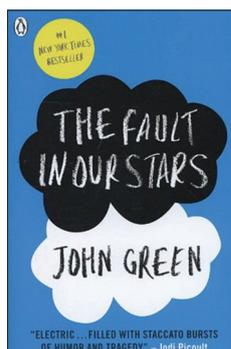


# Out of Hours Books

## THE FAULT IN OUR STARS JOHN GREEN

Penguin, 2012  
PB, 316pp, £7.99, 978-0141345659



Perhaps the important things about cancer doctors can't learn from textbooks. I hope I did eventually manage to cotton onto some of them from my patients in 30 years of clinical practice but this novel manages to do the job equally well in the space of a few hours. It is an exquisite example of how the humanities can reach deeply into essential parts of medical education that the comparative objectivity of science cannot.

As the Shakespearean allusion in the title suggests, *The Fault in Our Stars* is about two highly articulate teenagers, who, although not typical of any teen patients I have ever met in their philosophical and literary awareness, certainly convey powerfully the inside story of what it's like to have cancer and challenge some of our common misconceptions. As Hazel Grace, the novel's 13-year-old narrator with metastatic thyroid cancer, tells us on the opening page 'depression is not a side effect of cancer. Depression is a side effect of dying'. She may be confusing side effects with complications and from a purely scientific viewpoint is probably wrong, but we see what she means.

The effects of having cancer on family and friends are nailed with heart-breakingly evocative metaphor. When Hazel muses on why she shrinks from her new boyfriend Augustus' touch, she suddenly realises it is because she is afraid of repeating what his previous girlfriend Caroline did to him — namely dying. 'Caroline Mathers

had been a bomb and when she blew up everyone around was left with embedded shrapnel.' The realisation that, as another dying teenager, she can ultimately only inflict pain on those who love her makes Hazel then withdraw from her parents too. 'I'm a grenade' she tells them.

Relationships with healthcare professionals speak volumes to the medical reader. Dr Maria is a good oncologist because she doesn't bullshit you. Alison My Nurse is a good one because she is a rebel and gives Hazel some extra ice chips in ICU. On the other hand, the surgeon who crassly tells Isaac, a 17-year-old with recurrent melanoma requiring enucleation of his one remaining eye, 'Well the good news is you won't be deaf', is understandably the subject of considerable ridicule from both Hazel and Isaac himself. However, as GPs, who of us haven't demonstrated our own inadequacies by uttering such inanities?

Predictably death hovers over the book from beginning to end, yet the book though tear-jerkingly sad, is life-affirming rather than depressing. Two elements contribute to this; firstly Hazel's indefatigable black humour: when she and Gus first meet at their cancer support group in the Sacred Heart church, the defensive piety of Patrick, the group leader, causes him to reiterate empty religious platitudes reminding the group that they meet literally in the heart of Jesus, Hazel retorts, 'Someone should tell Jesus. I mean it's gotta be dangerous storing children with cancer in your heart'.

The second life-affirming theme is the unwavering love of the parents of all three of the central characters, Hazel, Gus, and Isaac. After Hazel shares with her parents that she feels like a grenade, they first wisely give her the space to be alone and work through her feelings. Later though they go together to her bedroom and her father tells her 'You are not a grenade, not to us. Thinking about you dying makes us sad, Hazel but you are not a grenade. You are amazing ... the joy you bring us is so much greater than the sadness we feel about your illness'.

As a GP, the saddest funerals of patients I have been to are when I have been almost the only mourner. We all have to die and it's when there is no one close enough to be hurt by our passing that surely our lives are the poorest?

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## BREAKFAST WITH LUCIAN GEORDIE GREIG

Jonathan Cape, 2013  
HB, 272 pp, £25.00, 978-0224096850



Jeremy King — co-owner of the Wolseley — used to compete with Lucian Freud to see who was better at remembering the lyrics of *Cheek to Cheek* or *You're the Top*, two songs Freud loved to sing. Reading the amazing story of Freud's life two other songs spring to mind which may well have been the leitmotif of his life. The first is Cole Porter's *Solomon*, of which the first line is 'Solomon had a thousand wives' and the second is 'I Put A Spell On You', one of Nina Simone's big hits.

Exactly how many women (and possibly a few men as well) Freud had is difficult to say but there were certainly a great many and he seemed capable of putting a spell on them from the moment he met them. It would have been a lifetime's work for his grandfather Sigmund to try and put together the broken pieces of his many affairs and his two marriages. How many children were born from these liaisons is impossible to know. According to this book there are at least 14, but this could well be the tip of the iceberg. It is often said that if we go back far enough among our ancestors we are bound to be related to some famous or notorious person. I have a feeling that if anybody in a 100 years from now would dig far enough into their ancestry they would find they

# Out of Hours

## Art

were related to Lucian Freud. Geordie Greig writes:

*'He was accused of infidelity, cruelty and absenteeism as a father, yet in spite of sometimes defiantly selfish behaviour some of his children and girlfriends, and even the children of his girlfriends, would defend him over what was pretty indefensible behaviour. All his life he got away with it. He was so charged with charm and charisma, few were immune to his power of seduction on some level.'*

This book is perhaps too preoccupied with gossip about the amorous part of Freud's life. Some people might even find reading the index a bit overpowering. *'I travel vertically, rather than horizontally'* is how he described his mingling of social classes.

However, in spite of all that, what comes through loud and clear is the fact that painting was the main occupation and driving force behind everything he did during his long, creative and certainly never boring life.

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### **MAD, BAD AND SAD: WOMEN AND THE MIND DOCTORS**

Freud Museum, London

10 October 2013–2 February 2014

The house is unmistakably Sigmund Freud's, although he only occupied it for a year. Emigrating to England as a result of Germany's annexation of Austria in June 1938, Freud died there in 1939. Now a museum, visitors can see his collection of heavy furniture, rich cloths, and archaeological treasures and totems of many traditions: Greek, Roman, Mesopotamian. He called them his 'old and grubby gods' who aided him in his work. Archaeology and psychoanalysis were closely connected for Freud since both require digging to reveal the truth.

Inspired by Lisa Appignanesi's acclaimed 2009 book *Mad, Bad and Sad: Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present*, the exhibition is billed as:

*'... highlighting the experience of women and their relationship to those who confined, cared for and listened to them. It also shows how women today conduct their own explorations of mind and imagination in challenging works of art.'*

An ambitious brief, but not one that I'm sure was completely pulled off. However, this is a very interesting exhibition and

definitely worth a visit. The somewhat oppressive interior served to overwhelm the art a tad. Perhaps this is also symbolic? The weight of history anchoring down and providing the backdrop to modern female artistic expressions. Despite this you couldn't really argue with Sarah Lucas's forthright *Suffolk Bunny (1997–2004)* which was placed in Freud's study. What could we infer from this? A joke at Freud's expense? Women as subjects but now taking over the house with humorous, unequivocal, in-your-face art? The patriarchal gaze upturned. To further underline the point we also had Helen Chadwick's arresting *'adore; abhor'* a duo of fuzzy-feltish familiar female forms.

Upstairs was a selection of photographs and other artefacts looking back at female patients. These women were treated according to the wisdom of the day with a broad brush applicable only to the female gender, where mental distress was deemed as 'hysterical'. We learn that Marilyn Monroe was treated by Anna Freud with the 'talking cure' and see the famous portrait of inmates at the Salpêtrière, Charcot's asylum in late 19th century Paris, where women performed their 'madness' and 'hysteria' to male doctors and paying spectators.

There is a charming painting by 'Wolf man' Sergei Pankejeff, a Russian aristocrat and one of Freud's most famous patients. Freud wrote up his case to show the importance of infantile factors in the development of a neurosis. During psychoanalysis Sergei returned constantly to an early childhood dream in which he saw wolves sitting on a tree outside his bedroom.

Freud's views of women were limited and limiting, but he certainly nailed the power of the unconscious, our unseen drives and desires, and the development of neuroses. A heavy cigar smoker, Freud had battled mouth cancer since 1923 and undergone several operations. On 21 September 1939 aged 83 he asked his doctor to administer a fatal dose of morphine and died that day in his study.

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***Suffolk Bunny in Freud's Study, Sarah Lucas © Sadie Coles HQ and Freud Museum London.***

