

# The Fault in Our Stars

By John Green

A Glimpse into the World of Teenagers with Terminal Disease

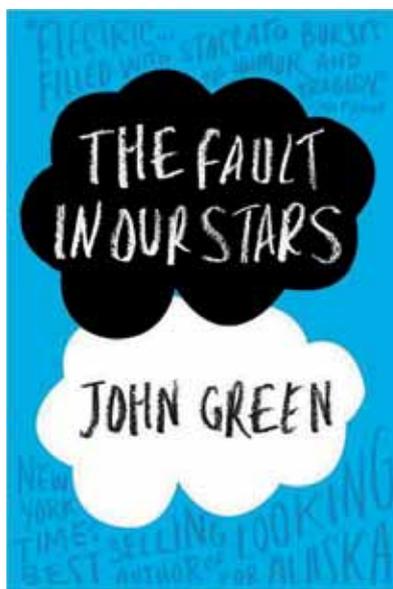
The Fault in Our Stars. John Green. London: Penguin Books, 2013. Paperback. A Hebrew translation is available from The Armchair Publishing House

IMAJ 2014; 16: 464

**T**he *Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, a renowned writer for young adults, was published in 2012. The much anticipated movie is currently showing in Israel. This is a delicate story told by Hazel Grace, a 16 year old girl diagnosed with thyroid cancer that has metastasized to her lungs. The novel is achingly beautiful, written in a poignant but lively style. Beyond the book's literary quality, I recommend it to both medical professionals and chronically ill patients. *The Fault in Our Stars* provides an illuminating portrayal of the world of teenagers afflicted with end-stage cancer and the medical realities that accompany it.

Hazel Grace is alive owing to her participation in a clinical trial of the novel drug Phalanaxifor (fictional). The treatment, which she refers to as "the miracle," has arrested the growth of lung metastases for three years. Hazel feels fine most of the day except for the effects of desaturation and its implications. She has dyspnea on exertion and tires easily. She is obliged to wear an oxygen mask and lug an oxygen tank behind her at all times, and sleeps with a Bipap. She quit high school when her disease was progressing pre-miracle, and now spends most of her time at home, watching America's *Next Top Model* with her dedicated parents, and attending a few courses in the nearby community college. Phalanaxifor, however, is unable to reverse the progression of the disease and her prognosis is all but indeterminate. Every day without an exacerbation is a gift, the only certainty being the terminality of her disease.

In a support group for teenagers with cancer, led by an overtly dramatic coun-



selor, Hazel meets Augustus. Augustus is 17, "hot" and witty, an osteosarcoma survivor who has lost a leg to the disease. Hazel is cautious at first, since she is acutely aware of the impending end of her life and of their relationship. She does not wish to be "a grenade" for Augustus, further distributing her tragedy. They fall in love – in Hazel's words – "like you go to sleep. Slowly at first, and then all at once." What ensues is a touching mature relationship in the face of unusual challenges and grave diseases.

As a medical professional, I was absorbed and fascinated by the lives of these teenagers on an additional level. John Green portrays the joys and sorrows of everyday life with a deadline. Hazel and Augustus's zeal for life compels the reader to ponder the meaning of life without a future and its implications for patients

and their families. As treatments for terminal diseases develop and become more potent in prolonging survival, more people enter Hazel's twilight zone, with an indefinitely approaching end.

The support group that Hazel and Augustus attend plays a significant role in the plot and emphasizes the importance of such groups in the treatment of chronic diseases. Hazel and Augustus become true friends with other group members. They are able to share morbid jokes and to genuinely console each other in hard times. They are practically each other's only circle of friends.

The characters' interaction and mutual understanding unfolds a universe of teenage cancer. We discover what "cancer perks" mean, how chemotherapy makes one feel, that taking out a drainage line feels like "being stabbed backwards," how to play video games when you are blind, and why the idealization of cancer victims is an annoyance. More importantly we feel through the characters the meaning of life with the realization of limited time, as Augustus frequently mentions – "the world is not a wish-granting factory."

*The Fault in Our Stars* is a heartrending book that compels us to follow Hazel and Augustus in their hardest, most humiliating times. Hazel lovingly tells Augustus that he has made her small finity infinite. She feels that she has now lived. This beautifully written sad book would make the reader optimistic.

**Anna Gurevich BMedSc MPhil**

Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University,  
Tel Aviv, Israel [anna.gur@gmail.com]