## *The Fault in Our Stars*

*By John Green*
Published by Penguin Books Limited, 2012, 336 pages

Reviewed by:
**Sarah Shields** (Sarah.shields3@gmail.com), Masters Candidate, HESA, Florida State University

The *Fault in Our Stars* is a book about friendship and love between two teenagers living with cancer. Hazel is a sixteen-year-old girl who has been diagnosed with a terminal form of thyroid cancer, as well as metastasis in her lungs. She has already graduated high school and spends her time taking advanced classes at the local community college and doing "normal" teenage things like watching reruns of *America's Next Top Model* on TV and going to the mall. Augustus, or Gus, is a seventeen-year-old high school student who survived osteosarcoma by having one of his legs removed. He used to play basketball and now spends his time playing video games with his best friend, Isaac, while truly wanting to figure out a way to leave his mark on the world. Isaac is also battling cancer; when he was younger, he had to have one of his eyes removed to fight the disease, and now, he faces the reality of having his only working eye removed, rendering him blind at only seventeen.

These three teenagers move through the book dealing with what would be considered typical teenage issues, such as dating and homework, but they are compounded by the fact that they are also grappling with innately adult life choices. Hazel is asked to weigh in on her treatment options alongside her parents, all the while knowing that none of these options include a cure—just a way to prolong her life. Gus has already experienced the burden of watching someone he cares about suffer through brain cancer and eventually pass away, and Isaac learns that teens who do not have cancer, like his girlfriend, cannot necessarily handle being around him and eventually break his heart.

The three stories collide when Hazel, Isaac, and Gus all attend a support group for young people who are dealing with cancer. Eventually, they become friends and form their own sort of support group. Hazel and Gus become fast friends, and a love story begins to unfold. Hazel introduces Gus to her favorite book, *An Imperial Affliction*, which is about a teenage girl who has cancer but is elusively unlike typical "cancer novels," so Hazel feels like she can relate to it. Unfortunately, the book ends abruptly without explaining what happens to the characters. Hazel and Gus begin to obsess over finding out the fate of their beloved characters, making up their own alternate storylines, when Gus incredibly manages to find the author's e-mail. He sends him a message, and surprisingly, the author responds to both of them with an invitation to come to Amsterdam and meet with him. Gus so chivalrously offers to use his one "Genie Wish," from a fictitious company based on the real Make A Wish Foundation, to fly them both there, and they spend three days exploring the city and eating romantic dinners along the river. When the two eventually meet the reclusive author with whom they had waited so long to talk, it turns out to be somewhat of a disappointment. The meeting leaves them both deflated; their one idol, with whom they thought they had a deep and meaningful connection, let them down, and they are not sure what to do next. This event is actually used as a catalyst for Gus and Hazel to explore what is important to them, and as they soon discover, it is each other.

Throughout the book, the reader discovers that the book is not just about cancer. The disease is used as a vehicle to express the deep and, oftentimes, mature thoughts of these three friends. When Hazel discovers the Facebook page of Gus's ex-girlfriend, Caroline, she happens across a post that says, "It's like we were all wounded in your battle." For Hazel, the thought of being something of a "grenade," as she calls it, ready to hurt anyone to whom she is close when she passes away, ut-

terly terrifies her. The author uses this to hint at the idea that we are all connected, that our actions have a reaction, and that we are not alone in our decisions. Hazel also deals with the realization that life sometimes hands us "grenade" status through no fault of our own, where hurting others and being a burden to others is something as hard as it is that we must accept.

*The Fault In Our Stars* is rich in discussion opportunities, and I believe first-year students could benefit greatly from reading this novel. The author does a fantastic job of making sure cancer does not become the theme of the book. It is merely an aspect of the plot that provides a sense of urgency to the characters. Hazel knows she does not have a long and healthy life in front of her, so she repeatedly asks herself how she can *live* now. She will not let her diagnosis plot the course of her life or make decisions for her; she embraces the minimal freedom she has now to explore literature, friendship, and even love.

This theme of decision making can be translated to a college or university setting to impress upon first-year students the importance of knowing what consequences their actions can have. Especially in a residential or classroom setting, where individuals become part of a smaller community, many students may not have had the freedom to be completely in charge of their day-to-day lives. Exploring the "grenade" metaphor can be a powerful tool for instructors and staff members to use when advising students about the community aspect of a college environment.

In addition, I believe this theme can be used in a first-year experience course to inspire students to think about how to make the most of their college experience. Faculty and staff can help guide students in the right direction, but it is important for them to realize that, ultimately, the decisions are their own to make. The wisdom and curiosity of the characters in the novel can be a great foundation for students to start to think about their own lives and how to plan to leave a mark of their own.

The book is also rich in discussion topics if used in an orientation or first-year course. Exploring the two characters in depth, whether in a literature or English class, would be a great place to start. Asking questions like "How do Hazel and Gus define themselves?," "Do they let the cancer define them?," and "How do they differ in the ways they think about their illnesses and the world around them?" could lead to a journaling exercise for students and a way to illustrate the changes and transition issues they are going through when starting college.

Another option would be to have students explore the themes of the book by asking, "What do you see as the main theme of the book, (knowing it is not just a 'cancer novel'?" and "How is *An Imperial Affliction* used as a metaphor for the characters' lives and as a theme within the plot?" Diving into the novel and picking apart the meaning behind the author's choices can assist students in making meaning of their own lives while reading it.

The topics in this book can be very useful in any classroom or residential setting when dealing with the difficult topics of grief and loss, most likely in conjunction with counseling staff. Many novels directed toward young adults regarding disease and death present the afflicted character as an "angel," only garnering sympathy from others instead of real relationships. Green's characters, however, are *alive* in a story, while simultaneously dealing with the ideas of death and dying. They do not let the inevitable stop them from living in the *now.* Hazel and Gus both have an innate love of life, bringing tears and laughter in equal and joyous measure. They become like friends to the reader, and readers inherently know that the world is a better place having known them. This is an excellent model to use with students to begin a dialogue about these difficult subjects and ideas.

Caution should be taken when dealing with the sensitive subject matters found in this novel. Ensuring that staff and faculty are equipped to deal with the discussions and questions that may arise is key, especially when working with first-year students in their own time of transition and uncertainty. Collaborating with a campus's counseling center might be a good route to take, as this would provide hands-on support for students when discussing the difficult topics, and these centers may

also be able to provide ideas for further programming.

I would highly recommend this book to be used in colleges and universities within first-year programming and curriculum. Its subject matter, combined with its readability and relevant topics, makes it a must read for students, staff, and faculty alike. The novel is written with sensitivity, honesty, and integrity, inviting real conversations without feeling forced. Additionally, I think this book can be highly adaptable to different subject areas, programming ideas, and student needs, making it a good fit for many schools.