



[A Separate Peace](#), by John Knowles

In A Nutshell

A Separate Peace tells the story of a sixteen-year-old boy at boarding school in New Hampshire during World War II, and the mixed feelings of admiration and jealousy he harbors for his best friend and roommate. (Things get messy pretty fast, as you might expect from a bunch of ill-supervised adolescents.) Published in 1959, the novel is the first from author John Knowles, who would follow his breakout success with many more novels, short stories, and essays, including a sequel of sorts, *Peace Breaks Out*. Still, nothing ever topped Knowles's debut; *A Separate Peace* remains his most popular and well-known work. Just ask any of the high school students who have read it in class.

Speaking of English class, Knowles seems to have followed that old English teacher's adage: *write what you know*. Like the main character and narrator of *A Separate Peace*, Knowles was born in the South (West Virginia) and during World War II attended boarding school in New Hampshire, at Phillips Exeter Academy. His descriptions of the fictional "Devon school" in *A Separate Peace* are largely based, physically, on the Exeter campus. (Yes, those marble stairs are still there. Yes, they're still very hard.) Even parts of the plot – like the jumping out of the tree gig, or the character of Phineas – came from Knowles's experiences as a student. (So just think: someday you could write a novel that 1) stands as one hallmark of great modern American literature, and 2) embarrasses the heck out of your high school friends.)

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 You know all of Gene's great insights at the end of the novel? Do those reflect the point-of-view of Gene the youngster, or Gene the narrator?
- 2 Discuss one of literature's biggest questions amongst yourselves: did Gene intentionally cause Finny's accident?
- 3 How is the reader made to feel about Gene? Do we judge him for his actions? Condemn him for them? Or is he a sympathetic character?

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