

The Anthropocene Reviewed by John Green

You know when you read a book, and it's like the book just happened to arrive at the time when you needed it the most? That was this one for me.

John Green is not only known for the YouTube shows he runs with his brother, Hank (watching the Crash Course videos was definitely the highlight of my high school World History classes), but for his infamous coming-of-age novels: *Looking for Alaska*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and *Turtles All the Way Down*, to name a few. *The Anthropocene Reviewed* is instead a collection of personal essays where he rates everything from Canadian geese to viral meningitis on a five star scale, effortlessly illustrating how in the anthropocene, there are no disinterested observers. There are only participants.

Ultimately, this book is a love letter to the human experience. The good and the bad together. And with so much bad going around in the world right now, this is exactly what I needed to read. I always have a hard time reading inspirational books about just how great it is to be alive – they feel... idealized? Plastic? Foolishly optimistic? Whatever the right word is, something is lacking. *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, on the other hand, is exactly the opposite. It's incredibly self aware, discussing both the egregiously bad and the incredibly good. I think John Green himself says it the best:

“To fall in love with the world isn't to ignore or overlook suffering, both human or otherwise. For me anyway, to fall in love with the world is to look up at the night sky and feel your mind swim before the beauty and the distance of the stars. It's to hold you children while they cry, and watch as the sycamore trees leaf out in June ... We all know how loving ends. But I want to fall in love with the world anyway, to let it crack me open.”

Above all else, *The Anthropocene Reviewed* is a beautiful and honest attempt to do just that.

Beautiful Country: A Memoir by Qian Julie Wang

Qian Julie Wang's journey begins as she leaves her life in China behind for a promising future in Mei Guo (which translates directly to “beautiful country” in English). But when seven-year-old Qian arrives in New York City in 1994, it's anything but beautiful and she is faced with fear, poverty, and forced secrecy. Her parents – once scholars and professors in China – now live in constant fear of discovery and deportation, working underpaying and dangerous jobs. They give their daughter one piece of advice: “Whatever happens, say that you were born here, that you've always lived in America.”

Young Qian is left to navigate her new life on her own – from trying to make friends to battling hunger and taking care of her parents. In between shifts at the sweatshop working for pennies and teaching herself English, Qian finds solace in the New York Public Library, in between the pages of the *Baby Sitter's Club* and *Sweet Valley Twins* books.

So many times reading this book, my heart broke for the little girl in the pages, struggling under the weight of adopted invisibility. I couldn't imagine how one little girl could go through so much, and still remain hopeful and optimistic. This is a story that we don't hear often, and the whole time I read this book, I could not shake the feeling that I needed to tell everyone I knew about it because everyone has something to learn from this story.

Wang tells her story with unforgettable clarity and strength, while also doing justice to the hardships and struggles undocumented families are still facing all over the country – the ugly side of the “American Dream.” But what truly makes this memoir unique is that Wang takes heavy subjects like poverty, prejudice, and xenophobia and tells them with the clarity and honesty we could only receive from a child narrator. Through her eyes, complicated and heavy subjects are stripped down to their very roots, creating a strange but extremely powerful balance of darkness and light. Compelling, heartfelt, and eloquent, this is a must-read for everyone everywhere.

Every Summer After by Carley Fortune

If you want the perfect summer romance with immaculate lake house vibes told in a nostalgic then/now dual timeline – look no further.

Every Summer After tells the story of Percy and Sam: childhood best friends whose friendship ultimately leads to something more, until one tragic mistake takes it all away. Percy Fraser grew up spending summers in Barry's Bay, a rural lake town in northern Ontario, while Sam Florek and his older brother Charlie lived in the house next door year-round. Percy and Sam become instant friends, and visiting Barry's Bay (and seeing Sam) every summer quickly becomes the highlight of Percy's teenage years. But the book begins with Percy in her 30s, living in a fancy part of Toronto, and she hasn't spoken to Sam in 12 years.

Tragedy strikes the Florek family, and Percy doesn't think twice before she drives back to the little lake town, and Sam, for the first time in 12 years. Here, Percy must confront the memories, both good and bad, that she has suppressed in order to try and forget Sam and move forward.

Every Summer After beautifully illustrates young love – how everything feels perfect when it's good and everything feels like the end of the world when it's bad. But my favorite thing about this book is that we also get to see Percy and Sam come back to examine their relationship as adults as well.

If you're a fan of *Love & Other Words* by Christina Lauren, *The Summer I Turned Pretty* by Jenny Han, or *People We Meet on Vacation* by Emily Henry, definitely try out this beautiful debut before summer slips through your fingers.

All My Rage by Sabaa Tahir

Did this book take my heart, stomp all over it, and then put it back in my chest and try to get it to beat again? Yes. Is it also one of my favorite books I've read so far this year? Also yes.

All My Rage follows two timelines – one follows “then,” where Misbah is in Lahore, Pakistan meeting her husband and dreaming about their future. The other follows the “now,” where Misbah’s son, Salahudin, and his best friend Noor live in the small desert town of Juniper, California. In the “now,” Misbah’s health is failing and the family business, the Cloud’s Rest Inn Motel, is in jeopardy. A masterful examination of life, love, and grief, this book depicts the decisions we make when everything is on the line with unforgettable (and often painful) clarity.

Perhaps the most incredible thing about this book for me is the emotional rollercoaster I was strapped into – I was rooting hardcore for these characters from the very beginning to the very end. And it was just over 350 pages! In the grand scheme of things, that’s so little time to be introduced to them, learn their stories, see them at their best, then their worst, then see them find some sort of resolve despite everything they’ve been through – and be fighting for them the entire time. But Sabaa Tahir did it. Sometimes the decisions Salahudin and Noor made had me putting my head in my hands and whispering “why” over and over again, but I could also understand why they made them. These characters were so fleshed out it felt like they could pop right off the page and be fully formed people right in front of me.

This book was one for the ages. I read it weeks ago and find myself thinking about it all the time. I have a feeling Salahudin and Noor will just be some of those characters who take up residence in my head for quite some time. *All My Rage* is a beautiful story that also deals with a lot of dark and heavy subjects, so please read carefully and check content warnings for this book if you decide to pick it up.

Time Is a Mother by Ocean Vuong

Ocean Vuong is an artist. I’m convinced he sees words in a way no one else does. I often have a hard time describing his writing – so incredibly sad at times but I swear there’s hope and beauty in there too.

Time Is a Mother is Ocean Vuong’s newest poetry collection, and it is magical. Last summer, I read *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, his novel told in a series of letters to his mother who isn’t able to read. And when I say I fell in love with his writing, I fell in love. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* quickly became one of my all-time favorites, unlike anything I had ever read. It did not surprise me at all that he was a poet, because even the novel read like poetry at times – perfect words exactly in the right place at the right time. *Time Is a Mother* draws on themes from the novel, focusing on the movement through grief after his mother’s death and the duality of remembrance and moving forward.

I love poetry, but also feel like sometimes my words don't do justice to the words I'm talking about so here are some of my favorite lines from *Time Is a Mother*:

“How else do we return to ourselves but to fold
the page so it points to the good part”

“Words, the prophets
tell us, destroy
nothing they can't
rebuild”

“Stand back, I'm a loser on a winning streak.”

If you love beautiful words and haven't picked up one of Ocean Vuong's books yet, you're making a mistake! *Time Is a Mother* is a masterpiece not to be missed.

How To Be Perfect by Michael Shur

In a world full of complicated decisions, where every choice we make affects something or someone, how do we ever figure out if the decisions we make are inherently good or bad? And how the heck do we figure out if we're actually as good (or bad) of a person as we think we are?

Along with being the co-writer behind *Parks and Rec* and *The Office*, Michael Shur is the writer behind NBC's *The Good Place* – a comedy show about a woman who ends up in heaven by mistake. This book was born from the years of research that went into writing *The Good Place*, which explores moral and ethical dilemmas through four seasons of brilliant characters and hilarious dialogue (can you tell it's one of my favorites?).

So obviously, when I saw this book was coming out, I absolutely had to read it. But even better – I listened to it on Libro! And along with being read by the author, the actors from the show read many of the footnotes and acted out hypothetical situations (and there were a lot of them). This just made the experience of the book so much better. But regardless of whether you have seen the show or not, I feel like this book has to be a must-read for everyone.

The reader and writer in me is just reeling at the task Shur took on: reading convoluted and complex works of moral philosophy like Aristotle and Kant, and boiling the concepts down to something everyone can understand while simultaneously calling out their faults and acknowledging biases (including his own). He recognizes that “good decisions” are often expensive or time consuming, and it's often a privilege to even have the option to make a “good” decision. I won't give any spoilers, but rest assured, this book taught me that “being a good person,” while intimidating, might not be so hard after all.

How Do You Live? by Genzaburō Yoshino

I really don't know why I was so drawn to moral philosophy books this month, but this book was another one that I knew I absolutely had to read once I heard about it. *How Do You Live?* is a Japanese children's classic originally published in 1937, but the English translation was just recently released at the end of last year. Hayao Miyazaki, the brilliant animator behind Studio Ghibli films *Spirited Away*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, and countless others is adapting this book into his next film.

Told from our main character Junichi Honda – nicknamed Copper after the famous philosopher Copernicus – and his uncle's journaled letters to the young boy, we follow as Copper tackles big subjects like friendship and bravery, thinking for ourselves, and how to make tofu.

At first, I thought this book was just about Copper's relationship with his uncle, as he navigates life and frequently asks his uncle for advice. But it wasn't until I looked more into the author's story that I really began to understand this book. Yoshino was born in 1899 and grew up in Tokyo, where the book is set, and studied literature and philosophy. During this time, Japan was becoming increasingly authoritarian, passing laws that banned people from saying or writing anything that was critical of the government. Yoshino, who had attended political meetings with progressive thinkers, was arrested and imprisoned for 18 months. After a friend helped release him from prison, he wrote *How Do You Live?* for young readers to teach the next generation about the importance of free thought and human progress.

In this light, the book holds so much weight for me. The lessons feel valuable even now, almost a hundred years later, when people all over the world are still being punished for thinking differently. Even though this book is meant for younger readers, sometimes I'm still surprised by how books for the littlest readers sometimes have the biggest messages.

Saving Sorya: Chang and the Sun Bear by Trang Nguyen

When eight-year-old Chang is walking home from school, she stumbles upon a bear farm where people are illegally harvesting bear bile. Scared and angry after seeing beautiful bears crying in cages, Chang makes herself a promise that day that she will become a wildlife conservationist and devote her life to the humane treatment of wild animals.

Based on the true story of author and wildlife conservationist Trang Nguyen, we follow Chang's story as she makes her dream a reality. After finally being accepted into a position at Cat Tien National Park in Vietnam, Chang is able to volunteer with Free the Bears — an organization that rescues bears from bile farms all over southeast Asia. There, she meets a young sun bear cub named Sorya. Chang makes it her mission to train Sorya to be able to return to the wild and find the perfect place for her to live.

Beautiful story aside, this book is absolutely stunning. Breathtaking full-color graphics paint the pages, bringing Sorya and her countless other wildlife friends to life. Chang's detailed field notes

sprinkle the pages, giving us fun facts about bears but also her fears and hopes for Sorya as she adjusts to her new life.

Perfect for any and all of the animal-lovers in your life, Saving Sorya is sure to pull hard on your heartstrings. It's easy to think graphic novels and middle grade books are just for kids, but Chang and Sorya had me convinced that I need to save the sun bears too.