

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

What is it that you're exploring in *Paper Towns*?

The book explores more than one theme, I hope, but *Paper Towns* is at least partly about the imagination. I'm very interested in what the human imagination can and cannot do. Can we see ourselves as others see us? Can we see others as we see ourselves? In *Paper Towns*, everyone is misimagining everyone else. That's where the humor comes from, and also the seriousness.

There's something profoundly weird and uncomfortable about being a human in a world full of other humans, because you recognize that you share a lot of fundamental qualities with all the other people, but at the same time there is a glaring distance between you and everyone else: You are stuck inside the skinned-in enclosure of yourself, and they aren't. So you inevitably experience the world in a self-centered way. This is what makes it so easy to make assumptions about other people that are radically oversimplified.

An aside: So, for instance, when I was a kid, I believed longer-than-I-care-to-acknowledge that I was the only human being on the planet and everyone else including my parents and my brother were aliens who dressed up like humans when I was around. And in a way, in my weirdly solipsistic childhood way, I was right.

Are there any tips you would give a book club to better navigate their discussion of your book?

J. D. Salinger dedicated one of his books in part to the reader "who reads and runs," which has always struck me as an unfair attack against critical, thoughtful discussions of novels. But I understand what he means a little bit: In the best books, symbolism and metaphor and language do not need to be consciously apprehended in order to be effective. In "The Catcher in the Rye," we don't need to recognize that the hunting cap Holden wears as a security blanket is the same red as his dead brother's hair to be heartbroken for Holden. If it doesn't work on your gut, it doesn't work. So that's what I like to talk about--how (and whether) a book makes me feel.

What was one of the most surprising things you learned in writing *Paper Towns*?

Paper Towns is set in Orlando, where I grew up, and when I was writing it, I returned several times to Central Florida. It's great fun to write about a place you know, to feel totally comfortable with the geography and ethnography of a place. But in returning, I learned how much I had forgotten about what I love about Florida--everything is so lushly green that you feel like nature could take the land back from us at any moment. So it was nice to have Orlando, for all its awful commerciality and transience, rehabilitated in my memory a bit.

What three elements does a book need in order to grab your attention as a reader?

Well, I like a good narrative voice; I like to be told a story by someone I enjoy listening to. I also like crisp dialogue, and most of all I need a book not to condescend to me. I like books that challenge me, that treat me as if I'm smarter than I am. Fortunately, there are a lot of books out there that meet those criteria. (Does this mean I'm not very smart? Possibly.)

Stuff I read and loved this year:

The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau Banks, by E. Lockhart
The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, by M. T. Anderson
The Book Thief, by Markus Zusak
Lock and Key, by Sarah Dessen
Kendra, by Coe Booth
Bliss, by Lauren Myracle

A Paper Townsian Reading List:

Leaves of Grass, 1855 Edition, by Walt Whitman
Into the Wild, by Jon Krakauer
Final Harvest: The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson
As Simple as Snow, by Gregory Galloway
The Bell Jar, by Sylvia Plath
The Virgin Suicides, by Jeffrey Eugenides
Moby Dick, Herman Melville
The Last Good Kiss, by James Crumley

Paper Towns playlist:

1. "Game Shows Touch Our Lives," The Mountain Goats
2. "The History of the Concept of the Soul," The Mr. T Experience
3. "Holland, 1945," Neutral Milk Hotel
4. "Up the Wolves," The Mountain Goats
5. "Piazza, New York Catcher," Belle and Sebastian
6. "Bucketseats," Cake
7. "Walt Whitman's Niece," Billy Bragg and Wilco
8. "Champs Elysees," NOFX
9. "Cotton," The Mountain Goats
10. "New Partner," The Palace Brothers
11. "Union Maid," Old Crow Medicine Show
12. "Walk on Boy," Doc Watson
13. "Hesitating Beauty," Billy Bragg and Wilco
14. "Greetings in Braille," The Elected
15. "All My Little Words," The Magnetic Fields