

**BEFORE AND AFTER:
SPIRIT IN THE ACT OF READING
AN EXPLORATION OF JOHN GREEN'S *LOOKING FOR ALASKA***

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
IN
ENGLISH

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

September 2012

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Library and Archives
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395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
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Bibliothèque et
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Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-94113-3

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-94113-3

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Abstract

In my thesis I argue that the intangible mystery of the spirit is a vital dynamic in reading. When I use the word “spirit,” I mean the vital animating essence within us. I develop my argument using the metaphorical lens of a labyrinth and show how this symbol replicates the spiritual component of reading. The labyrinth is a metaphor that has room for the mystery of spirit and for the rational thinking required in academic research circles. The text I have chosen to support my argument is John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*. My analysis of reading builds on the work of reader-response theorists and educators who view literature as a transitional object. I argue that the process of loosening the boundaries which exclude the visceral from the public realm will strengthen scholarship directed to the education of our youth.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express deep gratitude to the people who have supported me in my study. Dr. Kristen Guest, my supervisor has given me constant support, encouragement, and insightful suggestions to keep me on track. Most importantly Dr. Guest has allowed me to proceed at my own pace and in my own way. I could not have completed this study without her. Dr. Robert Budde offered me guidance and flexibility to help me navigate the theory course that launched my academic study and generously agreed to be on my thesis committee. Dr. Willow Brown not only agreed to serve on my committee but also offered me enthusiasm for my project and challenging questions to stimulate my thinking. Dr. William Owen agreed to act as my external examiner at the busiest time of his academic year and asked me thought-provoking questions. I have deep appreciation for my fellow graduate students who have shared the frustrations and rewards of this kind of study. I would also like to acknowledge all the colleagues and friends who have supported my study, especially Maureen Mercer and Elizabeth Woods. I am deeply grateful to all the young people I have encountered in my career who have helped me keep my passion for reading alive. I would also like to acknowledge my parents who introduced me to the wonderful world of books and reading. Without them I would not have uncovered the sacredness of the reading act. Lastly, but most importantly I want to thank my husband Gary for his steady dependable support throughout the ups and downs of this project and our forty-two years of relationship.

Dedication

I dedicate my thesis to that librarian at the Dartmouth Nova Scotia Public Library who introduced me to the book that changed my life. I will never forget the gift she, probably unknowingly, gave to me.

Introduction : Spirit and Young Adult Fiction

In my forty years as a children's librarian introducing fiction to young readers, I have witnessed the powerful impact a story can have on their inner being. This comes as no surprise to me, because I experienced the transformational power of a book in my own formative years. When I was ten years old, I read a book about a children's librarian sharing stories with young children. I no longer remember the title, author, or many of the details of the story, but I will *never* forget how reading that book made me feel. I felt something come alive deep within my physical being. That book awakened me to the energy that poets and athletes credit as the source of their inspiration. I consider this enervating force to be spirit. My professional experience has affirmed the central role of the spirit in reading literature written for youth. Yet when I talk to other professionals about how reading connects to this aspect of our being, I detect resistance. Because this response is usually expressed non-verbally, and I am referring to something that is intangible and difficult to articulate, I assume that I have entered questionable, perhaps taboo territory. Curious about that response, and buoyed by my personal and professional experience with the visceral aspect of reading young adult fiction, I applied to the University of Northern British Columbia to study this feature of the reading experience.

Much has been written about young adult fiction and the representation of coming of age in this century. Issues addressed include gender, power, and diversity. Yet I have found no evidence that anyone has written about the spirit as I use the term. The expected thing for me to do at this point in my study is to provide a clear definition of what I mean when I use the word spirit. Reaching an understanding of spirit, however, is a process that slowly reveals the true nature of this terrain. I encourage the reader of this study to keep turning pages and

experience the discomfort of not knowing with certainty that is a central feature of the spiritual terrain, a discomfort that invites continued dialogue and exploration. Critics who do consider the territory of the spiritual limit themselves to the institution of religion – primarily fundamentalist Christianity. These critics also constrict the representation of spirit by limiting their analysis to the objective, rational evidence of it in the world. I argue that it is time to acknowledge the inner, mysterious, and intangible dimension of reading. In this study I intend to broaden the conversation about religion and spirituality in the young adult literary field and to introduce the work of John Green to the academe.

As I began a close examination of twenty-first-century young adult fiction and its criticism, I began to suspect that the spirit has been marginalized because of its association with religion, “the last taboo” in the field of children’s literature (Schmidt 25). In the spring of 2011, while addressing teachers attending the Northern Zone annual conference, I asked if the spirit was considered a taboo topic in the twenty-first-century classroom. Attendees told me that they avoided the inclusion of anything that might be connected with religion. Ever since prayer in schools was prohibited, there has been a perceived need to be inclusive, and the easiest way is to move anything that might *engender* difference into the private domain. This experience is borne out more generally by historical trends in the field: since the 1963 decision by the United States Supreme Court to ban the practice of religion in schools, educators, critics, and authors in the field of young adult literature have been cautious about addressing spiritual matters (Hilbun 2008, Lott 1991, Nixon & Small 1999).

In the realm of publishing there has been a similar response. Publishers envisage a significant loss in sales if they print books with protagonists whose religious beliefs may offend readers (Nilsen 2009). Jack Zipes argues that books have become marketable products

that can respond to current social issues (Zipes 2009), including gender identity (Cart 2006, Silver 2010, Trites 1997), identity conflict (Kaplan 1999) and cultural diversity (Rice 2006). What is overlooked in the treatment of these topics is any connection to the human spirit or religion. Such is the case with critics who focus on teenagers' troubling behaviour (Carroll 1999), abuse (Kaywell 2004), and bullying (Bott 2004, 2009). With this focus on conduct, adolescent literature becomes primarily a utilitarian product. Implicitly, utility and inspiration are viewed as mutually exclusive. Although the adolescent search for meaning and values or character education have received some critical attention, they are not in any significant way aligned with the spirit (Warner 2006, Jweid & Rizzo 2001, Lickona 1992). In fact, their primary focus is teenagers' expected behaviour and actions in the external environment. All of the novels that address the aforementioned issues have been interpreted in light of post-structural theories that emphasize intellectual analysis. What critics miss, however, is how adolescent fiction gives us "not only an external view [of these issues], but an internal one as well" (Cart "Why We Read" 269). As Aidan Chambers argues, young adult fiction affirms the significance of the spirit:

The experience of finding out who you are is not simply to do with the emotions or with the intellect or with the social and political constraints and frustrations of the society you happen to live in. Rather it is spiritual in nature, encompassing all those other aspects of life and *transcending* (italics mine) them. (Chambers 82)

By ignoring this fact, educators, publishers, authors and academics leave a crucial aspect of the human being out of the reading act.

My first class at the University of Northern British Columbia, Contemporary Theory, introduced me to the academic emphasis on theoretical modes of interpretation in the study of English literature. Literary theory, some critics argue, stimulates thoughtful questions that

can be useful in the interpretation of young adult literature. It offers multiple poststructural theoretical lenses: psychological, feminist, new historicist, cultural, rhetorical, postcolonial, deconstructive and psychoanalytic. Some argue that these critical approaches support the claim that literature for young adults is complex and deserving of academic attention (Capella 2010). Still others have described these theories as “postmodern paralysis, a reluctance to take any position” (Ammons 6). I agree with Nelson that these theories offer scholars a way to analyse texts and produce a variety of interpretations to satisfy the current predisposition to an analytical, left-brained perspective (Nelson 309). Yet, as currently practised, literary theory does not provide room for an understanding of reading that is not exclusively rational and objective. During my study of literary theory I did encounter two exceptions to this assertion. Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) affirms the visceral, numinous, and sensual reality of the reading encounter, while Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration* (1938) argues for the importance of reader response. Though both Barthes and Rosenblatt emphasize reading as a dynamic process, neither connects it to the spiritual. Despite the resistance of theorists, there is evidence that educators are moving to broaden the study of reading. In the fall of 2011, while attending the annual NCTE¹ Conference, I was introduced to three educators who are creating space for the evocative aspects of literary reading in the classroom. Jeffrey Wilhelm and Bruce Novak² build on, and join, the reader-response work of Louise Rosenblatt and the philosophical perspective of John Dewey. Cristina Vischer Bruns³ argues that because a book can be a transitional object, English education needs to move in the direction of closing the gap between the academic

¹ NCTE stands for National Council of Teachers of English.

² Jeffrey Wilhelm and Bruce Novak are the co-authors of *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom: Being the Book and Being the Change*.

³ Cristina Vischer Bruns is the author of *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*.

and personal aspects of reading. Though they focus on teaching methodologies, the work of these academics supports my argument that the inner being of the reader contributes significantly to the reading experience. My close examination of young adult fiction and its criticism suggests that both academe and education are currently shifting in their willingness to consider the spiritual aspect of young adult literature.

The attention given to the spiritual is often characterized by an “either/or” polarity. Spirit and religion are represented as being at opposite ends of a continuum. In *School Library Journal*, for example, Donna Freitas has documented her use of children’s literature to introduce college students to the religious imagination. According to Freitas, these stories are a tremendous source for “soul-searching” (Freitas “The Big Questions” 35). Similarly, Patty Campbell, an editor and librarian, questions the scarcity of the spiritual dimension in young adult literature (Campbell 2010, 2011). In framing her analysis, however, Campbell limits her consideration of the spiritual to religion, as does Pam Cole in *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century* (2009). It is the work of the Search Institute⁴ that pushed me to see that I, too, may have been supporting this same dichotomy by considering the spirit without considering religion. This 2008 study of more than 6,500 youth in eight countries breaks new ground, arguing that spiritual development cannot be separated from other aspects of one’s being.⁵ This research report also acknowledges that spiritual development can be conceptually distinguished from religious development, though the two are “integrally linked in the lived experience of some people” (Roehlkepartain 4). By limiting our frame of

⁴ Since 1958 the Search Institute has generated and disseminated applied social science research to strengthen how communities and citizens raise children and adolescents. In 1985 researchers from the Institute introduced the concept of developmental assets that are intended to enhance the physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth of young people. In 2008 it expanded the assets to acknowledge and support the spiritual development of youth.

reference to only one side of this dichotomy, religion, we are excluding a vital aspect of the human being. Over the course of my research I have come to appreciate the many ways that spirit and religion overlap and impact each other. The Search Institute's claim that "the time is right to be investigating this complex territory of the spirit" provides added support to my decision to examine the treatment of the spirit in American young adult fiction (4).

In what follows I direct my study to the trends and issues being addressed in American fiction written for and about adolescents, paying particular attention to how the spiritual dimension of human life is portrayed. Since the mid-twentieth century, the territory of the spiritual has experienced broad popular appeal and the result is an array of perplexing meanings. Ben Nelms, an educator, captures an important characteristic of the spirit when he claims that spiritualizing education "calls us back from surfaces to *essences*, to whatever may be at the bottom of things or beyond our kin and ken"⁶ (Nelms 48 italics mine). Gary Schmidt makes a similar argument when he insists: "the spiritual experience is one of *mystery* rather than certainty" (Schmidt 25 italics mine). *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines spirit as "the vital animating essence of a person," a definition that comes closest to my own ("Spirit"). When I use the word "spirit," I mean the vital animating essence *within* living beings. I do not mean "religion," but, like the Search Institute, I acknowledge that religion can be an integral part of the lived experience of the spirit. It is the spirit that engages in the search for meaning and purpose in life, wrestles with the pain and suffering life includes, and longs for connection to self and others. I argue that the literature designated "young adult" is particularly suited to explore and represent this elusive, yet vital, animating essence within human beings.

⁶ Nelms credits James Moffett, author of *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening Through Education* with this definition

What, exactly, is young adult literature? Those working in the field of adolescent literature, like academic specialists in spirituality, continue to struggle to capture the fundamental boundary of their discipline. At the core of current debates are issues such as the age of the reader, the nature of the content of the stories, discussions about whether this literature is actually a genre, or just a classification, or whether it is merely whatever adolescents choose to read. In my study I use the term ‘young adult literature’ to describe a body of literature that includes many genres. Adolescent novels feature teenage characters and their primary focus is the teenage experience. I argue that this literature provides a path for adolescent and adult readers both to seek, and to make meaning in their lives.

As I began to gather data to support or counter my arguments about the power of adolescent fiction to connect readers to the vitality within that is spirit, I encountered some challenges. I employed a variety of search terms but found they produced limited results. The reason for this difficulty became apparent when I inadvertently discovered a significant text relating to my topic. *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story* (2006) omits any subject headings or keywords in library databases to indicate its engagement with the power of story as part of the search for meaning or spirit.⁷ As a result, I broadened my search terms, but this effort proved overwhelming. The twenty-first century has seen a dramatic increase in the amount of literature written for the teenage audience and a pronounced interest in this format by adult readers (Beckett 2009, Falconer 2009). This phenomenon is identified by Rudd as “crossover,” while Falconer also uses the term “‘kiddult’” to describe it (Falconer 2009, Rudd 2010). There has also been an increase in the attention given to adolescent fiction by researchers in universities and, according to Jeffrey

⁷ The Library of Congress subject headings included: 1. Teenagers – Books and Reading – United States. 2. Young Adult Literature – Bibliography. 3. Young Adult Fiction – Bibliography. 4. Social Problems – Juvenile Fiction – Bibliography. 5. Teenagers in Literature. 6. Adolescence – Bibliography.

Kaplan, the result is the publication of a plethora of critical texts that support educators and librarians (Kaplan 2011). Cappella claims it is “a hot time” to introduce new thinking to the study of Young Adult Literature (Cappella 2).

Following my survey of critical texts, I reviewed selected journals.⁸ This search included literature written for both children and teenagers.⁹ In addition, I scanned the on-line catalogues of some academic presses to determine what they were contributing to this field.¹⁰ I then requested a selected number of these texts using the University of Northern British Columbia’s interlibrary loan service. Further, I considered speeches, articles, blogs, and web sites by authors of young adult fiction, as well as conference proceedings and email conversations with other professionals working in this field. Yet another method of gathering information, a fruitful one, involved consulting the bibliographies of a variety of books and articles obtained during my research. My search included perusing my own bookshelves because, with my professional and personal interest in this field, I have acquired many books that analyse this literature. Finally, having realized that I was ignoring the vast field of religion, I discovered some very important research that contributed to the development of my thoughts.¹¹

The fictional representation of life in novels written for and about teenagers has a long history. In 1980 Kenneth Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, two professors of English at Arizona State University, published the first edition of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*,

⁸ These journals included *The ALAN Review*, *The English Journal*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, *Signal*, and *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)*.

⁹ Journals included were *Children’s Literature*, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, *Children’s Literature in Education*, *The Horn Book*, *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, *Journal of Children’s Literature*, *Lion and the Unicorn*, and *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children’s Literature*, *School Library Journal*.

¹⁰ Presses included were American Library Association, Heinemann, Johns Hopkins, Neal-Schuman, Routledge, Scarecrow.

¹¹ The journals I found useful in this area included the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, *Journal of Religious & Theological Information*, *Literature and Belief*, and *Spiritus*.

a work that has gained status as a classic reference textbook for the study of young adult literature. Before 1800, they argue, books written for, and read by, adolescents “consisted of a few religious novels” (Donelson 56). Hilbun goes even further back, stating that the United States has, “from its inception,” been a country where religion, politics and literature are closely linked” (Hilbun 181). In the twentieth century, Donelson and Nilsen note, religion begins to lose its hold. The influence of the Protestant work ethic continues, but there is a shift in young adult books from moralizing to excitement and adventure (Donelson 188). The concept of the human spirit, however, begins to appear. In his 1917 publication, *The Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools*, J.F. Hoscic claimed that the study of literature offered students a portrait of the human spirit and its growth through history. Although some critics, including Hilbun, note that the years following World War II witnessed an almost complete disappearance of morality and religion from youth literature, others, such as Donelson, suggest a rise in the 1950s of concern about the morals of the young who were reading comic books (Donelson 1980, Hilbun 2008). I suggest that both views indicate that the primary expectation of literature in the first half of the twentieth century was directed to its presentation of living as it “should be,” as opposed to how it *is*. A significant change occurred in the 1960s. Realism, portrayed in what became known as “problem” novels, was introduced by teenage S.E. Hinton, with the publication of *The Outsiders* (1967). This book introduced the reality that life is tough for youth across the economic continuum, a significant change in the portrayal of life in novels directed to youth. It did not, however, abandon the religious or moral standards found in earlier times. These standards remained within the code of behaviour embraced by the story’s teenage characters.

The last half of the twentieth century produced several changes to the approach to the spirit. In the 1970s representations of the spiritual life took a new direction with the publication of Robert Cormier's novel *The Chocolate War* (1974). This book is important not only because it introduces readers to a rarely stated truth that darkness resides within all human beings, but also because it introduces the concept of "meaning making" as a core component of the human condition. Most importantly, the search for meaning that Cormier proposes is isolated from religion. By the 1980s, the decade when 'political correctness' became a major social focus, religion, and Christianity in particular, disappears from young adult literature. In her 1991 bibliography of young adult fiction that portrays religion and religious experience, for example, Kristen Lott notes the scarcity of such titles. Between 1986 and 1990 she found few titles and attributes this scarcity to the 1963 United States Supreme Court decision to ban prayer in schools (Lott 1). Another contributing factor was the rise of multiculturalism during the 1980s, which brought with it religious pluralism and increased fear of offending non-Christians. By the 1990s, religion had become the last taboo, but another phenomenon began to emerge towards the end of this decade (Cart 2009, Schmidt 2000). Cross-over reading, the practice of adults reading adolescent fiction, was identified by Rachel Falconer (2009) and Sandra Beckett (2009). According to Falconer, this shift was due to the power of teen fiction to access "a latent spirituality and/or hope of redemption within post modern, secular culture"(Falconer 131). The increase in the popularity of fantasy, launched by the *Harry Potter* series, can also be interpreted as lying within the domain of the spiritual. Certainly this novel, along with the fantasy genre, has provoked a fair amount of criticism from some Christians who question the contradictory relationship between children's literature and the Bible (Gish 2000).

Concern about the absence and representation of the spirit has intensified in the twenty-first century. In the first decade of this century, terrorism launched a culture of fear that has produced “helicopter parents,”¹² heightened religious (Putnam & Campbell 2010) and racial (Aronson 2003) polarities, and a consumer driven culture that is founded on the illusion that material comfort provides safety and security (Salvner 2001). According to Muslim reformer Irshad Manji, the elevated status of multiculturalism has led to the perpetuation of “deadly silences” on topics that might produce conflict (Manji 2011). Yet when it comes to the presentation of the spirit in young adult twenty-first-century fiction, authors, educators, and publishers have found a way around these silences. A close examination of the literature published between 2000 and 2011 for youth reveals the spirit hidden in plain sight. The spirit is present in novels that include the search for meaning; that depict characters wrestling with emotional pain; that address the losses and confusion within daily living; and that portray the human longing for connection. Even the prohibition against religion is losing force.

Mary Warner has written a book about the power of young adult stories to address the broader human search for meaning. Like me, she connects the search for meaning to the spirit but she has a very particular, and, I suggest, narrow focus. She argues that a lack of meaning is responsible for the troubling issues in the modern teenage world: violence, suicide, obesity, and drug and alcohol use. She believes adolescent literature can address this lack of meaning, and she is not alone in her stance (Carroll 1999, Kaywell 2004, Warner 2006). Warner implies, as do other critics, that the search for meaning is not part of every

¹² According to the online Oxford English Dictionary a helicopter parent [with allusion to the notion of such parents ‘hovering’ over their children] A parent who takes an excessive and overprotective interest in the life of his, or her, child (“Helicopter Parent”).

human being's life. I disagree. I argue that both the quest for meaning and the presence of trouble are realities in everyone's lives. Trouble is not prejudiced and it visits even well-behaved teens, as does the search for meaning. Life is confusing and complex, and suffering is inevitable. Ever since the time of the first hominids, as the anthropological history of humanity reveals, people have told stories and carved pictures on cave walls in an attempt to understand life (Matthews 1998). In fact, story, in all cultures, is considered to be *the* way to connect to other human beings – those in our past and in our present. I argue that story helps us open to meaning and discover that it is not located outside the self: story stimulates the process of meaning-making within. Young adult fiction is a rich resource to awaken and nurture the spirit. This is because young adults are at a vital stage of development. They are moving from a purely concrete way of interpreting life to one that is able to see that there is something more beyond the reach of fact. Their physical bodies are also changing drastically, producing a chemistry that is unfamiliar. Questions begin to arise that have no easy answers. Authors of young adult literature are sensitive to, and anxious to offer paths through, this transformational time of life. They recognize that this awakening can produce feelings of isolation and a longing to connect with others. In addition, because they have moved beyond this stage of life, these authors can see that the questions that begin to arise in adolescence continue into adulthood. When twenty-first-century literature is viewed through this lens, it offers many novels that engage the spirit as I am using the term, and these are titles that appeal to youth and adults alike.

Young adult fiction published during the first decade of this century provides a path to the spirit through characters who, like their readers, are contending with questions about human worth in the midst of situations that make no sense. Death - from abuse, accident,

illness, suicide, or war - is a reality in the lives of these characters, as it is in the lives of their readers. Authors provide stories that help readers process the pain, suffering and guilt that such situations elicit (Asher 2007, Crutcher 2007, Pearson 2009, Schmidt 2008, Shusterman 2010, Zarr 2007). Others portray characters confronting issues that lead to conflict, related to religion, gender identity, race and bullying (Brande 2007, Green & Levithan 2010, Meehl 2011, Myracle 2011, Naylor 2010). Sometimes these books confront readers with the ambiguous, dichotomous nature of life in our postmodern world. Others respond to the evidence that teenagers in the twenty-first century are longing for connection, a longing suggested by the current fascination with cell phones and computer networks such as Facebook and Twitter.¹³ I argue that adolescent fiction offers a rich resource for what they are seeking, that this literature can connect the inner private self of the reader to the inner private self of others in a way that Twitter, Google and Facebook cannot.

My survey of this field has led me to conclude that, to date, those working within the field of critical analysis operate primarily within a model that is objective and rational. As English professor Elizabeth Ammons observes, the most highly valued academic approach in the humanities in the postmodern era has been questioning. But what the academy does not do well is bring to the surface and consider seriously hope and idealism. I agree with her conclusion that it is these elements that determine our own actions and frame most of the texts academics analyse (Ammons 2010). Yet in my own attempt to report what I have learned about the spirit, I have found myself seeking a way to describe and understand it intellectually. Such an approach denies the reality of my own experience with the spirit. Spiritual response does not occur exclusively in the rational domain. Ultimately, researchers in the area of spiritual development helped me see why analysing spirit is so difficult: our

¹³ This view was first introduced to me by Claire Woodbury

modern world studies only what can be measured and theorized using left-brain analytical thinking. The Search Institute's 2008 research report¹⁴ argues that the spiritual development of youth needs to take a more visible place in youth development, research, policy, and practice. This report affirms that the spirit is an intrinsic part of being human but acknowledges that there are several challenges to addressing this reality in the public domain. Included in their list of obstacles is the resistance to considering this subject, which has been aligned with religion, in academic research fields. They conclude that we are unable to let go of our trust in measurement, or the need for a solid theoretical foundation that can be empirically tested, and, as a result, we will not give spiritual development the attention it deserves (Benson 2008). In my thesis I argue that we need to make room for the intangible mystery of the spiritual dynamic, to consider how it operates within readers, texts and authors, *without* excluding the rational.

John Green's Printz Award winning novel, *Looking for Alaska*,¹⁵ provides an excellent model for examining the potential of young adult fiction to portray and engage the spirit within a postmodern context. Green is a relatively new voice in the field of young adult literature and, to date, the academic community has given little attention to his work. Kathy Latrobe devotes a small section of *Critical Approaches to Young Adult Literature* (2009) to the analysis of *Alaska*, as does Kathryn James, who refers to *Alaska* briefly to show that death and sexuality are often treated together in adolescent fiction (James 4). To my knowledge, however, no one has considered the spiritual or religious dimensions of this novel. In an interview Green admits he is 'religious' and that he worked as a chaplain at a

¹⁴ The full title of this report is *With Their Own Voices: A Global Exploration of How Today's Young People Experience and Think About Spiritual Development*.

¹⁵ For the remainder of this thesis I will refer to this novel as *Alaska*.

hospital for sick and dying children. *Alaska* is his response to the questions he encountered in his time as a chaplain (Green “Realities”).

In this novel Green takes religion, with which I argue the spirit has traditionally been conflated, and integrates it with matters that our modern culture understands as broadly spiritual. The search for meaning and the suffering that life inevitably engenders via death, loss, suicide, and self-destructive choices and actions are features of this book. Green chooses a World Religions class as the logical setting for his representation of this taboo topic. Such a setting brings with it certain negative associations, including rigid doctrine and strict rules governing conduct. Yet within this narrow structure Green takes up life’s existential questions: What does it mean to be a person? How shall I live my life? Why do bad things happen to good people? What happens when we die? Inviting readers to consider how all the religions of the world respond to these questions without advocating or preaching the validity of one over another, Green offers a meaning-centred, rather than a rule-centred, depiction of these systems of belief. In doing so, he also connects the spiritual aspect of being human, which has been the exclusive territory for “meaning making,” to religion. More importantly, in taking up the search for meaning, Green thematizes the ways in which we seek the significance or purpose of life.

I have chosen a metaphorical lens to show how *Alaska* provides a way to access the vital essence of the spirit that is part of the reading act. According to Lakoff and Johnson, our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, allowing us to understand and experience one thing in terms of another. They also argue that abstract concepts are not complete without metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). Spirit is most certainly an abstract concept, and metaphor allows room for its heuristic dynamic. Most significantly, metaphor operates by

providing room for the reader to participate in the making of meaning, demanding that we use both the reasoning capabilities of the left-brain *and* the imaginative, intuitive capacities of the right. Metaphor provides the ideal support for my contention that reading and the spirit are essentially “grey,” or of a “both/and” nature. A “both/and” frame of reference is broad and deep, allowing room for the many contradictory and uncertain facets of being human. With metaphor there is room for both logic and mystery, both simplicity and complexity, both certainty and uncertainty.

Metaphor plays a crucial role in *Alaska*, perhaps most notably in the labyrinth which functions as a key metaphor for this story. The labyrinth is a unicursal path with only one winding route into its centre. It is often referred to as a maze but this term is incorrect. The maze, unlike the labyrinth, is multicursal, having many paths, some of which do *not* lead to its centre. The topology of the labyrinth consists of a square that has been transformed into a circle (see Figure 2). Kern suggests that these two shapes represent two world views – earth and heaven respectively. I suggest that earth can be aligned with the rational dimension of reading, while heaven captures the spiritual dynamic. The labyrinth has a very long history in which religion, spirituality, and secularism co-exist. This symbol is connected with the secular pastimes of games and dancing but also has spiritual and church-related roots (Kern 2000, Saward 2002). Artress and Curry have argued that walking a labyrinth is a transformative experience, and I suggest John Green chose it as a central metaphor for *Alaska* because it captures the essence of transformation. He began writing this novel shortly after completing a summer job as a chaplain at a hospital for sick and dying children. This experience was a transformative event in his life, one he describes as a “before-and-after moment” – a structure Green incorporates in the narrative of *Alaska* (Green “Speaking”). As

a means of negotiating the spiritual dynamic within the reading act the labyrinth is a metaphor that offers room for both mystery and abstract knowledge.

A labyrinth requires the walker to travel into, and out of, a patterned path. In making the journey, however, the experience of walking into, and out of, the centre changes how the path is viewed. In essence, both the walker and the world into which she is walking have changed. This same principle pertains to the reading act. A book, like the path of a labyrinth, offers twists and turns in plot, character and setting. As a reader turns each page, she becomes more engaged by the story and, in the process, experiences transformation. At one moment the story is about the characters and then, mysteriously, it is about the reader and her life. When she reaches the end of the story, she leaves the characters behind and comes back to her own life, but she sees herself and the world in which she lives differently. Reading, like the labyrinthine path walk, is relational in nature. By connecting to a fictional character, one discovers an intangible path to other human beings, as well as to oneself. The labyrinth also captures the dynamic of non-duality that is central to my view of the reading act. I link the square pattern of this symbol to rational left-brain thinking and the circle to the right-brain work that allows room for hope and idealism. Like the labyrinth, with its fluidity and boundaries, reading demands the reader's imaginative, intuitive, *and* intellectual capacities. Finally, I choose the labyrinth for my metaphorical interpretation of *Alaska* because it models the interweaving of spiritual, religious, and secular influences.

The first chapter of my thesis reports how the various components of spiritual life make their way into *Alaska*. Specifically, I examine how Green presents religion both overtly, in its traditional institutional form, and indeterminately, as a quest for meaning, connection, and insight into suffering. I also examine how Green brings spirit and religion

into productive tension.¹⁶ In *Alaska* both religion and spirit are sites for exploring meaning, wrestling with suffering and loss, and uncovering the relational dynamic within and between them. This chapter establishes both the grey nature of the spiritual in *Alaska* and the space it provides for the reader to make meaning. In chapter two, I consider how Green uses characters to address the tensions inherent in twenty-first-century notions of the spiritual. Alaska, the central character, and Dr. Hyde, the World Religions teacher, emplot the binary divide separating youth and age, spirit and world, and life and education. Despite the reality of their differences, however, Green's representation of these two characters highlights ambiguity, not fixed binaries. I engage the labyrinth and maze symbols to explore how these two characters are both alike and different. My rationale for approaching these two characters this way is that it allows me to address the missing, or buried, component of the reading act – the reader's inner being or spirit. This latter is the subject of chapter three, in which I use the metaphor of the labyrinth to take us through *Alaska*. Following the meandering path of its narrator, Pudge, I examine the way Green uses indeterminacy to create space in which the reader can discover the evocative dynamic of story, connect through it with self and other, and reflect on the meaning it holds for living life in the world. My analysis of reading builds on the foundation of reader-response theorists and educators who view literature as a transitional object but do not directly address the crucial role of the spirit.

¹⁶ Productive tension draws people together to explore and discover new possibilities.

What I hope my thesis opens is further exploration of the propensity to elevate scientific, measurable data above human beings' inherent draw to the intangible, ambiguous realities of spirit. The spirit, that mysterious vital energy *within* each of us, cannot be isolated from other aspects of one's being in the process of reading. *Alaska* offers us a path to bridge the essential contribution of mind *and* spirit in reading.

Chapter One: Spirit in *Alaska*

In *Alaska*, Green includes many details that can be interpreted as having a spiritual/religious connection. Thematically, Green includes religion and explores how three world religions address suffering. His novel also addresses questions about the meaning or purpose of life and its contradictions and ambiguities. These questions are shown to be intrinsic to religion, spirituality *and* humanism. Structurally, Green divides his story into two parts, a critical element in his involvement of the reader to make meaning. In the first half of the book, entitled “before” (Green *Alaska* 1), the narrator, Miles “Pudge” Halter,¹⁷ sets off to a private boarding school located in the heart of evangelical Christianity – Birmingham, Alabama. Pudge is in search of something he describes as a “Great Perhaps,” and shortly after arriving, he meets the beautiful and troubled Alaska, who is central to the novel’s representation of spirit (Green *Alaska* 4). In an early scene Alaska introduces one of the novel’s key themes when she poses the philosophical question that recurs throughout: “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth [of suffering]?” (19). More questions that are intrinsic to both religion and the spiritual realms are raised in the World Religions class. Throughout the first half of this novel, Green builds tension and indeterminately foreshadows the crisis that takes place at the narrative’s midpoint – the death of Alaska. In the second half of the novel, entitled “after,” the search for meaning and questions of suffering are no longer merely theoretical (135). Pudge and his roommate agonize over both her death and their sense of guilt for failing to prevent it. They, and other characters in the story, walk the labyrinthine path of grief and loss until they reach an acceptance of, and insight into, its effect on their lives.

¹⁷ For the remainder of this thesis I will use the nickname Pudge for this character.

Green describes what he is doing in this novel as “preaching” (Green “Realities”). I disagree. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to preach means: “To utter a serious or earnest exhortation, esp. a moral or religious one. Now usu. *derogatory*: to give moral or religious advice in a self-righteous, condescending, or obtrusive way” (“Preach”). Far from “preaching,” which has a strong traditional religious connection, Green broadens the representation of religion and the spirit using indeterminacy, a concept first introduced by Wolfgang Iser.¹⁸ Green’s indeterminacy involves the placing of open-ended details within *Alaska* that invite the reader’s participation in making meaning. In order to focus on matters of religious and spiritual life, Green begins by placing his story in a setting that epitomizes fundamentalist religion. Such religion has three areas of concern – belief, conduct and membership. This Christian model asks: What do I believe? How should I believe? Who am I? The first question is answered with doctrine and dogma, the second one with rules and techniques, and the third with membership requirements that emphasize a personal commitment (Butler-Bass 2012). Green’s way of conveying this particular religious view is *not* explicit, but rather, indeterminate.

Setting is one of Green’s indeterminate details. The geographical location of the school Green chooses for this story allows him to build connections to religion without referencing it directly. Early in the story, the reader is introduced to the stifling heat that one encounters fifteen miles south of Birmingham, where Culver Creek Preparatory School is situated. The heat of the sun “burned through [Pudge’s] clothes” and made him “fear hellfire” (Green *Alaska* 6). Pudge imagines a conversation with a fellow student in which he jokingly makes reference to the extreme heat: “I wouldn’t be used to this heat if I were from

¹⁸ Wolfgang Iser’s research is documented in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978). Indeterminacy as I use the term is subtle, ambiguous, or uncertain and leaves room for the reader to enter and make meaning.

Hades” (8). When Pudge’s roommate takes him on a tour of the school grounds, he describes the swan in the near-by lake as “the spawn of Satan” (16). Green’s language around setting also offers a connection to the conservative Christianity of the southern United States. Ever since the Puritans landed in North America, believing that God had singled them out, an attitude of being separate and apart has prevailed in the history of Christianity in the United States. Fundamentalist, conservative Christians are particularly inclined to set themselves apart, and this exclusivity has led to divisiveness (Hilbun 2008). This separatist view also contributes to the religious polarity that dominates modern American politics and everyday life and has engendered binary thinking that focuses polarities between good and evil, right and wrong (Putnam & Campbell 2010). In *Alaska*, Green’s description of the living quarters and grounds connects us to this aspect of religion. Pudge’s room is compared to a hospital room, “the place looked more like a hospital than the dorm room of [Pudge’s] fantasies,” and the fact that the furniture is attached to the walls, makes “creative floor planning” impossible and implies a dogmatic, unimaginative learning institution (Green *Alaska* 6). In addition to the setting, language, and polarities that subtly project an image of traditional religion, Culver Creek Academy also includes rigid rules restricting student behaviour.

Rules play a significant role in Green’s novel and help him to project a picture of both religious and personal guidelines in our modern world. The living quarters of the school, like many in the twenty-first century, are gender neutral; yet, a boy is required to keep the door to a girl’s room open when he visits after seven o’clock in the evening. Mr. Starnes, the dean of students, is dubbed “the Eagle” because “he sees all” (16). The irony of this situation is that smoking, one of the forbidden activities, takes place constantly and the Eagle frequently turns a blind eye to it. The smoking hole provides a contrast to the rigidity in this

conservative region because it is “an oasis” (42). This space offers relief from the heat with its shade and coolness, and Pudge feels “unhot for the first time in weeks” (42). This locale also serves as a way for Green to critique the hypocrisy of the rigid rules that religion provides to control behaviour, without condemning them overtly.

The unwritten rule students have created to govern their code of behaviour: “never never never never rat” has the same ambiguous effect (17). This rule, which Pudge learns shortly after his arrival at Culver Creek school, creates an expectation of loyalty and commitment to the group; yet, before the first part of the novel is over, we learn Alaska has “ratted” on her roommate Marya (72). When Mr. Starnes catches Alaska sneaking off campus after curfew with a bottle of wine in her car, he threatens her: “Either tell me everything you know or go to your room and pack up your stuff” (73). Alaska chooses to save herself from expulsion rather than protect her delinquent roommate, Marya, who is drunk in their room with her boyfriend. Rules that emphasize conduct are also included in the World Religions class, and most overt references to religion take place within this classroom. The World Religions class itself is a “vestige from when Culver Creek was a Christian boys’ school” (31). There are few sensate details used to describe the space of this class. It has a lectern from which *Doctor Hyde* issues commands, and it is this teacher who determines the character of the classroom (italics are mine). He begins his first class by announcing the code of behaviour he expects students to follow: They will read what they are told to read when they are told to read it, and they will attend class religiously and listen attentively to Hyde’s every word. Pudge’s response - “this teacher rocked” – is surprising given the strict nature of this traditional teacher (31, 32). One might well wonder if Pudge is being sarcastic. As the novel unfolds, however, this class comes to offer a stark contrast to the stifling heat and

religious views held in Alabama and in the rest of the school. Indeed, rather than present the rules and doctrine of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, Dr. Hyde constructs a comparative framework for them that emphasizes a shared primary focus - the search for meaning (32). This view of religion projects an honest picture of twenty-first-century American spiritual life that includes religious pluralism. This presentation also opens a path into the relational dynamic within religion. Hyde's focus on the similarities within these religions, rather than their differences, sets up critical issues in *Alaska*.

Most centrally, the World Religions class introduces challenging questions about the meaning and purpose of life. That the class is not just about religious practice is highlighted by Hyde when he tells the students: "We are engaged here in the most important pursuit in history: the meaning of life" (32). This teacher goes on to use stories from the religions being taught to engage the participation of his students in discovering whatever meaning for their own lives might be found there. Hyde's approach shifts the focus of religion away from its stereotypical association with doctrine, rules, and membership requirements, offering instead a view that invites reflective engagement with meaning. This invitation to personal reflection is further developed when Hyde articulates the questions this class intends to explore: "What is the nature of being a person? What is the best way to go about being a person? How did we come to be, and what will become of us when we are no longer?" (32). The root word of question is 'quest,' and, by choosing to present religion within such a framework, Green links it to the search for meaning.

In "before," the first half of this novel, religion is confined to a theoretical frame. In "after," however, the World Religions class becomes a focal point for wrestling with the suffering following Alaska's death. During the first class after this horrific event, Hyde tells

the students that “questions of religious thought have become, I suspect, personal” (158). By so doing, he subtly introduces the productive tension between the private and public boundaries of the spirit. The language used to describe situations and emotions continues to derive from evangelical Christianity: [Alaska] “was up and down – from fire and brimstone to smoke and ashes” (167). Before Alaska’s funeral, her father comforts Pudge using the traditional religious explanation for her death: “Anyway, son, she’s with the Lord now” (151). At the same time, however, Green opens the boundaries of religion using the same indeterminate style brought into play in “before.” Whenever he mentions Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, or its relation Sufism, directly, Green uses stories that connect to dying or suffering, or both. Often these stories are presented without any direct reference to how they might apply to the reality of loss. As Hyde begins his lecture about Sufism, Pudge indicates that one of the stories in the required reading for that class had drawn his attention because it contained some great last words:

This poor Sufi dressed in rags walked into a jewelry store owned by a rich merchant and asked him, “Do you know how you’re going to die?” The merchant answered, “No. No one knows how they’re going to die.” And the Sufi said, “I do.”

“How?” asked the merchant.

And the Sufi lay down, crossed his arms, said, “Like this,” and died, whereupon the merchant promptly gave up his store to live a life of poverty in pursuit of the kind of spiritual wealth the dead Sufi had acquired. (173)

This story raises an important question about death and dying that Pudge fails to take note of because of his fascination with dying words. Nonetheless, this story is indirectly addressing his loss.

After hearing Dr. Hyde relate the Sufi story of Rabe’a al-Adiwiyyah, a saint who attempts to burn heaven and drown hell, Pudge reflects:

I couldn't honestly imagine [Alaska] as anything but dead, her body rotting in Vine Station, the rest of her just a ghost alive only in our remembering. Like Rabe'a, I didn't think people should believe in God because of heaven and hell. But I didn't feel a need to run around with a torch. You can't burn down a made-up place. (174)

His response enters the gap between the private and public dynamic of religion. This story offers Pudge a connection to his dead friend, but it also leads him to consider his own interpretation of heaven and hell and the doctrine of religion.

The World Religions class is the impetus that leads Pudge to move beyond, or bridge his insistence on finding answers and move slowly towards an acceptance of what seems senseless. Near the end of the novel, Dr. Hyde asks his students to share an example of a Buddhist koan, a riddle that is intended to help one achieve enlightenment. Pudge chooses the following one:

I wrote about this guy Banzan. He was walking through the market one day when he overheard someone ask a butcher for his best piece of meat. The butcher answered, "Everything in my shop is the best. You cannot find a piece of meat that is not the best." Upon hearing this, Banzan realized that there is no best and no worst, that those judgments have no real meaning because there is only what is, and *poof*, he reached enlightenment. (195, italics in original)

Pudge notes that he is not convinced "enlightenment struck like lightning," yet he still longs for enlightenment in regards to his own tragic loss (195). He has not abandoned his search for answers. When Dr. Hyde takes the World Religions class outside, he metaphorically links religion to life and weaves them together. Indeed, Green uses this natural setting to overtly connect hope to both religion and the personal search for an explanation of suffering. Hyde begins by suggesting Muhammad, Jesus and the Buddha each taught a message of radical hope. He then brings his students into this territory of religion with the question he chooses

for their final exam: “ ‘What is your cause for hope?’” (216). By doing so, this teacher traverses the divide between the private and public aspects of religion and enters the territory of the spirit.

In *Alaska*, spirit is developed in a similar way to religion, indeterminately, with a focus on exploring life’s meaning, wrestling with suffering and loss, and seeking connection. Green’s representation of spirit expands the modern view that separates it from religion. Early in the novel Pudge announces he is going to boarding school to seek a “Great Perhaps” (5). For him this means leaving his “minor life” in Florida for the great possibilities he imagines can be found at school in Alabama (3). Pudge’s inclusion of the names of famous people, like John F. Kennedy, James Joyce, and Humphrey Bogart, who have also attended boarding school, implies that his future holds grandiosity. The realities Pudge encounters at this school, however, contradict his expectation. The room he had envisioned had plush carpet, wood-paneled walls, and Victorian furniture. What Pudge finds is more like a box containing a bunk bed of unfinished wood with vinyl mattresses, two plain wooden dressers and a set of bookshelves, “*and no air conditioning*” (6 italics in original). In addition, he discovers he must squat and spread his legs in order to shower: “Surely John F. Kennedy did not have to *squat at his* boarding school” (9 italics in original). Even the weather reinforces the contradictions between the imagined and the real. When it rains, “the whole goddamned world has better water pressure than the showers” (67). In pursuit of the “Great Perhaps,” Pudge involves himself in a prank meant to outdo the one inflicted by the Week Day warriors on his friend Alaska: “The Great Perhaps was upon us and we were invincible” (103). In his effort to distract Mr. Starnes, the watch dog of student behaviour, however, Pudge is bitten on the bottom by the crazy swan in the nearby lake. Meeting the beautiful and sexy Alaska

supports the possibility of finding the “Great Perhaps” he longs for, but her moodiness and unpredictability counter his hopes. Pudge’s search for an understanding of Alaska’s confusing actions and reactions can be interpreted as evidence to circumvent our postmodern world’s expectation that everything can be explained logically. Green, however, does not leave it here. Rather, he connects Pudge’s growing confusion to the theme of suffering introduced in “before.”

The question of suffering is introduced early when we learn the narrator’s idea of a “Great Perhaps” is taken from the dying words of poet Francois Rabelais (5). Dying implicitly raises questions about life’s meaning and the suffering it sets in motion. Last words provide room for a meaningful resolution to a life, yet realistically, they can never be conclusively determined. Green builds this idea using the names of famous people, the last words of some, and titles of books, poems, and screenplays. I would argue that Green’s use of such names and words is what Alleen and Don Nilsen describe as a “manipulation of names” by a skilled author to produce a certain effect (Nilsen & Nilsen x). In *Alaska*, the names allow us to consider the contradictory nature of dying and loss. The act of losing someone may be final and dramatic, or it may be the doorway to something more, or it may even be meaningless. Loss cannot be simply categorized or explained. According to Pudge, playwright Henrik Ibsen’s last words were “on the contrary,” in response to his nurse’s observation that he must be feeling better (11). Those of assassinated president JFK were “that’s obvious” to the person who noted there was no doubt that Dallas loved him (18). Famous civil war general Ulysses S. Grant shouted, “Water,” while Robert E. Lee announced, “Strike the tent!” (71). The symbolic effect achieved by these dying words underscores the ambiguities surrounding death. Some of the titles, such as “*Jesus Christ*

Superstar” and *“Final Days”*, convey finality, but also imply impending loss and suffering (4, 24).

Early in the novel, Alaska introduces the central question around which the story develops: “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?” (19). The source for these last words is Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), which recounts the story of the fall of South American hero Simon Bolivar. In his attempt to fulfil a dream and rescue South America from the hands of Spanish conquerors, Bolivar gained hero status. Nonetheless, Bolivar died a disillusioned, suicidal, depressed old warrior. Indirectly, the combination of courage and disillusionment projects an ambivalent portrait of suffering pertinent to other details in “before.” Such particulars include smoking and drinking that are aligned with a “badass” reputation that appeals to the narrator, offering an aura of romantic mischief that offsets his boring existence (49). Green also conveys the mixed messages adults send young people about drugs, drinking, and cigarettes. On the one hand, adults tell their children, as Pudge’s parents tell him, that these behaviours are unacceptable. On the other hand, adults indulge in these behaviours themselves, thereby conveying the hypocrisy of such rules. Pudge notes that his dad, an alumnus of Culver Creek, “had done the things I had only heard about: the secret parties, streaking through hay fields, drugs, drinking, and cigarettes” (7). Indeed, Green pushes this point further when he has Alaska and Pudge drive to the local liquor outlet, where the entire business model is built around selling cigarettes and alcohol to minors. With the sign posted outside this establishment, “WE CATER TO YOUR SPIRITUAL NEEDS,” Green adds a play on words thereby opening the topic of alcohol use by teenagers to the possibility that it is a panacea for personal pain (94, capitals in original). The word “needs” suggests there is more to drinking than rebellion, a perspective that echoes

what Green, in an interview, laments: that adults often condemn the inclusion of alcohol in a story for adolescents without considering what underlies its use. Green suggests that such behaviour is a self-destructive coping mechanism for managing the uncertainty, confusion, and suffering life engenders (Barkdoll & Scherff 2008).

“Suffering” is a word that is used to describe many different experiences, and over time, the root meaning of the word has been lost. As Helen Luke points out, “suffer” comes from the Latin verb “ferre” which means “to bear” or “to carry.” The first part of the word derives from the Latin prefix “sub” and means “under.” Thus, suffering may seem to support whatever is brought to bear on it, a very different interpretation than the one encountered in our world view, which emphasizes weight bearing down on rather than offering a strong foundation for us (Luke 1987). Green gradually develops a picture of suffering that captures this root essence. He builds this image gradually. In “before,” suffering is primarily directed to the outward conduct of characters. That changes in “after” as Green indirectly reveals how suffering becomes a support from which a strong spirit can emerge.

That suffering is uncomfortable territory is implied in the phrase “the not restful sleep,” included in the first sentence of “after” (Green *Alaska* 137). Mr. Starnes raps on students’ doors and tells them “to go to the gym” for an announcement about a terrible accident. When Pudge insists, “We can’t start without Alaska,” this teacher drops his policeman persona momentarily and cries:

He was crying noiselessly. Tears just rolled from his eyes to his chin and then fell onto his corduroy pants. He stared at [Pudge], but it was not the Look of Doom. His eyes blinking tears down his face, the Eagle looked, for all the world, sorry. (139)

Pudge now realizes what has happened without hearing what Mr. Starnes has to say, but he is unwilling to believe it. Alaska has been killed in a terrible car accident. Shock is the first response of the student body and in the silence Pudge thinks, "*It's all my fault*" (139 italics in original). Pudge realizes he feels unwell and runs outside to vomit. When he returns, he sees his roommate, who is screaming, "I'm so sorry" over and over. Chip, "The Colonel,"¹⁹ is being comforted by Madame O'Malley, who reassures him that he has nothing about which to be sorry. But Pudge thinks, "If only she knew" (140-141). Madame O'Malley, like many adults, is quick to respond to the outer behaviour yet fails to understand the complex nature of the agony within this student.

Subsequently, Pudge and his roommate are tormented by guilt because they allowed their friend Alaska to get into a car drunk. They are unable, initially, to bear the weight of the pain their contribution to this accident has inflicted. Neither do they understand that suffering is a process, the essence of which Elisabeth Kubler-Ross captured in her study of the stages of death and dying. Pudge and the Colonel must navigate through the horror of loss, revealing the steps into the heart of suffering.²⁰ After the initial shock of the news comes denial: "She's not dead. She's alive somewhere" (140). The guilt that first surfaced transforms quickly into anger, the Colonel towards Alaska, while Pudge blames himself. Both of these young men turn to coping mechanisms to help them avoid entering into true suffering. Alcohol and cigarette consumption increase. After memorizing the capitals of the countries of the world, the Colonel takes an eighty-two mile walk, during which he memorizes the populations of the countries of the world. Pudge reviews the last words of car

¹⁹ For the remainder of the thesis I use 'the Colonel' when referring to this character.

²⁰ *On Death and Dying* (1969) is the classic text authored by Kubler-Ross that originally outlined the five stages of grief experienced by the terminally ill. Kubler-Ross eventually expanded her model to apply to any serious loss. The five stages include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages do not necessarily emerge in the order they are listed here, nor within a predictable time frame.

accident victims including Princess Diana's, "Oh God, what's happened?" and James Dean's, "They've got to see us" (142). Fruitless attempts to rationalize this horror are undertaken from such false assurances as "At least it was instant. At least there wasn't any pain," to compulsive lists of possible scenarios intended to uncover what really happened (146). All of these keep the sting of grief at a distance. Green uses the World Religions class to introduce the inescapable truth that the only way out of suffering is to enter fully into it. As Dr. Hyde tells the students, everyone, at some point in their lives, loses their way due to suffering and feels as though they are in a maze. Hyde thereby highlights the universality of suffering. What Hyde also implies is that the journey into suffering is a process that winds, meanders, and confuses. As Pudge, the Colonel, and their close circle of friends take this winding path, they go into the heart of pain. Once there, everything feels different. They discover that suffering and grief have not destroyed or separated them; rather they have strengthened them and their relationship with each other.

Authentic relationship, like suffering, is a process which involves both our external and internal worlds. *Alaska* offers us a view of the outer and inner landscapes that shape relationship and the challenging path that must be taken to bridge them. The "before," and "after" structure of the story provides a way to bridge the two faces of connection. In "before," the outer landscape of relationship is the focus. Pudge's interactions with family and friends mirror the superficiality of social encounters in the public realm. In "after," we journey with the narrator into the inner landscape of relating where intimacy takes root.

As "before" opens, we are introduced to Pudge's parents, who are hosting a farewell party for him. The party is a dismal failure. Worse than having a party to which no one comes, Pudge notes, is having one attended by only two boring people. Such is the case in

this instance. The conclusion that he lacks a close relationship with friends seems inevitable and is expanded to include his parents, whose obvious ignorance of Pudge's lack of popularity suggests disinterest. After arriving at Culver Creek, Pudge imagines himself as "cool" and able to make a good first impression (8). When he meets his roommate dressed only in a towel, Pudge is ashamed: "*Great, I thought. I'm meeting my roommate naked*" (9 italics in original). The Colonel lets him know that he is not going to be his "entrée to Culver Creek social life," a comment which Pudge interprets as unwillingness to become his friend (13). Since the lack of friends is familiar territory for Pudge, he assumes that he is being isolated. When we learn this roommate is well versed in classic poetry and can memorize and itemize the names of countries and cities alphabetically, however, we infer his own status as an outsider. The Colonel confirms this reputation as "other" when he confesses that he is a regular boarder and considered inferior to the Weekday Warriors, the rich, popular kids. There is strong rivalry between these two groups that mounts in "before" as they attempt to outdo each other, resorting to mean pranks and comments. The result is disconnection. Isolation also characterizes personal relationships. Pudge is unable to connect with Lara, the girl Alaska introduces to him as a potential girlfriend; the Colonel has on-going conflict with his girlfriend; Pudge has dissatisfying phone calls with his parents, while also experiencing uncertainty in his relationship with Alaska and her circle of friends. When Alaska's violation of the "no ratting" norm is revealed, another vital component of authentic relationship is unveiled – trust. Trust is lacking within this small circle of friends, a fact that is compounded when Alaska confesses that her mother died when Alaska was eight and she feels responsible. In the three years she has known the Colonel, this fact has *never* been revealed.

In “after,” relationships take a twisting path into the inner dimension of experience. When Pudge learns that Alaska has been killed in a car accident, he knows “the ineluctable fact of the matter” - he is responsible for her death (141). Meanwhile, the Colonel dissolves into tears of regret for his part in this horror. This shared guilt becomes the basis for a growing connection between them that is felt within, rather than stated out loud. As Pudge recounts,

He grabs onto me and starts sobbing, again saying, “I’m so sorry,” over and over again. We have never hugged before, me and the Colonel, and there is nothing much to say, because he ought to be sorry, and I just put my hand on the back of his head and say the only true thing. “I’m sorry, too.” (143)

Guilt also reveals Pudge’s changing view of, and relationship with, others. When the Weekday Warriors, who are mere acquaintances of Alaska, express deep grief about her death, the Colonel becomes angry. Pudge, however, is willing to accept their grief because “everyone else had a better excuse to grieve than we did – after all they hadn’t killed her” (159). Pudge’s relationship with his parents begins to shift during his first telephone conversation with them “after” Alaska’s death. He realizes just how much he needs them to simply pick up the phone. This exchange between Pudge and his parents conveys the reality of the loneliness inherent in the journey into suffering. The path of grief must be travelled alone, yet it also offers the company of others on this same path. The Colonel, Takumi, and Lara have been important parts of Alaska’s circle of friends and remind Pudge he is not alone in his grief:

I may have kissed her, but I really *didn’t* have a monopoly on Alaska; the Colonel and I weren’t the only ones who cared about her, and weren’t alone in trying to figure out how she died and why. (195 italics in original)

When Pudge is finally able to be completely honest with Takumi and Lara about the part he and the Colonel played in Alaska's accident, he feels even less alone. Pudge's honesty engenders trust and brings these friends closer. Together they come to realize that an ongoing spiritual relationship with their dead friend is possible through their memories of Alaska.

At the smoking hole Alaska's close circle of friends gather and the Colonel pulls a cigarette out of his package and throws it into the lake in remembrance of Alaska. This gesture takes on a ritualistic character when the others do the same. Pudge observes, "I liked the idea of connecting an action with remembering...I imagined that Alaska would want a smoke, and so it seemed to me that the Colonel had begun an excellent ritual" (193). When Mr. Starnes announces the school is going to build a playground by the lake in honour of Alaska, this circle of friends objects. Lara stands up at the meeting and insists, "They should do something funnier, something Alaska herself would have done" (199). The Colonel suggests a prank is something more connected to their dead friend because Alaska loved to plot outlandish pranks. When the friends get together again, the Colonel unveils the details of The Alaska Young Memorial Prank. It will be "the crown jewel of pranks, the *Mona Lisa* of high-school hilarity, the culmination of generations of Culver Creek pranking" because "Alaska deserved nothing less" (200). Still, the prank will not work without the assistance of the whole school and that includes the Weekday Warriors, Alaska's archenemies. Nonetheless, this rival group loves the idea of the prank and together these two rivals, the Weekday Warriors and Alaska's close circle of friends, successfully execute the memorial. The loss of Alaska and the living memory of her spirit that still lives have created a bridge for their rivals' polarized relationship.

There is still one vital piece missing in the growing intimacy Pudge has with his friends. Slowly this missing piece emerges. One day Takumi confesses, “We all let her go, really” (183). The vagueness surrounding Takumi’s comment leaves Pudge wondering what it really means (183). The meaning of this confession only becomes clear after Takumi takes an early departure at the end of school term without saying goodbye to his friends. He leaves a letter explaining his sudden departure. Reading this note, Pudge learns that Takumi also saw Alaska on the night of her death and failed to prevent her from getting into her automobile drunk. Pudge realizes that he is not alone in keeping secrets: “There were so many of us who would have to live with things done and things left undone that day” (214). The realization that all of us make fatal mistakes is the key that intimately connects Pudge to his friend *and* himself. Vulnerability strengthens rather than weakens Pudge’s relationship with himself and others. This insight bridges Pudge’s internal and external worlds, helps him feel more connected to others, and brings him to an acceptance of life’s unexplainable suffering: “Those awful things are survivable” (220).

In *Alaska* Green gives us a portrait of the spiritual terrain that bridges the divide between religion and spirit in the twenty-first-century world. He creates a broad view of the spiritual domain using indeterminate or subtle details that require the participation of the reader to achieve their meaning. Green’s indeterminate style allows him to reveal not only the connections that exist within religion and spirit but also the dichotomies.

Chapter Two: Labyrinth and/or Maze: Two Central Characters in *Alaska*

The picture most often painted of the spiritual/religious life in the twenty-first-century world is that of polarities. Despite a number of differences, however, Americans live together cooperatively. This is the conclusion reached by Putnam and Campbell, two researchers who conducted a thorough survey of the spiritual life of twenty-first-century Americans. They discovered that there are many world religions represented in the population, as well as significant numbers who claim to be spiritual rather than religious, and some who describe themselves as atheist. According to these researchers, little conflict arises among people despite having views that are, in character, polar opposites (Putnam & Campbell 2010). Nevertheless, there is a cautionary approach to the spiritual in the public domain. Educators, and some authors, fear including anything that might be interpreted as entering spiritual territory because it may engender conflict. There are other contributing factors to the avoidance of the spiritual in the public realm that the Search Institute brought to attention in their 2008 research report. *With Their Own Voices* stresses that the spiritual aspect of the human being involves both an inward and an outward journey. Indeed, youth in countries around the world who were interviewed about their spiritual lives reported that the inner aspect of their lives contains challenges and burdens (Roehlkepartain et al., 2008). In *Alaska*, John Green using metaphor and symbol explores these tensions inherent in the visceral aspect of life.

Green's use of metaphorical connections is prominent in his development of the characters who play key roles in his portrayal of spirit. Alaska Young is the primary character metaphor, but Dr. Hyde, the World Religions teacher, also plays a significant role. Both are central to Green's creation of a story that unsettles the binaries that characterize

traditional formulations of the spiritual. Alaska and Hyde each provide a metaphorical link to the religious polarity and variety of spiritual views in modern America, as well as to the pain and suffering that are part of every human life. Despite interpreting these issues differently, these characters share common ground, and Green uses them to offer us a picture of the spirit that has a “both/and” quality, in the midst of what initially appears to be the “either/or” dichotomy.

Alaska herself is young and wild like the state for which she is named. According to an Alaskan tourism promotion, “nowhere else combines the conveniences of the modern age with the freedom and adventure of living on the edge of a vast, unspoiled wilderness” (“Moving to Alaska” Web). This state has been surrounded with an aura of mystery and mystique equated with the search for meaning ever since the publication of Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* (1997), an account of Chris McCandless, a young man who dies seeking a dream, and himself, in the far North. In *Alaska*, Green situates his central character within the stifling, “oppressive” atmosphere of southern Alabama, the heart of evangelical Christianity. This fundamentalist region imposes rigid rules for conduct and morals that counter the freedom to explore meaning, a freedom that is associated with the North. The north/south polarities that divide these two geographical locations mirror the divisions within American spiritual life and between Dr. Hyde and Alaska. The southern United States embraces traditional Protestant Christianity, which came to the United States with the Puritans in the seventeenth century, while the North is aligned with liberal and mainstream religious views (Hilbun 2008, Putnam & Clark 2010). These two regions also capture another binary that is reflected in Alaska Young and Dr. Hyde. The state of Alaska is the youngest to join the republic of the United States, thereby symbolically representing youth, while Alabama

reflects tradition. In *Alaska*, Dr. Hyde exemplifies old age and the rigidity of traditional religion in Alabama, whereas Alaska epitomizes youth and the spiritual questioning that is connected to the North. Despite these seeming contradictions, however, these two characters also reveal kindred parallels that broaden this juxtaposition. Together they metaphorically bridge the tensions that have led to the avoidance of anything that might be deemed spiritual in the public domain.

In *Alaska*, the title character is associated with youth. She is a student with a wild impulsive nature, but she is also, less obviously, a broken spirit caught in a maze of suffering. It is Alaska who introduces the central theme in this novel: “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth [of suffering]?” (Green, *Alaska* 19). By contrast, Dr. Hyde is referenced as “the Old Man” with some qualities that are stereotypical of old age. He is a rigid teacher who rules his World Religions classroom with an iron hand, and Alaska describes him as “condescending” (33). Yet Hyde, too, has another side that slowly emerges to reveal vulnerability. Pudge encounters this sensitivity in the first meeting with his teacher: “I realized for the first time how hunched his shoulders were, and he seemed suddenly sad” (50). Both Hyde and Alaska incorporate aspects of the ambiguities and elusiveness that characterize the spiritual domain. What is significant about the portrait Green develops of these two characters is the interweaving of their outer and inner beings to demonstrate that both are necessary to gain an authentic view of who they are.

Alaska is introduced to us by Pudge and the first thing we learn about her is written on the white board outside her dorm room. It says: “*Alaska has a single*” (14 italics in original). Alaska lives alone because her roommate “got kicked out at the end of last year” (14). But her loss of a roommate also, less directly, signals her isolation. This separateness

gains significance as “before” unfolds. Early in their relationship, Pudge brings our attention to her outer presentation because the first thing that catches his attention is that she is “the hottest girl in all of human history...talking loud and fast” (14). If she is a beauty queen, however, Alaska is also a “book worm.” Pudge is “stunned partly by the force of the voice emanating from the petite (but God, curvy) girl and partly by the stacks of books that lined her walls” (15). Thus, Alaska displays contradictory qualities. On the surface she is uncomplicated, conveyed by the white board and her physical beauty. Inside, however, is confusion. The stacks of books that line her bedroom walls and overflow into piles of books everywhere throughout the room symbolize this other aspect of her nature. Alaska’s ambivalence is further revealed when she joins Pudge, who is sitting on a swing. A swing suggests fun and entertainment, but the subsequent conversation counters this frivolity. She asks, “Do you really memorize last words?” and on hearing an affirmative, she quizzes him (18). In doing so she introduces the South American general, Simon Bolivar, who had a vision of South America free from Spanish control. Bolivar is connected with the labyrinth, and his dying words set the keynote for the rest of the novel: “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?” (19). Simon Bolivar considered Spain the enemy at the centre of his labyrinthine fight for an independent state. He reached the end of his life sick in body and, according to Garcia Marquez’s fictional account of his last days, sick in soul as well (Marquez 1989). Alaska’s invocation of Bolivar implicitly links her to the labyrinth and suffering.

The labyrinth symbol does, itself, have a significance that is often missed. In the twenty-first century the meaning of the word “labyrinth” has become skewed because it is often used interchangeably with that of “maze.” In fact, these two spiritual symbols are different, yet connected. A labyrinth consists of a single circular, or unicursal, path, while the

maze is a network of paths, or multicursal. Each has a clearly marked centre to which the paths lead, and the route into their centres is confusing. Most notably, the maze offers a number of false turns that do not lead to the centre. Ultimately, one can get lost in the maze, unable to find the centre. In contrast, the labyrinth requires only that walkers have faith to stay on its single meandering, albeit confusing, trail in order to reach the core. The circles cause confusion because at times the path seems to be very close to the centre when, in fact, it is actually the opposite. It is the process of navigating into, and out of, the twists and turns of a labyrinth that can bring new insights.

Early in the novel, Pudge overtly connects Alaska and the labyrinth when he points out the similarities between the curves of a labyrinth and those of the beautiful Alaska:

It was right then, between when I asked her about the labyrinth and when she answered me, that I realized the importance of curves, of the thousand places where girls' bodies ease from one place to another, from arc of the foot to ankle to calf, from calf to hip to waist to breast to neck to ski slope nose to forehead to shoulder to the concave arch of the back to the butt to the etc. I'd noticed curves before, of course, but I had never quite apprehended their significance.
(19)

Despite Pudge's initial connection to the labyrinth, Alaska seems more like the puzzle of a maze. There are many confusing, false turns on the path into her centre. This title character, herself, refuses to engage in the process of wrestling with suffering that the labyrinth invites. She sees this symbol in "either/or" terms and wonders: "Is the labyrinth living or dying?" (19). Alaska lets us know she wants a simple, quick answer to Bolivar's profound question when she says to Pudge: "You figure out what the labyrinth is and how to get out of it and I'll get you laid" (20). This statement offers a key to her character. Alaska is seeking a quick, easy explanation for suffering that she hopes deconstructing it logically will produce.

Discovering meaning in suffering, however, is not a straight path but rather, like the curves of a labyrinth, a slowly unwinding process into what lies beneath the surface.

Unlocking the mystery of Alaska proves to be a meandering process for the narrator. As the chapter following this conversation opens, Pudge is pestering the Colonel with questions about this beautiful girl. His enquiries focus on the surface details of her life, but the fact that he is taping a van Gogh poster to his door as he seeks information about Alaska implies that there is something about her that he is not able to hear. Vincent van Gogh, who cut off his own ear, is associated with self-destructiveness and emotional torment; the presence of his poster in the midst of a conversation about Alaska suggests there is anguish within this young woman. Alaska's contradictions are many. On the one hand she displays "casual malice," as when Pudge goes to her room seeking sympathy after his cruel orientation experience and she responds coldly, "Guess you went for a swim, huh?" (27). On the other, she bubbles with sexual energy, silliness, and intelligence. Pudge captures her inconsistency when he notes:

Maybe she could be mean...but the way she talked that first night about getting out of the labyrinth – so smart. And the way her mouth curled up on the right side all the time, like she was preparing to smirk, like she'd mastered the right side of the *Mona Lisa's* smile...(31)

The meaning intended by the enigmatic expression on this famous face has been a source of investigation for centuries. By using the Mona Lisa as a comparison for Alaska, Pudge is both idealizing and limiting his understanding of her. What lies below the surface cannot be accessed with the eye. Nonetheless, the inner reality is a vital part of Alaska's being that, in idealizing her, Pudge misses.

Alaska herself both invites, and resists, idealization. As she notes, rudely awakening Pudge from a nap, “I’m unpredictable” (33). She interacts with Pudge in a playful, teasing manner, yet screams at the Colonel when he asks for help with his ironing: “You’re not going to impose the patriarchal paradigm on *me*” (34 italics in original). Her rebelliousness surfaces in the World Religions class after Dr. Hyde ejects Pudge for staring out the window, and it continues in a location Pudge describes as an oasis (39). In fact, the word “oasis” is ambiguous because it is the secret smoking hole used by students. The route to the smoking hole, “not even a path so much as a series of hints,” mirrors what lies beneath the surface of smoking (42). When Pudge asks her, “Why do you smoke so damn much?” she replies, “Y’all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die” (44). This is the first overt evidence that Alaska is self-destructive. In an interview about his novel, Green argues that smoking and drinking are signs that his characters are experiencing self-destructive impulses, as so many teenagers do. Green goes on to explain that he believes this desire “to hurt ourselves without killing ourselves” is a coping mechanism for the unfairness of suffering in life (Barkdoll & Scherff 70). The reason he includes this element of teen behaviour in his novel is not to raise the issue of under age smoking and drinking, but rather to raise the issue of the suffering that lies below the surface of these behaviours (Barkdoll & Scherff 2008).

Alaska directs us to the reality of suffering in a human life and the ways in which we avoid it. She not only smokes and drinks, but also drives her car recklessly and indulges in promiscuous sexual behaviour. When Mr. Starnes catches her smoking for the seventh time she philosophically dismisses it: “It’s the eternal struggle, Pudge. ‘The Good versus the Naughty’” (56). Mr. Starnes succumbs to the inclination to see the world of teenagers simplistically. He gives his attention to the behaviour being displayed, without considering

what it might be covering. In addition, he judges this behaviour according to binary divisions, either good or bad. Alaska, like the youth for whom she is the archetype, knows this binary well. She delivers her observation about this polarity with a lightness that disguises the confusion and pain such a simplistic division creates for times when bad things happen to good people, or even worse, for those times when we ourselves do bad things. The “either/or” binary forces separation and isolation, and is based on a perception system that denies the reality of “both/and.” Both good *and* bad do exist within the same human being. Nonetheless, the reality is that Mr. Starne’s binary approach is the one youth meet most often in their classrooms and homes.

Alaska continues to follow the winding path into the complexity of life for youth. Pudge asks Alaska about her first name. She tells him her parents allowed her, at the age of seven, to choose her own name. Alaska was drawn to the name of the northern state for two reasons. Firstly, it was learning that this state’s name came from the Aleut word meaning “that which the sea breaks against” (53). Secondly, the fact that this northern state was big, and far away from where she was living, had great appeal. Alaska’s explanation for her choice of personal name symbolically reveals significant aspects of youth seldom confronted. Suffering *is* part of youth’s experience, a big part, but it is far away from the life they are expected to live. When Alaska notes: “Getting out [of Alabama] isn’t that easy,” she is hinting that she has already experienced the impact of life’s storms, and the difficulty of escaping from the prison that ‘the way life *should* be’ imposes (53). Green, however, is doing more than this here. Alabama, as the centre of evangelical Christianity, symbolizes the polarity that characterizes the religious and political aspect of twenty-first-century American life. That Alaska, as the archetypal youth, is put in the centre of such a polarized location, far

from the freedom from suffering that she longs for, reinforces the tension that inevitably arises when one approaches struggle within a binary framework. Alaska mistakenly believes getting out of the experience of such tension is her only choice.

The binary framework chosen by Alaska and Pudge leaves no room for moral ambiguity, paradox, or inconsistency. When Pudge learns she has violated the one important rule among the students at Culver Creek, to “never never never never never rat,” he is shocked (17). He realizes that Alaska is moody, but her disloyalty is far more unsettling. It is ironic that this violation of Alaska’s is exactly the same as that of which she accuses the Colonel’s girlfriend: “How will stabbing one another in the back help women to rise above patriarchal oppression?” (65). The reality is that human beings, young and old, female, male, and transgender, do betray each other. Another of Alaska’s friends notes that it was her fear of being expelled that prompted her betrayal, and this nudges both him and Pudge to wonder why Alaska is so terrified of being expelled (74). Nonetheless, when Alaska confesses she did ‘rat out’ her roommate, Pudge refuses to accept her inconsistency. In fact, Alaska’s moral ambiguity intensifies his lack of trust in her. He prefers the Colonel, who, when he was cranky, “at least had a reason” (75). His choice leads him further away from Alaska and metaphorically projects the narrow image of youth held by adults who educate and evaluate them. Adults are unwilling to acknowledge the contradictory nature of human experience, perhaps because of the uncertainty, and therefore, discomfort it imposes.

Alaska continues to unveil a complex picture of youth. Alaska recognizes and has sympathy for Pudge when he displays the same inconsistency that characterizes her own behaviour. She entices him to stay at Culver Creek for Thanksgiving and Pudge calls his parents to let them know about this decision (77). Later he has second thoughts and is

distressed by his willingness to “abandon” his parents (78). Yet when he calls them back to say he has changed his mind, he is devastated to learn that his parents have happily gone ahead with plans of their own for Thanksgiving. Alaska is quick to assure him that he will not be alone over the holiday because she’ll be keeping him company. Symbolically, she lets Pudge know he is not alone in his vulnerability. Alaska goes on to reveal a glimpse of her own fragility when she confesses she chooses not to go home because she is “scared of ghosts and home is full of them” (80). During this holiday period together, Alaska displays more signs of suffering and coping strategies. She introduces Pudge to alcohol, reads Kurt Vonnegut’s book *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) aloud to him, and shares lines from Auden’s poetry. At the same time, however, Alaska also invades the rooms of the Week Day Warriors, whom she despises, in search of anything that might offer her clues for a cruel “prank” that will “hit them where it hurts” (84). Into this tangle of contradictions Alaska hints at the source of her personal suffering when she implies she may be the source *and* victim of her life’s misery:

It’s not life or death, the labyrinth. [It’s] suffering. Doing wrong and having wrong things happen to you. That’s the problem. Bolivar was talking about the pain, not about the living or dying. How do you get out of the labyrinth of suffering? (82)

Alaska raises crucial issues for youth: the problem of injustice, or unfairness in life, as well as the bad choices we make which can lead to pain, and a search for an explanation of life’s lack of moral reinforcement.

Alaska goes on to insist “nothing’s wrong” when Pudge suspects her observation about “doing wrong and having bad things happen to you” is a sign that something in her life is causing her pain (82). Nonetheless, Alaska is unable, or perhaps unwilling, to enter into this pain and seeks, instead, a way to eliminate her distress. Immediately after sharing

Auden's beautiful lines, "You shall love your crooked neighbour/With your crooked heart" and noting that they capture "love and brokenness," Alaska suggests that it is time to search other dorm rooms for some pornography to view (85). Truly, Alaska is trapped in the denial of suffering in her public conduct while struggling with the reality of its existence within herself.

After the school break, Alaska calls her circle of friends together and reveals yet more behind the suffering that lives within her. The "Best Day/Worst Day" drinking game Alaska introduces to her friends captures the source of her pain. This is a competition she improvises to slow down their drinking. In this game all members of the group will share the story of their best, and worst, days and the best storyteller in each category will not have to take a drink. Alaska's best day was a trip to the zoo with her mother when Alaska was eight years old, a story which strikes her friends as a bit "lame" until they learn what happens next (115). The worst day for Alaska occurs the day after her best one, when her mother dies from a brain aneurysm. Alaska believes her mother would still be alive if she had not failed to call 911. When Takumi, one of this close circle of friends, points out that she "was just a little kid," Alaska retorts: "Yeah. I was a little kid. Little kids can dial 911" (119). Nonetheless, Alaska continues to avoid, or deny the impact of this profound incident with her closest friends. Even when the Colonel, who has known her for three years, in a soft voice asks: "Why didn't you ever tell me?" Alaska brushes him off, "It never came up" (120). This is as close as Alaska's friends get to her suffering and they turn their attention to her outward behaviour, not her wounded spirit. When Pudge points out Alaska's excessive consumption of alcohol she responds: "Pudge, what you must understand about me is that I am a deeply unhappy person" (124). Despite her wild public persona, Alaska is seriously troubled.

That Alaska is disturbed becomes apparent in the chapter “the last day” at the book’s midpoint. (125). After an evening of heavy drinking, Alaska challenges Pudge to participate in a game of “truth or dare” (130). When he chooses “dare,” Alaska responds, “Hook up with me” (130). These hook-up antics with Pudge are further evidence of behaviour Green attributes to youth’s struggle to cope with life’s unfairness. Despite her drunken state, Alaska makes clear the depth of her despair when she returns to Pudge’s room later in the evening, sobbing: “God, how many times can I fuck up?” (132). Indeed, she appears to be incapable of accepting the unpalatable truth that there is no easy way out of her suffering – at least not the sort she is desperately seeking. Alaska’s friends support her in this faulty choice when they allow her, despite her intoxication, to get into her car and drive. The words she utters, that prove to be her final words, are “God, oh God, I’m so sorry” (132). But what *is* she sorry about that causes her to make this life-threatening choice? This mystery becomes the preoccupation of Alaska’s close circle of friends in “after,” the second half of the book.

The problem of meaninglessness becomes profound in “after” when Alaska’s friends discover that she was killed “in a terrible accident” (139). Alaska’s last words, “I’m so sorry,” are the motivation behind the compulsion to understand what caused her accident that overtakes Pudge and the Colonel (132). Pudge wants to know the reason this happened because “people do not just die” (142). Surely, Pudge rationalizes, she is just playing an “Alaska Young Prank Extraordinaire” (149). The Colonel attributes her accident to the fact that Alaska has always been “so goddamned impulsive [and prone to] getting upset for no reason” (149). The assumption that drives their responses is that there has to be a logical reason for what has happened. They encounter problems when they use this frame of reference to investigate Alaska’s death. Insisting on the “either/or” binary of “she killed

herself,” which the Colonel proposes, versus Pudge’s insistence that he and the Colonel, by letting her get into the car when she was so inebriated, are “wholly, unforgivably guilty,” proves to be a completely unsatisfactory explanation (157). This dichotomous framework does not allow Alaska’s friends to move beyond certainty and begin to uncover a greater understanding of Alaska and themselves.

Slowly, Pudge and the Colonel open to the possibility that there are not always logical answers or explanations. Neither eases the pain of loss and Pudge acknowledges that it must be hard to die, “but it cannot be much harder than being left behind” (151). In addition, he comes to recognize that the anger the Colonel expresses in response to the pain of loss “just distracts from the all-encompassing sadness, the frank knowledge that you killed her and robbed her of a life” (153). Both of these friends are shocked when they come upon Alaska’s copy of *The General in His Labyrinth* as they are cleaning out her dorm room. Pudge notices that Alaska has added a marginal note beside the sentence that has fueled her search for an escape from suffering. It reads “*Straight and Fast*” (155 italics in original). This note refuels the Colonel’s search for an explanation when he speculates that Alaska’s accident was suicide. Pudge resists this explanation and suggests: “Maybe we should just let her be dead” (164). Nonetheless, their exploration of suicide as an explanation for Alaska’s death leads both of these friends to consider a different view of her.

As the Colonel says, “Something happened that we aren’t seeing...Something inside of her” (188). This acknowledgement is a key shift for these two friends that leads them to consider their own “inside” selves. The process of doing so is traumatic because it means looking honestly at their part in Alaska’s death. The Colonel cruelly shouts at Pudge: “I was drunk. What’s your excuse?” (171). Pudge screams in response, but his scream is about his

failure to prevent Alaska's death: " I hated her for leaving that night, and I hated myself, too, not only because I let her go but because if I had been enough for her, she wouldn't have even wanted to leave" (171). Nonetheless, the result of this altercation is that Pudge and the Colonel are more willing to accept the aspects of Alaska that irritated them and to remember the qualities she displayed that enchanted them. This result leads to their execution of the Alaska Young Memorial Prank, which captures the essence of Alaska's fun-loving, but rebellious, nature, and helps Pudge begin to accept the fact that it may not be possible to discover exactly what happened on that fateful night. There is one more thing these two friends need to do to deepen the understanding of this tragic event in their lives.

Pudge agrees to accompany the Colonel on a drive through the site of Alaska's fatal crash. They choose to take this drive in the light of the afternoon, not in the dark of night as Alaska did. Symbolically, this drive, and the light in which it is undertaken, capture the meaning of suffering. After speeding through the spot on which Alaska died, Pudge notes:

And POOF we are through the moment of her death. We are driving through the place that she could not drive through, passing onto asphalt she never saw, and we are not dead. We are not dead! We are breathing and we are crying. (213)

Alaska was not able to drive into, and through, her pain, but her death has opened her friend's eyes to the awareness that the true nature of suffering can be survived. It is an experience to be lived through, rather than analysed. Such an experience, like the labyrinth, is a "both/and" process, not the "either/or" approach required in a maze.

Pudge could not have reached this conclusion without another key character in this novel, Dr. Hyde, the World Religions teacher. In Dr. Hyde, we find a guide for the spiritual aspect of being human within the educational setting. Unlike Alaska, who is caught in the binary of "either/or" thinking, Dr. Hyde challenges our tendency to think and to judge in

polarities rather than to struggle with a process-based approach to acquiring wisdom. Hyde's name captures the essence of non-dualism that characterizes his way of thinking. This appellation symbolically weaves together the inner and outer dimensions of the human being, thereby creating space for the spirit. Hyde is the private self of the infamous Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. That the inner dimension of this character is prefaced with the formal designation "Doctor," implies, symbolically, that the private self within the World Religions teacher is also present in the classroom (32). Most significantly, this name broadens the stereotypical picture of religion, age, and teaching. Hyde is Jekyll's inner, dark side and, as such, has been kept separate, or apart from the rational world. This appellation joins the inner and outer aspects of Hyde's character and thereby challenges a representation of religion, age and teaching that keeps them apart. Nonetheless, Dr. Hyde, "the Old Man," appears to be an archetype for this stage of life, and a counterpoint to Alaska as youth, rather than the wise, caring, complex man that he is (31).

Our first introduction to Dr. Hyde paints a stereotypical picture of old age. It begins with the descriptor "the Old Man," and the capital letters signify that the portrait being unveiled invites a metaphorical interpretation. What follows is a physical description that highlights the comical perceptions of age. Describing his first impression of this teacher,

Pudge notes:

He breathed slowly and with great labor through his wide-open mouth. He took tiny steps toward the lectern, his heels not moving much past his toes. The Colonel nudged me and pointed casually to his notebook, which read, *The Old Man has one lung*, and I did not doubt it. His audible, almost desperate breaths reminded me of my grandfather when he was dying of lung cancer. Barrel-chested and ancient, the Old Man, it seemed to me, might die before he ever reached the podium. (32-33 italics in original)

Dr. Hyde captures the physical frailty of the old person and projects, metaphorically, vulnerability. He is also a dictator in the classroom: “I will talk most of the time, and you will listen most of the time” (32). When students do not pay attention, or write notes to one another, the Old Man ejects them from the classroom (39). Alaska finds him to be a pedagogical horror show, but Pudge insists he is a genius. Pudge sees beyond Hyde’s surface, and is inspired by his knowledge and passion for the subject he is teaching: “the Old Man made me take religion seriously” (33). When this teacher introduces himself, he appears to be reinforcing the stereotypical picture held by Alaska: “My name...is Dr. Hyde. I have a first name. So far as you are concerned it is Doctor” (32). Nonetheless, despite his one lung and his dictatorial remarks, Hyde’s inclination to plurality and openness begins to surface.

Dr. Hyde begins the first lecture of his World Religions class by introducing his students to religion within a comparative, rather than a “mono” focus. He makes no reference to the doctrines, creeds, or rules embraced by Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. Instead he suggests all three of these religions address the human search for meaning, and, by implication, so will his class. Further, Hyde introduces the questions that all these faiths address. These are questions that every young person begins to raise in adolescence, and that adults contend with for the remainder of their lives: “What is the nature of being a person? What is the best way to go about being a person? How did we come to be, and what will become of us when we are no longer?” (32). Dr. Hyde is offering a non-dualistic framework of inquiry to his students, rather than a directive one. Such a framework provides room for personal exploration and secures the participation of his students.

During one of Hyde’s lectures Pudge turns his attention to what he sees through the classroom window. He knows he is in trouble when he hears this teacher say “Mr. Halter,

here I am, straining my lungs for your edification. And yet *something* out there seems to have caught your fancy in a way that I've been unable to do" (39 italics in original). Dr. Hyde asks Pudge to leave class. On the surface, this teacher seems to succumb to the pedagogical impulse to tell Pudge how to act and think. On a deeper level, however, he is giving Pudge the opportunity to learn from his experience. From the classroom Pudge looks at the "wooded, slow-sloping hill" and, inspired by Dr. Hyde's lecture on the Buddhist concept of interconnection, sees "everything so intricately woven together" that trees and hill seem one (39). When Pudge gets outside, however, "the woods were a totally different creature than from Dr. Hyde's classroom" (41). This is because he *is* now in the woods – not viewing them from afar. Despite Hyde's apparent concern with behaviour, he is finding ways to put his students in charge of their own learning. The next day Hyde reinforces Pudge's lesson by drawing his attention to the Buddhist concept of "being present" (50). Hyde continues to find ways to broaden the outreach of religion to include both the personal and public lives of his students

Dr. Hyde strives to present religion as a resource that can help his students explore the issues in their lives. Hyde's concern with connecting his subject to the lives of his students is reflected in the topic he poses for the first semester's exam:

What is the most important question human beings must answer? Choose your question wisely, and then examine how Islam, Buddhism and Christianity attempt to answer it.
(70 italics in original)

Hyde does not insist that these three religions provide answers to life's difficult questions; rather, he offers his students the opportunity to explore if, or how, they might find tentative answers themselves. The Colonel is excited about the chance to investigate the central question of his own life: "I hope the poor bastard lives the rest of the school year...because

I'm starting to enjoy that class" (70). Dr. Hyde's lecture on this particular day reinforces a more personal view of religion. He begins by talking in a surprisingly casual way about Jesus Christ. Breaking with the reverence central to fundamentalist Christian discourse, Hyde identifies Christ with the peasants of first century Palestine, describing him as a "nobody in an empire ruled exclusively by somebodies," and goes on to say, "a nobody just like you"(70). In connecting Jesus with his students, Dr. Hyde makes room for, and connects, theory with the personal. As Pudge says, "Maybe Dr. Hyde's class isn't total bullshit" (82). That Dr. Hyde is succeeding in opening religion to life becomes clear when Pudge, Alaska, and their inner circle of friends gather together and share stories of "their best day" (114). Pudge's account shows evidence that he has embraced Dr. Hyde's message about the Buddhist concept of presence: "Best day of my life was today...just sitting here, even if I'm watching the Colonel whittle, or whatever. Whatever. Great day. Today" (115). By bringing theory, life, and questions together in his class, Hyde is moving beyond binaries.

Hyde's focus on process becomes central in the second half of this novel. During his first class "after" the death of Alaska, Dr. Hyde begins to transpose the knowledge of life he has acquired into knowledge a teenager can discover (135). He begins by observing: "It is a law that parents should not have to bury their children,...And someone should enforce it" (157). Hyde's statement suggests that there should be someone in charge of the world, a role assigned to God in religion, and to a higher source of power in spiritual traditions, but apparently such a control is lacking. In fact, Hyde is acknowledging the messy nature of suffering and connecting it to the subject under examination in his class. He notes: "The questions of religious thought have become, I suspect, personal" (158). In other words, the subject matter they are studying is no longer merely theoretical. The merging of personal and

theoretical is central to his final exam, which poses the question Alaska chose for her first semester submission: “*How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?*” (158 italics in original). Hyde is, symbolically, bringing Alaska’s suffering into the classroom. Further, in this same class, he insists that suffering is part of every human life.

Hyde’s analysis of suffering conveys a challenging reality. Bad things happen to everyone, and there is no way to avoid or detour around pain. Rationalizing is one way we choose to distance ourselves from the feeling of emotional pain. Dr. Hyde realizes that the death of a peer, by accident or suicide, is beyond logic, but he does not abandon critical thinking or scholarly texts in his consideration of loss. Most critically, he understands that thinking and feeling do not need to be polarized:

I’m going to leave that [Alaska’s question] up for the rest of the semester,” he said. “Because everybody who has ever lost their way in life has felt the nagging insistence of that question. At some point we all look up and realize we are lost in a maze, and, I don’t want us to forget Alaska, and I don’t want to forget that even when the material we study seems boring, we’re trying to understand how people have answered that question and the questions each of you posed in your papers – how different traditions have come to terms with what Chip [the Colonel], in his final, called ‘people’s rotten lots in life.’” Hyde sat down. “So, how are you guys doing? (158)

All of his lectures following Alaska’s death take up death and the pain of loss from multiple perspectives. Yet in none of these classes does he ever resort to imposing his views on his students. Dr Hyde models a teaching style that engenders deep learning because it leaves room for his students to reflect. He recognizes the power of story to access feelings that elude analysis but can be reached through the intuition and imagination. Pudge finds a Sufi story of particular interest because it includes some great last words and is drawn to it for this reason, rather than its spiritual or religious message (173). In his next lecture Dr. Hyde shares

another Sufi story about a woman who burns the doors to heaven and extinguishes the fire of hell with water:

A woman so strong she burns heaven and drenches hell.
Alaska would have liked this Rabe'a woman, I wrote in my notebook. But even so, the afterlife mattered to me. Heaven and hell and reincarnation. As much as I wanted to know how Alaska died, I wanted to know where she was now, if anywhere. (174 italics in original)

This story leads Pudge to consider his own thoughts and beliefs about heaven and hell after the death of his friend Alaska.

Dr. Hyde achieves something that, I argue, is key to the education of the whole person, and that is trust. He gives his students the room, and permission, to live the questions that arise within them in light of both the material they are studying and the loss they are experiencing. Hyde goes one step further at the end of term when he gives the class their final exam question, asking: "How will you – you personally – ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?" (215). Recognizing that each of them has experienced "the incontestable fact of suffering" he believes that each of them now has his own view of its path (215). Getting out of suffering is not a possibility. Pudge and his classmates must live through their suffering in order to get past it. He ends this class by reminding his students of the one characteristic shared by each of the three religions, "radical hope" (215). By linking suffering and hope, Hyde implies that they are connected and can co-exist. This is very much a "both/and" approach to suffering that provides room for what seems to be a contradiction.

The final class of the year is not held in the classroom, but rather outside on the grass. Bridging inside and outside, theory and experience, Hyde portrays a labyrinthine view of life and religion. Unlike Alaska, who approached suffering as a puzzle to solve, Hyde recognizes the profound pattern within it. At the same time, he understands that it can be very difficult to

see the pattern when one is inside suffering. In addition, Hyde comprehends that it is his age and his life experience, both personal and professional, that have helped him establish his labyrinthine view. Having lived as long as he has, and having experienced the death of his life partner, Dr. Hyde has developed the faith, and patience, to journey into the centre of suffering.

Attaining the centre of a labyrinth “demands faith,” suggests scholar Craig Wright (Wright 3). In *Alaska*, faith is connected not with religion, but with the process of suffering. As the days pass after Alaska’s death, and the presence of suffering is so clear, Dr. Hyde brings one Zen thought to the attention of his students: “Everything falls apart” (Green *Alaska* 196). This teacher goes no further than making this connection for his students, allowing them time to consider the personal implication of this reality as they continue their journey into the labyrinth of grief and loss. Dr. Hyde has faith in the process of life to help his students find their own way through suffering. When Pudge receives a note from Takumi, a fellow student, confessing his part in Alaska’s death, he suddenly understands how to get through the labyrinth of suffering: “we had to forgive to survive in the labyrinth” (217). The key word in this epiphany is “in.” Pudge is able to forgive Alaska, “his crooked neighbor,” despite the fact that she forgot everyone who cared about her in those last moments of her life because she was preoccupied with her past: “When she fucked up, all those years ago, just a little girl terrified into paralysis, she collapsed into the enigma of herself.” (218, 219). Pudge realizes that Alaska was unable to allow herself to be fully in the experience of suffering. Dr. Hyde and the World Religions class are central to Pudge’s life-changing discovery.

These two central characters, Alaska and Dr. Hyde, are powerful spiritual symbols for our time. They bring the tensions that pervade spirit in both the public and private domains to our attention and provide a way into and through them. Alaska and Hyde also symbolize the weaving together of inner and outer dimensions of being human. This conclusion cannot be finally reached until our reading journey through the “before” and “after” sections of *Alaska* is complete.

Chapter Three: The Labyrinth and Reading

“Before” and “after” are two simple words that capture the essence of spiritual transformation. This same “before” and “after” quality captures the transformational nature of walking into, and out of, a labyrinth. A walker enters this figure for a host of reasons, bringing whoever she is at the moment of entering the “mouth” of this ancient symbol. In the process of putting one foot down after another, following the circuitous trail, a person experiences a variety of internal feelings, thoughts or insights some of which arise immediately, while others lead to transformation long after the walk has been completed. Because a labyrinth is a public space, a walker will usually meet others who are traveling into, or out of, this symbol. This meeting may be also include an encounter with the spirit of others who have walked this path throughout history. All are encouraged to proceed at their own pace and, in order to make this possible, there are places along the path to stop and reflect, or to allow someone who has chosen a different pace to pass (See Figure 1).²¹ These resting places also offer opportunities to pause and connect outer and inner experience on the path. A labyrinth has a clearly defined centre which provides another space to consider the process of the inward journey. What becomes clear in the centre is that in order to return to the mouth of the labyrinth, a walker must turn around and walk back out along the same path. Surprisingly, despite the fact that this journey out is a mirror image of the one taken into the labyrinth, a walker is often surprised to see the path differently. Once the walker returns to the mouth, she is encouraged to turn around and look back into the labyrinth. The process of walking into and out of the centre of this physical landscape transforms the view of the

²¹ Lauren Artress, in her text *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool* (1995) uses the term “labrys” for these resting places.

pattern of the path, herself, others she has met on her journey, and the world into which she is returning.

A labyrinth offers a metaphorical path into the complex, intangible nature of reading. Like the process of navigating a labyrinth, the profound, evocative process of reading is transformational. Indeed, the two words “before” and “after” also characterize the experience of reading a work of fiction. A reader enters the mouth of a novel bringing all of who she is, the conscious and unconscious elements of being, into the experience of reading. The book, this concrete object within the reader’s hands, contains unknown twists and turns in plot, character and setting. She enters with her uncertainties into the process of turning each page and, thereby, moves slowly into the mystery at the centre of her being, connecting from there to the unfolding events and characters. This connection is reached using both intuitive and rational thinking capacities to make meaning. When the reader reaches the end of a fictional story, she comes back to her outer reality, but sees herself, others, and the world to which she returns with new eyes.

The “before” and “after” structure of Green’s *Alaska*, like the “before” and “after” quality of walking a labyrinth, provides a concrete path into the visceral, elusive terrain of reading. Green chooses a “before” and “after” structure for *Alaska* because he believes that every culture and human being has a moment that becomes “the dividing line between what we were and what we are now” (Green “Speaking”). My personal and professional experience has convinced me that reading has the power to be such a “dividing line,” and Green’s novel reinforces my belief. A reader enters *Alaska* bringing her private thoughts, feelings, and hopes into the physical object in her hands. The reader is not alone in this experience because she has the company of the narrator; in this case, Pudge is the reader’s

guide and companion on this reading journey. Within the first few pages we learn that Pudge is going to boarding school in search of “a Great Perhaps” (5). According to Green, the Dutch title of *Alaska* is “*Het Grote Misschien*,” which means “The Great Perhaps.” When one enters this Dutch phrase in Babel Fish, however, the translation for this figure of speech is “The Big Maybe” (“Speaking”). The Dutch phrase captures very simply the contradictory nature of the search for meaning in life. “Big” suggests importance and significance while “maybe” conveys possibility and speculation without any surety. This metaphor of a “Great Perhaps” serves as the entrance into Pudge’s search for meaning in life and the impetus behind his decision to attend Culver Creek school. The “Great Perhaps” adds an aura of uncertainty to Pudge’s desire for something more in his life and implies that his journey, and the reader’s, will include unpredictability.

The reader’s point of entry into *Alaska* is the preposition and subordinate conjunction “before,” which Green chooses as the framework for the first part of his novel. “Before” is for the reader what a “Great Perhaps” is for the narrator, a metaphor for the search for meaning. This one simple word has strong connections to both *chronos* and *kairos* time. The *chronos* time model is one that historians use to mark significant social, scientific or cultural changes in the external environment in chronological or sequential order, while *kairos* time indicates a moment in life when something special happens.²² Green’s use of “before” indeterminately introduces the Christian calendar which references all events as “before” or “after” the birth of Jesus Christ. By doing so, Green is subtly introducing the spiritual nature of his novel. In addition, the word “before” carries connections to life-changing personal “before and after” moments that impact both one’s external *and* internal worlds. Readers may

²² The concept of *kairos* time was introduced by the Greeks who used it to describe time “in between” in which something extraordinary takes place.

not know that Green opens *Alaska* with this meaning-charged word because his story relates the life changing moment in the lives of his characters, but they will intuit that something significant is about to unfold. What might happen, however, is at this moment a mystery.

The most critical effect of the word “before” is that it engages the energy of the reader. In an interview with Jennifer Buehler, Green shared that he believes a book has a certain amount of energy. In order to attain the maximum amount of kinetic energy, he contends, a book needs a reader (Buehler Web 2008). Reader-response critics, too, argue that the reader is an essential element in the literary process. In *Literature as Exploration* (1995), Rosenblatt describes the literary work as a “transaction” between the reader and the verbal symbols on the page (Rosenblatt *Literature* 26). The term “transaction” is one Rosenblatt adopted from the work of John Dewey because it counters the Cartesian dualistic paradigm and offers room for the dynamics of process that are crucial to her reading model (Rosenblatt 1993). Rosenblatt’s research has received little attention from current literary theorists and critics. However, educators in the twenty-first century do continue to incorporate this reader-response critic’s approach in their teaching of reading within the English classroom. Two of these educators, Jeffrey Wilhelm and Bruce Novak, argue that Rosenblatt’s transactional theory is important. In *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom* (2011), Wilhelm and Novak attribute criticism of Rosenblatt’s work to the perception that it is “*merely* subjective” and “dangerously soft” (Wilhelm & Novak 12, 34). Building on Rosenblatt’s work, these two educators argue persuasively for a renewed vision of the teaching of English that includes the evocative, connective, and reflective aspects of reading. Another educator, Cristina Vischer Bruns, builds a detailed case in support of the book as a transitional object in the life of a

reader.²³ I endorse Rosenblatt's insistence on the essential role of the reader and on reading as a process, as well as Wilhelm and Novak's convincing plea for recognition of the power of story to deeply engage readers, and Bruns's impressive defence of the book as an object that can transform its reader. The metaphorical interpretive lens of a labyrinth also offers a way to explore more deeply the mystery within the reading experience. With Green's use of indeterminate details that engage the reader, *Alaska* is equally important in exploring this aspect of reading.

The uncertain, subtle elements in *Alaska* surface immediately. The first chapter of Green's novel, entitled "one hundred thirty-six days before," brings chronos and kairos aspects of time together (Green *Alaska* 3). "One hundred thirty six days" is chronos time, linear and ordered, with a definite beginning and end. "Before" is kairos time, circular and indeterminate, having no clearly defined start or finish. By choosing this unusual chapter designation, Green establishes the "both/and" nature of the path into his novel. The narrator proves to be equally circuitous. "Miles Halter" is the name which Green chooses for this character, a name that captures the essence of contradiction (10). "Miles," which derives from the Latin word "millia," meaning "thousands," implies that a long journey is ahead. "Halter," however, conveys an image of a strap fastening an animal or piece of clothing in one place. Metaphorically, this name choice reinforces the indeterminate style of Green's novel, which asks for the reader's participation in the unfolding of its meaning. In addition, the narrator's name implies the nature of the connection between him and the reader of *Alaska*. The narrator offers the reader places to stop, or "halt," on the journey into and out of the "miles" of this novel.

²³ Bruns records her research in a text entitled *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching* (2011).

The first stage of the reader's passage into *Alaska* is getting to know the guide. Soon after Miles meets his roommate, he acquires the nickname "Pudge," an ironic choice because our narrator is "skinny" (14). Such a choice subtly conveys that there is more to Pudge than meets the eye. In addition, such a nickname reinforces the contradictions within our narrator. Pudge begins his story by presenting himself as a social outcast. He claims his only connection is with a "ragtag bunch of drama people and English geeks" with whom he sat "by social necessity in the cavernous cafeteria of [his] public school" (3). Pudge's mother organizes a "Good-bye to Miles" farewell party "awash in the delusion" that her son has kept his popularity a secret from her. As a result, she prepares for a "cavalry" of his friends to attend (3). "Said cavalry consisted of exactly two people," whom Pudge describes as "vastly, deeply uninteresting" (4). Despite insisting that his only social contact is with "drama people," Pudge contradicts his assertion when he responds to the news that his guests are participating in a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* with the following:

I might have asked a question about *Jesus Christ Superstar*, except that 1. I didn't know what it was and 2. I didn't care to learn, and 3. I never really excelled at small talk. (4)

Pudge's lack of interest in this musical theatre production and in conversation with his guests suggests superficial engagement. He further contradicts his self-evaluation when responding to his mother's enquiry about the reason for his decision to attend boarding school by reading from a biography of the French writer Francois Rabelais. Pudge makes an aside comment for the reader's ears alone: "I liked reading biographies of writers, even if I'd never read any of their actual writing" (5). These internal observations counter Pudge's association with "English geeks" (3).

All of these initial details provide opportunities for the reader to develop a relationship with Pudge, who weaves together his outer life and inner responses to what is unfolding and, thereby, leaves room for the reader to come into the process of making meaning. The heat of southern Alabama is physically unbearable for Pudge, and he seeks relief from it in a “magnificently cold shower” (9). As he bends into the shower to turn on the faucet, Pudge cannot help examining his naked self in the mirror and noting:

My skinniness always surprised me: My thin arms didn't seem to get much bigger as they moved from wrist to shoulder, my chest lacked any hint of either fat or muscle, and I felt embarrassed and wondered if something could be done about the mirror. (9)

Immediately following this self-deprecating confession, Pudge exits the bathroom wearing only a towel to cover his skinniness and encounters his roommate for the very first time. Chip Martin “stood five feet and nothing, but was well built, like a scale model of Adonis” (9). Pudge’s comparison is a key element in the relationship the reader is developing with him. What reader is not familiar with the tendency to make personal comparisons on first meeting someone based solely on appearances? Pudge’s conclusion is also familiar to the reader. She inevitably empathizes with Pudge’s inclination to evaluate himself on external evidence and find himself wanting. On the other hand, this same act of comparing allows the reader a path of connection with this imaginary person.

Making such a connection as quickly with someone in our external world seldom occurs in life, as Pudge continues to demonstrate. Our narrator finds himself in an awkward place after asking what he thinks is a harmless question: “So where are your parents?” (10). When Chip responds with details from his personal life, Pudge feels awkward and responds, “Oh” (10). Privately, he admits that he is not sure how to respond to such personal

information and acknowledges, “I shouldn’t have asked, I guess, if I didn’t want to know” (10). Chip comes to Pudge’s rescue by taking things back to a surface level when he declares, “I’m a top bunk man. Hope that doesn’t bother you” (10). Chip then tells him, “Listen. I’m not going to be your entrée to Culver Creek social life” (14). To this remark Pudge replies nonchalantly, “Uh, okay” but confesses, privately: “I could hear the words catch in my throat. I’d just carried this guy’s couch beneath a white-hot sun and now he didn’t like me” (13). Each turn in Pudge’s school experience is part of a process that engages Pudge’s internal, as well external, response to this new life. For the reader, each turn of the page is part of the process of a growing relationship with Pudge. Reading about the unfolding events in Pudge’s school experience and his evolving relations with fellow students, the reader has opportunities to consider possible connections with him. The words on the pages of *Alaska* and the reader’s own lived experience of, and imaginative response, to those words determines the nature of this growing relationship.

Meeting the beautiful Alaska Young restores Pudge’s hope for a “Great Perhaps” at Culver Creek. This meeting is also a significant event for the reader of *Alaska*. The fact that Alaska is the title character makes her a person of special interest for the reader. Indeed, this character heightens the reader’s curiosity, and prompts her to wonder how Alaska might be connected to “before” or the “Great Perhaps.” Another clue is provided later that day when Alaska joins Pudge on the swing and asks, “So do you really memorize last words?” (18). This seemingly innocent question leads to the introduction of the labyrinth as a significant symbol in *Alaska*. Alaska pulls out her copy of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s historical novel *The General in His Labyrinth* and reads aloud the words of Simon Bolivar that introduce the labyrinth. Pudge admits to himself and, thereby, the reader that he does not know who Simon

Bolivar is and makes a mental note to get a copy of a biography to relieve this mystery. He does, however, ask Alaska, “So what’s the labyrinth?” (19). Some readers may also not know what this ancient symbol is and, therefore, not recognize that at this moment they are, themselves, navigating a labyrinth. Alaska responds to Pudge’s question: “That’s the mystery, isn’t it? Is the labyrinth living or dying? Which is he trying to escape – the world or the end of it?” (19).

Alaska’s response to Pudge’s enquiry about the word’s meaning provides a subtle, but significant, shift in the direction of the path into this novel. By introducing the binary framework of “either/or” and connecting it to “living *or* dying” (italics mine), Alaska confuses the labyrinth with a maze. This common misunderstanding highlights an important characteristic of the topology of a labyrinth in regards to the act of reading. If one examines the ancient Cretan labyrinth, one discovers that its construction is achieved with the squaring of a circle.²⁴ The square shape incorporates the logical, linear nature of binary thinking that is dominant in the public realm. The circle, however, breaks apart this dichotomy to provide room for mystery, uncertainty, and meaning (See Figure 2). This same, seemingly impossible combination is present in the experience of reading. Pudge ignores the profundity within Alaska’s question, “Is the labyrinth living or dying?” when he responds, “Uh, I don’t know” (19). He then changes the direction of the conversation by asking a less complicated question: “Have you really read all those books in your room?” (19). Pudge’s response mirrors the resistance I have encountered in the public realm when I bring the visceral component of reading to attention. The tendency is to skirt around the topic, as Pudge does, hoping to find something more tangible and comfortable to address. *Alaska* does not overtly

²⁴ The source for this information is the work of well known labyrinth scholar, Hermann Kern, reported in *Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings Over 5,000 Years*. The interpretation of the squaring of the circle and how it applies to John Green’s novel is my own.

give the reader details to help her discover what the labyrinth is or what the unfolding events might mean. Nonetheless, Green gives the reader many clues that encourage going beneath the surface of both the plot and self to make meaning. Pudge's inner, private responses to Alaska and the events that are unfolding both enlighten and confuse the reader in the search for their meaning.

The plot of "before" continues to turn and twist as Pudge struggles to understand this beautiful, troubled girl. The narrator focuses his attention on Alaska's surface behaviour and emotions yet, unknowingly, offers hints to the reader of what might not be visible to the outer eye regarding Alaska *and* himself. Pudge refuses to accept the reality of Alaska's moodiness and contradictions despite the fact that Takumi, the Colonel, and Alaska herself point them out repeatedly. Indeed, our narrator seems equally unaware of his own moodiness and contradictions. On the one hand, he resolves to sleep in his clothes "no matter how miserably hot it got" in order to avoid unexpected disaster (28). On the other hand, Pudge feels "the fear and excitement of living in a place where you never know what's going to happen or when" (29). Pudge captures the paradoxical nature of the reading process. Sometimes there are elements in a plot which confuse or confound the reader. She may be tempted to avoid, or skip over such details. But the landscape of reading is also a place where the reader is caught up in the mystery of not knowing "what's going to happen or when" (29).

This mystery of not knowing "what's going to happen or when" is what keeps Pudge and the reader walking together into the unfolding plot of *Alaska*. The process of doing so requires a willingness to persevere when confronted with contradictory details that prompt intuitive leaps into one's own experience. During the first World Religions class, Dr. Hyde raises some of the existential questions that will be the focus of his lectures. One of these

questions, “What are the rules of this game, and how might we best play it?” sparks Pudge’s excited response: “*The nature of the labyrinth*, I scribbled into my spiral notebook, *and the way out of it*” (32 italics in original). This connection is based on intuitive, not concrete evidence. This same open-ended existential question offers the reader a labrys moment, an opportunity to halt and reflect on its meaning for Pudge and herself.²⁵ She may not choose, or be able, to keep pace with the narrator when he notes:

The Old Man made me take religion seriously. I’d never been religious, but he told us that religion is important whether or not *we* believed in one, in the same way that historical events are important whether or not you personally lived through them. (33 italics in original)

Religion is a taboo topic in the public domain and, therefore, rarely addressed so overtly.

Pudge’s observation about Hyde’s representation of religion counters the rigidity and ambience of political correctness that surround the stereotypical view of this domain and invites the curiosity of the reader. She has the opportunity to retreat to the safety of her inner thoughts and experience to consider how religion relates to “before,” the “Great Perhaps,” Alaska, or even self.

Pudge adds other details that keep the path into *Alaska* turning towards the transformational event predicted by that significant word “before.” For the reader these twists can be confusing. Many details may seem trivial or even irrelevant in “before” because she cannot see their significance at this point in her journey. Just as a walker in a labyrinth finds herself at times moving in a direction that seems to be taking her very close to the centre, but then takes another step and finds herself moving *away* from the centre, so, too, the reader of *Alaska*. The reader needs to trust that the entire path with all its twists is necessary to get her

²⁵ I am using the term labrys that Lauren Artress introduced to identify the resting places within the labyrinth and applying it to the reader’s process (See Figure 1).

to the crisis at the novel's mid-point that is the dividing line between "before" and "after." But puzzlement, even the discomfort of uncertainty, keeps the reader turning each page to encounter whatever twist in plot awaits. The rivalry between the Weekday Warriors and Alaska's inner circle of friends is one such twist. As the Colonel says, "there is only one time when I put aside my passionate hatred for the Weekday Warriors and their country-club bullshit," and that is when he attends a Culver Creek basketball game (45). Within the "before/after" structure, this comment prompts the reader to speculate how the Weekday Warriors or a basketball game might be connected to a life changing moment. Furthermore, whenever Pudge mentions the Weekday Warriors, he always adds some reference to "pranking" (47). Perhaps a dramatic prank is the transformational event to which "before" is leading. Such a possibility is the logical conclusion suggested when Pudge reports a disaster that is inflicted upon Alaska. Storming through pounding rain, Alaska tells the Colonel and Pudge:

The fuckers flooded my room. They ruined like a hundred of my books! Goddamned pissant Weekday Warrior shit. Colonel, they poked a hole in the gutter and connected a plastic tube from the gutter down through my back window into my room! The whole place is soaking wet. My copy of *The General in His Labyrinth* is absolutely ruined. (70-71)

To this announcement the Colonel replies, "Don't worry dude, God will punish the wicked. And before He does, we will" (71). Perhaps a prank is the "before" to which Pudge's narration is leading. The juxtaposition of this Weekday Warrior "prank" and the "absolutely ruined" copy of *The General in His Labyrinth*, however, metaphorically projects both superficiality and depth. Uncertainty, as well as the resulting tension it elicits, mounts.

Then, yet another possibility surfaces. "Sixty-seven days before" Takumi takes Pudge aside to inform him about Alaska's betrayal of her ex-roommate, Marya. According to

Takumi, Alaska was in the process of leaving campus without formal permission and was caught by the Eagle. She chose to rat on her friend because she was “afraid of getting expelled” and her co-planner of pranks, the Colonel, does not know about her defection (74).

Takumi goes on to say to Pudge:

I don't know what kind of prank Alaska and the Colonel are going to come up with to end this, but I'm sure we'll both be involved. I'm telling you all this so you can know what you're getting into. (74)

Perhaps “before” involves Alaska, Pudge, Takumi and/or the Colonel being expelled from Culver Creek. The reader's uncertainty about where, or to what, “before” is leading is now enmeshed in possibilities. Is “before” leading to a dramatic prank, or to someone's expulsion from Culver Creek, or to Alaska's betrayal of her friends?

Pudge adds to the confusing twists in his narration when he returns to his growing romantic feelings for Alaska. Awakening to find Alaska sitting on his bed with her butt against his hip Pudge decides to accept her invitation to stay at school over Thanksgiving and keep her company. The Colonel warns Pudge: “If you're staying here in hopes of making out with Alaska, I sure wish you wouldn't. If you unmoor her from the rock that is Jake [her boyfriend], God have mercy on us all. That would be some drama indeed” (78). The Colonel's statement offers another possibility for the direction the path into “before” is taking. Perhaps the life-changing event is the evolution of the relationship between Pudge and Alaska. Maybe “before” reveals the transition of this relationship from one of friendship to one that is sexual, and “after” reveals the possible effects of such an alliance. Culver Creek's expellable offences include “genital contact,” along with alcohol consumption and drug use (23). Pregnancy is another possible consequence of such an act. As Pudge lies beside Alaska under the stars, drinking strawberry wine, realizing he loves her, he steels

himself to say those “Three Little Words” (82). Alaska takes him in a completely different direction, however, returning to the subject of Bolivar’s labyrinth and connecting it to suffering: “It’s not life or death, the labyrinth...[it’s] suffering. Doing wrong and having wrong things happen to you” (82). Our narrator is certainly reinforcing the uncertainty surrounding “before.” The reason for Alaska’s preoccupation with the labyrinth of suffering is a mystery; the reader cannot help but wonder why Bolivar’s labyrinth and suffering keep appearing in the midst of *casual* flirting, hints of expulsion and betrayal, and visions of grand pranks.

As Pudge relates all of the confusing details in his life at Culver Creek school to the reader, he continues to weave together concrete facts and his private responses to them. What meaning is to be made of this strange melange is a mystery that keeps the reader turning pages. In the process of doing so, the reader becomes more attached to Pudge and the new friends he is making. After his surprise invitation to Thanksgiving dinner at the Colonel’s home, Pudge, too, feels more secure in his new relationships. Both Pudge and the reader are jolted back to uncertainty, however, when Alaska admits that she told the Colonel about her betrayal of Marya. According to Alaska, the Colonel did not take this news well:

He said he’d never let me out of his sight during pranks.
That he couldn’t trust me on my own. And I don’t blame
him. I don’t even trust me. (95)

This revelation is puzzling and hints that there is something about this girl that has not yet been revealed. Despite being extremely upset, however, Alaska artfully dodges Pudge’s enquiry for the truth about why she betrayed Marya. The reader cannot help but wonder what Alaska is avoiding. Pudge and the reader meet at the same spot on the path into the labyrinth

when the narrator observes: “I didn’t even know what [Alaska] was talking about anymore” (96). Mystery continues to dominate “before.”

After Christmas break, “eight days before,” Alaska enters Pudge and the Colonel’s room with news (97). She wants a “pre-prank” to “lull the administration into a false sense of security” and divert their attention from the grand prank she has in mind (98). “Three days before,” Pudge learns the details of the prank that Alaska and the Colonel have cleverly plotted. According to the Colonel, this prank will “prove once and for all that we are to pranking what the Weekday Warriors are to sucking” (102). Since this risky prank includes hacking into the staff computer network to alter the progress reports of the Weekday Warriors responsible for Pudge’s near drowning in orientation and Alaska’s ruined book collection, Pudge concludes: “We are definitely going to get expelled” (103). Yet Pudge notes, the “Great Perhaps” may be the real prize. Together with Takumi, Lara, Alaska, and the Colonel, Pudge enters wholeheartedly into this adventure. Still, he has second thoughts when he learns that Alaska has failed to “follow the plan” and altered the progress reports of all the Weekday Warriors (108). Alaska, however, is not at all worried, insisting, “I’ll take the fall” (110). Given Alaska’s track record in that department, the Colonel responds sarcastically, “like you took the fall for Paul and Marya” (110). Takumi is more confident and assures the Colonel that the administration will not learn the source of this prank, but should that unfold, “I’ll take the fall with Alaska” (110). The centre represented by “before” seems very close.

“Two days before,” the path into the centre of “before” shifts dramatically. On the evening following the execution of the grand prank, Alaska, Pudge, the Colonel, Takumi, and Lara are camping and Alaska suggests playing a drinking game, called “Best Day/Worst

Day” (114). The rules of this game require each player to share a “Best Day” and “Worst Day” story. When Alaska tells the story of her “Worst Day,” which takes place the day “after” her “Best Day,” she relates that her mother died of a brain aneurysm because she failed to pick up the telephone and dial 911. Pudge is shocked. This public confession strikes Pudge dumb because “he was too surprised and uncomfortable to talk” (119). Privately Pudge concludes:

It was the central moment of Alaska’s life. When she cried and told me that she fucked everything up, I knew what she meant now. And when she said she failed everyone, I knew whom she meant. It was the everyone and everything of her life, and so I could not help but imagine it: I imagined a scrawny eight-year old with dirty fingers, looking down at her mother convulsing. So she sat down with her dead-or maybe-not mother, who I imagine was not breathing by then but wasn’t yet cold either. And in the time between dying and death, a little Alaska sat with her mother in silence. And then through the silence and my drunkenness, I caught a glimpse of her as she might have been. She must have come to feel so powerless, I thought, that the one thing she might have done – pick up the phone and call an ambulance never even occurred to her. (120)

The reader is right with Pudge at this point. Every reader has experienced a situation in which words seem inadequate and from which, therefore, she withdraws. Imagination offers a way to enter into what cannot be grasped tangibly. Pudge’s imagined portrait of Alaska’s private reality leaves room for the reader to broaden her own view of this complex character and to imagine how Alaska might be connected to the transformational “before.”

In the final pages of “before,” the space between the narrator and the reader on the path widens. On the “day before,” Pudge admits, “I should have done extraordinary things. I should have sucked the marrow out of life” (124). The reader halts in order to prepare for whatever dramatic event may be around the next turn. The last day, however, life seems to

return to normal. Pudge and the Colonel begin their school day in the usual way. After school Pudge gets together with Lara, the girl Alaska has chosen to be his girlfriend. This time together captures the awkwardness and humour of attempted intimacy. Just as the reader begins to relax, the direction of “the last day” shifts (125). Pudge and the Colonel join Alaska to celebrate the success of their pranking efforts. As he watches Pudge and the drunken Alaska “hook up,” the Colonel observes, “that wretched beast, drama, draws nigh” and he concludes : “This is going to end poorly” (130,131). The reader is on the edge of her seat, but Pudge pays no attention to the hints his friend gives him. Not even when Alaska comes sobbing to Pudge’s room later that same night does the sober Pudge give any thought to what her crying means or attempt to find out why she suddenly needs to drive off campus. Instead, Pudge and the Colonel help a desperate Alaska get into her car and drive away from school, despite the fact that she is highly intoxicated. This event seals the reader’s immersion in the unfolding drama. Pudge reports that he and the Colonel return to their room and “sleep like babies” (133). Just before doing so, Pudge shares his private thoughts that foreshadow approaching disaster:

We did not say: *Don’t drive. You’re drunk*; We did not say:
We aren’t letting you in that car when you are upset; We
did not say: *We insist on going with you*; We did not say:
*This can wait until tomorrow: Anything – everything – can
wait.* (132 italics in original)

Pudge does not tell the reader exactly what will happen but his words both push her into the discomfort of not knowing with certainty, and repel her from turning the page.

What follows is one blank page (134). The reader is in the centre of “before,” an empty space free of words, but, metaphorically, she is fully *in* the world of *Alaska*. There is nothing concrete to grasp or to explain what has happened, but the lack of anything tangible

underscores the authenticity of this imaginary space. All that is required in the centre of a labyrinth is for the walker to turn around and walk back through the turns of the path that has led to this interior place in the experience. All that is required in the centre of *Alaska* is to turn the page and take the first step *out* into what lies ahead. What appears on the next page is one word, “after” (135). This simple word signals profound change in the lives of the characters. For the reader, the inner terrain is the focus of “after.” From this point on the reader is completely immersed *in* Pudge’s world. This inference is supported by Green’s choice of chapter headings. The reader’s “after” journey is framed by *chronos* time, as was “before,” but the numbers are in reverse order. “Before” began “one hundred thirty-six days before” while “after” begins “the day after” (137). In addition, the reader’s “after” journey takes place in *kairos* time, which is circular and indeterminate, having no definite end point. Just as a walker in the labyrinth takes the same circuitous route out of the centre and into the world left behind, so does the reader of *Alaska*. Paradoxically, this path looks very different when navigated from the inside to the outside. Both Pudge and the reader discover this truth in the process of navigating “after.”

“The day after,” Pudge awakes to the sound of “three quick knocks” (137). When he opens the door to his room and sees the Eagle standing there, Pudge is sure that he is about to be expelled because of the progress report prank. Next, Pudge considers possibilities for the emergency meeting to which he and his fellow students have been called. Despite the Eagle’s announcement that his friend Alaska has died in a tragic car accident, despite his knowledge that “you don’t let someone drive drunk,” and despite the visible evidence of distress Pudge sees in his fellow students, he insists “[Alaska] had not died at all” (140). Pudge is clinging to the world of “before,” resisting the reality of this tragedy and the suffering which

surrounds it. Just as Alaska in “before” chose a maze path into her suffering, Pudge, in “after,” takes a winding path that appears to be like that of a maze. Pudge’s path, however, is, in fact, taking him deeper into his suffering. The reader travels this path with Pudge because all of us have experienced some kind of loss – if not the death of someone close, then the death of a dream or something vital to us. When Pudge telephones his parents to tell them about the death of his friend and they ask him if he wants to return home, Pudge answers honestly : “No, I want to be here....I can’t believe it” (144). The ambivalence Pudge admits comes from deep within himself. He confesses his private feelings: “I felt paralysed into silence” he tells us, yet wonders why he is so terrified (144). Pudge reports all that he hears and sees but adds details that are invisible to anyone except the reader. As a result, the reader experiences the depth of the pain surrounding loss, a depth which is rarely, except between the covers of a book, unveiled so poignantly.

The line between the reader and Pudge is less pronounced in “after.” If Pudge and the reader were companions on the journey out of the centre of a labyrinth, they are now walking very closely together. Pudge is brutally honest about his experience of this loss, but at first only with the reader. “Two days after,” Lara asks Pudge if he saw Alaska on that last night, and he replies: “She got drunk. The Colonel and I went to sleep, and I guess she drove off campus” (143). To the reader he adds privately that this is a lie. The guilt surrounding his participation in Alaska’s accident isolates Pudge from everyone except his companion on this journey of suffering, the reader. In the privacy of reading, aided by imagination and personal lived experience, the reader is able to bridge the distance guilt imposes and connect with Pudge. Some of what Pudge shares with the reader is very personal and rarely expressed in public because such information is relegated to the private domain. The nature of the

growing relationship between Pudge and the reader is shifting from one of companionship to one of intimacy. Pudge's first person narration allows the reader an honest view of his inner experience of the unfolding events surrounding death and loss, a view rarely encountered in life.

When the Colonel learns that Alaska's aunt is coming to pick up her personal belongings he begs Pudge to help him. Entering Alaska's room to help the Colonel find anything that her family might not want to find there, things like condoms, bottles of liquor, sex toys or "God knows what," Pudge recognizes her smell (154). Suddenly, he confesses, "[Alaska] flooded into my present, and only tact kept me from burying my face in the dirty laundry overfilling the hamper" (153). Pudge is at this moment in *kairos* time – his past and present are intimately connected. The linear, ordered representation of past and present has no room for Pudge's suffering. Pudge risks telling the Colonel that this experience of sorting through Alaska's personal belongings "is unbearable" but he delivers this message "matter-of-factly" (154). These contradictory descriptors polarize feeling and thinking and mirror the approach to the reading experience in classrooms. Logical analysis and response is the choice in the public realm, while feeling is relegated to the private territory. This division fails to acknowledge the two world views represented by the labyrinth. The topology of the labyrinth weaves square and circle together, acknowledging that both are present. The reader of *Alaska* recognizes this interconnection of feeling and thinking and this recognition helps to deepen her connection to Pudge.

The contradictions between what is unfolding in the external world and Pudge's internal responses provide many opportunities for the reader to connect intimately with the grieving narrator. Our narrator is struggling with integrating his memories of Alaska that are

now, according to the chronos time model, in the past. Nonetheless, the past is present in his current reality and he clings to these memories out of fear of losing them. Pudge harbours his memory of discovering Alaska's secret hiding place for her alcohol because "sharing the memory might lead to its dissipation" (155). In kairos time there is room for both past and present because such time is circular, with no definite end or beginning. Grief is a process. Slowly, Pudge navigates the twists and turns such a process imposes. Our narrator asks himself uncomfortable questions about his part in Alaska's death: "If I had cared about her as I should have, as I thought I did, how could I have let her go?" (159). The Colonel holds tight to rational analysis, insisting on figuring out exactly what happened to Alaska and why, but Pudge admits, "I don't know. I don't really want to know" (161). Pudge especially does not want to know who telephoned Alaska on the last night of her life. Privately he confesses: "I had wondered who called, and why, and what made her so upset. But I'd rather wonder than get answers I couldn't live with" (160). Uncertainty is Pudge's choice because he is afraid of what he might find out.

Pudge's disclosure about his fear of discovering the truth has strong metaphorical connections to the reader and the visceral element of reading. The reader is fully in this experience with Pudge, wanting to know what happens, yet unsure how it will end. There is the possibility that *Alaska* will end with something she would rather not "live with" (160). Uncertainty is hard to face. Not surprisingly, Pudge is tempted to escape his new reality, which is filled with inconsistency and has no simple answers. He confesses:

I imagined just going back home, ditching the Great Perhaps
for the old comforts of school friends. Whatever their faults,
I'd never known my school friends in Florida to die on me.
(165)

The “Great Perhaps” has reappeared but Pudge seems unwilling to acknowledge its presence here in the midst of loss. The reader’s sense of the “Great Perhaps,” however, has matured. She now recognizes that intimate relationship comes with risk. Pudge resists confronting this reality and considers withdrawing from this situation. Some first-time walkers on the path out of the centre of the labyrinth have reported the same response to their experience. These walkers entered this ancient symbol with great hopes for the insights it would provide, yet uncertain of what this wisdom might be. On reaching the centre, however, they realize that nothing great or inspiring has been reached, and the inclination to abandon the process and walk directly out is very tempting. This same disillusionment may entice some readers who, like Alaska, want a “*straight and fast*” exit from the labyrinth (155 italics in original). Still, the “Great Perhaps” is on the path into “after” just as it was on the path into “before.”

Pudge acknowledges the “aura of mystery” surrounding Alaska, and the reader extends that to the “Great Perhaps” (168). The path leading to the “Great Perhaps” is not simple or linear but rather complex, winding circuitously. Reaching the “Great Perhaps” is a process, not an end in itself. The Colonel refuses to accept this emerging actuality and claims: “There are *always* answers. We just have to be smart enough” (168, italics in original). Pudge claims he does not want to know what happened to Alaska on the last night of her life. The Colonel wants certainty, while Pudge holds onto what his friend judges to be “fantasy,” a secret love affair with Alaska (170). Both are equally limited perspectives. In life there is much that is unpredictable, elusive, and inexplicable. Avoiding the discomfort inherent in facing the truth about life’s unfairness and uncertainty, or insisting there must be some logical reason for what has happened, inevitably leads to road blocks. Indeed, some questions eventually prove difficult, even impossible, to answer.

Pudge encounters this difficulty “twenty days after,” when the Colonel tells him that he is going to call Jake, Alaska’s boyfriend, to find out what, if anything, happened that might have upset Alaska during their telephone call on that life-changing night. When Pudge insists, “*I don’t want to know* about them. I *already know* what she told me, and that’s all I need to know,” the Colonel challenges him (170 italics in original). The Colonel asks: “If she loved you so much, why did she leave you that night? And if you loved her so much, why’d you help her go? I was drunk. What’s your excuse?” (171). Pudge avoids the pain these questions unleash by becoming angry at the Colonel, at himself, and, finally, at Alaska: “I wanted to be to be the last one she loved. And I knew I wasn’t. I knew it, and I hated her for it. I hated her for not caring about me. I hated her for leaving that night” (171). Within minutes, however, Pudge returns to the idealized picture of Alaska he created in “before” and acknowledges that she “had embodied the Great Perhaps” (172). Then, once more, he turns abruptly back into the painful reality of his “after”:

Now she was gone and with her my faith in perhaps. I could call everything the Colonel said and did “fine.” I could try to pretend that I didn’t care anymore, but it could never be true again. You can’t just make yourself matter and then die, Alaska, because now I am irretrievably different, and I’m sorry I let you go, yes, but you made the choice. You left me Perhapsless, stuck in your goddamned labyrinth. (172)

The labyrinth of suffering has reappeared, and Pudge chooses to enter it in what appears to be the same way as Alaska did in “before,” with questions. Pudge’s questions, however, are not “either/or” in character but more open-ended. Pudge recognizes that he “never knew” Alaska (173). In order to grieve his loss, he realizes, he must discover who this girl really was. As he admits, “Before I could begin the shameful process of forgetting the how and why

of her living and dying, I needed to learn it: *How. Why. When. Where. What.*" (173, italics in original).

Immediately following this confession, Pudge encounters a Sufi story that asks the question "Do you know how you're going to die?" (173). This question shifts the direction of the path into "after." The reader has the opportunity to halt and reflect on the implication within this question. How much can we know at a conscious level about death and dying? The Sufi story concludes that the kind of knowing that can access the mystery of death is "spiritual" (173). Later that same day, Pudge has a conversation with Takumi at "McInedible" that metaphorically represents Pudge's struggle with the conflict between his external existence and his internal, guilt-ridden experience. Pudge's encounter with Takumi underscores the labyrinth of suffering in which he finds himself. After Takumi shares how much he misses Alaska, Pudge tells him that he misses her, too. Privately he adds:

Sorry I haven't talked to you because you couldn't know the truth about the Colonel and me, and I hated being around you and having to pretend that my grief is this uncomplicated thing. (175 italics in original)

Pudge's admission that his inner and outer realities do not match is an invitation to the reader to join him in his labyrinth of suffering. Who has not experienced incongruity between outer and inner realities? The path into *Alaska* continues to weave inner and outer, "before" and "after," elements together.

"Twenty-seven days after," Pudge is playing a video game with the Colonel when he resurrects a memory of Alaska from "before" (175). As Pudge describes it,

I nearly elbowed the Colonel in the face, swinging my arms wildly as if contorting my body in the right ways mattered as much as pressing the right buttons at the right moments – the same video-game playing delusion that had always gripped Alaska. (176)

At the same moment, the Colonel brings Pudge's attention to their present, "after" reality. Alaska, their "booze connection," is "*POOF. Gone*" (176). Since the Colonel is attempting to recreate the details of Alaska's last night and determine if her accident was indeed suicide, he needs alcohol to drink. Takumi approaches the Colonel and Pudge insisting that he be included in whatever "secret shit" they are planning because Alaska was his friend too (177). The Colonel assures him, "Tomorrow. Honestly" (177). Pudge, however, resists inviting Takumi into their private hell of guilt. The fear of expulsion that appeared in "before" then makes a return visit when the Eagle knocks on the door of Pudge's dorm room while his roommate is consuming the forbidden alcohol. Pudge quickly lights a cigarette to draw the Eagle's attention away from the Colonel. The Eagle reminds Pudge about "living within the confines of the rules lest he risk his place on this campus" (181). In doing so, the Eagle reintroduces the possibility of expulsion and appears to be reclaiming his "before" persona as the teacher most likely to "bust you" (16). Still, the Eagle departs after asking the Colonel if there is anything he can do to help him and even suggests that the boys keep their light on until they are ready to go to sleep. The Colonel returns to his drinking and together he and Pudge conclude that it is unlikely that Alaska committed suicide, but "maybe she fell asleep" (182). The uncertainty surrounding Alaska's death remains. "Twenty-eight days after," Pudge enters his dorm room to find the Colonel telling Takumi what happened on Alaska's last night. Takumi's response is a question, "so you think it was suicide?" (183), to which the answer is "maybe" (183).

"Maybe" becomes a familiar companion on the journey into the reality of Alaska's death, but this uncertainty gradually becomes more bearable. After hearing the Colonel pronounce that there has to be something that they are not seeing that will help them solve

this mystery, Takumi humourously observes: “So we just have to read the mind of a dead person” (189). “Forty-six days after,” Takumi, according to Pudge, pulls “the ultimate guilt trip” by calling attention to Pudge’s neglect of Lara (191). A surprising thing happens after Pudge risks telling Lara “I’m sorry” (192). In his experience with Lara “before,” Pudge could find nothing significant to talk about. “After,” however, they talk meaningfully and honestly about Alaska, and their feelings about her loss. Together, Pudge, the Colonel, Takumi, and Lara search for the meaning of Alaska’s impulsive drive away from school. They agree that they want to know what exactly happened to Alaska but also wonder, “how the hell are [they] going to find out?” (194).

“Fifty-one days after,” with the investigation “stalled,” Pudge turns back to the routine of life at school (195). In World Religions class, Pudge realizes that his life is evidence of the truth within the Buddha’s claim that “everything falls apart” (196). Alaska “was slipping away, falling apart in [his] memory and everyone else’s, dying again” (196). “Sixty-nine days after,” Pudge concludes, despite “the hint of resurrection” in the maple trees on campus, that “we had finally lost [Alaska]” (199). This seems more than clear when, later that day, the Eagle announces that “the school was going to build a playground by the lake in memory of Alaska” (199). This seemingly inappropriate choice of monuments proves to be the impetus that motivates Alaska’s close circle of friends to find something that would better represent their dead friend. Their choice is a prank which consists of “Subverting the Patriarchal Paradigm” (199). Alaska, herself, had planned this prank, which she had hoped to carry out during her senior year. According to Pudge, the Alaska Young Memorial Prank is:

The crown jewel of pranks, the *Mona Lisa* of high-school hilarity, the culmination of generations of Culver Creek pranking. And if the Colonel could pull it off, it would be etched in the memory of everyone at the Creek and Alaska

deserved nothing less. Best of all, it did not technically involve any expellable offenses. (200)

This prank brings together many elements from “before.” In “before,” Pudge compared Alaska, or the Alaska he idealized, to the Mona Lisa; he spent time with Alaska helping to prepare for their Weekday Warrior industrial-strength blue hair dye prank; and he lived in constant fear of being expelled. This prank has the potential to bridge “before” and “after.”

According to Pudge, the Colonel returns from spring break with plans for the execution of this “crown jewel of pranks” and “an excitement I hadn’t seen in him since Before” (200). He notes that “the prank could not work without the assistance of the Weekday Warriors” (202). Longwell Chase, a Weekday Warrior and victim of the industrial-strength blue hair dye prank in “before,” joins Pudge to tell the Eagle about the speaker they have chosen to represent the junior class at the annual Speaker Day event. Unbeknownst to the Eagle, this speaker is, in fact, a male stripper. “To ensure” that no one in the junior class “would get expelled,” Takumi and Pudge collect five dollars from each student (204). Still, Pudge realizes that “everything would fall apart” if anyone told the Eagle (204). “One hundred two days after,” however, Maxx, “a male stripper with more aliases than a covert CIA agent,” successfully arrives at Speaker Day disguised as “Dr. William Morse, a professor who studies adolescent sexuality” (203). In the middle of Dr. Morse’s speech on the tendency of boys to objectify girls’ bodies, Lara stands and interrupts Dr. Morse : “You’re so hot! I weesh you’d shut up and take off your clothes” (208). Maxx obliges, shouting loud enough for Takumi, who is in charge of the music, to hear him: “This one’s for Alaska Young” (208). The Eagle “[is] up in a flash” and, “not smiling, but sucking his lips in as if not smiling [requires] effort,” indicates with his thumb that Maxx should leave (209).

The prank is “Alaska’s prank through and through,” and her four friends are, at day’s end, “aglow in the success of it” (209). Alaska, they believe, has been suitably put to rest.

A week and a half later, “one hundred fourteen days after,” Pudge, the Colonel, and Takumi suddenly make a connection that seems central to Alaska’s death. Takumi asks Pudge: “January 10. That date ring a bell?” and Pudge replies, “Yeah, it’s the day Alaska died” (210). Takumi then reminds Pudge that January 9 was Alaska’s “best day,” the day her mother took her to the zoo,” and Pudge exclaims “Holy shit” (210). Still, connecting the date of Alaska’s death to the date on which her mother died does nothing to solve the mystery of why Alaska drove into the police car. Pudge reports that it does allow them to admit failure and give up the search for the meaning of Alaska’s death. There is just one more thing they choose to do. Together, Pudge and the Colonel drive through “the accident scene” (212). “After” they have made it through this traumatic scene Pudge relates, “*POOF* we are through the moment of her death” (213). “Poof” is an ironic statement because their suffering has been the twisting pattern of process, not the sudden passage suggested by the word “poof.” Pudge and the Colonel take the next exit off the freeway and pull off to the side of the road. Hugging his friend closely, Pudge confesses: “*God we must look so lame*, but it doesn’t much matter when you have just now realized, all the time later, that you are still alive” (214 italics in original). Pudge’s comments echo those he made early in “before” when he painted the picture of himself as a “geek” with a “minor life” (1). There is a significant change here, now, with the Colonel. Journeying into the labyrinth of suffering caused by Alaska’s death has led Pudge to deep connection with another human being.

The reader, too, feels a sense of connection to Pudge and his friends and begins to slow her pace realizing that there are not many more turns until the end of this experience.

Pudge and the Colonel return to their school work, and their room becomes “Study Central with Takumi and Lara over till all hours” (214). “One hundred and thirty-six days after,” Pudge notes that there are just twenty-four hours left in his semester. He has completed his precalculus exam without Alaska’s assistance, and is optimistic about the results. The Alabama heat has returned, and Pudge’s parents will arrive the next day to help him pack and return to Florida. Pudge has only one more thing to accomplish and that is to complete his final for the World Religions class. When he opens the door to his dorm room, he discovers a note from Takumi in which his friend confesses that he, too, let Alaska go on that fateful night one hundred and thirty-six days ago. This confession helps Pudge write his way “out of the labyrinth” (219). Pudge has returned to the mouth of his labyrinth and is able to turn around and look back at the path that has led him into, and out of, pain. He admits: “I still believe in the Great Perhaps, and I can believe in it in spite of having lost [Alaska]” (219). Pudge feels more connected to himself, his circle of friends, and Alaska after his journey into the mystery of suffering. His winding journey has given him a new understanding of self and of life.

The reader, too, has new eyes, standing with Pudge back at the point where the journey with him began. Just as the unicursal pattern of a labyrinth is difficult for a walker to recognize from within the symbol, so, too, is the structure of *Alaska* difficult to fully comprehend from within the novel. Once a walker navigates into and out of a labyrinth, however, and turns around to look back into the symbol, the unicursal shape is much clearer. The process of reading *Alaska*, then standing outside to ponder the implications of the “before” and “after” framework and the indeterminate details that now have deeper meaning, transforms the reader’s view of this novel. Now there is room to see Pudge as the mythical

Greek hero Theseus, who uses a magic ball of thread to track his journey into the centre of the labyrinth to kill the Minotaur, and then uses this same thread to find his way back out.²⁶ In the original Greek myth, the Goddess Ariadne discovers that the only way to navigate the labyrinth is by taking the same path into and out of it; to ensure Theseus can escape the labyrinth, Ariadne gives him the thread to mark his way. For Pudge and the reader, Alaska is the thread into and out of the narrative. This thread is more visible to the reader when she looks back into her reading experience: she now appreciates that every twist and turn contributes to the meaning of the whole, and that this meaning is open to her interpretation. She finds herself drawn back to “before,” the “Great Perhaps,” and her companion on this reading journey, Pudge.

The reader may notice that “before” and “after” begin and end with “one hundred thirty-six” days, implying that the “before” and “after” paths are the same (3, 16). Yet the reader views the indeterminate word “before” with new eyes. Now this term more clearly conveys transformation, a profound dividing line in Pudge’s life that marks who he was “before” Alaska’s death, and who he is “after” this event. The simple word “before” now connects more obviously to the life and death of Jesus Christ. This prophet is, according to Christian scholars, an agent of transformation with deep connections to the spiritual life. Thus, “before” indeterminately introduces the transformational and spiritual essence of the story that is to follow. With “after” eyes, the reader sees Pudge, and his pursuit of “The Great Perhaps,” quite differently.

²⁶ Knossos on the island of Crete is the legendary location of the labyrinth in which King Minos imprisoned the Minotaur – half bull, half man. Such early labyrinths as the one in the Greek myth are not puzzle mazes. The Minotaur was at the centre of a single circuitous pathway, a fact that the Goddess Ariadne learned from the Knossos labyrinth creator Daedalus.

When Pudge first introduces the “Great Perhaps” as the last words of Francois Rabelais he insists: “That’s why I’m going. So I don’t have to wait until I die to start seeking a Great Perhaps” (5). Ironically someone does die in order for our narrator to find his “Great Perhaps.” Indeed, in the pursuit of this goal both Pudge and the reader’s view of the “Great Perhaps” has been transformed. No longer is this a journey toward a simple end but rather one that weaves together the many uncertain, complex aspects of being human *and* the intangible rewards of navigating life’s beauties. Reconsidering apparently trivial details, more irony surfaces for the reader. At the beginning, as Pudge stands in the dribbling shower, he wonders “whether I had made a grand miscalculation” (5). The reader now knows that this statement is an understatement. The metaphor of the labyrinth of suffering, introduced by Alaska and by Pudge’s fascination with dying words, takes on deeper meaning with “after” eyes. Within the first pages of *Alaska* Pudge makes reference to several dead people – Jesus Christ, Francois Rabelais, John F. Kennedy, James Joyce, Humphrey Bogart, and Henrik Ibsen. Then Alaska introduces another person long dead – Simon Bolivar. From a “before” perspective, their dying words or actions seem to suggest that such words will capture the essence of these significant people. “After,” quite the opposite is true. Dying words, the “Great Perhaps,” and the “labyrinth of suffering” are now infused with uncertainty and contradiction. Pudge’s references to great works of literature such as *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton’s 1911 fictional account of the ironic twists of fate in the life of its narrator, reinforce this picture of ambiguity and unpredictability. With every turn of the page the reader sees more signs of the depth of meaning to be found within seemingly ordinary details.

Significantly, the reader also has a very different view of Alaska with her “after” experience. The reader cannot help but recognize the many subtle indicators of Alaska’s pain and life’s fragility. Alaska’s broken spirit is not tangible but, with “after” eyes, is more visible. When Alaska tells Pudge, “There are people with real problems. I’ve got real problems,” the reader recognizes the truth hidden within this statement (27). And when Alaska replies to Pudge’s question about her mother smoking with “Not anymore,” the reader now knows this is an honest response. Alaska’s reading choices also now have broader implications and help the reader make deeper connections with this central character. Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *The General in his Labyrinth* reveals that Bolivar never recovered from the death of his wife. Indeed, her death proved to be the “before” and “after” event of his life, just as the death of Alaska’s mother became the dividing line in her life. Referring to Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Alaska tells the Colonel, “I like that book” (59). The Colonel responds to Alaska’s declaration with the observation, “You would. Big white whale is a metaphor for everything. You live for pretentious metaphors” (59). With “after” vision the reader recognizes the depth in the Colonel’s observation. Metaphor is multi-faceted and complex and implies there is much below the surface of what is being described. There are many levels to *Moby Dick* just as there are to Alaska. In addition, both *Moby Dick* and *The General in his Labyrinth* are texts that subvert linearity and embrace the symbolic dimension of life in a way that requires *both* intellectual *and* imaginative, intuitive capacities to fully experience. The lines of poetry Alaska shares with Pudge similarly offer the reader myriad implications for understanding this young woman. For example, Alaska summarizes the lines of Auden’s poem “As I Walked Out One Evening” with, “It says so much about love and brokenness” (85). The reader now realizes Alaska says this in light of her own experience

with these two realities of life. When Alaska quotes Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "Night falls fast. Today is in the past," and tells Pudge, "It's about depression, dumb-ass," the reader now sees this seemingly funny comment as self-revelatory black humour (89). Indeed, the reader recognizes that there is much more to this character, and this novel, than what appears on the surface of its pages.

The process of reading this narrative makes the reader mindful of details that on first glance seem merely superficial, but in fact encode deep truth. With an "after" view, the reader is more likely to consider *Alaska* as a twenty-first-century version of the Christ myth.²⁷ Alaska is a Christ figure and her death brings her disciples, Pudge, the Colonel, Takumi, and Lara together in a way that leads to their resurrection. "After" Alaska's death Pudge, the Colonel and Alaska's other inner circle review the time they spent with her in the days preceding her death and attempt to make sense of their loss. Like Christ's disciple Peter, who betrayed Christ, Pudge needs to assuage his guilt. After "one hundred thirty-six days" of navigating his labyrinth of suffering caused by Alaska's death Pudge realizes: "I know now that [Alaska] forgives me for being dumb and scared and doing the dumb and scared thing. I know she forgives me, just as her mother forgives her" (219). Ultimately it is this knowledge of Alaska's forgiveness, like the forgiveness of Christ, that gives Pudge and his friends new life. When viewed within the "before" and "after" structure of *Alaska* this possible connection to the Christ myth is strengthened. *Alaska* is also an agent of transformation or resurrection for the reader. She is not the same person that she was "before" this reading

²⁷ I am using the word myth in the sense that Pudge summarizes in *Alaska*: "*Myth* doesn't mean a lie; it means a traditional story that tells you something about people and their worldview and what they hold sacred" (33 italics in original). Myth encodes deep truth.

experience. Her reading journey has transformed her view of self and the world to which she has returned.²⁸

Mystery is a central dynamic in the process of reading *Alaska* and walking a labyrinth. Both offer unexpected twists and turns into an uncertain centre. On the path into *Alaska*, like that into a labyrinth, one slowly releases the details of one's outer life and becomes one with the characters in the story. The inner and outer worlds of Pudge and the reader draw together. When or how this happens is unclear, for the process is like that of following a circuitous path into a labyrinth. Navigating *Alaska* and a labyrinth involve the surrendering to spirit. Pudge concludes his account of the journey into his labyrinth with words that capture not only the vital essence of the spirit in the imaginary character of *Alaska*, but also in reading and life:

I believe now that we are greater than the sum of our parts.
If you take Alaska's genetic code and you add her life
experiences and the relationships she had with people, and
then you take the size and shape of her body, you do not get
her. There is something else entirely. There is a part of her
greater than the sum of her knowable parts. (220)

As there is part of *Alaska* "greater than the sum of her knowable parts" so, too, there is more to reading and life than rational, objective evidence reveals. There is the inner, mysterious, and intangible dimension of reading and life – spirit.

²⁸ My choice of the female pronoun throughout this document is deliberate. What I have been addressing in my thesis is the intimate, personal quality of the reading experience. Gender neutral language is more formal and impersonal and does not capture the essence of what I am arguing. Furthermore, my early reading encounter has strongly influenced my view of the reading act and I am female and see this experience through my eyes. In addition, the spirit, according to ancient and eastern cultures, is viewed as divine feminine energy. The use of female language has allowed me, indeterminately, to acknowledge all of these elements.

Conclusion: Before and After

The labyrinth captures the essence of my experience researching and composing a thesis about the visceral, elusive element of reading - spirit. I find myself standing back at the mouth of this labyrinth with the opportunity to turn around and look back into the path I have traveled and report what I now see. This journey began long ago with the book that I read when I was ten years old. That book opened me to the reality that there is something more to reading than the physical object held in my hands. The years I spent introducing works of fiction to youth confirmed my belief in the central role of the spirit in the reading act. The process of researching the representation of spirit in American adolescent fiction, confronting the resistance this taboo subject elicits, and reporting what I have learned has strengthened my argument for the acknowledgement of the spiritual component of reading. This same process has given me new eyes to see a path to bridge the essential contribution of mind and spirit in reading. The labyrinth metaphor and Green's *Alaska* have proved to be rich resources providing me with a depth and richness that demonstrates the spirit at work.

Both the academe and education in our twenty-first-century world are shifting in their resistance to the presence of the spirit in the reading act but there remains a tendency to set up compartments between and within ourselves when we delve into the spirit. The challenge is to allow the "either/or" and "both/and," the scientific rational and the mysterious intangible approaches to inform and influence one another rather than to isolate them from each other. Ammons judges the postmodern propensity to question everything to be in opposition to hope and idealism (Ammons 2010). What if questions and hope are vitally connected? In *Alaska* Dr. Hyde introduces the three religious traditions he will be teaching using questions. In the final class of the year he summarizes the essence of these same religious traditions:

“Each brought a message of radical hope” (215). We are closest to spirit when we are asking questions. The search for meaning is a quest which, with faith, patience, and perseverance, uncovers new possibilities. The Search Institute currently maintains that there are two significant challenges to addressing the spirit in academic research fields. One is that spirit has been conflated with religion. But what if spirit cannot be separated from other aspects of our being and doing? Further, what if, as Dr. Hyde insists, “religion is important whether or not *we* believed in one, in the same way that historical events are important whether or not *you* personally lived through them?” (33 italics in original)). The second challenge to the study of the spirit that the Search Institute highlights is the twenty-first-century world’s insistence on a solid theoretical foundation for any academic pursuit. But what if the path to a more solid foundation for study is to be found by entering fully into the discomfort that arises when we loosen our rational, empirical boundaries? Dr. Hyde points out that “the Buddha knew one thing science didn’t prove for millennia” (196). I suggest that rather than searching for a “*Straight and Fast*” path into this terrain, we need to direct our attention to the twisting, turning path that characterizes process and, in time, discover new meaning and connections.

Adolescent fiction, as Green’s *Alaska* reveals, is particularly suited to explore new avenues into the spirit. Green loosens the boundaries that have restricted the spirit to the private domain. His methods of doing so include indeterminacy. Both spirit and religion in *Alaska* are represented indeterminately with a focus on exploring the meaning and purpose of life, struggling with life’s uncertainty and fragility, and seeking connections with self, others, and the world. Green’s use of such open-ended details depends on the participation of the reader inviting her reflective engagement to make meaning. The reader’s vital role in meaning-making is further assisted by the questions that are shown to be intrinsic to religion,

spirit, and life. In addition, the “Great Perhaps” and the “Labyrinth of Suffering,” two metaphors that are indeterminately connected to death and dying, take us into the heart of the discomfort in the modern world elicited by matters that cannot be explained logically. What Green succeeds in doing, however, is to give a new face to this suffering. Suffering becomes a foundation on which the spirit can grow and develop without abandoning logic and analysis. When Pudge asks the Colonel, “So how will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?” he replies: “It still seems like straight and fast is the only way out – but I choose the labyrinth. The labyrinth blows but I choose it” (216). As I stand back at the mouth of my study of this novel, I support the Colonel’s choice. I see the possibilities for what can be gained by entering the discomfort that surrounds the visceral. Perhaps suffering and discomfort are, in fact, the place in which a new approach can arise. Perhaps also we could approach the spirit within a comparative framework just as Green does with the three religions taught in the World Religions class.

As I have argued in this thesis, metaphor is a vital component in the process of bringing together the tensions inherent in our approach to the spiritual. With Alaska Young and Dr. Hyde, Green brings the inner and outer aspects of our being into productive tension. His metaphorical portrait of these two characters implies that the separation of church and state, and the contradictions between our inner and outer experience, are realities that exist within each human being. Alaska attempts to navigate the inexplicable nature of her mother’s death by limiting herself to “either/or” thinking, denial, and coping mechanisms like flirting, drinking, and smoking. What happens, however, is that her choices increase her suffering. What Alaska mistakenly envisions is a life free from suffering, and all her efforts are directed to this end. This same mistaken vision pervades our modern culture about matters that are

currently thought to lack a solid theoretical, logical foundation. But as Dr. Hyde notes, “Everybody who has ever lost their way in life has felt the nagging insistence of that question [How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?]. At some point we all look up and realize we are caught in a maze” (158). Instead of denying this reality, Dr. Hyde invites his students and the reader of *Alaska* to enter into it. He does this without overt directions. Rather, using stories and questions, he offers his students a way to consider how the subject of their study might respond to the uncertainty and unfairness that exist in their lives. As Hyde notes immediately following Alaska’s death:

Even when the material we study seems boring, we are trying to understand how people have answered [Alaska’s] question and the questions each of you posed in your papers – how different traditions have come to terms with what Chip, in his final, called ‘people’s rotten lots in life.’ (158).

Hyde does not abandon critical thinking but finds a way to weave together the rational and mysterious aspects of navigating life. Again the participation of his students and the reader is key to achieving this connection.

Reading, as my thesis, personal, and professional experience demonstrate, has the potential to be transformational. Green’s “before” and “after” structure for *Alaska* mirrors this elusive aspect of reading. There is so much more to these two simple words than first meets the eye, as the winding plot of *Alaska* reveals. Green’s structure indeterminately highlights the dynamic of non-duality that is central to my argument about the reading act. Both the inner, mysterious, intangible nature of time and the concrete, linear, rational aspect of it mirror the reading process. *Alaska* also portrays reading as a threshold between the public and private realms or, to put it a different way, between our outer and inner experience. That reading is a process that takes us deeply into the mystery at the center of our

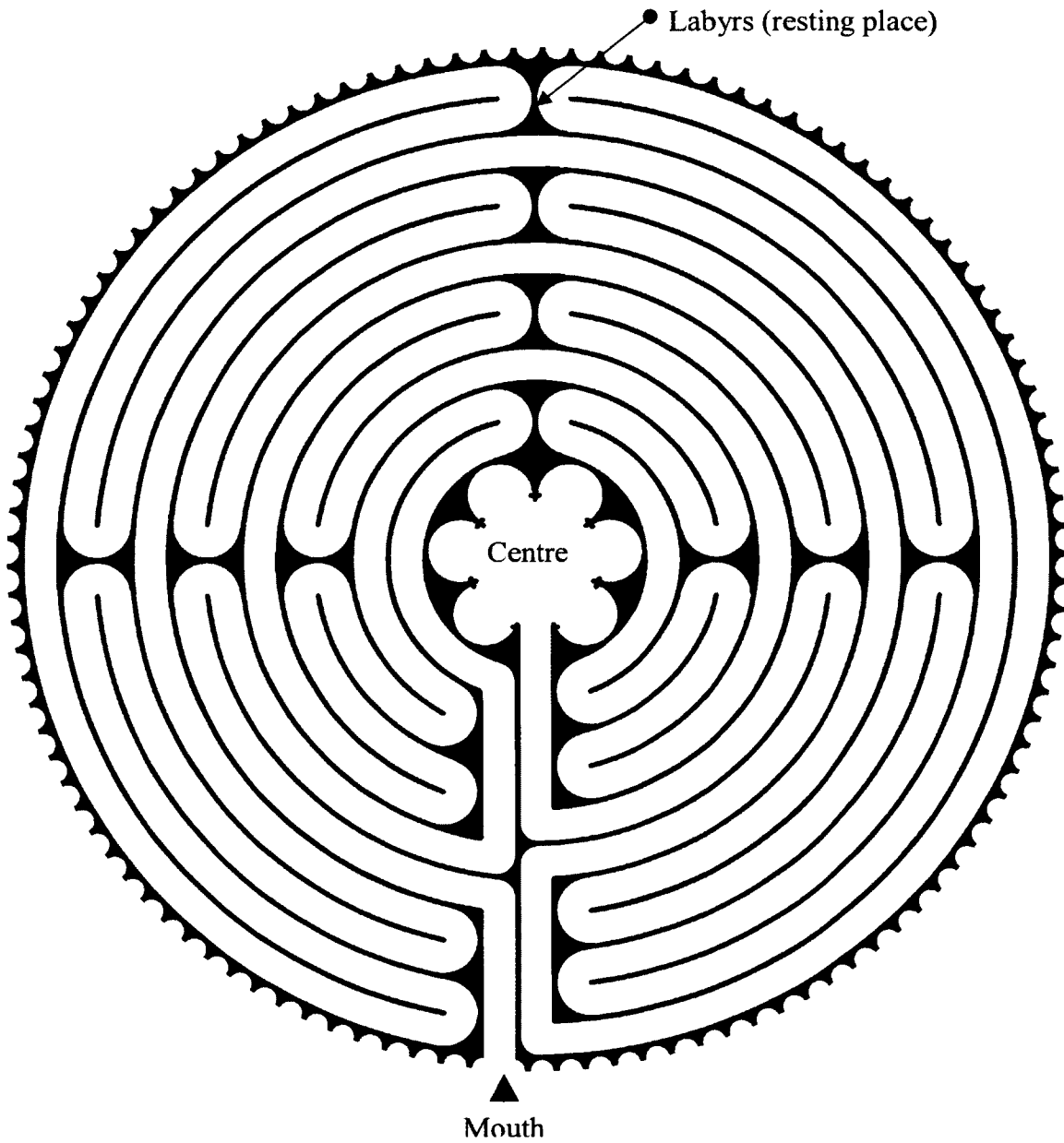
own being and allows us to connect from there to the characters in the story is dramatically portrayed by the blank page following the conclusion of the “before” section of *Alaska*.

However, making such a connection does not end with the closing of the cover of the book. Rather this connection informs and influences our feeling of connection with fellow human beings and may impact future decisions we make in our daily lives. The labyrinth metaphor is especially crucial in calling our attention to this aspect of reading. This symbol also concretely mirrors the nature of process that characterizes reading. Process twists and turns, slowly unveiling new possibilities.

“Conclusion” is a word that implies a final destination has been reached, but such is not the case for me when it comes to drawing my thesis research on the visceral dynamic of reading to a close. I set off on this journey like Pudge, who enrolled at Culver Creek in search of a “Great Perhaps.” The “Great Perhaps” first appeared to me back in my childhood when I read that book that transformed my view of myself and the life I was living. What I comprehend now that I am back at the point of my entry into the study of this subject of spirit is that I, like Pudge, entered this endeavour hoping for a grand revelation. The process of navigating the realities of the study of something that eludes my rational left-brain education has included much struggle. I now have a genuine appreciation for the labyrinth of suffering we need to walk in order to uncover what might be if we enter fully into the challenges of addressing the spirit in the public realm. Furthermore, like Pudge, whose attempts to discover an explanation for Alaska’s death gave him enough “to rediscover the Great Perhaps,” I acknowledge that my study has left me enough to rediscover my “Great Perhaps” and given me hope for the future of reading. The boundaries surrounding spirit are indeed loosening, and, with time, the process of entering into this unknown and therefore uncomfortable

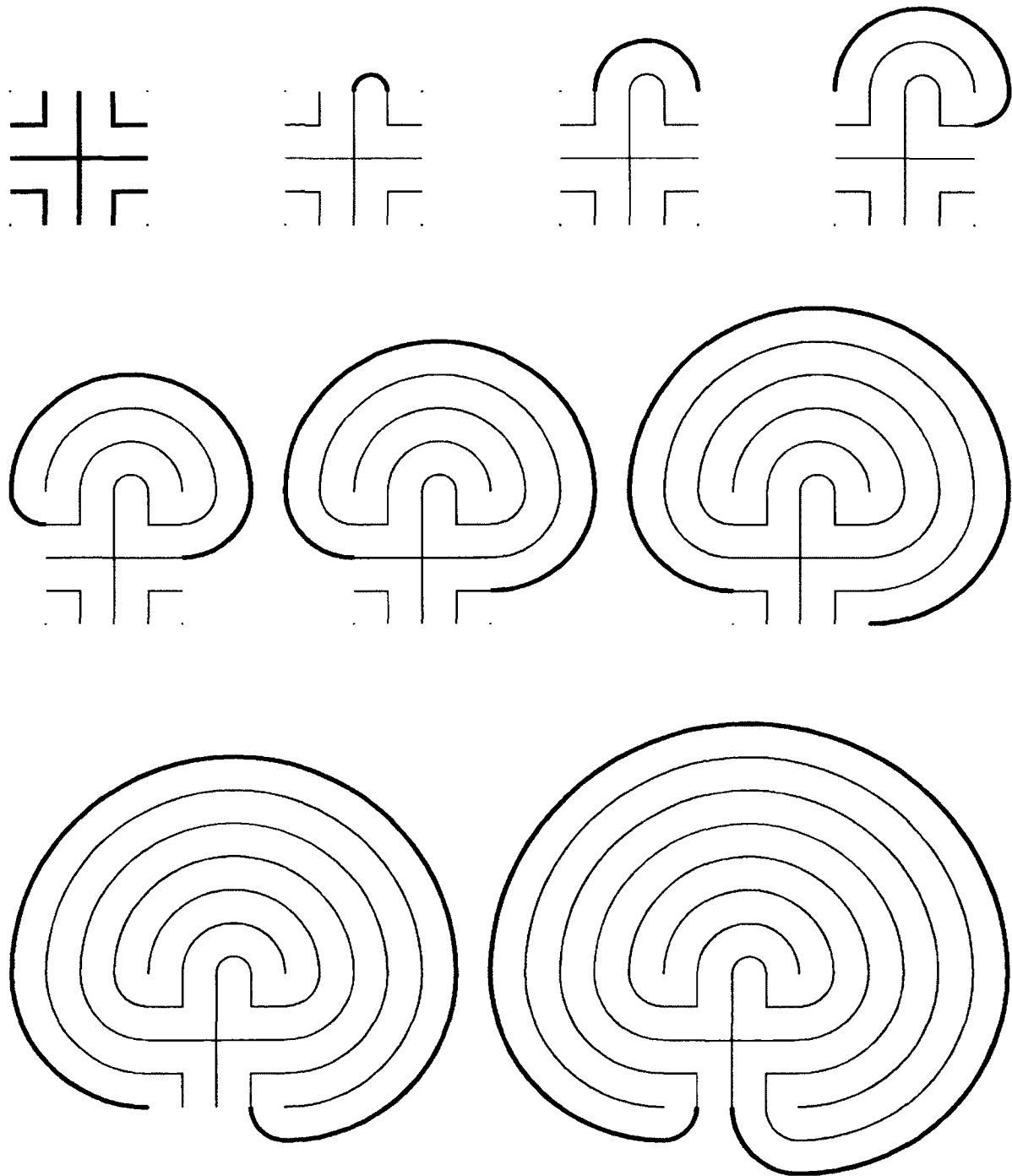
territory will bridge the divide between the mysterious and theoretical aspects of reading and strengthen the scholarship directed to this vital field in the education of youth.

Fig. 1 A Chartres Labyrinth²⁹



²⁹ This Chartres labyrinth pattern is drawn by Gary Dean in Autocad and used with permission.

Fig. 2 A Cretan Labyrinth³⁰



³⁰ This Cretan labyrinth pattern is drawn by Gary Dean in Autocad and used with permission.

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