
Is the Fault in Our Stars?

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

I was fortunate to have read John Green's excellent novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, some time ago, soon after it was published. It was so good, and so moving and realistic, that I refrained from seeing the movie for fear that I would be disappointed.

Without giving too much away, the novel is both a serious and a humorous account of the adolescence of Hazel Grace Lancaster, who at 16 years old has cancer – serious cancer. In a cancer support group led by a somewhat ridiculously earnest counselor, she nevertheless becomes friends with a guy named Gus (Augustus Waters), a fellow cancer patient. Together, they seek and enjoy life, through laughter and tears; they especially want to meet a reclusive author named Peter van Houten, who has written a book about which Hazel Grace wants to know more.

The author turns out to be not at all what they expect, and he delivers the words that provide the title of the book. In a line from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Cassius, says: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings." This is meant to imply that fate is not to blame for the misfortunes of our lives (including cancer, one could say).

Well, I finally saw the movie a few days ago, just as Epiphany was about to start – just as we Christians celebrate the glory of a wondrous star. It is well known by now that John Green, the author of *The Fault in Our Stars*, originally intended to be an Episcopal priest; years as a chaplain to cancer patients led him to be a writer instead. It may not be so well known that Green continues to be a proud Episcopalian (in fact, I learned about Green from the rector of the church that he attends).

I am glad John Green is an Episcopalian, and I am so glad for this book (and movie) during the Epiphany season. Many of us believe wrongly in stars. Sometimes we think they rule our lives like some sort of astrological determinism. Silly. And sometimes we project all our desires and fantasies upon the "celebrity" stars among us. And sometimes, we just make wishes upon stars in some sort of naïve prayer.

Green's novel does an excellent job, however, of describing lives of people who know how to deal with reality without succumbing to futility. Life does deal differently with each of us. Bad things happen to good people in this life. During this very Christmas season, for instance – even in the midst of celebrating the star, I have also been with families who have lost loved ones – including two cases of surprising suddenness. I have seen much loss that was certainly no "underling's" fault.

John Green's book teaches me this about Epiphany: the movement of Epiphany is to not be blinded by the star. The movement of Epiphany is to transfer the glory of the Epiphany star to ourselves. If we live our lives too addicted to the star, it remains outside ourselves. Instead, the goal of Epiphany is to become stars ourselves.

Towards the end of the book, Gus says this about Hazel Grace: "What else? She is so beautiful. You don't get tired of looking at her. You never worry if she is smarter than you: You know she is. She is funny without ever being mean. I love her. I am so lucky to love her, Van Houten. 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. I like my choices. I hope she likes hers."

We do have choices in life, no matter what the stars have fated. And the great star, the Star of Bethlehem, points to a Savior who shows us how to love no matter what our flesh is suffering. In the season of Epiphany, to follow the star means to love like the star loves.

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