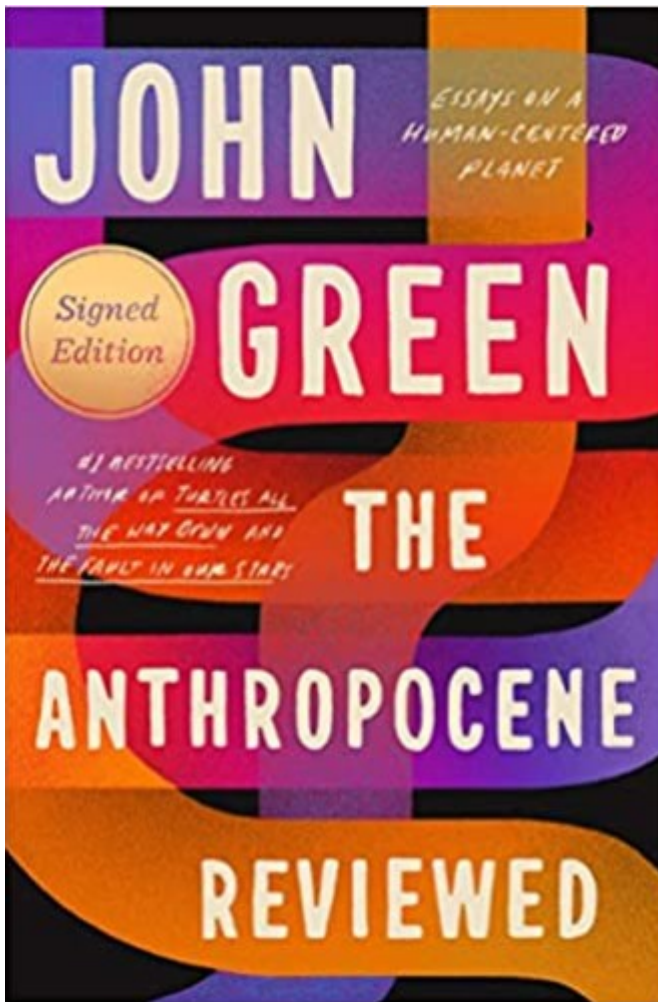


The good news in John Green's reviews of Diet Dr Pepper and sunsets

He says they're memoirs, but I'm onto him. *The Anthropocene Reviewed* is more like a collection of sermons.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Anthropocene Reviewed

Essays on a Human-Centered Planet

By John Green

Dutton

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According to John Green's wife, "when people write reviews, they are really writing a kind of memoir—here's what *my* experience was eating at this restaurant or getting *my* hair cut at this barbershop." She made this point upon reading an early iteration of Green's review of Diet Dr Pepper. (For reasons that baffle me, Green is more than a little obsessed with it.) In the first draft of the review, Green adopted the stance of an impartial evaluator. After receiving his wife's wise counsel, Green revised his assessment of the soft drink, writing himself into it.

Thus *The Anthropocene Reviewed* was conceived—first as a wildly popular podcast and now as a wildly popular book. Green reviews a disparate array of subjects that ultimately have only one thing in common: they are aspects of the "human-centered planet" that caught his attention and have some relevance to his life. The four-star Diet Dr Pepper review is tucked between an appraisal of scratch 'n' sniff stickers and an analysis of how *Jurassic Park* shaped our collective imagination of velociraptors. The raptors come in a half star lower than scratch 'n' sniff stickers, which feels wrong. But you have to take into consideration that these stars are being doled out by a singular judge. Who can blame Green for being more enthusiastic about stickers than velociraptors when the stickers still off-gas the aroma of his childhood?

Since any review of Green's collection of reviews will also be a kind of memoir—here's *my* experience of reading this book—I'll admit that if I hadn't already been familiar with Green's oeuvre of humane young adult books and endearing web projects, I might have rolled my eyes. I'm ambivalent about the rise of the user review. It's one thing to write a Yelp report on one's experience at the local pub. But who does this guy think he is, crowning himself the assessor of sycamore trees?

Still, Green is the opposite of a cynical critic who finds fault and dispenses scorn. Which is not to say he can't dole out a scathing review when needs must. If anything deserves to be summarily panned, it's historical outbreaks of bubonic and pneumonic plague, to which Green assigns one star. But to borrow a line from St. Paul, as often as not Green's reviews celebrate that which is true, honorable, just,

pure, and pleasing. Indeed, as the book proceeds Green grows in his capacity for praise.

Green really starts to sing, figuratively speaking, in his review of sunsets. The piece begins with a vestige of cynicism as he ponders, “What are we to do about the clichéd beauty of an ostentatious sunset?” Despite its many exquisitely crafted sentences about the actual phenomenon of the sky turning brilliant shades of pink, this essay is really about the inherently risky act of making oneself vulnerable. Reflecting on his dog’s ability to roll onto his back, Green writes,

It’s hard to trust the world like that, to show it your belly. There’s something deep within me, something intensely fragile, that is terrified of turning itself to the world. I’m scared to even write that down, because I worry that having confessed this fragility, you now know where to punch. I know that if I am hit where I’m earnest, I will never recover.

By reckoning with his vulnerability, Green is able to shake off the last remnant of misanthropy and turn his face to the setting sun. “It is a sunset, and it is beautiful, and this whole thing you’ve been doing where nothing gets five stars because nothing is perfect? That’s bullshit. So much is perfect. Starting with this.”

This book made me weep as often as it made me chuckle. No essay elicited more tears than the one about Googling strangers, of all things. At age 22, Green interned as a student chaplain at a children’s hospital with plans to attend divinity school and become an Episcopal priest. (He is still a practicing Episcopalian.) Elsewhere he notes, “Those months of chaplaincy are the axis around which my life spins. I loved the work but also found it impossible—too much suffering that I could do nothing to alleviate.”

One night, Green bore witness to the unimaginable suffering of a badly burned boy and his stricken parents. The medical team told him it was unlikely the boy would survive. Green completed his chaplaincy without learning of the boy’s fate. “The months of not knowing became years, then more than a decade,” he writes. “And then one morning not long ago, I typed the kid’s name into the search bar . . . there he was. Eighteen years old, a decade and a half removed from the one night we spent together. He is alive.” This is one of the essays I first heard Green read on the original podcast, and when I read the words on the page I could still hear the layers of relief and wonderment in Green’s quavering voice.

I've known about Green's brief foray into chaplaincy for years, because it's often brought up as a sort of quirky factoid about his life before he was a best-selling author. There was, for me, a bit of vindication in hearing him acknowledge that the experience was formative. From where I read, Green is something of a modern Mister Rogers, sans ordination. His pulpit is the podcast, his congregation a global readership so vast the first printing of this book was 250,000 (notable in part because he signed every single copy by hand).

Green is every bit a minister, and a contemplative one at that. He wants us to believe these essays are reviews with a twist of memoir, but I'm onto him: they are kissing cousins to sermons. Preachers called to proclaim the Good News could learn a lot from these essays on our human-centered planet.

If it isn't abundantly clear, *The Anthropocene Reviewed* was, for me, a five-star reading experience.