BOOK REVIEW

John Green’s The Fault in Our Stars

By Michael Pikaart, Hope College

Why do you love science? What is it about cells, proteins, and DNA and how they work that makes you want to learn about them, study them, maybe even obsess about them a little? There they are, perfect and beautiful....cells that grow into paved monolayers on our culture dishes, or round little colonies on our agar plates; PCR products that make a zillion identical copies of a single molecule; those elegant ribbons and arrows summarizing a protein’s structure. The basis of life itself, humming away flawlessly, all the time, whether we know it or not. What an amazing process to get to learn about!

But life, and the molecules that make it go, do not always work perfectly. Sometimes proteins fold the wrong way, and Alzheimer’s begins. Sometimes nerve endings don’t maintain enough serotonin, and depression results. Sometimes cells divide too much, too fast, and a tumor grows. This, too, is why we learn, because maybe if we learn how those molecules go awry in disease, we can find cures. Maybe your own studies are inspired by a loved one who has suffered disease. Seeing an older person, or a child, whose cells have seemingly turned against her, can inspire thoughts of “let’s figure out how to fix this!”

In his novel, The Fault in Our Stars, John Green takes the usual boy-meets-girl plot and throws cancer into the mix. Hazel Grace Lancaster is a sixteen year old who lives life in the Republic of Cancervania (as she calls it) since her diagnosis with thyroid cancer at age thirteen. Her disease has metastasized to her lungs, requiring her to use an oxygen tank and leaving her constantly short of breath. She is in a precarious remission owing to a (fictional) experimental drug treatment. At her parents’ insistence, she attends a cancer support group. There she meets seventeen-year-old Augustus Waters, who has lost a leg to osteosarcoma, but is otherwise in stable health. Although attracted to Augustus, Hazel Grace anticipates the oblivion that will follow her own death and refuses to pursue her affection for Augustus for that reason.

Hazel’s disease has prevented her from attending school, so instead she has completed her GED and compulsively re-reads the (also fictional) novel An Imperial Affliction by Peter Van Houten, an American living as a reclusive and alcoholic expatriate in Amsterdam. The novel tells the story of Anna, a young girl with leukemia, and ends mid-sentence with Anna’s death. Hazel Grace desperately wants to learn the fate of Anna’s survivors – her mother, her friends, even her hamster, Sisyphus. She shares her literary interest with Augustus, who invokes the Wish Genies (analogous to Make-A-Wish in the real world) to arrange travel to Amsterdam and meet Peter Van Houten. The author, however, refuses to offer any comment on the future of any of the characters in An Imperial Affliction, instead confirming Hazel’s expectation of oblivion and meaninglessness. But while their visit with Van Houten proves disappointing, Augustus and Hazel Grace manage both to fall in love, despite Hazel’s determination otherwise, and to have a beautiful time in Amsterdam.

However, it soon becomes obvious that, while Hazel’s health is worrisome, Augustus’s has taken a turn for the worse as well. Yet the contrast between Van Houten’s nihilism and Augustus’s ambitious optimism nudges Hazel out of her self-imposed isolation, and she realizes that even those who have loved her most – her parents – will manage to live lives of value even after her own death. Augustus concludes that “you don’t get to choose if you get hurt in this world, old man, but you do have some say in who hurts you.”

The Fault in Our Stars would be a great book to read as a BMB student book club (or go see the film together) and discuss afterwards. Not
everybody will love it. The book can seem to exploit the cancer theme a little brazenly – would a tale of two teenagers falling in love and trying to find meaning in life be any different if they did not happen to be dying of cancer? In real life, children (and adults) with cancer are no more brave, or insightful, or witty or cute, than anybody else. Nowadays it seems our society romanticizes cancer in the same way that tuberculosis was glamorized a century ago, and Green seems to play to that at times. While presenting Hazel’s and Augustus’s disease in medically realistic terms, The Fault in Our Stars comes nowhere near a realistic portrayal of the pain suffered during cancer. In its defense, though, this isn’t meant to be a book about cancer. It’s a young adult romance novel, and if it seems a little narcissistic, well, that’s what young adults in love are, cancer notwithstanding. Just don’t expect the book to deliver you a bracing dose of intellectual motivation as you prepare for your next exam or work through a complicated experiment. Sometimes getting back into the lab and sticking with an apparently failed experiment is going to make you feel like Sisyphus the hamster – running around in its little ball in the name of the Greek guy condemned to push a rock up a mountain every day, only to have it roll back down. John Green reminds us that, even as we push rocks up mountains, or culture cells, or isolate proteins, it’s a lot more fun if we do not do so alone.