

Book Review

An Abundance of Katherines

Reviewed by Oaz Nir

An Abundance of Katherines

John Green

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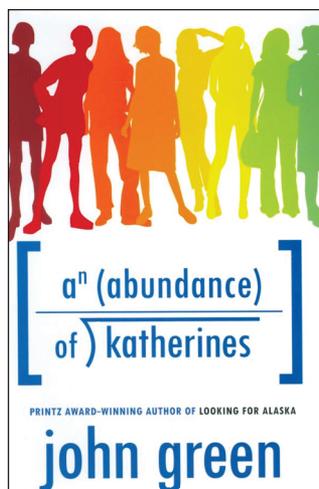
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For the reader who takes an active interest in the idiosyncrasies of the intellectually gifted, and who is comfortable with the crude language and dismissive humor common to satire, John Green's *An Abundance of Katherines* is a pleasantly raucous comic experience, studded with some glimpses of insight. Gifted teenagers are Green's target audience, and he crafts the book specifically for that population.

It is a standard story. Hard-on-his-luck boy meets girl; he helps her realize she doesn't need her meaty boyfriend; he gets the girl; along the way, he learns something about life; he also helps her learn something about life; deep conversations occur long into the night, and kissing, too. All along, his *Sancho Panza* supports him; they have a fight; there is sexual jealousy between them; the sidekick feels taken for granted (because he is); they make up; the friend learns a valuable lesson. There is a road trip involved, although the travelers settle on a location rather quickly, and the new setting serves as a site of transformation for the protagonist. He gains a new perspective on his life, and on mathematics.

It is a tried and true story (but let's not be too hard here—how many stories have not been told yet?). What makes it worth reading—because it is—is the uniqueness of the characters, coupled

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with Green's distinctive voice. *An Abundance of Katherines* may be said to be a study of genius, and of the peculiar social dynamics that shape and color the experience of extremely talented youth.

Colin Singleton, former child prodigy, has just graduated from high school. He is hell-bent on having his own *Eureka moment*,

wherein he would finally think up a truly original thought and stake his immortal claim as a genius. In the meantime, he churns with a nervous energy, brimming with a self-doubt that borders on self-hatred. He gets joy out of little things: He has an encyclopedic brain and is always stating random facts that pop into his mind. He loves to anagram street signs, graffiti, any words he sees—spontaneous anagramming is “his greatest passion”. He seeks to pacify his overwhelming anxiety by having girlfriends; their words of approval—each “I love you”—helps him feel momentarily okay about himself. In fact, Colin has had nineteen girlfriends, all named Katherine.

Our starting point is Colin's dumping at the callous hands of Katherine XIX. Colin and Hassan Harbish, a crude, lazy, laughable boor and Colin's only friend, decide to take a summer road trip (Hassan's Lebanese descent is just too cute, as Colin himself is half-Jewish). Embarking from

Chicago, they make it as far as Gutshot, Tennessee—where they find everything they need: a summer job, relative anonymity, and a pretty girl for Colin to fall in love with. The girl is named Lindsey Lee Wells, which you'll notice is not the same as "Katherine"—but not to worry, for Lindsey's current boyfriend is named Colin (to avoid confusion, Hassan calls him TOC—"The Other Colin"), and so we see that the name game bodes well for our pair of star-crossed lovers. There ensues a summer full of growing pains and betrayal, great laughs and loves, life lessons—and a mathematical "Theorem of Underlying Katherine Predictability".

Green has found the right balance of seriousness and humor to make his subject matter appealing to teens—he places the characters in very real situations, but treats the situations with a slant of sarcasm. The lack of seriousness may strike adult readers as insensitive, but it would be wrong to criticize the book on this count—Green is writing to his intended audience, and he does so well.

A central theme is the distinction between prodigy and genius. Colin feels a profound dread that he is nothing more than a washed-up child prodigy, doomed to a life of base normalcy. He yearns to ascend to the hallowed rank of *genius*—to make an indelible mark on society and so secure his place in the world's intellectual history. As you might imagine, Colin is self-centered and self-deprecating. He doesn't have friends (well, only one) and complains about it regularly.

The distinction between prodigy and genius might strike a little too close to home with some adult readers. There are many prodigies—children who have a special talent, who achieve a certain limited fame—but the number of these prodigies who can focus their talents into a productive adult career is small. Green suggests that as they come of age, child prodigies feel an intense pressure to reach the next step and that in some cases this pressure can be overwhelming. In some ways, a more modest record of success as a child and young adult molds one's mindset into a healthier one—with less torment, it may be easier to achieve.

The notion of *being interesting* is another central theme. Colin yearns at every juncture to be interesting, to say interesting things, to appeal to his own sense of aesthetics by thinking up interesting things. He is a bad storyteller because he "always included extraneous details and tangents that interested only him." Hassan cajoles him into saying only interesting things by applying a stock rejoinder ("not interesting, kafir") whenever Colin's comments miss the mark. Lindsey's face is described as "not pretty so much as interesting-looking". Above all, Colin is drawn naturally to devote his mind to interesting things. In this way, Colin could have been a mathematician (well, if only he had a little more natural talent). For mathematicians,

sheer interest is sufficient to study some object. Curiosity and a (curious sense of) aesthetics has been a tremendous driving force in the development of mathematics. The well-written appendix by Daniel Biss, assistant professor at the University of Chicago and associate editor of the *Notices*, hints at the connections between these ideas. Biss does a stand-up job of communicating the basic concepts underlying the math woven throughout the novel. It is natural for the reader to wonder to what extent Biss himself associates with Colin and to what extent the relationship between Colin and Hassan approximate that of Green and Biss.

All along, Colin is trying to prove his Theorem, which is supposed to be his claim to genius. The Theorem aims to predict which of the two members of a romantic relationship will be the one to break up with the other. It's fairly morbid, really, but nevertheless we can understand how a super-intellectual, over-dumped kid would devote his brain to a task of this sort. Colin, like all of us, wants to understand—and control—the events of his life. In the end, his equation takes this form:

$$-D^7x^8 + D^2x^3 - \frac{x^2}{A^3} - Cx^2 - Px + \frac{1}{A} + 13P + \frac{\sin(2x)}{2} \left[1 + (-1)^{H+1} \frac{(x + \frac{11\pi}{2})^H}{|x + \frac{11\pi}{2}|^H} \right]$$

It is a cardinal rule in writing reviews not to give away the ending of the book. Whoops. That Colin initially thinks that such a formula is possible betrays his emotional immaturity. A turning point in the novel comes when Colin makes his Theorem fit all past cases (how many anagrams can you find for "overfitting"?), but also realizes that it can't possibly predict all future outcomes. For the mathematician, Colin's realization may strike a real chord. How is it that we move beyond the work that has already been done in our field and make a new contribution? And it adds a dimension to our understanding of young mathematicians—we see in Colin a transformation to a more mature mathematical mind, a transformation that the reader may remember experiencing for him/herself.

The process of discovery is described with Gothic, overwrought imagery:

For some reason, as he discarded equations left and right, the room seemed to grow warmer. Sweat pooled in the gauze bandage over his eyes, so he tore it off. He removed his shirt, wiping still-trickling blood from his face. Naked from the waist up, his vertebrae extruded from his skinny back as he hunched over the desk, working. He felt as he had never felt before—that he was close to an original concept.

In my own experience, math research is not quite so intense as this. But then again, I do applied math.

Green crafts the prose itself to entertain twenty-first century teens, and to that end he largely succeeds. The language is a crude vernacular, littered with images of body parts, fluids, sex acts. It's an attempt to be hip to the voice of today's youth, and it works. Parents be warned, though, that if you read the book, you may find yourself cringing at some turns-of-phrase, not limited to these gems:

- Shame about how we're gonna die here, though. I mean, seriously. An Arab and a half-Jew enter a store in Tennessee. It's the beginning of a joke, and the punch line is "sodomy".
- To Colin, tampons were a little bit like grizzly bears: he was aware of their existence, but he'd never seen one in the wild, and didn't really care to.

Teens may well *LOL* at these, and as an early-twenty-something myself, I have to plead guilty to chuckling at a few of Green's precious one-liners. At times his writing is crisp and witty, but it remains highly audience-specific. In addition, Green really nails a number of great passages. His vivid descriptions paint colorful, detailed scenes. Teenage readers will delight in the scene where Hassan and Colin first meet Lindsey at the tomb of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand (located in Gutshot, TN) and no less at the Monty Pythonesque boar hunt—a sequence that comes loaded with all the bells and whistles of sex and violence.

And in addition to that passage quoted earlier (a.k.a. "blood, sweat & math"), Green does at another time capture the experience of research with remarkable sharpness: "He kept at the formula, *haunted* by the feeling that his head was just about to wrap around something big and important" (emphasis added). That sort of drive is something most every mathematician can relate to.

An Abundance of Katherines also explores the role that parents play in the lives of gifted youth. Colin's father is an unyielding taskmaster, and some of his words to Colin border on the criminal. When Colin announces his intentions to take his road trip, his father responds, "Will you really be happy just driving around aimlessly? That doesn't seem like you. Frankly, it seems like *quitting*." And a moment later, he follows up with, "It pains me to say this, Colin, but if you wish to continue to grow intellectually, you need to work harder right now than you ever have before. Otherwise, you risk wasting your potential." His father's pressuring no doubt contributes to Colin's impossibly high standards for success.

It is worth delving a bit deeper. Indeed, Colin may have been doomed by Nature alone—even

though, in practice, he has both Nature and Nurture working against him. Without explicit pressure from his parents, an implicit reward system would likely have arisen by default, where parental praise would motivate Colin to keep achieving (because even parents who are careful to avoid pushing their children will nevertheless provide positive feedback—really, who wouldn't?). But his father's unending pushing and less-than-subtle criticism lead Colin's internal drive to grow to the point of excruciating insatiability.

As a book for young adults, *An Abundance of Katherines* contains a powerful central lesson. Each of the main characters learns a fundamental truth, which together may be summed up in the maxim: *Life is complicated; if you think you've figured it out, you haven't.*

By the novel's end, Colin no longer feels as if he's wasted his life—he sees the power of re-visioning the past and the promise of the unknowable future: it holds promise precisely because it is unknowable. Colin's attempts to use mathematics to predict it may have failed, but the failure is fortuitous. He has learned the important lesson that the power of mathematics has its limits, limits that we need not just accept, but actually rejoice in. True, things may not work out with Lindsey; true, he'll undoubtedly still feel that unyielding drive to excel—to fulfill his potential—and that comes with a tremendous pressure. But now he has undergone a change of mindset that gives us some hope, as companions in his story, that *this time* may be different, that he may be able to deal with the pressure that comes with greatness, that he may be able to live a productive *and* happy life.