

**TURTLES  
ALL THE  
WAY DOWN  
JOHN  
GREEN**

*#1  
Bestselling  
Author of  
The  
Fault  
in Our  
Stars*

THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

**CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR**

# **Turtles All The Way Down**

THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

A *New York Times* Notable Book • A *New York Times* Critics' Top Book of the Year • An NPR Best Book of the Year • A *TIME* Best Book of the Year • A *Wall Street Journal* Best Book of the Year • A *Boston Globe* Best Book of the Year • An *Entertainment Weekly* Best Book of the Year • A *Seventeen* Best Book of the Year • A *Southern Living* Best Book of the Year • A *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year • A *Booklist* Editors' Choice Selection • A *BookPage* Best Book of the Year • An *SLJ* Best Book of the Year • An A.V. Club Best Book of the Year • A *Bustle* Best Book of the Year • A *BuzzFeed* Best Book of the Year • A *PopSugar* Best Book of the Year • A *Vulture* Best Book of the Year

**#1 *New York Times* Bestseller**

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“So surprising and moving and true that I became completely unstrung, incapable of reading it to my husband without breaking down. One needn’t be suffering like Aza to identify with it. One need only be human. Everyone, at some point, knows what it’s like when the mind develops a mind of its own.”

—Jennifer Senior, *The New York Times*

“There is tenderness and wisdom here, and a high quotient of big ideas.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

★ “A teenage romance in which the love story is more about loving yourself than another; it is an incredibly powerful tale of the pain of mental illness, the pressures of youth and coming of age when you feel like you’re coming undone.”

—*Shelf Awareness*

“A thoughtful look at mental illness and a debilitating obsessive-compulsive disorder that doesn’t ask but *makes* you feel the constant struggles of its main character. . . . Green expertly communicates the confusion and pain of Aza’s invasive thoughts, the way they spin out of control and their inescapable hold on her. But there’s also a neat depth to the way *Turtles* explores the definition of happy endings, whether love is a tragedy or a failure, and a universal lesson for us all: ‘You work with what you have.’”

—*USA Today*

“An existential teenage scream. . . . Aza’s story accordingly feels real, and exhausting, and authentic.”

—*Vox*

“Compassionate and compelling.”

—*Southern Living*, Best Books of the Year

“Each year, more young people are diagnosed with anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders. Having someone like Green speaking so publicly and writing so well about these problems is a real gift.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Green does more than write about; he endeavours to write inside, making explicit attempts to describe the non-sensorial and inexplicable nature of the spiral. He brings readers on the terrifying slide down with Aza, to a place even scarier than rock bottom because it’s both unknowable and undefinable. . . . John Green hasn’t created a book as much as he’s created a place—a place to have your most indefinable and grotesque thoughts articulated, to ponder the disconnected reality you experience when you can’t actually remember how you got to school or work, to acknowledge the times when your body feels like a disgusting cage, even as it does the vital work to keep you alive. No matter where you are on the spiral—and we’re all somewhere—Green’s novel makes the trip, either up or down, a less solitary experience.”

—*Globe and Mail*

“A powerful tale for teens (and adults) about anxiety, love and friendship.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“A new modern classic.”

—*Guardian*

“[Green’s] descriptions are visceral, emotional, and difficult to read at times, because they are raw and unflinching in the face of the realities of mental illness. *Turtles* is a moving treatise on the many ways mental health can affect our lives, and a loving reminder that it’s possible to have a happy, successful life with mental illness.”

—*Bustle*

“John Green novels are filled with quiet moments that tap into the universal feelings that both young and older readers alike experience: navigating friendships, fear of loss, the magic of falling in love. Those quintessential John Green moments are still featured in *Turtles*, but now John Green takes those meditations and turns them inward. Aza is not striving to find and love someone else. She’s striving to find and love herself. . . . Even during its most painful moments, there is tenderness that radiates out of *Turtles All the Way Down*. . . . *Turtles* delivers a lesson that we so desperately need right now: Yes, it is okay not to be okay.”

—**Mashable**

“Funny, clever, and populated with endearing characters.”

—**Entertainment Weekly**

“An unflinching look at mental illness.”

—**Seattle Times**

“With *Turtles All the Way Down*, John Green has crafted a dynamic novel that is deeply honest, sometimes painful, and always thoughtful, delivered with the characteristic charm the author is known for. . . . Many adults reading it will find themselves wishing they’d had a book like this as a kid.”

—**AV Club, Best Books of the Year**

★ “Superb. . . . Green, a master of deeply felt material, handles all of this with aplomb. With its attention to ideas and trademark introspection, it’s a challenging but richly rewarding read.”

—**Booklist**

★ “[A] heartbreaker, full of intelligent questions. It’s also a very writerly book, as Aza frames a lot of the questions she asks herself in literary terms. Am I a fiction? Who is in charge of my story? Why do we describe pain with the language of metaphor? . . . In an age where troubling events happen almost weekly, this deeply empathetic novel about learning to live with demons and love one’s imperfect self is timely and important.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

★ “[Aza’s] tough, brutally honest first-person narrative will leave teens battered and raw but will also show them that, with love, everything is possible. . . . A deeply resonant and powerful novel that will inform and enlighten readers even as it breaks their hearts. A must-buy.”

—*SLJ*

ALSO BY JOHN GREEN:

*Looking for Alaska*

*An Abundance of Katherines*

*Paper Towns*

*Will Grayson, Will Grayson*

WITH DAVID LEVITHAN

*The Fault in Our Stars*

**TURTLES  
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GREEN**

DUTTON BOOKS



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*To Henry and Alice*

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Man can do what he wills,  
but he cannot will what he wills.

—ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

# ONE

AT THE TIME I FIRST REALIZED I might be fictional, my weekdays were spent at a publicly funded institution on the north side of Indianapolis called White River High School, where I was required to eat lunch at a particular time—between 12:37 P.M. and 1:14 P.M.—by forces so much larger than myself that I couldn't even begin to identify them. If those forces had given me a different lunch period, or if the tablemates who helped author my fate had chosen a different topic of conversation that September day, I would've met a different end—or at least a different middle. But I was beginning to learn that your life is a story told about you, not one that you tell.

Of course, you pretend to be the author. You have to. You think, *I now choose to go to lunch*, when that monotone beep rings from on high at 12:37. But really, the bell decides. You think you're the painter, but you're the canvas.

Hundreds of voices were shouting over one another in the cafeteria, so that the conversation became mere sound, the rushing of a river over rocks. And as I sat beneath fluorescent cylinders spewing aggressively artificial light, I thought about how we all believed ourselves to be the hero of some personal epic, when in fact we were basically identical organisms colonizing a vast and windowless room that smelled of Lysol and lard.

I was eating a peanut butter and honey sandwich and drinking a Dr Pepper. To be honest, I find the whole process of masticating plants and animals and then shoving them down my esophagus kind of disgusting, so I was trying not to think about the fact that I was eating, which is a form of thinking about it.

Across the table from me, Mychal Turner was scribbling in a yellow-paper notebook. Our lunch table was like a long-running play on Broadway: The cast changed over the years, but the roles never did. Mychal was The Artsy One. He was talking with Daisy Ramirez, who'd played the role of my Best and Most Fearless Friend since elementary school, but I couldn't follow their conversation over the noise of all the others.

What was my part in this play? The Sidekick. I was Daisy's Friend, or Ms. Holmes's Daughter. I was somebody's something.

I felt my stomach begin to work on the sandwich, and even over everybody's talking, I could *hear* it digesting, all the bacteria chewing the slime of peanut butter—the students inside of me eating at my internal cafeteria. A shiver convulsed through me.

“Didn't you go to camp with him?” Daisy asked me.

“With who?”

“Davis Pickett,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Why?”

“Aren't you listening?” Daisy asked. *I am listening*, I thought, *to the cacophony of my digestive tract*. Of course I'd long known that I was playing host to a massive collection of parasitic organisms, but I didn't much like being reminded of it. By cell count, humans are approximately 50 percent microbial, meaning that about half of the cells that make you up are not yours at all. There are something like a thousand times more microbes living in my particular biome than there are human beings on earth, and it often seems like I can *feel* them living and breeding and dying in and on me. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans and tried to control my breathing. Admittedly, I have some anxiety problems, but I would argue it isn't irrational to be concerned about the fact that you are a skin-encased bacterial colony.

Mychal said, “His dad was about to be arrested for bribery or something, but the night before the raid he disappeared. There's a hundred-thousand-dollar reward out for him.”

“And you know his kid,” Daisy said.

“*Knew* him,” I answered.

I watched Daisy attack her school-provided rectangular pizza and green beans with a fork. She kept glancing up at me, her eyes widening as if to say, *Well?* I could tell she wanted me to ask her about something, but I couldn’t tell what, because my stomach wouldn’t shut up, which was forcing me deep inside a worry that I’d somehow contracted a parasitic infection.

I could half hear Mychal telling Daisy about his new art project, in which he was using Photoshop to average the faces of a hundred people named Mychal, and the average of their faces would be this new, one-hundred-and-first Mychal, which was an interesting idea, and I wanted to listen, but the cafeteria was so loud, and I couldn’t stop wondering whether there was something wrong with the microbial balance of power inside me.

Excessive abdominal noise is an uncommon, but not unprecedented, presenting symptom of infection with the bacteria *Clostridium difficile*, which can be fatal. I pulled out my phone and searched “human microbiome” to reread Wikipedia’s introduction to the trillions of microorganisms currently inside me. I clicked over to the article about *C. diff*, scrolling to the part about how most *C. diff* infections occur in hospitals. I scrolled down farther to a list of symptoms, none of which I had, except for the excessive abdominal noises, although I knew from previous searches that the Cleveland Clinic had reported the case of one person who’d died of *C. diff* after presenting at the hospital with only abdominal pain and fever. I reminded myself that I didn’t have a fever, and my self replied: *You don’t have a fever YET.*

At the cafeteria, where a shrinking slice of my consciousness still resided, Daisy was telling Mychal that his averaging project shouldn’t be about people named Mychal but about imprisoned men who’d later been exonerated. “It’ll be easier, anyway,” she said, “because they all have mug shots taken from the same angle, and then it’s not just about names but about race and class and mass incarceration,” and Mychal was like, “You’re a genius, Daisy,” and she said, “You sound surprised,” and meanwhile I was thinking that if half the cells inside of you are not you, doesn’t that challenge



the whole notion of *me* as a singular pronoun, let alone as the author of my fate? And I fell pretty far down that recursive wormhole until it transported me completely out of the White River High School cafeteria into some non-sensorial place only properly crazy people get to visit.

Ever since I was little, I've pressed my right thumbnail into the finger pad of my middle finger, and so now there's this weird callus over my fingerprint. After so many years of doing this, I can open up a crack in the skin really easily, so I cover it up with a Band-Aid to try to prevent infection. But sometimes I get worried that there already is an infection, and so I need to drain it, and the only way to do that is to reopen the wound and press out any blood that will come. Once I start thinking about splitting the skin apart, I literally cannot not do it. I apologize for the double negative, but it's a real double negative of a situation, a bind from which negating the negation is truly the only escape. So anyway, I started to want to feel my thumbnail biting into the skin of my finger pad, and I knew that resistance was more or less futile, so beneath the cafeteria table, I slipped the Band-Aid off my finger and dug my thumbnail into the callused skin until I felt the crack open.

"Holmesy," Daisy said. I looked up at her. "We're almost through lunch and you haven't even mentioned my hair." She shook out her hair, with so-red-they-were-pink highlights. Right. She'd dyed her hair.

I swum up out of the depths and said, "It's bold."

"I know, right? It says, 'Ladies and gentlemen and also people who do not identify as ladies or gentlemen, Daisy Ramirez won't break her promises, but she will break your heart.'" Daisy's self-proclaimed life motto was "Break Hearts, Not Promises." She kept threatening to get it tattooed on her ankle when she turned eighteen. Daisy turned back to Mychal, and I to my thoughts. The stomach grumbling had grown, if anything, louder. I felt like I might vomit. For someone who actively dislikes bodily fluids, I throw up quite a lot.

"Holmesy, you okay?" Daisy asked. I nodded. Sometimes I wondered why she liked me, or at least tolerated me. Why any of them did. Even I found

myself annoying.

I could feel sweat sprouting from my forehead, and once I begin to sweat, it's impossible to stop. I'll keep sweating for hours, and not just my face or my armpits. My neck sweats. My boobs sweat. My calves sweat. Maybe I did have a fever.

Beneath the table, I slid the old Band-Aid into my pocket and, without looking, pulled out a new one, unwrapped it, and then glanced down to apply it to my finger. All the while, I was breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth, in the manner advised by Dr. Karen Singh, exhaling at a pace "that would make a candle flicker but not go out. Imagine that candle, Aza, flickering from your breath but still there, always there." So I tried that, but the thought spiral kept tightening anyway. I could hear Dr. Singh saying I shouldn't get out my phone, that I mustn't look up the same questions over and over, but I got it out anyway, and reread the "Human Microbiota" Wikipedia article.

The thing about a spiral is, if you follow it inward, it never actually ends. It just keeps tightening, infinitely.

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I sealed the Ziploc bag around the last quarter of my sandwich, got up, and tossed it into an overfilled trash can. I heard a voice from behind me. "How concerned should I be that you haven't said more than two words in a row all day?"

"Thought spiral," I mumbled in reply. Daisy had known me since we were six, long enough to get it.

"I figured. Sorry, man. Let's hang out today."

This girl Molly walked up to us, smiling, and said, "Uh, Daisy, just FYI, your Kool-Aid dye job is staining your shirt."

Daisy looked down at her shoulders, and indeed, her striped top had turned pink in spots. She flinched for a second, then straightened her spine.

“Yeah, it’s part of the look, Molly. Stained shirts are huge in Paris right now.” She turned away from Molly and said, “Right, so we’ll go to your house and watch *Star Wars: Rebels*.” Daisy was really into Star Wars—and not just the movies, but also the books and the animated shows and the kids’ show where they’re all made out of Lego. Like, she wrote fan fiction about Chewbacca’s love life. “And we will improve your mood until you are able to say three or even four words in a row; sound good?”

“Sounds good.”

“And then you can take me to work. Sorry, but I need a ride.”

“Okay.” I wanted to say more, but the thoughts kept coming, unbidden and unwanted. If I’d been the author, I would’ve stopped thinking about my microbiome. I would’ve told Daisy how much I liked her idea for Mychal’s art project, and I would’ve told her that I did remember Davis Pickett, that I remembered being eleven and carrying a vague but constant fear. I would’ve told her that I remembered once at camp lying next to Davis on the edge of a dock, our legs dangling over, our backs against the rough-hewn planks of wood, staring together up at a cloudless summer sky. I would’ve told her that Davis and I never talked much, or even looked at each other, but it didn’t matter, because we were looking at the same sky together, which is maybe more intimate than eye contact anyway. Anybody can look at you. It’s quite rare to find someone who sees the same world you see.

# TWO

THE FEAR HAD MOSTLY SWEATED OUT OF ME, but as I walked from the cafeteria to history class, I couldn't stop myself from taking out my phone and rereading the horror story that is the "Human Microbiota" Wikipedia article. I was reading and walking when I heard my mother shout at me through her open classroom door. She was seated behind her metal desk, leaning over a book. Mom was a math teacher, but reading was her great love.

"No phones in the hallway, Aza!" I put my phone away and went into her classroom. There were four minutes remaining in my lunch period, which was the perfect length for a Mom conversation. She looked up and must've seen something in my eyes. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You're not anxious?" she asked. At some point, Dr. Singh had told Mom not to ask if I was feeling anxious, so she'd stopped phrasing it as a direct question.

"I'm fine."

"You've been taking your meds," she said. Again, not a direct question.

"Yeah," I said, which was broadly true. I'd had a bit of a crack-up my freshman year, after which I was prescribed a circular white pill to be taken once daily. I took it, on average, maybe thrice weekly.

"You look . . ." *Sweaty*, is what I knew she meant.

"Who decides when the bells ring?" I asked. "Like, the school bells?"

"You know what, I have no idea. I suppose that's decided by someone on the superintendent's staff."