instead of following a script that was written before they were born.

**June:** One thing that I ask suicide-counselors-in-training to do is to shout out the word "suicide" several times. Once the shock value has worn off, meaningful discussion can take place. Not discussing suicide in class does not protect students, and I suggest my students consider this same technique in their future classrooms, if the school culture will allow. There are a lot of taboo topics—sex, suicide, drugs, abuse, trauma, etc.—that parents/caregivers/administrators/teachers are advised not to discuss in the classroom, but these topics should be discussed openly. Discussion is care. Discussing trauma does not invite trauma to be experienced. Reading about trauma in developmentally appropriate texts within supervised classroom settings helps students understand the symptoms of trauma and provides opportunities to learn how to read, respond, and deal with it.

**Marissa:** *What would it mean for Alaska to be Alaska?*

**June:** She needs help understanding her mourning. Parental death is one of life's most stressful events (Dowdney, 2008; Kaplow, Layne, Pynoos, Cohen, & Lieberman, 2012). When parental death is experienced between the developmental stages, clarifications between "reactions to parental death" and "normal conflicts of adolescence" especially need to be recognized (Keenan, 2014). Counselors or therapists would be helpful in the process. She needs both social support and clear, honest information about her mother's death. Without this, Alaska is unable to develop trust, relationships,

self-esteem, or self-worth. Instead, she experiences the loneliness, isolation, and inability to express feelings that we see in this book (Ellis, Dowrick, & Lloyd-Williams, 2013).

**Kris:** *As mental health experts, do you think this book should be challenged or removed from English language arts classes?*

**June:** I would like to see the school counselor and teachers work together to create lessons with this book—lessons on trauma and support, social/interpersonal relationships, and trauma and healing. A first lesson might begin with a question to students, "Why do school counselors want students to read this book?" This would prompt an honest discussion on why some adults may not like students to read it, while others would. More intentional discussion questions would also be beneficial for students by helping them to experience the social and emotional learning components and to unfold their own story: "What do students notice from each character regarding how they respond to Alaska's trauma?" "What would you do in this social circle as a friend of Alaska?" "How is your story similar to Alaska or different from Alaska?"

**Christie:** I like that this book was challenged because of the discussion it brought forth, specifically the conversation between counselors and teachers. I want this dialogue to be a model for schools, so that collaboration and support for students, especially traumatized students, will increase. Students need the opportunity to see a story from multiple perspectives and through multiple interpretations. It's okay to dislike Alaska initially; after all, creating community is hard when someone's automatic default is to keep distant. However, these are the prompts of a rich text discussion. Students and teachers benefit from questioning their own beliefs and assumptions: How can a school community respect an individual for who they are while helping all promote their best selves? What are safe communities? When is it okay not to be transparent? If the women in this novel had voices, how would we know them as persons? How might it change our view of Alaska?

## Keeping *Alaska* Alive and Well in Classrooms

Texts might be challenged for a variety of good reasons, but if a text provides valuable learning for adolescents as determined by a community of discerning stakeholders, it deserves to remain accessible.

School counselors and school psychologists should be part of decision-making processes about censorship as they consider the needs of adolescent students within the contexts of mental health. *Looking for Alaska* deserves to be read because of its presentation of the complexity of a vulnerable young woman and her resulting risk-taking and sometimes unlikable behaviors. Alaska's behavior makes more sense if her trauma is understood by readers, and her trauma gives voice to the trauma of other adolescents. Young adult literature is a powerful tool for empathy when finding a hidden story. *Looking for Alaska* is an excellent example of this.

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