



THE FAULT IN HIS STARS

John Green's new novel is the story of a teenage girl and her struggles with mental illness. The bestselling author tells *Helena de Bertodano* how he drew on his own experience

For a man who once made it to Time magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world, John Green is almost absurdly understated. Everything about him seems an exercise in drawing the least possible attention to himself. Which is why I find myself in a remote suburb of Indianapolis searching for an unmarked office in an unmarked alleyway between a cafe and an ice-cream parlour.

There is only one possible door in the narrow alleyway. It opens with a push (no intercom, no security) and I take the lift to the top floor, as instructed. The first person I see as the door slides back is Green himself, grappling with a coffee machine that is refusing to dispense coffee. "Oh hey, you found it!" he says. His voice betrays perhaps a tinge of disappointment; he rarely gives interviews and describes being photographed as his "least favourite thing in the world". "I always look like a curious dog in pictures," he sighs.

There is no getting away from it, though — willingly or otherwise, Green is a celebrity. He has more than 5m Twitter followers, and 50m copies of his books — including *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Paper Towns* — have been printed worldwide; his sixth novel, *Turtles All the Way Down*, which has just been published following a hiatus of almost six

years, is the most anticipated young-adult book release of the year. Meanwhile, his Crash Course educational videos are used in classrooms across America, and his video blog, vlogbrothers, which he hosts with his brother, Hank, to promote education and freedom of speech, has 3m subscribers. Their followers call themselves "nerdfighters", immersed in geeky interests and raising hundreds of

thousands of dollars for their favourite causes in the process.

Because of the effect he has on his fans, particularly teenage girls, Green has been called "the Justin Bieber of the literary world". "It's ludicrous," he says of the comparison, with a nervous laugh. Not *that* ludicrous. Although he recently turned 40, he still looks like an overgrown schoolboy in his polo shirt, jeans and Adidas trainers. ➤➤



BOX-OFFICE HIT Ansel Elgort and Shailene Woodley in the film of *The Fault in Our Stars*

At the very least, he could pass for Bieber's nerdy older brother. Do people constantly approach him on the street? "Yes, of course," he says. Is it annoying? "No, they are just overenthusiastic." Do they weep like Bieber fans? "Sometimes, yes. People just get really excited."

Nonetheless, Green does not hold with the view that young people today are made of weaker stuff, the so-called Generation Snowflake. "I don't think it's fair," he says, emphatically. "I remember when I was a teenager, people said we had it easy and that we were terrible employees and didn't know what it was like to work hard. To me, it just reeks of what every generation says of the next generation."

Nor does he despair that teenagers have replaced books with screens. "I'm quite optimistic about young people. I think that they're more deeply engaged intellectually with the world around them and read more words per day than I did when I was a teenager. Instead of criticising young people as if they were one thing, like imagining 50m people monolithically, I think we should work on improving the overall quality of discourse and acknowledge the humanness of everyone."

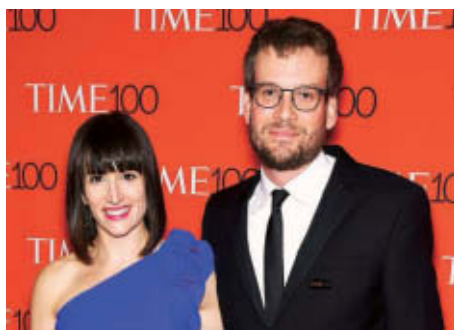
Having finally persuaded the coffee machine to work, he hands me a mug — "I would offer you milk and sugar, but I don't have any" — and settles into a red armchair with his own coffee in a yellow AFC Wimbledon mug. Green is a sponsor of the club, his love for it perhaps only surpassed by his love of Liverpool FC. Behind him on the wall is a shirt signed by every player, next to a Brazil shirt, which has writing scrawled across it: "To J Green, DFTBA. Good luck, Pele."

The letters stand for don't forget to be awesome, a code familiar to anyone who has watched the Greens' vlogs. Even Barack Obama is a fan: in 2013, he did a Google Hangout with Green and his wife, Sarah, who was then pregnant with their second child. When they asked whether he preferred the name Eleanor or Alice for their baby, Obama replied: "The main thing is, tell either Eleanor or Alice not to forget to be awesome." They went with Alice.

It was in 2014, the year that *The Fault in Our Stars* was released as a movie, that Green made the Time 100 list, joining the likes of Pope Francis, Hillary Clinton and Kim Jong-un. "It's obviously flawed," he says of the list. "But it was very flattering and the party was amazing."

Hold on, you actually go to a party with the other 99 people on the list? "Well," he says. "Kim Jong-un wasn't there: it would have been nice if he had been, then we could have dealt with him more directly."

This understated humour is one of the elements that make Green's books so enjoyable. He has a lightness of touch that renders grim themes palatable. *The Fault in Our Stars* tells the devastating



RELUCTANT STAR With his wife, Sarah, attending the Time 100 party in New York

story of two teenagers with terminal cancer falling in love — and yet it is also fiercely funny. *Turtles All the Way Down* takes another difficult topic — mental illness — and spins it into a touching narrative, on the surface an adventure yarn but underneath an examination of how people with mental illness navigate human relationships. The main character, Aza, is a 16-year-old girl who suffers from severe anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Green admits that the character is based on himself: he experienced — indeed still experiences — crippling anxiety and "obsessive thought spirals". He masks it well in company: indeed, when I first met him three years ago at a press junket, he seemed easygoing, confidently handling a round table of international press with humour and charm.

One on one, he seems more nervous. For the first 20 minutes, he barely meets my eye. Gradually, he relaxes — and tries to articulate his mental illness. "A lot of my life has been defined by worrying — but one of the big challenges with psychic pain is it is so abstract and internal that it is very difficult to find expression for it. And you feel like you're alone in it, that it makes you less. Part of the reason I wanted to write this book is an attempt to find some way of talking about it."

In *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza describes thoughts circling like vultures, preventing her from sleeping. "I woke up the next morning feeling wretched — not just tired, but terrified. I now saw myself as... clueless, helpless, useless. Less."

"I'm familiar with that feeling," Green says, tugging at his hair and twiddling it round and round. "As a child, the terror was that I wasn't in control of what I was

thinking, and if I wasn't, then who was? It felt like my thoughts were being hijacked." Or, as he put it in a recent vlog describing his OCD: "Am I actually the captain of the ship I call myself?"

Aza's OCD manifests itself in a self-harming ritual of making one of her fingers repeatedly bleed in a deluded attempt to drain an imaginary infection from her body. I ask if he has ever done anything similar. He hesitates: "I promise this is the only thing I'll say this about — but I genuinely cannot talk about it because it's so..." He shuts his eyes tightly and rubs the bridge of his nose under his glasses, struggling in vain for a word. Upsetting? He nods, speechless.

As well as taking medication, he also undergoes therapy, which helps to alleviate the condition. Later, I talk to his younger brother, Hank — who, John says, knows him better than anyone in the world — over the phone. He says that in the family they talk about John having "a bad day". "When Mom or Sarah say that to me, I know what that means. It's more about how his thoughts are functioning. He is a pretty high-stress kind of person, so maybe by necessity I am more laid-back, which allows our relationship to work. Sarah is also a very calm and calming presence. She's very good at handling situations without adding to the stress. When you have a loved one who struggles with mental illness, you have to find ways to help them and not inflame it."

Born in Indianapolis, Green grew up in Orlando, Florida, where his father was the state director of the Nature Conservancy, an environmental charity. His mother, Sydney, whom I also speak to on the phone, says it was clear very early on that John was preternaturally intelligent.

"I remember him, aged four, jumping on our bed saying, 'I need to know everything about Chad.' And I said, 'Who's Chad?' And he said, 'No, Mom, Chad the country.'"

He found it hard to make friends and was a target for bullies. "He was really smart but emotionally immature," says his mother. "Other kids didn't understand him and made fun of him. It was horrible. I used to go to work and put my head down on the desk and cry." She sounds emotional even 30 years later. They tried sorting it out with the school, but were told that John just needed to tough it out. So they switched schools, but the problem persisted. It was only when, aged 15, Green went to boarding school in Alabama — at his own insistence — that he found his niche, an experience echoed by the protagonist of his first novel, *Looking for Alaska*.

One of the defining experiences of Green's childhood was watching his father battle two bouts of cancer. "It had a deep impact on John," says his mother. "We were pretty undone and John spent a lot of time concerned about his dad." ➤➤➤

"I'm optimistic about young people. I think they're deeply engaged with the world around them"

Luckily his father pulled through, but then Green suffered another blow when one of his school friends died in a car crash.

"I think these experiences made him very empathetic," says his mother. "He has taken the pieces of his life and looked at them closely to understand what they mean."

"I'm definitely interested in questions of how we construct meaning in a world where suffering is such an important part of life," says Green today. "How do you make sense of a world that behaves as if there were no ordering principle to it? There are two awful thoughts — one, that it's pointless, and two, that we're all going to die. They are big, difficult thoughts to me, that fear of meaninglessness is a background buzzing pain and I think about it a lot."

"But," he adds, rallying, "I do feel very strongly that there *is* meaning in human life. I think despair is a lie; hope is the correct response to the human condition. The meaning may be constructed by us, but it doesn't matter: it's still real."

Perhaps not surprisingly, his quest for meaning led him initially towards the priesthood. After graduating in English and religious studies, Green spent several months as a student chaplain at a children's hospital in Columbus, Ohio. He planned to become an Episcopal priest, "but I wasn't well suited to the work on any level". He found the pain of dealing with children with life-threatening illnesses too much to bear and moved to Chicago, where he found a job at a book-review service and started to write his first novel. There was never any question in his mind that teenagers were his target audience. "Adolescence is such a difficult period of life. Everything feels intense and big and real in a way that is really appealing to me as a writer."

Shailene Woodley, who starred in *The Fault in Our Stars*, once tried to sum up Green's remarkable ability to connect with teenagers: "Some say that, through his books, John gives a voice to teenagers. I humbly disagree. I think John hears the voices of teenagers. He acknowledges the intelligence and vulnerability that stem from those beautiful years."

It was in Chicago that John met his wife-to-be, Sarah Urist, who was managing an art gallery. They moved to Indianapolis in 2007, when she was appointed curator of contemporary art at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Now, she hosts *The Art Assignment*, an educational contemporary-art web series, executive-produced by her husband. In the vlogbrothers videos, she is sometimes referred to as "the Yeti", as she is almost never seen on camera. While Green is being photographed, she emerges unexpectedly from her office. She smiles and introduces herself as "Sarah, John's wife." Green calls out: "Don't introduce yourself to a journalist



GRIN AND AIR IT With his brother, Hank (right), recording their video blog

unless you want to be interviewed." A look of panic crosses her face and she dashes off. "Don't take it personally," she cries, shutting her door firmly. "She is terrified of journalists," Green chuckles.

When Green met Sarah, says his mother, the family breathed a collective sigh of relief. "She's so clearly the right one for him. She's a joyful person and can also keep up with him intellectually, which not many of us can."

Green jokes, however, that his father still frets about him. "A couple of years ago I asked my dad, 'At what point do you feel I started to be independent enough that you didn't worry about me; when did I become a net positive in your life?' And he was like, 'It just hasn't happened.'"

"Now he's Sarah's problem," his mother laughs. On most days, the couple leave work together, pick up their children — Henry, 7, and Alice, 4 — and return to their four-bedroom home in a quiet part of Indianapolis, near the river where Green often takes walks in the morning. They prepare dinner together. "I'm not allowed near heat, but I do all of the chopping," says Green. "Then we all eat together. I'm making it sound like domestic bliss, but the kids are usually throwing food at each other and we're trying to calm them down while our dinner is only half-made."

Once the children are in bed, he and Sarah spend an hour together "in the library, usually reading or listening to music". They rarely watch television, although they are fans of the drama series *The Americans*. "It's the best show about marriage ever made," says Green. "You don't see a lot of happy marriages on TV — and I dig that."

If you want to get a measure of how

"I'm happiest when I'm observing. Probably because so much of my life has been spent stuck within myself"

intense Green is, you just need to mention the word Liverpool — although he will probably beat you to it. I first met him in 2014, the day after Liverpool beat Manchester City in the Premier League. "I can't remember a time I felt such joy," he enthused about the victory. "It was more joyful than the birth of my children."

At the time I thought he was joking, but today I'm not so sure. He tells me about the extraordinary ritual he established when each of his children was born. After driving home from hospital, he sets the baby down in their car seat in front of the television and switches on a recording of the 2005 Champions League final, when Liverpool beat AC Milan after coming back from 3-0 down. "I cry every time," he says. "It's the symbolism. I want them to see it, or if not see it, as their eyes are shut, at least to hear it."

He explains that he missed most of the live match because it coincided with his engagement party. "I got a text when the score was 3-2." So what did you do? "I left. The party was winding down anyway — and Sarah was fine with it."

The obsession began as a child — "I have no idea why" — but these days, although he still watches every game, he claims to care less about the final score. "I've divorced myself from outcomes because it's no good going through life letting 11 25-year-olds 4,000 miles away decide whether you have a good Saturday. I've already put way too much of my wellbeing into the hands of [Liverpool midfielder] Philippe Coutinho, who's a nice person, but I can't ask him to hold my entire happiness."

Green says he is happier now than he has been at any stage of his life. "I don't have any desire ever to be even 30 again, let alone 15. I'm happy, but I'm also other things. I understand that our species is temporary, but it doesn't negate the here and now. I do love getting to be a person. I just feel like it's so astonishingly unlikely."

In *Looking for Alaska*, Green's protagonist yearns to be widely admired: "I wanted to be one of those people who have streaks to maintain, who scorch the ground with their intensity. But for now, at least I knew such people, and they needed me, just like comets need tails."

Green says that he, too, has always felt like the tail of the comet — but that he would now never want to be anything else. "I'm happiest when I'm observing. Probably because so much of my life has been spent stuck within myself, I like being the tail of the comet. In fact, I think it's the better gig."

The irony, of course — and the fundamental key to his charm — is that he is the only person who sees himself this way ■

Turtles All the Way Down by John Green is out now (Penguin £15)