

John Knowles, *A Separate Peace* Study Guide

Author Background Information

- Born in 1926 in Fairmont, West Virginia
- Attended public school until age 15, when he left for Phillips Exeter Academy, an elite prep school for boys in New Hampshire
- Experiences at Exeter inspired *A Separate Peace* and *Peace Breaks Out*
- Graduated early from Exeter in Aug. 1947 because of his participation in the summer Anticipatory Program, a special wartime term, like Devon's Summer Session, meant to prepare boys for military service
- Graduated from Yale University in 1949 with a Bachelor of Arts in English
- Occasionally wrote theater reviews for the newspaper
- Wrote a novel that was never published
- Wrote short story "Phineas," published in *Cosmopolitan* in 1956
- Short story "Phineas" contains the story that was the basis for *A Separate Peace*
- Knowles's agent sent the manuscript for *A Separate Peace* to American publishers, but they all rejected it
- More than 9 million copies have since been sold
- Published 10 other books since 1960, including *Peace Breaks Out* (1981), a sequel to *A Separate Peace*

Historical Context

- World War II Began on September 1, 1939, when the German army invaded Poland
- After occupying Poland, the Germans moved west, occupying the countries of Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, and France
- By June 1940, only Great Britain held out against Hitler, and Italy joined the Axis powers
- America became involved in WWII in Dec. 1941, when Japan attacked military bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii
- A Separate Peace* is written through an extended flashback that begins in the summer of 1942
- 15 million American men joined the military during WWII
- All young men 18 and older who stood taller than 5 feet and weighed 105 lbs. or more were accepted - 2/3 (10 million) of the men serving were drafted
- Most of those were sent to the infantry, where they saw the worst of the war, and endured the highest casualty rate
- 5 million enlisted and could choose the branch of service they would join
- The boys in the novel in Devon School, mostly choose enlistment in relatively prestigious (and safer) training programs in preference to the draft
- World War II ended in Europe on May 7, 1945, when Germany surrendered
- Japanese forces did not surrender until atomic bombs were dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
- Japan surrendered on Aug. 15, 1945

Setting: The novel is set at Devon, a private boarding school in New Hampshire on the Atlantic Coast during World War II. Two rivers run through the school's campus: one is the Devon River (fresh water), and the other is the Naguamsett River (salt water, a swamp-like consistency). Some of the novel's action revolves around an oak tree overhanging a creek.

Background Information: The novel begins with the main characters, Gene and Finny, at Devon for a summer session. The school hopes that this session will allow the students to receive a diploma before they are drafted on their eighteenth birthday. Gene and Finny are roommates and friends at the school. Finny is a natural athlete who also acts as a leader for the other boys in the school, devising games like Blitzball and organizing the Winter Carnival. However, Gene is more academically oriented in his interests and is jealous of Finny's natural ability in sports, a quality he lacks in academics.

Major Characters:

Gene Forester – Narrator - This character is the protagonist whose envy of Finny eventually leads to Finny's untimely demise. He is also suspicious of Finny's motivations since his cynical attitude causes him to think that no individual could be as completely pure as Finny. So, he projects his own devious nature on other people.

Phineas – Finny -He is a nonconformist who fails to acknowledge school regulations and tradition. This behavior is illustrated in his consistent lateness to dinner, wearing the school tie as a belt, wearing a pink shirt, and organizing the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session.

Brinker Hadley – Yellow Peril -This character is an elitist student leader who is concerned about losing his power to Finny's popularity.

Edward Lepellier – Leper - He is an isolationist who was ridiculed by his classmates. He is important in the events of the novel since he was present when Finny "fell" from the oak tree. Leper surprises his classmates by choosing to enlist in the paratroopers after watching an army recruiter video, although he later deserts the army and returns to his Vermont home suffering insanity.

Plot Summary: The novel begins with Gene revisiting Devon several years after graduating to reflect on the incidents that occurred during the summer session. The first incident that Gene recounts indicates his dislike of Finny's attitude toward authority is when they attend a tea. Finny wears the school's tie as a belt and dresses in a pink shirt. Gene remarks that Finny is the only person who could "get away" with such an outfit. Later in the novel, Finny creates the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session and places Gene and himself as the leaders. In addition he conceives of the idea that he and Gene should jump from the tree at once. This is a very dangerous action because they must jump outward to land in the water or else they hit the ground. During the first jump, Gene loses his balance and Finny grabs his arm to steady him without thinking. During another jump, Gene jounces the limb and Finny reaches out to him for help; yet Gene allows him to fall, causing him to break his leg. Gene begins to feel guilty for his actions and realizes his own jealousy of Finny. Finny refuses to acknowledge the fact that Gene pushed him out of the tree because it conflicts with his idea of everybody's being innately good. Yet, at the end of the novel Finny begins to accept the truth after being questioned by Brinker. He then attempts to run away and trips down the stairs, breaking his leg once again. During the operation, some of the bone marrow enters his bloodstream and he dies.

Key Issues:

1. Gene is jealous of Finny's natural athletic ability and fluid walk, but believes he compensates for this lack of ability by excelling in academics. Gene leads himself to believe that Finny is attempting to sabotage his academic success with nights at the beach, and the Super Suicide Society. Yet the reader learns later that Finny thought Gene possessed a natural academic ability when he told him to study and not come to the Super Suicide Society meeting. This incident further annoys Gene since he realizes he is lacking in a way Finny is not.
2. Another issue involves Finny's denial of the events surrounding his accident. He refuses to believe that Gene caused him to fall from the tree. However, when Brinker begins to question Finny about that day he runs from the room instead of acknowledging the truth. Another manifestation of this denial of reality is Finny's inability to admit that the war exists. Instead Finny claims it is a fabrication of fat old men to stop the young people from enjoying themselves. This provides a convenient excuse since he cannot participate in the conflict. He refuses to accept the loss of his athletic ability by forcing Gene to train for the 1944 Olympics.
3. Gene's insecurity is one of the key factors in the development of the novel. He doubts his own abilities, and believes that Finny is attempting to destroy his academic success. Yet the reader learns that it is actually Gene's paranoia over his own lack of talent that leads both to his distrust of Finny and eventually to taking the opportunity to destroy Finny's unique nature.