



## *Paper Town*

By John Green

### Book Summary:

There are echoes of Green's award-winning *Looking for Alaska* (2005): a lovely, eccentric girl; a mystery that begs to be solved by clever, quirky teens; and telling quotations (from *Leaves of Grass*, this time) beautifully integrated into the plot. Yet, if anything, the thematic stakes are higher here, as Green ponders the interconnectedness of imagination and perception, of mirrors and windows, of illusion and reality. That he brings it off is testimony to the fact that he is not only clever and wonderfully witty but also deeply thoughtful and insightful. In addition, he's a superb stylist, with a voice perfectly matched to his amusing, illuminating material. Michael Cart, *Booklist* The mystery of Margo – her disappearance and her personhood – is fascinating, cleverly constructed, and profoundly moving. Green builds tension through both the twists of the active plot and the gravitas of the subject. He skirts the stock coming-of-age character arc – Quentin's eventual bravery is not the revelation. Instead, the teen thinks deeper and harder – about the beautiful and terrifying ways we can and cannot know those we love. *School Library Journal*

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### Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes:

English: Language Literacy and Literature

Appropriate Ages: **14+**

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- **Themes and key discussion points**

Identity, dissatisfaction, friendship, exploration, literature, writing, home, perseverance, admiration

- **Curriculum areas and key learning outcomes**

ACEEN001, ACEEN008, ACEEN009, ACEEN024, ACEEN027, ACEEN049, ACELA1553, ACELA1557, ACELT1771, ACELT1635, ACELT1812

- **Bibliography**

- **About the author**

- **Paper Town Playlist** <http://johngreenbooks.com/paper-towns-playlist/>

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### **Introduction**

In *Paper Towns*, eighteen-year-old Quentin Jacobson is in love with the girl next door, Margo Roth Spiegelman. Margo Roth Spiegelman isn't your typical Jessica Simpson/Alba/Biel girl next door, though. She has eclectic taste in music, likes breaking into abandoned buildings and theme parks, and... is missing.

*Paper Towns* was published in 2008, four years before *The Fault in Our Stars*.

### **Plot**

Quentin Jacobsen ('Q' to his mates) is in his last year of high school in Orlando, Florida. Friends in childhood, Margo and Q now move in different circles: Margo is reckless, popular and 'cool', while Quentin is clever and nerdish, hanging round the school band's practice room, listening to them despite being tone deaf. One memorable night, Margo appears at Q's window and insists he accompany her on an evening of revenge after her boyfriend has dumped her in favour of her best friend. Shortly after, Margo disappears, not for the first time. However, the clues that she leaves for Q suggest that the Margo that everyone thinks they know, may be far from the person Margo really is, and Q fears for her life.

Enlisting the help of his friends Radar and Ben, and Margo's friend Lacey, Q embarks on a search for Margo which fast becomes obsessive, culminating in a twenty-three hour drive at breakneck speed from Florida to a paper town called Agloe in New York. Summarising the events of this novel gives little clue to its essential nature and richness.

Using a poem of Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' as a loose framework, and including references to TS Eliot, Emily Dickinson and Greek mythology, it is witty and frequently hilarious. Music lovers will appreciate the playlist at the end of the notes. Every reader will have favourite moments. *Paper Towns* probes some fundamentals of being human – how we create images of others, even our closest friends, and in examining those images, reveal ourselves to ourselves.

Connectedness through friendship, love, family and the whole human

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catastrophe underpins the narrative arc of this remarkable book. Readers will savour its skill and panache, and writers will find plenty to inspire and play with. These teachers' notes explore aspects of both reading and writing. Green is such an inventive stylist and originator that it is impossible not to want to invite students to have a go at some of his ideas.

### **Structure**

The book has four sections and is framed by the Walt Whitman poem 'Song of Myself', which the students may like to read in its entirety, perhaps as an introduction to the book, to unravel various interpretations before *Paper Towns* is read. References to it can be highlighted during the reading of the novel. For instance, on page 185 Q's English teacher says the poem is optimistic; it is about connectedness – the image of grass – sharing the same roots (as compared with the title of this section of the book); on page 227 Q teases out ideas from it: 'I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen', and on pages 198-200 Q puzzles it out for how it allows him to see Margo.

### **Prologue**

This first person narrative has a compelling opening, when Quentin and Margo are nine. It is worth reading closely to talk about the ideas contained in it as many are the focus of the rest of the novel. Alternately, it could be returned to once the novel is read, to identify those ideas in retrospect. The episode of Q and Margo's discovery of the body of Robert Joyner in the park, bookends the novel. Significant here is Margo's analogy of the strings, which is furthered explored throughout the book.

### **Part One: Strings**

Margo has not been in Q's life in recent years until one night, she appears at his window, dressed as a ninja asking him to help her wreak revenge on her faithless boyfriend. Q thinks this is the beginning of a new relationship between himself and Margo, but as Part Two reveals, he is a long way from the truth.

There are hints of what is to come:

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- Page 59: Q suspects that something more might be 'really wrong' with Margo, but he doesn't say anything.
- Again on page 64 Q thinks he might be able to cheer up Margo, if he can 'be confident'.
- Page 63: Margo talks about how a bird's eye view of the town alters perception, introducing another thematic thread of the narrative.

### Discussion

- At the end of Chapter 6 predict the significance of Q's statements 'I was wrong';
- At the end of Chapter 8 'She either trusted me or wanted to fall' (p.89). Margo gives him a further hint on page 92: 'I. Will. Miss. Hanging. Out. With .You.' Why doesn't Q understand what Margo is telling him?

### **Part Two: The Grass**

Margo goes missing and, at first, nothing much happens. She has done this before, leaving clues as to her whereabouts. When her disappearance extends, Q goes looking for clues he hopes she has left. Margo's leaving provokes a change in Q.

Page 107: he feels it empowers him to take on Margo's role of standing up to the bullies at school.

But is the detective Otis Warner right, and Q is in danger of Margo's situation overtaking his life? (p.174)

### **Part Three: The Vessel**

Radar, Ben and Lacey miss their high school graduation and help Q go in search of Margo – an example of true friendship. Also important in this section are reactions to her when she is found – p.324 onwards.

For instance, Q says 'this girl who was an idea that I loved.' Who is Margo really?

Page 327: Ben says she could have let them know that she was all right. Margo mocks Lacey and Ben's relationship. Lacey calls her a bitch for reacting so critically when they have tracked her down. And benign Radar says 'I like the clues more than you'.

Q knows he should go with his friends to the motel, but he stays with Margo. However, even he says 'why are you acting like such a brat?'

Page 328: Margo accuses Q of being pissed at her for not being who he had imagined her to be.

Page 329: Q accuses her of playing with them. Is her failure one of not being able to be a friend?

What is the matter with Margo? Is it as Q says, 'complete self-centredness ... because if it doesn't happen to you it doesn't happen at all'.

Or, that she is incapable of being connected? For instance on page 338 she discovers that Q is not the paper boy she thought him to be'

#### Activity

The ending provides an opportunity to explore what students think will happen now. For example, write the journey home, including the conversations Radar, Ben, Lacey and Q will have.

Or write the next chapter in Margo's life.

#### **Title:**

As the reading progresses, track references to 'paper towns' to trace the increasing and perhaps changing significance of the title. A couple of examples below:

Page 63: Margo says 'It's a paper town...all those paper people living in their paper houses, burning the future to stay warm...Everyone demented with the mania of owning things...I've lived here for eighteen years and I have never once in my life come across anyone who cares about anything that matters'.

- *Page 64: Margo says 'It was a lame string, for sure, but it was the one I had left, and every paper girls needs at least one string'.*

### **Characters**

**Margo Roth Spiegelman:** while she doesn't appear in person for much of the book, there is no doubt that she is at its centre, the focus being the unravelling of her real identity as compared with others' images.

#### **Activity**

Students could compile a character portrait of her, and a chart/wiki of what various readers think about her. Some might empathise; others might find her a prima donna. Opinions need to be supported by evidence from the book. Much of the novel is about discovering who Margo is. She comes to us through Quentin, and is seen by her actions and reactions to others, what others say about her, and also in what she says about herself, although she may not always be right. In compiling the profile of her, students should look at each of these ways in which she is revealed to the reader and collect examples for each.

Some examples below to kick start the process...

#### **Actions:**

Page 15-16: Q documents everything she has done;

Page 86: paying off the Security Guard at Sea World.

Page 106: describing how she keeps things in check at school.

#### **Reactions of others to her:**

Page 104: Q says she is having the kind of fun we can only imagine

Page 160: 'Only now, after all this lost time, did I realise how terribly I had misunderstood both her game and the prize for winning it'.

#### **What she says:**

Page 39: being 'hot' is stupid to her

Page 78: she maps out Q's life for him

Page 340: it's kind of great, being an idea that everybody likes. 'But I could never be the idea to myself, not all the way.' She goes to Agloe because it became real and she thought maybe she could become real there

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Page 340: quote from Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Margo's comments about the cracks, the fault lines.

What others say about her:

Page 55: Q describes her with this analogy – (useful for writing) her 'Margoness'.

Page 103: Ben says 'She's the kind of person who either dies tragically at twenty-seven like Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, or else grows up to win, like the first-ever Nobel Prize for Awesome'.

Pages 118-119: the detective says she is a free spirit and uses the analogy of a balloon and string 'These kids they're like tied-down helium balloons ... they strain against the string and that string gets cut, and they just float away ... But once that string gets cut, kid, you can't uncut it'.

Page 122: Q says 'you don't want to miss too much school, even if you're Margo Roth Spiegelman.' Radar thinks that lost love is not a good enough reason for her to leave 'I would have figured her to be immune to that kind of stuff'.

Page 139: Lacey says she is weird.

Page 140: none of them think that the Whitman poem sounds like Margo

Page 162: Q says 'I don't know who she is anymore, or who she was, but I need to find her'.

Page 177: Ben says she is a drama queen high jacking the last three weeks of high school

Page 197: Q realises 'I didn't know Margo. I knew how she smelled, how she acted in front of me, and I knew how she acted in front of others ... I didn't know what she did at night with the shades down, with the door locked, in the sealed privacy of her room.'

Page 214: 'I thought of my Margo, and Lacey's Margo, and Mrs Spiegelman's Margo and all of us looking at her reflection in different fun house mirrors.'

Page 230: Q starts to think of Margo as a person. Someone who – because no one thought she was a person – had no one really to talk to Margo was not a miracle. She was not an adventure. She was not a fine and precious thing. She was a girl’.

Page 238: Gus says she seemed pretty depressed. Yet her friends did not sense this.

### **Quentin**

‘Q’ is a self-confessed nerd, cautious, likes the comfort of routine, poor at the computer game Resurrection, and suffers ‘from the kind of tone deafness that is generally associated with actual deafness.’ Q undergoes a change in self-awareness and understanding of others during the course of events. Tracking these changes throughout the novel to see how differently he comes to see himself would be valuable. Students can do this on a chart, or on a wiki. As with Margo, samples below are included to aid discussion.

#### *Activity*

Page 17: Q’s line in self-deprecating humour shows in his opposition to hiring a tuxedo for the prom. He did not ‘aspire to be the world’s only virgin with pubic lice’.

Pages 25-26: His parents are therapists, providing him with some funny lines. ‘They marvelled at what a wonderful job they’d done raising me’, and page 90 ‘... my psychological well-being was proof of their professional talents’.

We get most of Q, apart from how he reacts to others and behaves, in his ‘own words.

Page 26: ‘I liked routine. I liked being bored. I didn’t want to, but I did.’

How nerdy is he at the start? For instance, he has a panic attack helping Margo, and on page 53 stops at the stop sign at the end of the street when they are in a panic to get away.

Page 55: Q is pedantic. When Margo calls him 'Annoying McMaster Grammician' he replies 'Grammarians'.

Page 107: Q is empowered by Margo to see 'a way of starting a counteroffensive' to the bullies

Page 137: 'The school felt more mine than in all my four years there ... I knew these halls so well – and finally it was starting to feel like they knew me, too'.

Page 148: Q 'likes routine' and thinks drawing circles is 'reasonable insanity'.

Page 147: He won't miss school to go to New York to look for Margo and Ben says to him 'You know, your romanticism is a real inspiration'.

Page 151: Q admits he harbours prom fantasies too but doesn't speak them like Ben. What does that tell us about him?

Rarely, we get another opinion of him. For instance, on page 224 Radar says 'You know your problem, Quentin? You keep expecting people not to be themselves. I mean, I could hate you for being massively unpunctual and for never being interested in anything other than Margo Roth Spiegelman, and for, like never asking me how it's going with my girlfriend – but I don't give a shit, man, because you're you'.

Page 213: Lacey says 'You don't give a shit if people like you.'

Page 337: Searching for Margo has made him realise he is not as scared as she thinks he is Page 338 '...maybe being able to create in you at least an echo of the kick-ass hero of my little-kid story.' She had seen Q as a 'paper boy' – two dimensional – flat.

Discuss who the readers think Q is

### **Q's parents**

We only get them through Q, apart from Ben thinking Q's mother is hot. They do provide a vehicle for Q's sardonic wit. For instance, on page 96 Q's father recounts a recurring anxiety dream and his mother sees it as a metaphor for adolescence.

Page 120: 'My parents always liked it when I cursed in front of them...It signified that I trusted them, that I was myself in front of them'.

Are we meant to take this seriously? If so why doesn't he ask for their help? Isn't it his friends who really know him?

*Activity*

List the personality traits of the Q his parent's think he is, the one Margo thinks he is, and the one you think he is.

Q's parents challenge his views of other people, such as the bully,

**Chuck Parsons**

Page 229: 'They're just people who need to be cared for'. Are they right in terms of bullies or is Q?

A telling example of how they do not know Q is his graduation present. Any personal experiences that match that very funny one?

Presents are often good indicators. Margo's parents Make rare appearances but seem grotesque in their attitude to her.

Pages 114 -166 would make good Readers' Theatre material. This passage demonstrates how clever and revealing Green's dialogue is, and it begs to be heard aloud.

**Ben**

Page 12: Q describes him as 'a small, olive-skinned creature who had hit puberty but never hit it very hard'.

He thinks calling girls 'honeybunnies' is 'retro cool' rather than 'sexist and lame' and is desperate for a date to the prom. His aim is to be in the Guinness Book of World Records for the 'Most Honeybunnies Ever Pleased' (page.21).

Suffers from the 'Bloody Ben Story' (page. 14). His messaging name is ITWASAKIDNEYINFECTION Page151:

Q accuses him of being self-absorbed Page 208: He has a very funny scene at the party when he is thoroughly and amusingly drunk. Page 13 and 221:

Both Q and Lacey acknowledge that he tries too hard, Q saying 'liked that', and Lacey 'there's something to be said for trying hard, you know? I mean, I know he tries too hard, but why is that such a bad thing? And he's sweet isn't he?' Discuss trying too hard.

### **Radar**

Is named after the character on M\*A\*S\*H (the logic or illogic of this is explained by Q on page 13).

Clever – has a scholarship to Dartmouth. Is hampered socially by parents who are in The Guinness Book of World Records for having the world's largest black Santa collection. Page 16:

He is devoted to editing an online user-created reference source called omnictionary

He is a good friend to Q with a funny line in riposte and description. For example, after puking in the shower he says 'It was so disgusting that I puked while cleaning it up, and then while cleaning that up, I puked again. It's like a perpetual motion machine'. Page 224:

when Q finds out what he has been doing to help find Margo, Radar replies 'Only doing what I'd want someone else to do. I know I wasn't friends with her, but she deserves to be found, you know?' Lacey Page 134 -135:

Q says: 'A man can live a long and adventurous life without ever being spoken to by Lacey Pemberton, and when that rare opportunity does arise, one does not want to misspeak'. Then when her voice cracks he says 'and all at once Lacey Pemberton was not Lacey Pemberton. She was just – like, a person.' Page 308: Ben says to Q just remember that sometimes, the way you think about a person isn't the way they actually are... 'It's easy to like someone from a distance. But when she stopped being this amazing unattainable thing or whatever, and started being, like, just a regular girl with frequent crankiness who's kind a bossy – then I had to basically start liking a whole different person.'

## ***Ideas/Themes***

This book is full of ideas of all sorts, and readers will enjoy pursuing ones of their own choosing. Below are some examples:

***Friendship:*** There are lots of examples of the way Q, Ben and Radar support each other, such as on page p97 when Ben picks up Q's cue mid sentence; their playing of Resurrection and in their online conversations. Page 154 155:

Their actions: such as pages when 154-5 Ben and Radar both skip school to go with Radar to the pseudovisions. Page 158:

Q's description of feeling good '... listening to the Mountain Goats with your friends in a car that runs on a Wednesday morning in May on the way to Margo and whatever Margot's prize came with finding her.' Page 220:

Their friendship doesn't always run smooth: Ben won't help Q even though Q drove sober to the party to pick him up. Q says 'Maybe our friendship had always been about convenience – he didn't have anyone cooler to play video games with. ... He'd jumped at his first opportunity to join the fraternity of vapid asshats.'

Is Q just sour, or is it fair enough?

### ***How we live our lives:***

Page 37: Margo says 'and now life has become the future. Every moment of your life is lived for the future – you go to high school so you can go to college so you can go get a good job so you can get a nice house so you can afford to send your

kids to college so they can get a good job so they can get a nice house so they can afford to send their kids to college.' Too cynical?

Compare this with her quoting Emily Dickinson's 'Forever is composed of nows' (p.342).

Which view resonates most with students? Page 48:

'When you say nasty things about people, you should never say the true ones, because you can't fully and honestly take those back.' Page 41

**Idea of 'hot':** '

That's always seemed so ridiculous to me, that people would want to be around someone because they're pretty. It's like picking your breakfast cereals based on colour instead of taste.' Agree? Can Margo say this because she is 'hot'? Page 52: 'If I end up being the kind of person who has one kid and seven bedrooms, do me a favour and shoot me'. (Margo) Page 65:

Q says 'you had to be important to have enemies'. Agree? Page 87: 'Doing stuff never feels as good as you hope it will feel' True? P106:

Q says 'High school is neither a democracy nor a dictatorship – nor, contrary to popular belief, an anarchic state. High-school is a divine-right monarchy'. How would you describe the social structure of your school using a political analogy? Page 161:

Q describes how he is experiencing fear: 'This is the fear that made fish crawl out onto dry land and evolve lungs, the fear that teaches us to run, the fear that makes us bury our dead'. Use this as an example for describing other emotions or physical reactions.

It is a powerful example of 'showing, not telling', of evoking an emotion without using adjectives (well, only one) or adverbs. Try it! Page 230: Q's Dad says '...humans lack good mirrors. It's so hard for anyone to show us how we look, and so hard for us to show anyone how we feel'.

**Discuss**

Discuss this as the central idea of the book, the life lesson for Q, and in terms of wider human experience. Page 249:

Q enjoys listening to his friends telling 'window stories and mirror stories'.

Discuss preferences, for telling and/or listening with students. Page 250:

Q says: 'you listen to people so that you can imagine them, and you hear all the terrible and wonderful things people do to themselves and to one another, but in the end, the listening exposes you even more than it exposes the people you're trying to listen to.' What do you think he means – in terms of the book, and in terms of life in general?

**Humour**

A lot of it is word play, such as Radar and 'smackdown' p107 and the escalating exaggerations that Ben, Radar and Q play with for 'mutual amusement': page 17 'getting you a date to prom will be harder than turning lead into gold.' 'Getting you a date to prom is so hard that the hypothetical idea itself is actually used to cut diamonds' ... 'Ben, getting you a date to prom is so hard that the American government believes the problem cannot be solved with diplomacy but will instead require force.' Page 167 has other examples.

**Activity**

Find others that are favourites and have the class write some – related to current topics or to characters in the book. Q's descriptions of people: 'the human-shaped container of anabolic steroids known as Chuck Parson' who walks off to his 'first period class: The Care and Feeding of Pectoral Muscles' (pp.18-19).

Page 20: 'If I am ever told that I have one day to live, I will head straight for the hallowed halls of Winter Park High School where a day has been known to last a thousand years.' Use as an example for writing.

Page 121: Ben's 'bed head seeming to challenge our basic understanding of the force gravity exerts upon matter'.

*Activity*

Try similar descriptions.

- Page 122: 'Did you just use Greek mythology to talk trash?'
- Page 151 Ben's wonderful example of 'dork babble'.

YA fiction is full of such prattle, and students might to find examples in books they have read. Can they rewrite it in a more genuine, witty way à la John Green?

- Page 209: 'Talking to a drunk person was like talking to an extremely happy, severely brain damaged three-year-old.'

Much of chapter 13 would make excellent Readers' Theatre and would demonstrate how clever and much fun Green's writing is.

- Page 247: how to kiss – Q says there are two basic rules.
  1. Don't bite anything without permission, and
  2. The human tongue is like wasabi: it's very powerful, and should be used sparingly'.

Be as witty if you can.

Lacey says Ben's tongue is like sunscreen. It's good for your health and should be applied liberally.

*Activity*

- Write some more similes.
- Have a class vote for which are the wittiest.
- Set up a blog for on-going contributions.

Page 55: 'In the end, you could not say that Margo Roth Spiegelman was fat, or that she was skinny, any more than you can say that the Eiffel Tower is or is not lonely.'

*Activity*

- Try writing similar analogies, using personification.
- Importance of being able to imagine:

Page 346: Margo tells about her story in which Q is 'a superhot, superloyal defender of justice'. 'But then – you know you kind of were.'

*Discuss*

So did Margo imagine Q into the role he now plays, or has it just taken her until now to see beyond his surface?

Page 346: Q says 'If you don't imagine, nothing ever happens at all. Imagining isn't perfect ... but ... It is the machine that kills fascists'.

*Discuss*

Using personal, local, global examples.

Metaphor: Strings or grass? Pages 349-350 '... you have to be careful which metaphor you choose – because it matters.' Which one do readers go with?

*Activity*

Have students write their own metaphors for life.

Margo's Clues: One way to approach the reading and sharing of responses to this book is through Margo's clues. How do students read them? How much is that reading influenced by who they think Margo is and how much does that change through the course of the novel?

Pause at moments when the clues seem at a dead end, such as her door revealing nothing, and talk about suggestions the students might have about?

Page 63: Q considers that it may be a suicide note – do you agree?

P123: Poster of Woody Guthrie with THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS. How do students interpret that?

Page 234: all of them suggest where she might be and why – any supporters?

Pages 132-3, 142: are the highlighted sections of Whitman's 'Song of Myself' literal or metaphorical clues?

*Discuss*

Discuss interpretations of the poem's highlighted sections and what they might mean for Margo. Are they a map for finding her?

Page 136: Lacey says she could be in New York. Confirmed by Whitman and Guthrie living in New York.

Page 153: the address in Q's door.

Page 171; YOU WILL GO TO THE PAPER TOWNS AND YOU WILL NEVER COME BACK

Page 176; Q now thinks she is dead, but the detective, doesn't – what do readers think?

### **About the author**

John Green is the New York Times bestselling author of *Looking for Alaska*, *An Abundance of Katherines*, *Paper Towns*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*. He is also the co-author, with David Levithan, of *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. He was 2006 recipient of the Michael L. Printz Award, a 2009 Edgar Award winner, and has twice been a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Green's books have been published in more than a dozen languages.

### **About the author of these notes**

Dr Pam Macintyre teaches language and literacy and children's and young adult literature at The University of Melbourne. She is the editor of the quarterly review journal *Viewpoint*. She has been a judge for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, Aurealis Awards and CBCA Book of the Year Awards, and is co-author of *Knowing Readers: Unlocking the Pleasures of Reading*.

*The Spanish Apartment Music: Playlist from John Green's website*

<http://www.sparksflyup.com/2008/10/paper-towns-playlist.php>

*Hear John Green talk about Paper Towns at:*

[HTTP://us.penguin.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780525478188,00.html](http://us.penguin.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780525478188,00.html)

<http://www.amazon.com/Paper-Towns-John-Green/dp/0525478183.html>