

## Transcript of Conference Call with John Green

Caroline K.: Hi, everybody. This is Caroline Kitchener. I'm an associate editor at The Atlantic. Today for our Masthead conference call, we have John Green on the phone. Welcome, John.

John Green: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Caroline K.: It's really wonderful to have you here. John is a number one *New York Times* Bestselling author. His book, *The Fault In Our Stars*, sold over 23 million copies and was made into a major blockbuster movie. I personally have been reading John Green since I was a freshman in high school. His book, *Looking for Alaska*, was one of my favorites.

John is here to talk to us about his most recent book. That's called *Turtles All the Way Down*. It's our first official Masthead book club selection. I'll just read a little bit about what the *New York Times* has to say about it. They say it's far darker than John Green's other books, and I'm quoting here, "Not so much because of the subject matter, though that's dark too, but because of how he chooses to write about it. This novel is by far his most difficult to read. It's also his most astonishing."

Before I say any more, I want to quickly remind you of how these calls work. First, this call is all about your questions. I've collected a couple that people have sent in to me before the call, but we'd also love to answer questions submitted in real time. Just to remind you how to do that, you can log in to [social.maestroconference.com](http://social.maestroconference.com) to give us your questions. There'll be a little chat window down at the lower left-hand corner of your screen. Go ahead and click on that, and click on the "everyone" tab. If you type in questions there, Matt will pass them over to us. You can also email them to Matt at [mpeterson@theatlantic.com](mailto:mpeterson@theatlantic.com). Either way, we will get them.

Okay, that's all the background. Let's get going. John, could you start us out by giving us a little bit of background about the main character, Aza. What's going on with her?

John Green: Sure. I say her name Aza, but books belong to their readers, so my pronunciation is not better than yours. They're both legitimate. I'm just going to say that because I'm used to saying it.

Caroline K.: Cool.

John Green: She has, I guess, obsessive compulsive disorder. It's never stated outright in the book, or it's never named in the book, but she really struggles with these obsessive thought spirals. She's a 16-year-old who's trying insofar as possible to have a normal life. She wants to be the protagonist of her own story, the way that I think most of us do when we're teenagers. She's also always trying to

situate herself inside of certain kinds of stories or trying to understand what kind of story she's in, what kind of person she is, what kind of life she has, but the problem is that each time she tries to settle into an understanding of herself, that understanding of herself is undermined by these obsessive thought spirals that seem to come from outside of her and that make her feel like maybe she isn't real, or at least that she isn't steering the ship of her consciousness.

Caroline K.: One of the things that really struck me about the book was that it was written in first person, and this is something that a lot of our members picked up on too, you so effectively take us into Aza's mind and allow us, even if we don't have experience with what she's going through, to really experience it with her. I'd love for you to read an excerpt from the book to get us going.

John Green: Sure. Yeah, this is from near the end of the book but it doesn't really matter.

"I checked the light under the door to make sure Mom had gone to sleep and then snuck over to the bathroom. I changed the Band-Aid, looking carefully at the old one. There was blood. Not a lot, but blood. Faintly pink. It isn't infected. It bleeds because it hasn't scabbed over, but it could be. It isn't. Are you sure? Did you even clean it this morning? Probably. I always clean it. Are you sure? Oh, for fuck's sake."

"I washed my hands, put on a new Band-Aid, but now I was being pulled all the way down. I opened the medicine cabinet quietly, took out the aloe-scented hand sanitizer. I took a gulp, then another. Felt dizzy. You can't do this. This shit's pure alcohol. It'll make you sick. Better do it again. Poured some more of it onto my tongue. That's enough. You'll be clean after this. Just get one last swallow down, so I did. Heard my gut rumbling. Stomach hurt."

"Sometimes you clear out the healthy bacteria and that's when C. diff comes in. You gotta watch out for that. Great, you tell me to drink it, and then tell me not to. Back in my room, sweating over the covers, body clammy, corpse-like. Can't get my head straight. Drinking hand sanitizer is not going to make you healthier, you crazy fuck, but they can talk to your brain. The bacteria can tell your brain what to think, and you can't, so who's running the show? Stop it, please."

"I tried not to think the thought, but like a dog on a leash I could only get so far from it before I felt the strangling pull against my throat. My stomach rumbled."

"Nothing worked. Even giving into the thought had only provided a moment's release. I returned to a question Dr. Singh had first asked me years ago, the first time it got this bad: 'Do you feel like you're a threat to yourself,' but what's the threat, and what's the self? I wasn't not a threat, but I couldn't say to whom or what, the pronouns and objects of the sentence muddled by the abstraction of it all, the words sucked into the non-lingual way down. You're a we. You're a you. You're a she, an it, a they. My kingdom for an I."

"Felt myself slipping too, but even that's a metaphor. Descending, but that is, too. Can't describe the feeling itself except to say that I'm not me, forged in the smithy of someone else's soul. Please just let me out. Whoever is authoring me, let me up out of this. Anything to be out of this, but I couldn't get out. Three flakes, then four arrive, then many more."

There are two quotes that are referenced earlier in the book. One is, there's the part of "Ulysses" at the end where Molly Bloom says, "O Jamesy, let me up out of this," which is sometimes thought of as the first metafictional moment in literary history, because the character Molly Bloom seems to be aware of her author. Then that, "Three flakes, then four arrive, then many more," line I stole from Edna St. Vincent Millay, but I referenced it so I think it's okay. I also stole the, "Forged in the smithy of someone else's soul," it's a play on one of the last lines of "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." Man, I've never read that part out loud before.

Caroline K.: Oh, that's cool. I didn't know that.

John Green: It was weird to read it out loud.

Caroline K.: Well, I was really struck by this passage. I found it really powerful, and I think for everybody who doesn't have the book in front of them like we do, it's helpful to note that, interspersed throughout this passage there are sentences and questions that are italics, and you really get the sense that Aza is battling with her own mind here. I just wanted to ask you, what's going on? What's the conflict here? What's going on inside her head?

John Green: What I wanted to do in the book most of all was to find some kind of direct expression for the experience of intrusive thoughts or of obsessiveness, and that meant that metaphor wasn't going to be sufficient. It wasn't going to be sufficient for me to say what it was like. I wanted to try to find a way to say something of what it is, and the kind of italicized intrusions in that passage and a few others are intended to try to reflect something of that experience. Then also, the whole shape of the book is hoping to do that as well, by trying to have this mystery novel that keeps getting interrupted and doesn't ever get to become a mystery novel because this girl's thoughts are so overwhelming to her and to the story. That was one of the ways I guess that I was trying to try to speak directly about it.

Even in that passage, Aza is struggling with the fact that she can find metaphorical language for it, but she can't find a direct form for it. I have OCD and pretty severe anxiety problems, and I think that's part of what I find so frustrating about it, is that language always comes up short in the face of pain. There's so much that language is so great at, and I love language, but it does really, really struggle when it comes to describing and sharing pain. That's part of, I think, what makes pain so isolating.

Caroline K.: Yeah, and she really struggles throughout the book to convey, she has these really strong relationships but it's really hard for her to articulate this.

John Green: Yeah.

Caroline K.: Aza is particularly concerned about bacteria and something called C. diff throughout the whole book. Can you say a little bit about what that is, and why that triggers her anxiety so intensely?

John Green: Yeah. C. diff is a bacterial infection, it usually happens after a course of antibiotics. A lot of the antibiotics sometimes can kill good bacteria as well as the bad bacteria the infection is, they're trying to pinpoint. Then occasionally this bacteria called C. diff will grow out of control, and it can be very, very serious. It can lead to extreme diarrhea and dehydration. It can in some cases be fatal, and it can also be hard to treat because the treatment for it is actually more antibiotics. We're actually getting better treatments for it, but it's a reasonable thing to be freaked out about, I think, if you're hospitalized or on a long term course of antibiotics.

It's not a reasonable thing for Aza to be freaked out about, but the problem is that she can never quite ... I don't know, I'm not a psychologist by any stretch of the imagination, but my experience with obsessiveness is that it has to come from a place that logic can't quite touch, or logic can't quite fix. She can never quite close the loop, because she can never be sure that she isn't on the edge of being overwhelmed by bacterial infection, because the truth is, bacteria are all around us, and half of the cells inside of your body are not you, they're bacteria. It's true that the bacteria in your gut probably can talk to your brain, and that means that they can tell your brain some of the things that your brain thinks. She's not wrong about any of that. What she's wrong about is the appropriate response to that, I guess.

Caroline K.: Right, and how does this obsession with C. diff impact her relationships and her day to day life?

John Green: Yeah, I think the biggest way it affects her relationships is that it makes her really unobservant. There's a long history of detectives in fiction who are obsessive, and their obsessiveness makes them really good detectives. That is not my experience with obsessiveness at all. It makes me a really bad detective. I can't pay attention to anything outside the universe of myself.

I guess I wanted to show some of the ways that it can be so frustrating and upsetting, because you aren't, or at least Aza's not, she is not as empathetic as she needs to be. She's not able to pay attention to or meet the needs of her best friend or her mother or her boyfriend in the ways that she wants to, because so much of her consciousness is constantly occupied by this fear that she can never be far from. In that passage that I just read, she talks about it as

being a dog on a leash, and you can only go so far from the thought, and that is definitely something that I think she struggles with throughout the story.

Caroline K.: Yes. I've got a question from John. He says, "Often, in order to reach in to touch our pain, a safe environment and an ability to be vulnerable are necessary. Does Aza have either?"

John Green: That's an interesting question. Yeah, I do think that it's really hard. It's hard to look directly at your own pain sometimes, if you feel like you don't have that safety or you don't have the support for it. One of the things I did, I wanted Aza to have more support than even maybe the average person who's struggling with this does, because she has access to not amazing medical care, like she has a psychiatrist but she doesn't have weekly therapy sessions or anything, but she has access to pretty good mental health care compared to, unfortunately I think, what is the average for Americans.

Her mother obviously cares about her a lot, and she has a best friend who cares about her a lot, and it can be exhausting for both the mother and the best friend and anybody in Aza's life to spend time with her, but they're still largely kind to her. That was, I guess, one of the reasons I wanted her to have that in her life, was so that we could see her pain more directly and not have her trying to bottle it down. That's one of the challenges of writing from inside of one character's perspective, is that you can't show Aza as other people are experiencing her, or at least not directly, but I wanted her to have empathetic people around her, in part because that solves a lot of problems for me as a writer, but also because it made things possible for Aza that I think otherwise might not have been.

Caroline K.: I was really interested in the fact that the three main players in Aza's life, her mom, Daisy, and Davis, they all respond to her mental illness in very different ways. One tries to fix it, one is brutally honest at times, and one just mostly rolls with it. I'm wondering, why did you decide to show that range of reactions? As somebody who suffers from mental illness yourself, from these same kinds of things, what do you think is the most effective? Because I know a lot of Masthead members in the conversations that we've had have asked, "If you have somebody in your life who's very close to you who struggles with this kind of thing, what do you do?"

John Green: Yeah. It's hard, it's really hard, and one of the things I wanted to write about was how painful it is for people to see someone you love suffering so much and not be able to take that pain away, and not really know how to respond to it even.

Yeah, and I think it's hard. I'm not an expert in this by any means, and I don't think that I should be dispensing psychological advice, but my personal experience has been that, I guess the people in my life, the most effective people are the people who roll with it but who are also reassuring, and who reassure me that even though it is difficult to live with this and to love someone

who's living with this, that there's also a lot of things about caring about me that are very rewarding, and there are lots of times when I am able to care for people in ways that are deeply meaningful to them and important to them, and that when I'm sick and not able to do that as well, that they're patient with me and they know that there's going to be an other side to this.

That's one of the things that I think, it's so hard in the middle of one of these experiences, you feel like it's going to be forever. You feel like there's no escape from it, and there never will be an escape from it. Then, because almost mental illness is treatable, eventually things do get better, usually for most people and over time, sometimes over a long period of time.

I guess that's one of the things I wanted to write about, especially with the end. I wanted to write about the fact that, for me at least, living with chronic mental health problems, it's much more like a sine wave than it is like a straight line, but ... I was about to say it's like a sine wave that slowly goes toward healthier, but then I don't think I can say that, actually. I wish I could say that. I'm going to go ahead and not say that.

Caroline K.: It's complicated.

John Green: Yeah, but I find being reassured that people care about me, even though I'm difficult to be around when I'm sick, that is helpful.

Caroline K.: We've got this question from Lucy. She wants to know, "How does shame affect and complicate mental illness, both for Aza and in your own experience?"

John Green: Oh yeah, it has a tremendous impact. I've really struggled with this. It's hard for me to talk about. I can't talk directly about the locuses of my own OCD, partly because I'm embarrassed about it, partly because it just feels to exposing. Yeah, I've really struggled with feeling embarrassed about it, and also there's an element of ...

I remember when I was a little kid, and I had this obsessive belief that I was the only person and everybody around me was like an alien, and I was part of this huge conspiracy to see what would happen to a human child if you exposed them to a certain set of circumstances. My parents were aliens, my brother was an alien, and my teachers and all my classmates were aliens, et cetera. I would worry about this all the time. Then I would try to check and see if they were really aliens and try to prove to myself that they weren't.

I would lose hours everyday to this stupid alien thing, and it's embarrassing, because it's so narcissistic. It is shameful, or I find it shameful, to be that incredibly narcissistic and unable to get over it, and I remember someone saying to me at one point, when I was talking to them about it for the billionth time, it was one of my closest friends when I was 8 or 9 or whatever. He said, "Just stop thinking about it."

People often criticize that as a response, but I'm so sympathetic to it, because of course that's what a normal person would do, because that's what the normal person would do, would be like, "That's stupid, let's stop thinking about it." I find it impossible to stop thinking about ... That's the whole problem, is that I can't stop thinking about something, and that's Aza's whole problem too.

I think that some of that comes from the stigmatization of mental illness, that people, once they talk about having a mental illness, are often treated differently in their professional lives. That's a big problem and I think an ongoing problem. I hope that it's getting better and that more people are understanding that you can live with chronic mental illness and have a rich and fulfilling professional and personal life, and that that's actually the rule, I think, more than the exception, but I think some of it, for me at least, is internalized.

I wanted Aza to struggle from the inside with trying to convince herself that she wasn't a bad person just because she struggled to be a lot of the things that we associate with good people. She struggles to be empathetic, she struggles to pay attention to other people, and it's because she's so sucked into this tightening whirlpool of her own thoughts that it is really difficult for her, but that doesn't mean that she's bad or that she's shameful or anything like that, but I do think that, for me at least, there is a huge interplay there. Yeah.

The only other thing I'd say about that is, she's tremendously embarrassed about drinking hand sanitizer, because she knows that's super weird, and she knows it's wrong, and she knows it's fucked up, but being embarrassed doesn't get her closer to wellness. I think that's a true thing for me too.

Caroline K.: Yeah. Then we have to watch her go through this horrible experience of having her best friend write about her in a fan fiction, disguising her as a character, but really writing probably all of the things that she fears are true about herself, and having to read that.

John Green: Right.

Caroline K.: That was probably the hardest part of the book for me to read. I can't imagine what that would be like.

John Green: Yeah, it is, but I think from Aza's perspective, yeah, it's a crappy thing to do, there's no question about it. It was interesting for me writing about that, because of course I fictionalize people in my own life all the time, and I take stuff from people who are around me all the time, and I don't feel particularly guilty about it. Even when I probably should feel guilty about it, I don't because whatever serves the book, within reason, I don't want to hurt my family or anything, but I will steal when it suits me. I had a lot of empathy for Daisy in that, because I see how that stuff happens, and I see how it gets out of control. Also, for her it was a way of processing the difficulty of loving Aza in a way that seemed extremely safe, because she knew or thought she knew that Aza would never

read her stories. I think it was a huge betrayal but, I don't know, from my perspective, I see how it happens.

Caroline K.:

Yeah. You've mentioned a couple of times this idea of this whirlpool of thoughts, this whirlwind of thoughts spinning around, and we've got this question from Jason. He says, "I have social anxiety with accompanying depression. I think the author really captures what it's like to have ruminating thoughts. Use of the imagery of the spiral to effectively symbolize how anxious or depressive thoughts feed on each other, closing in tighter and tighter until one wants to jump out of her own skin." I'm wondering, can you explain the concept of that spiral, spiraling thoughts, and how you arrived at it?

John Green:

Yeah. In the book, they talk about this Raymond Pettibon painting that has a spiral in it. That's a real painting, and I saw it at an art show in Miami. I'd never had that language before, I'd never had the idea of the spiral for the experience of intrusive thoughts. What I'd had before that was the, "Three flakes, then four arrive, then many more," this idea that you have one thought, it's just a little thought, and then you start to be like, "Oh crap," because that thought starts to spread very quickly like an invasive weed, or what starts off as one snowflake soon becomes this blinding blizzard. It becomes the only thought that you can have, and a thought that you really can't get out of. It's really scary. Anybody who's had the experience of not being able to choose their own thoughts knows that it's super scary and difficult and painful, really psychically painful.

When I saw the painting, I just thought, "Yeah, that's it, that's it. That's what it feels like." Then I thought about the fact that a spiral, when it starts to tighten, it never ends. It can get tighter infinitely, and so that was also really powerful for me in trying to just talk about my own experience to people I love, talking about the fact that when I get into these thought spirals, it's not that I can't get out of them for a while. It's that it feels like I can't get out of it ever, because this thing is going to tighten forever until I die, until it kills me. It's really scary.

Caroline K.:

You capture that really effectively through the fact that it is first person. Was that ever a question for you, that you would write from her perspective?

John Green:

No. Yeah, from the beginning it was first person. I was writing a different story when I started writing this one, and I wrote it in ... I just opened a Gmail draft window and didn't put anybody in the "to" line and just started writing about Aza and Daisy, and about the idea of internet detectives. For me, it was almost immediately a way of writing about this girl who was struggling with thought, struggling to feel a secure sense of self because of thought. I think even that first day of writing that happened all inside that Gmail window was in first person. I don't think it was ever a question.

I did want to switch to second person a few times. There are a few points where she switches to second person for several paragraphs, and I wanted to do that because, two reasons I guess, one, those were places where she almost can't talk about herself, and she has to start talking about someone else or a generic

someone. Then secondly, in the hopes that I would put you, Caroline, you the reader, inside that experience.

Caroline K.: Yeah. I mentioned this to you a little bit before, but we chose this book for our first Masthead book club because in the group we've been talking a lot about mental illness. I was pretty blown away a couple of weeks ago when, in our Facebook group, one member totally unprompted, shared her own personal experience with bipolar disorder. Then in response, many, many other members followed up with their own stories. It just seems to me that this is one of those taboo topics that becomes a lot less taboo when just one person opens up about it. I'm wondering, have you found that as you've been traveling around and talking about this book all over the country?

John Green: Yeah, I think you're right that it's hard to talk about until people are talking about it, and then it feels, at least for me, like a huge relief to be able to talk about it, and also to not feel alone in it. One of the terrifying things about it for me is feeling alone. I'm stuck with these feelings that are extremely painful, and that I can't communicate well, and for a long time, I didn't know that I had OCD. For a long time, it sounds silly, but I thought I was the only person who felt this way and who experienced this extreme level of discomfort within myself, or the inability to feel like a self within myself, and I wasn't. There was a lot of relief in that.

I remember the first time I read a book about OCD, I was like, "Oh my God, this person is so incredibly brave to be talking about this stuff without any embarrassment, like it's a total normal thing to have," and I still go back to that book. It's called "The Man Who Couldn't Stop" by David Adam, and I still really un-alone in the face of it. I hoped that this story would help people who feel this stuff feel less alone in it, but also that it would help people who don't maybe understand a little bit more of what it's like to live with psychic pain.

Caroline K.: Yeah. Rachel is wondering, "Is it therapeutic for you to write about these issues through fiction?"

John Green: That's an interesting question. I kind of hoped that it would cure me somehow, and it didn't, which is a bummer. I couldn't write about it when I was really unwell. I can't write anything when I'm really unwell, or even read or whatever, but I think the one way that it has helped me, at least a little bit I think, is that when I was writing the story, I felt bad for Aza. I felt a lot of pity for her, and I felt like she wasn't bad or evil or anything like that. I have often struggled to feel that way toward myself. I have often struggled to be as compassionate toward myself, and I think in writing about her and feeling a deep well of compassion for her, I did discover a little bit more compassion for myself, I guess.

Caroline K.: Megan has a question about how this book can be used to help other people. I'm not sure if this is something you've thought about, but she wants to know, "How can educators use this book to engage in an effective examination of mental health concerns, particularly anxiety, with students and even other

educators or counselors and with families?" She says, "I often find those who work with adolescents to be fearful of talking about mental health." Do you think that this book could be used as a tool?

John Green:

Well, that's up to readers in the end, not to me, but that would certainly make me happy. I think a lot of times, adults are worried about talking about mental health to teenagers, because they may not feel like they're experts, and they may feel like they might make things worse. I feel that way, I am completely sympathetic to that. I worry about that a lot. I certainly don't want to give bad advice or point people in the wrong direction. That's something I spent a lot of time worrying about when I was writing the book and thinking about how to write the book.

I think that, we know what we're doing is not working. Right? Not what Megan in particular is doing, but what we're doing as a social order isn't working, because while life is getting better by almost every measure, lives are longer, they're physically healthier, absolute poverty is dramatically lower, in most ways life around the world is getting better, and one of the few ways that life around the world is definitely getting better is that we are not seeing any reduction in rates of self harm. In many cases we're seeing suicide rates go up.

I think we aren't paying, in general, nearly enough attention to mental health. We don't treat it as the priority that we ought to treat it. I think some of that is because of stigma, some of that is because of shame, some of it is for fear of doing the wrong thing, but I think we need to have bigger conversations and include experts in those conversations.

What I always say is that to talk to, whether it's a guidance counselor at the school or if the school, because I know some schools do now, have full-time trained psychologists, to include those people in the conversations around the book because I don't feel qualified to do it, if that makes sense.

Caroline K.:

Yeah. I certainly felt like this book would help, if you were going through this or if somebody you knew was going through this. We've got a question from Lynn. Lynn says that she is extremely impressed by how well you seemed to nail the teenage mind, and I have to say, I absolutely agree with that. I really, really felt like I was in a teenager's head, and I had to keep reminding myself, John Green is not a teenager.

John Green:

No.

Caroline K.:

How do you write about teens so effectively when it's been a while since you were a teenager?

John Green:

A long while, yeah, more than half my life. Yeah, I think when I wrote *Looking for Alaska*, I still felt like a young adult in a lot of ways. I felt like I was closer to being in high school than I was to being a proper grown-up, that's for sure. As

I've gotten older, now I feel almost no connection to my teenage self. That person is a strange and foreign land for me. I think back to the things I liked and the things that I cared about, and they're so different from the things I care about now, and the way I conceptualize my problems.

I don't think that my writing sounds like teenagers really. Let me change that. I'm absolutely positive that my writing doesn't sound like teenagers. I didn't know much about teenage slang when I was a teenager, and I certainly don't know much about it now, but the thing that has continued to interest me is how teenagers approach big questions, like questions about self and meaning and suffering. Because they're looking at those questions as sovereign beings separate from their parents for the first time in a lot of cases, it's really interesting. I think that's what I've tried to hold onto. That's what I find interesting.

Then the only other thing I'd say is that, I try as much as possible in my writing, and also outside of writing actually ... The other thing that I think is really interesting and cool about teenagers is that they are doing a lot of things for the first time, and so they are excited about them. Teenagers have a reputation for being jaded and cynical, but in fact I find them wondrously lacking in cynicism and wondrously earnest in their un-ironized emotional experiences and everything. That is one of the things that I really like. I try to remember that when you're doing something for the first time, whether you're falling in love for the first time, whether you're grappling, in Aza's case, with this crippling destabilizing mental illness for the first time, it has an intensity to it that the second time just doesn't have.

I find that if you can hold onto some of that emotional intensity, if you can hold onto some of that un-ironic enthusiasm and passion and interest and attentiveness, it's pretty useful, in writing, but definitely also just in life.

Caroline K.: Along those same lines, Megan wants to know, "Who is your target audience, if you have one?" Your books are called young adult books, but I don't know. I know a lot of adults who really enjoy them. Megan says she's an adult, she really enjoys them.

Caroline K.: Do you feel that you write for one audience, or pretty much anybody?

John Green: I used to feel really strongly that I wrote for teenagers, and I used to find adult readers pretty uninteresting, to be honest with you, but that has changed as I have become more of an adult and have become more in favor of adulthood. Suddenly also, I think my last two books, it's probably pretty obvious that I care a lot more about the adults characters. A lot of times, in both *Turtles All the Way Down* and *The Fault In Our Stars*, I find myself thinking, "Wait a second, Aza. Your mom might have a point here. Let's listen to her for a minute."

Caroline K.: Yeah. I love the mom. I loved the mom in *Turtles All the Way Down*. She was so sweet and caring.

John Green: Yeah, she desperately wants to help. Sometimes that's unhelpful, and that's one of the great ironies I think of parenting a teenager, is that you want to save them from all of this stuff that you just can't save them from, for a variety of reasons. Yeah, I really like having adult readers, and I'm very grateful for that. I don't care as much about demographics as I used to, and I guess to me, the books are for whomever likes them.

Caroline K.: Cool. Going in a slightly different direction, we had a conversation on our Masthead Facebook group about gender in this book. For the first couple of pages, I actually wasn't sure whether our narrator, whether Aza was male or female. A couple of our members had the same experience, although one member did find a reference to boob sweat on page three. She corrected us there, but Craig, one of our Masthead members, he mentioned that gender is typically a trait that authors dwell on at the beginning of books. We're wondering, were you intentionally vague about Aza's gender at the beginning? Craig would also like to know why you decided to make her a girl, especially after having so many similar experiences yourself. As a male writer, was that a challenging decision?

John Green: I think part of it was probably creating distance. There are a lot of ways that I wanted to create distance between Aza and me, so that the novel could be a novel and not a memoir or a fictionalized memoir or anything like that. I think that was probably part of it, and then also, the obsessive detective trope tends to be a pretty patriarchal one, I think, from Sherlock to "Monk," both of which I like, but I also think have their strengths and weaknesses like anything.

Yeah, as far as whether I was intentionally vague about establishing her gender, I was definitely intentionally vague about establishing everything, all the sort of identifiers about her, outside of her experience of self. Gender is part of her experience of self, but it's so dominated by the particular microbial makeup of her body and of her self, rather than the genetics of the cells that she would call hers. That was intentional. It doesn't ever really describe what she looks like, and she doesn't seem to spend a lot of time thinking about what she looks like or anything, because she's so obsessively worried about the cells inside of her that aren't hers, that don't reflect anything about her gender or even her body.

Caroline K.: Yeah, that's really interesting. A question from Thomas. Thomas wants to know, once you're down in the hard details of creating something, how do you keep yourself going without anxiety robbing your motivation? That's something that he personally struggles with a lot, so he's wondering how you manage to write and complete books?

John Green: Yeah, it took six years, so I'm not that great at it. I think I know that experience, and I wish I had a magic key to solve it, but I don't. Part of it for me is trying to everyday give myself permission to suck, give myself permission to be bad, and understanding that I am living inside of one day of a process that will be many

months or many years. If nothing that gets written today ends up in the finished book, that's not really a catastrophe because it's not about today. It's about all of the days added up together.

To be honest, for a long time, I just figured that I wouldn't publish this, or that I would publish it under a different name. That's how I guess I tricked myself into writing it, was by telling myself that I didn't have to publish it if I didn't want to. I didn't have to show it to anyone if I didn't want to, and I didn't have to put my name on it if I didn't want to. That was pretty liberating for me.

Caroline K.: We had a Masthead conversation with Scott Stossel, the head editor at the magazine who wrote *My Age of Anxiety*, and he said a very similar thing about his book, that the only way that he got through writing it was to convince himself that it would never really get published.

John Green: That's a great book about anxiety, by the way.

Caroline K.: Yeah, it really is, and it's another one that's helped a lot of people. Let's wrap things up here. I've got one question from Julie that goes in a very different direction. Julie wants to know, and John, feel free to give a little bit of context here, "What on earth is a tuatara, and how did you learn about it?"

John Green: Yeah, so there's a tuatara in the book.

Caroline K.: Oh, tuatara. Okay. That has a real way of pronouncing it.

John Green: I don't know much about this animal, except for what I learned in my research, but there's a tuatara in the book. The idea was that these characters want to be characters in a madcap mystery, but they can't be because of Aza's brain problem, and the madcap mystery is that there's this billionaire who's publicly announced that in the event of his death, he's leaving his entire estate to the benefit of one particular tuatara, which is this really weird animal, maybe the weirdest animal on earth right now. Tuatara have not changed much in the last 150 million years. They're much older than almost any other terrestrial vertebrate, but also they're extremely genetically weird. They are the only animal in their entire order. They are the only species left in their entire order.

They look exactly like lizards, they look like an iguana or something, but they are about as closely related to lizards as crocodiles are related to birds. That's how genetically distinct they are. They live for 200 years, which if you're a billionaire who wants to make sure that-

Caroline K.: 200 years?

John Green: Yeah. If you're a billionaire who wants to make sure that nobody who is currently alive will ever see any of your money, it's a good animal to leave your estate to. Then the other thing that appealed to me, I can go on for a long time,

but the two things about tuatara that I find completely fascinating, one, they don't have teeth. That's how primitive they are. They just have bones, their bones stick out of their gums, and that's how they chew. They're one of the last terrestrial vertebrates that chew food that don't have teeth.

Secondly, the other thing, from a novel perspective, one of the things that appealed to me about them was that, even though they haven't changed body forms at all in 150 million years, which is weird and unusual, they have the fastest rate of molecular evolution of any animal observed in the world. They're experiencing molecular mutation extremely fast by contemporary evolutionary standards. There's lots of thoughts why this might be. It might be that in the past molecular evolution was just a lot faster, which would explain why we have so much diversity of life on earth, or might explain part of it. There's also lots of other theories, but I thought that reflected something about Aza. Here's this person, and to look at her, she looks fairly average, but there's just teeming infinity within her, and so to with the tuatara.

Caroline K.: Awesome. Well, we'll wrap things up there. Thank you so much, John. This was a wonderful conversation.

John Green: All right. I'm glad I got to talk about tuatara.

Caroline K.: Yeah, me too.

John Green: Thank you for the great questions. It's such an honor to have the book picked, and thank you all for reading it, and for reading it so thoughtfully. I really, really appreciate it.

Caroline K.: Absolutely. All right, everybody. We'll be back next week with our next conference call. We're going to be talking to Megan Garber, both about the piece that she wrote recently about Vietnam and memory, and also about all the incredible reporting that she's been doing on sexual harassment. Thank you so much, everybody, for tuning in today, and for also being so open and willing to discuss these issues that can be hard to talk about. We'll talk to you soon. Bye bye.