



**PINK SHIRT DAY**  
**FRIDAY 16 OCT 2020**

## **Turtles All the Way Down**

**John Green (2018), Penguin Books, UK**

In *Turtles All the Way Down*, the latest Young Adult novel from John Green, 16-year-old Aza finds herself on the hunt for an elusive billionaire.

Aza lives with anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Green has spoken openly of his own experiences with mental illness, and his decades of reflection on what this experience really is, combined with his sharp eye for the details of what it means to be human, have paid off with a fully-realised character who lives with mental illness and is so much more than her diagnoses. Aza is bright, curious and capable of deep self-absorption combined with moments of great empathy for others. She's interesting and interested, she's grieving the death of her father and her friendship with her best friend Daisy felt very true to life.

### **Believable characters**

The plot starts off slowly and then rips along. It is, at times, very theatrical, but so is adolescence. The characters crackle into life, preternaturally eloquent, able to distil complex philosophical ideas into quippy sentences, but nevertheless complex, flawed and likeable. They wonder if they are real, if they can control their own thoughts or actions, if what they think or do really matters. They also do their homework, bicker, fall in love and write fanfiction.

Sometimes this book made for very intense reading. Aza's thoughts spiral and we go along for the ride, tumbling through her anxieties and worries with no relief in sight. Aza compulsively self-harms, and that makes for difficult reading. Sometimes I needed to take a break, but it was never far from my thoughts and I was eager to finish it.

I have not experienced anxiety or OCD, but I did lose a parent at a young age, and the moments where the characters grapple with loss and what it means for someone to be gone forever felt more real to me than almost anything else I've ever read on the topic.

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## Relevant for teenagers

I went back and forth on whether I would recommend this book to a young person who experiences mental illness. Ultimately, I think I would, because being a teenager is a fundamentally lonely experience for many, and I remember well the comfort of recognising parts of myself in the pages of a book. I also remember what it meant at the time to be taken seriously, and John Green never fails to take young people and their hopes, dreams and worries seriously and kindly. A warning though, the self-harm is graphic and specific and unusual enough to leave an impression.

There is humour and warmth here, but it is, ultimately, a dark book. There is no shiny, happy ending tied neatly in a bow, but there is an ending – a surprising one. When reflecting on his own experience of mental illness, Green told the New York Times “people want that narrative of illness in the past tense. But a lot of the time, it isn’t.” This is not a story of a young woman who overcomes her mental illness and never thinks of it again. It’s a story of learning to live with, alongside and through mental illness, and to live with yourself. I really enjoyed it.

**Reviewed by Sophia Graham, Communications and Marketing Manager at the Mental Health Foundation**



The Mental Health Foundation's Information Service brings you reviews this Pink Shirt Day on books with bullying prevention themes.

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