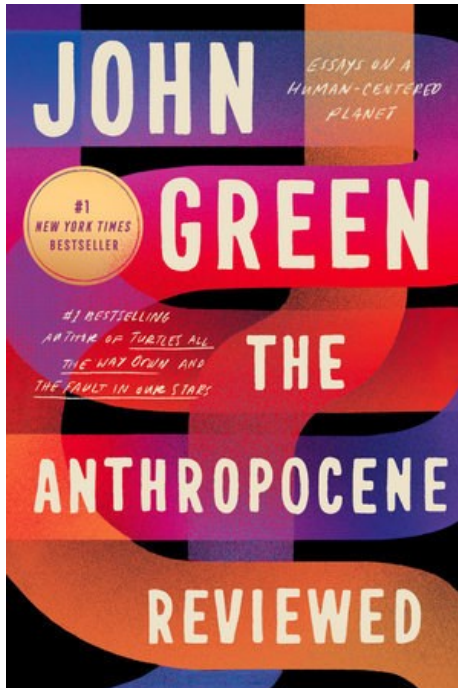


UM COMMON READ: 2022-2023



In its 12th year, the Common Reading Experience provides every first-year student with a copy of the selected text at orientation to finish before the school year begins in August. Instructors from the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, First-year Experience and others then use the text in their classes, which creates an enriched sense of academic community through communal reading.

Hallway exhibit by Michelle Emanuel, University of Mississippi Libraries
September 2022

PREVIOUS SELECTIONS:

2021-2022

World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments
*by Aimee Nezhukumatathil **

2020-2021

What the Eyes Don't See
by Mona Hanna-Atisha

2019-2020

Evicted
by Matthew Desmond

2018-2019

Collected Short Stories
by William Faulkner

2017-2018

Just Mercy
by Bryan Stevenson

2016-2017

Ten Little Indians
by Sherman Alexie

2015-2016

The Education of a Lifetime
*by Robert C. Khayat **

2014-2015

Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of Women Who Helped Win World War II
by Denise Kiernan

2013-2014

The Unforgiving Minute
by Craig Mullaney

2012-2013

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter
*by Tom Franklin **

2011-2012

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
by Rebecca Skloot

* = **UM Faculty Authors**

The Anthropocene Reviewed / John Green (2021)

HM621 .G735 2021

Available in UM Libraries in print (Main + Archives) and e-book
Several copies are also available on reserve (Access Services).

ALSO BY JOHN GREEN IN UM LIBRARIES

Looking for Alaska (2005) = PZ7.G8233 Lo 2005

An Abundance of Katherines (2006) = PZ7.G8233 Abu 2006

Paper Towns (2008) = PZ7.G8233 Pap 2008

The Fault in Our Stars (2012) = PZ7.G8233 Fau 2012

Turtles All the Way Down (2017) = PZ7.G8233 Tur 2017

The Anthropocene Reviewed: Essays on a Human-Centered Planet (2021) =
HM621 .G735 2021 > **3rd floor**

**YOUNG ADULT FICTION
is located on the 1st floor**

Text for this exhibit is from the e-book version of *The Anthropocene Reviewed*.

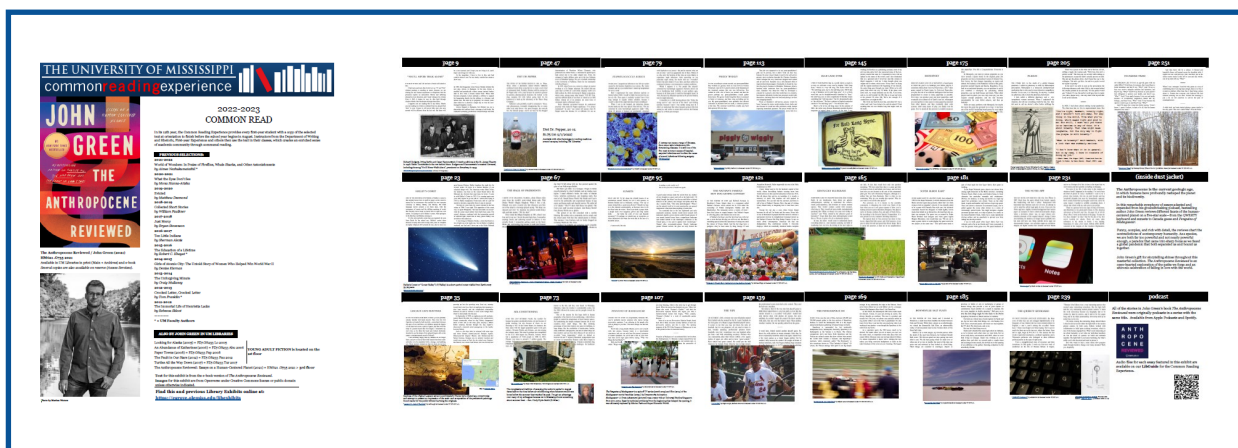
Images for this exhibit are from Openverse under Creative Commons license or public domain unless otherwise indicated.

Find this and previous Library Exhibits online at:

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/libexhibits>

Organization of display case: 1 poster, 36 x 42, focused on the UM Common Read selections of years past, and other publications of author John Green; 1 poster, 96 x 42, highlighted individual pages from Green’s novel, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*.

Posters were printed in the IdeaLab, University of Mississippi Libraries.



“YOU’LL NEVER WALK ALONE”

IT IS MAY OF 2020, and I do not have a brain well suited to this.

I find more and more that I refer to it as “it” and “this” without naming or needing to name, because we are sharing the rare human experience so ubiquitous that the pronouns require no antecedent. Horror and suffering abound in every direction, and I want writing to be a break from it. Still, it makes its way in—like light through window blinds, like floodwater through shut doors.

I suppose you are reading this in my future. Maybe you are reading in a future so distant from my present that “this” is over. I know it will never fully end—the next normal will be different from the last one. But there will

be a next normal, and I hope you are living in it, and I hope I am living in it with you.

In the meantime, I have to live in this, and find comfort where I can. For me, lately, comfort has meant a show tune.

In 1909, the Hungarian writer Ferenc Molnár debuted his new play, *Liliom*, in Budapest. In the play, Liliom, a troubled and periodically violent young carousel barker, falls in love with a woman named Julie. When Julie becomes pregnant, Liliom attempts a robbery to support his burgeoning family, but the robbery is a disaster, and Liliom dies. He ends up in purgatory for sixteen years, after which he is allowed a single day to visit his now-teenaged daughter, Louise.

Liliom flopped in Budapest, but Molnár was not a playwright who suffered from a shortage of self-belief. He continued mounting productions around Europe and then



Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin and Oscar Hammerstein II watch auditions at the St. James Theatre in 1948. Helen Tamiris sits in the row behind them. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical *Carousel*, including the song “You’ll Never Walk Alone”, premiered on Broadway in 1945.

([World Telegram photo by Al Aumuller](#). Library of Congress.)

HALLEY'S COMET

ONE OF THE ENDURING MYSTERIES of Halley's comet is that nobody knows how to spell its name, as the comet is named for an astronomer who spelled his own surname variously as Hailey, Halley, and Hawley. We think language moves around a lot these days, with the emergence of emojis and the shifting meaning of words like *literally*, but at least we know how to spell our own names. I'm going to call it Halley's comet, with apologies to the Hawleys and Haileys among us.

It's the only periodic comet that can regularly be seen from Earth by the naked eye. Halley's comet takes between seventy-four and seventy-nine years to complete its

good human lifetime, Halley brightens the night sky for several weeks. Or twice in a human lifetime, if you schedule things well. The American writer Mark Twain, for instance, was born as the comet blazed above the Missouri sky. Seventy-four years later, he wrote, "I came in with Halley's Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it." And he did, dying in 1910 as Halley reappeared. Twain had a hell of a gift for narrative structure, especially when it came to memoir.

Seventy-six years later, the comet returned in the late winter of 1986. I was eight. This apparition of the comet was, to quote Wikipedia, "the least favorable on record," with the comet much farther from Earth than usual. The comet's distance, combined with the tremendous growth of artificial light, meant that in many places Halley was invisible to the naked eye.

I was living in Orlando, Florida, a town that throws a lot of light up at the night sky, but on Halley's brightest



Halley's Comet or "Comet Halley" (1P/Halley) is a short-period comet visible from Earth every 75-79 years.

([Photo by NASA, May 2011](#))

LASCAUX CAVE PAINTINGS

IF YOU'VE EVER HAD OR BEEN A CHILD, you are probably already familiar with hand stencils. They were the first figurative art made by both my kids—somewhere between the ages of two and three, my children spread the fingers of one hand out across a piece of paper, and then with the help of a parent traced their five fingers. I remember my son's face as he lifted his hand and looked absolutely shocked to see the shape of his splayed fingers still on the paper, a semipermanent record of himself.

I am extremely happy that my children are no longer three, and yet to look at their little hands from those early artworks is to be inundated with a strange, soul-splitting joy. Those pictures remind me that my kids are not just

growing up but also growing away from me, running toward their own lives. But *I* am applying that meaning to *their* hand stencils, and the complicated relationship between art and its viewers is never more fraught than when we look deeply into the past.

In September of 1940, an eighteen-year-old mechanic named Marcel Ravidat was walking in the southwestern French countryside, when his dog, Robot, disappeared down a hole. (Or so the story goes, anyway.*) When Robot returned, Ravidat thought the dog might've discovered a rumored secret passageway to the nearby Lascaux Manor.

And so a few days later, he returned with some rope and three friends—sixteen-year-old Georges Agniel, fifteen-year-old Jacques Marsal, and thirteen-year-old Simon Coencas. Georges was on summer vacation and would soon return to Paris for the school year. Jacques, like Marcel, was a local. And Simon, who was Jewish, had



Map by [Google Maps](#)

Replicas of the original Lascaux caves in southwestern France were created as a compromise and attempt to present an impression of the scale and composition of the prehistoric paintings found inside for the public without harming the originals.

"[Lascaux II - Hall of The Bulls](#)" by Adibu456 is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

DIET DR PEPPER

THE STORY OF DR PEPPER BEGINS IN 1885, in Waco, Texas, where a pharmacist named Charles Alderton combined twenty-three syrup flavors to create a new kind of carbonated drink. Notably, Alderton sold the recipe for Dr Pepper after a few years because he wanted to pursue his passion, pharmaceutical chemistry. He worked at the drug company Eli Lilly before going back to his hometown to head up the laboratory at the Waco Drug Company.*

Alderton's soda probably would've remained a Texas-only phenomenon, eventually disappearing like so many other local soda flavors—the opera bouquet, the swizzle fizz, the almond sponge—had it not been for the dogged

determination of Woodrow Wilson Clements, who preferred to be called “Foods,” a nickname he picked up in high school due to his oddly shaped toes. Foods, the youngest of eight children, grew up in the tiny Alabama town of Windham Springs. He got a football scholarship at the University of Alabama, where he was teammates with Bear Bryant.*

In 1935, when Foods was a senior in college, he started working as a Dr Pepper salesman. He retired fifty-one years later as CEO of a soft drink company worth over \$400 million. By 2020, the Keurig Dr Pepper corporation, which owns, among many other brands, 7UP, RC Cola, and four different kinds of root beer, is valued at over \$40 billion. Almost all of its products are some form of sweetened and/or caffeinated water.

Foods Clements succeeded because he understood precisely what made Dr Pepper significant. “I’ve always maintained,” he said, “you cannot tell anyone what Dr Pepper tastes like because it’s so different. It’s not an



Diet Dr. Pepper, 20 oz.

\$1.75 (on 9/1/2022)

Available with other beverages in vending machines around campus, including UM Libraries.

THE HALL OF PRESIDENTS

I GREW UP IN ORLANDO, FLORIDA, about fifteen miles away from the world's most-visited theme park, Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom. When I was a kid, Orlando was such a tourist city that whenever you flew out of the airport, a message played saying, "We hope you enjoyed your visit." In response, my parents would always sigh, and then mutter, "We live here."

I first visited the Magic Kingdom in 1981, when I was four and it was ten. I loved the park back then. I remember meeting Goofy and allowing myself to believe it was actually Goofy. I remember getting scared on the Snow White ride, and feeling big because I could ride Thunder Mountain, and I remember being so tired at the end of the

day that I'd fall asleep with my face pressed against the glass of our Volkswagen Rabbit.

But then I got older. As a teenager, I began to define myself primarily by what I disliked, and my loathes were legion. I hated children's books, the music of Mariah Carey, suburban architecture, and shopping malls. But most of all, I hated Disney World. My friends and I had a word for the artificiality and corporatized fantasy of pop music and theme parks and cheerful movies: We called all of it "plastic." The TV show *Full House* was plastic. The Cure's new stuff was kind of plastic. And Disney World? God, Disney World was so plastic.

This period of my life coincided with a terrible blessing. My mother won a community service award, and the award came with four free annual passes to Disney. That summer, I was fourteen, and my family dragged me to Disney World All. The. Time.

I realize I'm probably not garnering much sympathy with my sorrowful tale of getting into Disney World for



["Naturalization Ceremony - Hall of Presidents Preview - Magic Kingdom"](#)

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AIR-CONDITIONING

OVER THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS, the weather for humans has gotten considerably hotter, not just because of global warming, but also because of where we are choosing to live. In the United States, for instance, the three states with the largest population gains in the past century—Nevada, Florida, and Arizona—are also among the warmest states. This trend is perhaps best exemplified by the U.S.'s fifth largest city, Phoenix, Arizona, which had a population of 5,544 people in 1900. In 2021, Phoenix was home to around 1.7 million people. The average high temperature in August is 103 degrees Fahrenheit, and yet they have a professional ice hockey team, the Arizona Coyotes. Until 1996, the Coyotes were

known as the Jets, and they were based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where the weather is considerably cooler, but the NHL followed the money and the people toward the equator.

One of the reasons for this huge shift in human geography is the miracle of air-conditioning, which allows people to control the temperature of their interior spaces. Air-conditioning has deeply reshaped human life in rich countries—from small things, like the declining percentage of time that windows are open in buildings, to large things, like the availability of medication. Insulin, many antibiotics, nitroglycerin, and lots of other drugs are heat sensitive and can lose their efficacy if not stored at so-called “room temperature,” which is defined as between 68 and 77 degrees Fahrenheit, temperatures that no rooms in summertime Phoenix could have hoped to achieve before air-conditioning. Climate-controlled drug storage remains one of the big challenges for healthcare



"[Air conditioner](#)" by Open Grid Scheduler / Grid Engine is marked with CCo 1.0.

The congressional tradition of escaping the nation's capital in August dates back to the time before air conditioning when Senators would race home before the summer heat reached its peak. I've got an advantage over many of my colleagues because we in Mississippi know something about summer heat. —Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.)



STAPHYLOCOCCUS AUREUS

YEARS AGO, I acquired an infection in my left eye socket caused by the bacteria *Staphylococcus aureus*. My vision clouded, and my eye swelled shut. I ended up hospitalized for over a week.

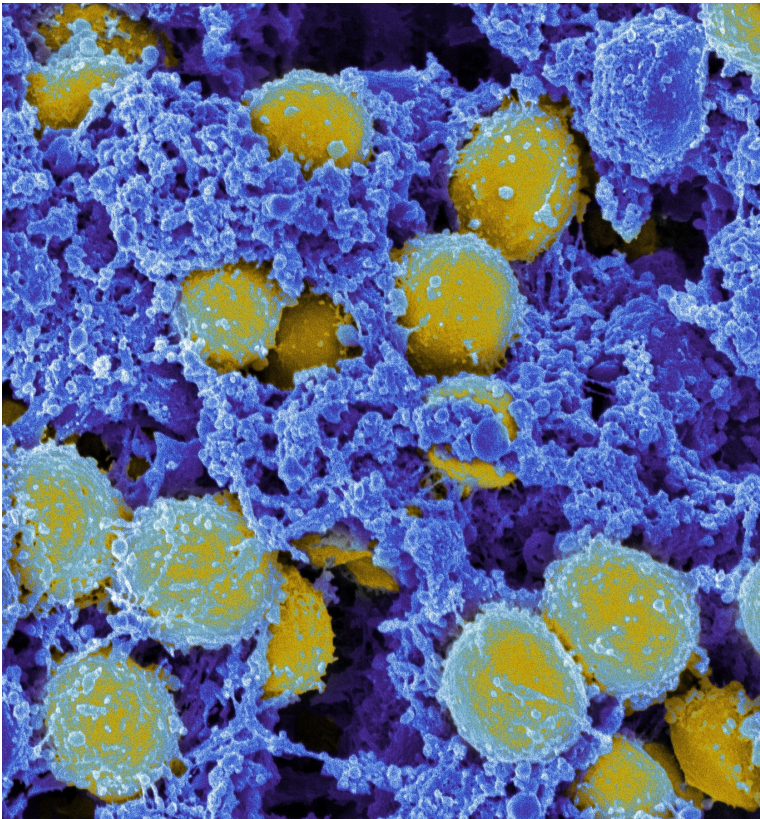
Had I experienced the same infection anytime in history before 1940, I would've likely lost not just my eye but my life. Then again, I probably wouldn't have lived long enough to acquire orbital cellulitis, because I would've died of the staph infections I had in childhood.

When I was in the hospital, the infectious disease doctors made me feel very special. One told me, "You are colonized by some fascinatingly aggressive staph." Only about 20 percent of humans are persistently colonized

with *Staphylococcus aureus*—the precise reasons why are not yet clear—and I am apparently one of them. Those of us who carry the bacteria all the time are more likely to experience staph infections. After marveling at my particular staph colony, the doctor told me I wouldn't believe the petri dishes if I saw them, and then called my continued existence a real testament to modern medicine.

Which I suppose it is. For people like myself, colonized by fascinatingly aggressive bacteria, there can be no hearkening back wistfully to past golden ages, because in all those pasts I would be thoroughly dead. In 1941, Boston City Hospital reported an 82 percent fatality rate for staph infections.

I remember as a child hearing phrases like "Only the strong survive" and "survival of the fittest" and feeling terrified, because I knew I was neither strong nor fit. I didn't yet understand that when humanity protects the frail among us, and works to ensure their survival, the human project as a whole gets stronger.



S. aureus can cause a range of illnesses, from minor skin infections to life-threatening diseases. It is still one of the five most common causes of hospital-acquired infections and is often the cause of wound infections following surgery. ([Wikipedia](#))

*is ending, or the world, or if
the secret of secrets is inside me again.*

SUNSETS

WHAT ARE WE TO DO about the clichéd beauty of an ostentatious sunset? Should we cut it with menace, as Roberto Bolaño did so brilliantly, writing, “The sky at sunset looked like a carnivorous flower”? Should we lean in to the inherent sentimentality, as Kerouac does in *On the Road* when he writes, “Soon it got dusk, a grapy dusk, a purple dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields . . . the fields the color of love and Spanish mysteries”? Or perhaps we should turn to mysticism, as Anna Akhmatova did when she wrote that in the face of a beautiful sunset,

I cannot tell if the day

A good sunset always steals the words from me, renders all my thoughts as gauzy and soft as the light itself. I’ll admit, though, that when I see the sun sink below a distant horizon as the yellows and oranges and pinks flood the sky, I usually think, “This looks photoshopped.” When I see the natural world at its most spectacular, my general impression is that more than anything, it looks fake.

I’m reminded that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, tourists would travel around with darkened, slightly convex mirrors called Claude glasses. If you turned yourself away from a magnificent landscape and looked instead at the landscape’s reflection in the Claude glass, it was said to appear more “picturesque.” Named after seventeenth-century French landscape painter Claude Lorrain, the glass not only framed the



"[sunset](#)" by Kiwi Tom is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

PENGUINS OF MADAGASCAR

UNLESS YOU'VE LIVED an exceptionally fortunate life, you've probably known someone who enjoys having provocative opinions. I am referring to the people who will say things to you like, "You know, Ringo was the best Beatle."

You'll take a long breath. Maybe you're out to lunch with this person, because lunch is a time-limited experience, and you can only bear this person's presence in minute quantities. So you'll take a bite of your food. And then you'll sigh again before saying, "Why was Ringo the best Beatle?"*

Well, the
asked. "Rin

you stop listening, which is the only way to get through lunch. When the person has finished you say, "Okay, but Ringo also wrote 'Octopus's Garden,'" and then the Provocative Opinion Person will regale you with a fourteen-minute lecture that begins, "Well, actually, 'Octopus's Garden' is a work of considerable genius because . . ."

Most of us are not Provocative Opinion People, thank God. But I think everyone secretly harbors at least one provocative opinion, and this is mine: The opening sequence of the 2014 film *Penguins of Madagascar* is one of the greatest scenes in cinematic history.

Penguins of Madagascar is an animated kids' movie about the Anthropocene: A villainous octopus named Dave has invented a special ray that makes cute animals ugly, so



"[Quentin and The Penguins](#)" by shawnzrossi is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

The Penguins of Madagascar is a spinoff TV series (2008-2015) and film (2014) of the *Madagascar* movie franchise (2005-) by Dreamworks Animation.

Madagascar: A Crate Adventure (pictured) was a water ride at Universal Studios Singapore from 2011-2019. Beset by technical problems from the beginning that delayed its opening, it was ultimately replaced by Minion Park and Super Nintendo World.

PIGGLY WIGGLY

IN 1920, according to census records, my great-grandfather Roy worked at a grocery store in a tiny town in western Tennessee. Like all U.S. grocery stores at the beginning of the twentieth century, this one was full-service: You walked in with a list of items you needed, and then the grocer—perhaps my great-grandfather—would gather those items. The grocer would weigh the flour or cornmeal or butter or tomatoes, and then wrap everything up for you. My great-grandfather's store probably also allowed customers to purchase food on credit, a common practice at the time. The customer would then, usually, pay back their grocery bill over time.

That job was supposed to be my great-grandfather's path out of poverty, but it didn't work out that way. Instead, the store closed, thanks in part to the self-service grocery store revolution launched by Clarence Saunders, which reshaped the way Americans shopped and cooked and ate and lived. Saunders was a self-educated child of impoverished sharecroppers. Eventually, he found his way into the grocery business in Memphis, Tennessee, about a hundred miles southwest from my great-grandfather's store. Saunders was thirty-five when he developed a concept for a grocery store that would have no counters, but instead a labyrinth of aisles that customers would walk themselves, choosing their own food and placing it in their own shopping baskets.

Prices at Saunders's self-service grocery would be lower, because his stores would employ fewer clerks and also because he would not offer customers credit, instead expecting immediate payment. The prices would also be clear and transparent—for the first time, every item in a



"[Piggly Wiggly](#)" by Billy Hathorn is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

THE NATHAN'S FAMOUS HOT DOG EATING CONTEST

AT THE CORNER OF SURF and Stillwell Avenues in Brooklyn's Coney Island, there is a restaurant called Nathan's Famous, which started out in 1916 under the ownership of Polish immigrants Nathan and Ida Handwerker. The restaurant serves a variety of food—from fried clams to veggie burgers—but Nathan's began as a hot dog place, and remains one at its core.

A Nathan's hot dog is not the best food you will ever eat, or even the best hot dog you will ever eat. But there's something special about the experience of eating one amid the clamor of Coney Island. And the hot dogs have a pedigree—they've been eaten by King George VI and

Jacqueline Kennedy. Stalin supposedly ate one at the Yalta Conference in 1945.

Coney Island used to be the huckster capital of the world, where fast-talking barkers wearing straw hats would sell you on this carnival attraction or that one. Now, like all places that survive on nostalgia, it is mostly a memory of itself. The beaches are still packed in summertime. You can still ride the carousel, and there is still a line at Nathan's Famous. But a big part of visiting Coney Island today is imagining how it must have once felt.

Except for one day a year, when Coney Island becomes its old self, for better and for worse. Every July 4, tens of thousands of people flood the streets to witness a spectacular exercise in metaphorical resonance known as the Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest. It says so much about contemporary American life that our Independence Day celebrations include 1. fireworks displays, which are essentially imitation battles complete



["Obligatory Trough Shot | Nathan's Hot-Dog-Eating-Contest-](#)
" by MichaelTapp is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

THE YIPS

ON OCTOBER 3, 2000, a twenty-one-year-old pitcher named Rick Ankiel took the mound for the St. Louis Cardinals in the first game of a Major League Baseball playoff series. It occurs to me that you may not know the rules of baseball, but for our purposes, all you need to know is that, broadly speaking, professional pitchers throw baseballs very fast—sometimes over one hundred miles per hour—and with astonishing accuracy. Pitchers who can consistently place their throws within a few square inches of space are often said to have “good control.” Rick Ankiel had great control. He could put the ball wherever he wanted. Even when he was in high school,

the professional scouts marveled at his control. They said the kid was a machine.

But about a third of the way into that playoff game in 2000, Rick Ankiel threw a very low pitch, so low that the catcher missed it—a so-called “wild pitch.” Ankiel had only thrown three wild pitches all season, but now, suddenly, he couldn’t regain his control. He threw another wild pitch, this one over the batter’s head. Then another. Another. Another. He was quickly pulled from the game.

A week later, Ankiel started another playoff game. He threw five wild pitches in twenty attempts. After that, he never consistently found the strike zone again. Ankiel won a few more games as a major league pitcher, but he couldn’t fully recover his control. He sought all kinds of medical attention, and even began drinking huge amounts of vodka during games to dull his anxiety, but his pitching



"[rick ankiel](#)" by shgmom56, Barbara Moore is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

AULD LANG SYNE

I FIND IT FASCINATING that in a world where so much is so new, we welcome a new year by singing “Auld Lang Syne,” which is a very old song. The chorus starts out, “For auld lang syne, my Jo, for auld lang syne / We’ll take a cup of kindness yet for auld lang syne.” *Jo* is a Scots word that can be straightforwardly translated to “dear,” but *auld lang syne* is more complicated. It literally means something like “old long since,” but it’s idiomatically akin to “the old times.” We have a phrase in English somewhat similar to “for auld lang syne”—“for old times’ sake.”

Here’s a bit of my old long since: In the summer of 2001, the writer Amy Krouse Rosenthal emailed *Booklist* magazine to inquire about a review. At the time, I was

working for *Booklist* as a publishing assistant; most of my job was data entry, but I also answered many of the low-priority emails that came in. I responded to Amy with an update on the status of the review, and I also mentioned that on a personal note I loved her zine-like column in *Might* magazine. I told her I often thought about one snippet she’d written, which went, “Every time I’m flying and the captain announces the beginning of our descent, the same thing goes through my mind. While we’re still pretty high above the city, I’ll think, If the plane went down now, we would definitely not be OK. A bit lower, and no, we still wouldn’t be OK. But as we get real close to the ground, I’ll relax. OK. We’re low enough; if it crashed now, we might be OK.”

She wrote me back the next day, and asked if I was a writer, and I said I was trying to be, and she asked if I had anything that was two minutes long that might work on the radio.



KENTUCKY BLUEGRASS

SOMETIMES I LIKE TO IMAGINE benevolent aliens visiting Earth. In my daydreams, these aliens are galactic anthropologists, seeking to understand the cultures, rituals, preoccupations, and divinities of various sentient species. They would conduct careful field research, observing us. They would ask open-ended, nonjudgmental questions, like “What, or whom, is in your view worthy of sacrifice?” and “What should be the collective goals of humanity?” I hope that these alien anthropologists would like us. We are, in spite of it all, a charismatic species.

In time, the aliens would come to understand almost everything about us—our ceaseless yearning, our habit of wandering, how we love the feeling of the sun’s light on

our skin. At last, they would have only one question remaining: “We have noted that there is a green god that you keep in front of and behind your houses, and we have seen how you are devoted to the care of this ornamental plant god. You call it Kentucky bluegrass, although it is neither blue nor from Kentucky. Here is what we are wondering: Why do you worship this species? Why do you value it over all the other plants?”

Poa pratensis, as it is known to the scientific community, is ubiquitous the world over. Much of the time when you see a soft, green expanse of lawn, you’re looking at least in part at Kentucky bluegrass. The plant is native to Europe, northern Asia, and parts of North Africa, but according to the Invasive Species Compendium, it is now present on every continent, including Antarctica.

The typical shoot of *Poa pratensis* has three to four leaves, shaped like little canoes, and if left unmown, it can grow to three feet tall and sprout blue flower heads. But it is rarely left unmown, at least not in my neighborhood,



["Kentucky Bluegrass Lawn from Sod"](#) by eXtension.org: Gardens, Lawns, and Landscapes is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.



["Kentucky Bluegrass"](#) by ND Parks and Recreation Department is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

THE INDIANAPOLIS 500

EVERY YEAR, near the end of May, between 250,000 and 350,000 people gather in the tiny enclave of Speedway, Indiana, to watch the Indianapolis 500. It is the largest annual nonreligious gathering of human beings on Earth.

Speedway is surrounded by, but technically independent from, Indianapolis. Basically, Speedway is to Indianapolis as the Vatican is to Rome. The Vatican comparisons don't end there. Both Speedway and the Vatican are cultural centers that draw visitors from around the world; both contain a museum; and Speedway's racetrack, while commonly called "The Brickyard," is also sometimes known as "The Cathedral of Speed." Of course, the Vatican analogy falls apart if you dig deeply

enough. In my admittedly few trips to the Vatican, I have never been offered an ice-cold Miller Lite by a stranger, whereas that happens often when I visit Speedway.

At first blush, the Indianapolis 500 seems tailor-made for ridicule. I mean, it's just cars driving in circles. The drivers literally go nowhere. The race is crowded, and usually hot. One year, my phone case partially melted in my pocket while I sat in the Turn 2 grandstand. It's also loud. Every May, I can hear the cars practicing when I am working in my garden—even though the Speedway is five miles from my house.

As a spectator sport, the 500 leaves much to be desired. No matter where you sit or stand, you can't see the entire track, so important events take place that you cannot follow. Because some cars are laps ahead of others, it's almost impossible to know who's winning the race unless you bring oversized headphones to listen to the radio broadcast of the event you are watching. The largest



["Indianapolis 500 Qualifying"](#) by Elijah Lane is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

MONOPOLY

WHEN MY FAMILY AND I PLAY MONOPOLY, a board game in which the goal is to bankrupt your fellow players, I sometimes think about *Universal Paperclips*, a 2017 video game created by Frank Lantz. In *Universal Paperclips*, you play the role of an artificial intelligence that has been programmed to create as many paperclips as possible. Over time, you produce more and more paperclips, until eventually you exhaust all of Earth's iron ore, whereupon you send probes to outer space to mine paperclip materials from other planets, and then eventually other solar systems. After many hours of play, you finally win the game: You've turned all the universe's available resources

into paperclips. You did it. Congratulations. Everyone is dead.

In Monopoly, you land on various properties as you move around a square board. In the original game, the properties are from a fictionalized version of Atlantic City, New Jersey, but that changes depending on region and edition. For instance, in the Pokémon version of the game, properties include Tangela and Raichu. Regardless, if you land on an unclaimed property, you can purchase it, and if you establish a monopoly by purchasing related properties, you can build houses and hotels. When other players land on places you own, they must pay you rent. Acquire enough properties, and the rent becomes unsustainable for your fellow players, and they go bankrupt.

There are many problems with Monopoly, but maybe the reason the game has persisted for so long—it has been one of the world's bestselling board games for over eighty years—is that its problems are our problems: Like life,



["Monopoly Justice"](#) by MTSOfan is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

SUPER MARIO KART

SUPER MARIO KART IS A RACING GAME, first released in 1992 for the Super Nintendo, in which characters from the Mario universe squat atop go-karts, rather like I do when trying to ride my daughter's tricycle. It was initially slated to be a game with Formula One-style cars, but technical constraints forced the designers to build tightly woven tracks that folded in on themselves, the kind that only go-karts can navigate. The game was co-created by Super Mario Brothers lead designer and video game legend Shigeru Miyamoto, who would later say, "We set out to make a game where we could display the game screen for two players at the same time." This split-screen mode is

part of what made the first *Super Mario Kart* game so thrilling.

In the Super Nintendo game, players can choose from among eight characters in the Mario universe—including Princess Peach, Mario, Luigi, and Donkey Kong, Jr. Each character has particular strengths and weaknesses. Bowser, for instance, is strong and travels at a high top speed but accelerates very slowly. Toad, on the other hand, is quick and handles well, but has a lower top speed. Once you choose a character (I recommend Luigi), you're pitted against the seven other drivers in a series of increasingly surreal tracks. You might navigate a regular pavement go-kart track, or a ship of ghosts, or a castle, or the famed Rainbow Road, which has a many-splendored driving surface and no guardrails to prevent you from falling into the abyss below.

I was in tenth grade when *Super Mario Kart* was released, and as far as my friends and I were concerned, it was the greatest video game ever. We spent hundreds of



["Super Mario Kart on the Wii"](#) by goosmurf is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

BONNEVILLE SALT FLATS

IN THE WINTER OF 2018, Sarah and I traveled to Wendover, a small town that straddles the border between Utah and Nevada. While there, almost as an afterthought, we visited the Bonneville Salt Flats, an otherworldly valley of salt-encrusted land on the western shore of the Great Salt Lake.

Sarah is, by a wide margin, my favorite person. After the death of the poet Jane Kenyon, her husband Donald Hall wrote, “We did not spend our days gazing into each other’s eyes. We did that gazing when we made love or when one of us was in trouble, but most of the time our gazes met and entwined as they looked at a third thing. Third things are essential to marriages, objects or

practices or habits or arts or institutions or games or human beings that provide a site of joint rapture or contentment. Each member of a couple is separate; the two come together in double attention.” Hall goes on to note that third things might be John Keats or the Boston Symphony Orchestra or Dutch interiors or children.

Our kids are critical sites of joint rapture for Sarah and me, but we have other third things, too—the Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle, the books we read together, the TV show *The Americans*, and so on.

But our first third thing was art.

Sarah and I attended the same high school in Alabama, so we’ve known each other since we were kids, but we never really had a conversation until 2003, when we were both living in Chicago. Sarah was working at an art gallery then, and after we crossed paths a couple times and exchanged some emails, she invited me to the opening of an exhibition at the gallery featuring sculptures by the artist Ruby Chishti.



["Bonneville Salt Flats"](#) by mypubliclands is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

PLAGUE

THE OTHER DAY, in the midst of a global disease pandemic, I called my pharmacy to refill my Mirtazapine prescription. Mirtazapine is a tetracyclic antidepressant medication that is also used to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder. In my case, it is lifesaving. So anyway, I called my pharmacy only to learn the pharmacy had closed.

I then called a different pharmacy, and a very sympathetic woman answered. When I explained the situation, she told me everything would be fine, but they did need to call my doctor's office before refilling the prescription. She asked when I needed the medication, and I answered, "I guess in a perfect world, I'd pick it up this



Copper engraving of Doctor Schnabel [i.e Dr. Beak], a plague doctor in seventeenth-century Rome, ca. 1656. [Public domain](#).

There was a pause on the other end of the line. At last, stifling a laugh, the woman said, "Well, hon, this ain't a perfect world." She then put me on hold while talking to the pharmacist, except she didn't actually put me on hold. She just put the phone down. And I heard her say to her colleague, "He said—get this—he said *in a perfect world* he'd pick it up today."

In the end I was able to pick up the prescription the following afternoon, and when I did so, the woman behind the counter pointed at me and said, "It's the perfect world guy." Indeed. It's me, the perfect world guy, here to regale you with a plague story—the only kind I find myself able to tell at the moment.



In 2020, I read about almost nothing except pandemics. We often hear that we live in unprecedented times. But what worries me is that these times feel quite precedented.

"You're right, Rambert, totally right, and I wouldn't turn you away, for anything in the world, from what you're doing, which seems right and good to me. But still, I must tell you there is no heroism in any of this. It's about honesty. That idea might seem laughable, but the only way to fight the plague is with honesty."

"What is honesty?" said Rambert, with a look that was suddenly serious.

"I don't know what it is in general. But in my case, I know it consists of doing my job."

— Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1947). Translated from the French, *La Peste*, by Laura Marris. (Knopf, 2021): page 175.

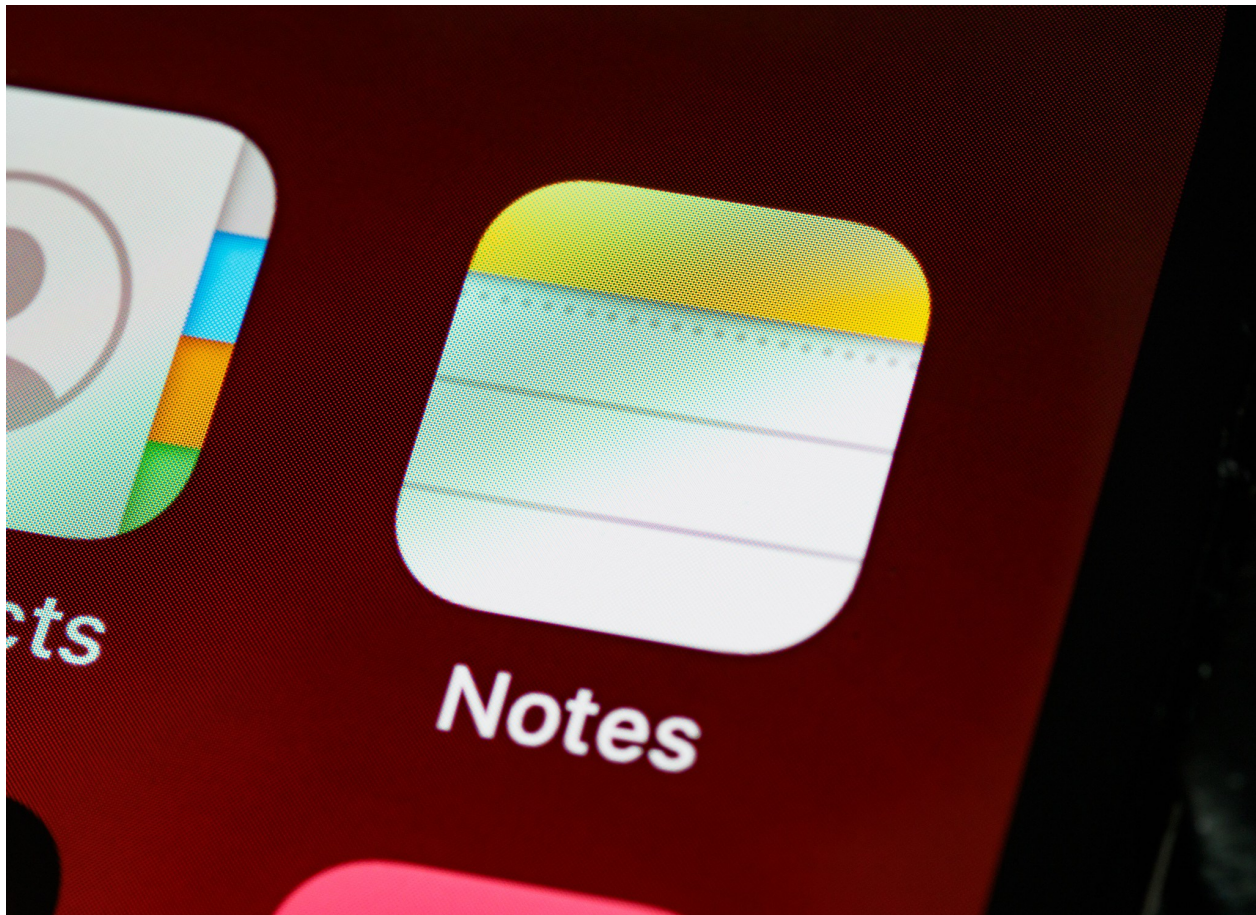
THE NOTES APP

THE IOS NOTES APP DEBUTED with the first iPhone in 2007. Back then, the app's default font looked vaguely like handwriting, and had a yellow background with horizontal lines between each row of text, an attempt to call to mind the yellow legal pads of yore. Even now, the Notes app has a slightly textured background that mimics paper, an example of what's called skeuomorphic design, where a derivative object—say, an app—retains now-obsolete elements of the original object's design. Casino slot machines, for instance, no longer need a pullable arm, but most still have one. Many mobile device apps use skeuomorphic design—our calculator apps are calculator-shaped; our digital watches have minute and hour hands,

and so on. Perhaps all of this is done in the hopes that we won't notice just how quickly everything is changing.

For most of my life, I took notes in the margins of whatever book I happened to be reading. I've never been the kind of person to carry a notebook. I *want* to be a person who journals, who sits on park benches and has wonderful thoughts that must be immediately captured. But I usually found that my thoughts could wait, and if for some reason I needed to scribble something down, I always had a book with me, and a pen in my pocket.

There is a grocery list in my copy of *Song of Solomon*, and directions to my great-aunt's house in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. On page 241 of *All the King's Men*, I wrote at the bottom of the page, "It rains for two days straight," an idea I had for the plot of my first novel, *Looking for Alaska*. There are many other references to my stories in books I was reading. Sometimes it's only a few words: *FERAL HOG HUNT*, scrawled in the margins of *Our Southern Highlanders*,



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THE QWERTY KEYBOARD

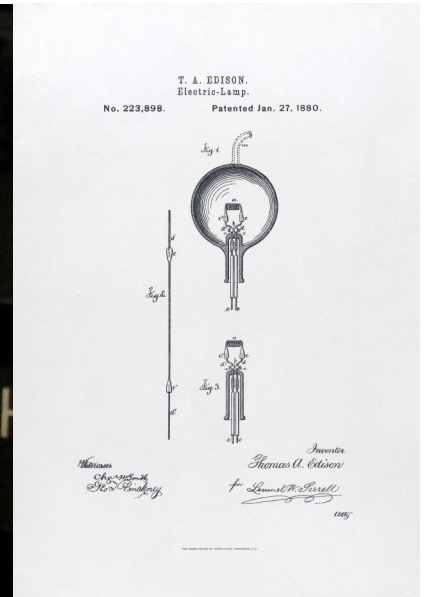
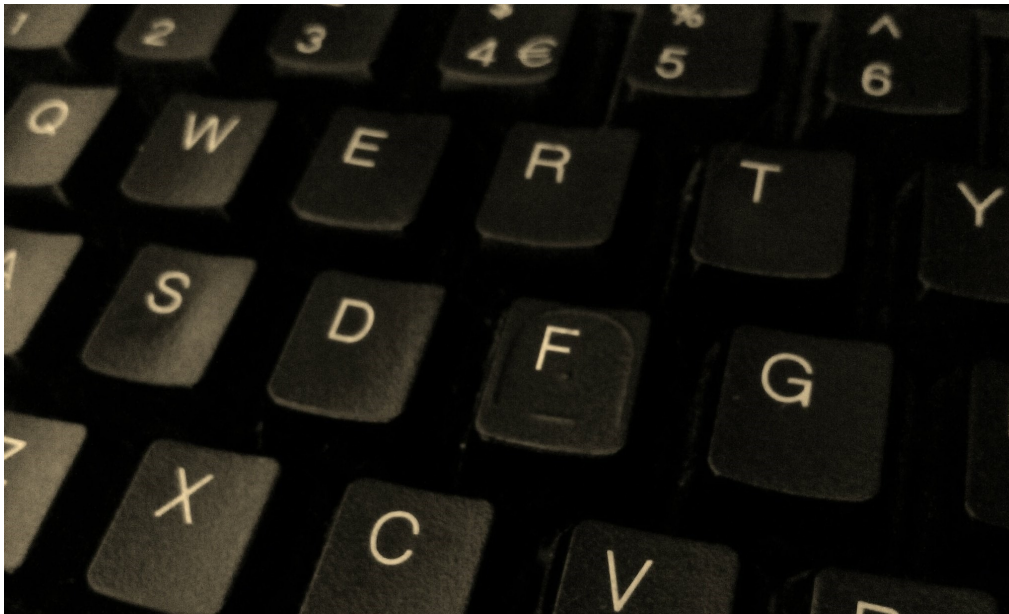
ON MOST ENGLISH-LANGUAGE KEYBOARDS, the three rows of letter keys are not arranged alphabetically or by frequency of use. Indeed, the two most common letters in English—*e* and *t*—aren't among the so-called “home keys,” where your fingers rest when typing. You've got to reach for them up on the top row, where the letters, from left to right, begin Q W E R T Y. The reasons for this involve typewriter mechanics, a militant vegetarian, and a Wisconsin politician who belonged to three different political parties in the span of eight years.

I love a straightforward story of inventors and their inventions. In fifth grade, I wrote my first-ever work of nonfiction on the life of Thomas Edison. It begins,

“Thomas Alva Edison was a very interesting person who created many interesting inventions, like the light bulb and the very interesting motion picture camera.” I liked the word *interesting* because my biography had to be written by hand in cursive, and it had to be five pages long, and in my shaky penmanship, *interesting* took up an entire line on its own.

Of course, among the interesting things about Edison is that he did not invent either the light bulb or the motion picture camera. In both cases, Edison worked with collaborators to build upon existing inventions, which is one of the human superpowers. What's most interesting to me about humanity is not what our individual members do, but the kinds of systems we build and maintain together. The light bulb is cool and everything, but what's really cool is the electrical grid used to power it.

But who wants to hear a story about slow progress made through iterative change over many decades? Well, you, hopefully.



"[QWERTY Keyboard](#)" by ads20000 is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

[US patent application 223898](#), Thomas Alva Edison, "[Electric lamp](#)", published 1880-01-27

SYCAMORE TREES

MY CHILDREN LIKE TO PLAY an age-old game with me called Why? I'll tell them, for instance, that I need them to finish breakfast, and they'll say, "Why?" And I'll say so that you receive adequate nutrition and hydration, and they'll say, "Why?" And I'll say because as your parent I feel obligated to protect your health, and they'll say, "Why?" And I'll say partly because I love you and partly because of evolutionary imperatives baked into my biology, and they'll say, "Why?" And I'll say because the species wants to go on, and they'll say, "Why?"

And I'll pause for a long time before saying, "I don't know. I guess I believe, in spite of it all, that the human enterprise has value."

And then there will be a silence. A blessed and beautiful silence will spread across the breakfast table. I might even see a kid pick up a fork. And then, just as the silence seems ready to take off its coat and stay awhile, one of my kids will say, "Why?"

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When I was a teenager, I used the why game as a way of establishing that if you dig deep enough, there is no why. I reveled in nihilism. More than that, I liked being certain about it. Certain that everyone who believed life had inherent meaning was an idiot. Certain that meaning is just a lie we tell ourselves to survive the pain of meaninglessness.

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A while back, my brain started playing a game similar to the why game. This one is called What's Even the Point.



["Sycamore Trees"](#) by Stanley Zimny (Thank You for 52 Million views) is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

(inside dust jacket)

The Anthropocene is the current geologic age,
in which humans have profoundly reshaped the planet and its biodiversity.

In this remarkable symphony of essays adapted and expanded from his groundbreaking podcast, bestselling author John Green reviews different facets of the human-centered planet on a five-star scale—from the QWERTY keyboard and sunsets to Canada geese and *Penguins of Madagascar*.

Funny, complex, and rich with detail, the reviews chart the contradictions of contemporary humanity. As a species, we are both far too powerful and not nearly powerful enough, a paradox that came into sharp focus as we faced a global pandemic that both separated us and bound us together.

John Green's gift for storytelling shines throughout this masterful collection. *The Anthropocene Reviewed* is an open-hearted exploration of the paths we forge and an unironic celebration of falling in love with the world.

podcast

All of the stories in John Green's book *The Anthropocene Reviewed* were originally podcasts in a series with the same title. Available from Apple Podcasts and Spotify.



Audio files for each essay featured in this exhibit are available on our **LibGuide** for the Common Reading Experience.

