

A Scribner Reading Group Guide

A Separate Peace by John Knowles

Introduction

Set at a boys' boarding school in New England during the early years of World War II, *A Separate Peace* follows the friendship of the serious, intellectual Gene and the athletic, charismatic Phineas and the tragic turn their relationship takes when a moment's impulse has terrible consequences. *A Separate Peace* is timeless in its description of adolescence during a period when the entire country was losing its innocence; it is an American classic, published more than fifty years ago and a bestseller for decades, striking in its depiction of coming-of-age and the struggle to understand human nature.

Questions for Discussion

1. Gene says, "I was subject to the dictates of my mind, which gave me the maneuverability of a strait jacket" (page 34). Where do Gene's rules for himself come from? Why are they so strict?
2. Why does Phineas choose the pink shirt for a school flag, his emblem? And why does Gene so envy his ability to "get away" with this (page 25)?
3. Gene thinks Finny's secret swim record is "too unusual for—not friendship, but too unusual for rivalry" (page 45). Why does this shock Gene? Why is rivalry so essential at Devon? What does it say about the dynamics of Gene and Finny's friendship?
4. How do the school's rivers, the Devon and the Naguamsett, represent innocence and experience in the boys' lives?
5. How is it that Gene "becomes" Finny alone in their room after Finny's fall (page 62) and the next day he's "pretty sure I didn't know Finny at all" (page 63)? What is the truth?
6. When Gene tells Finny he won't start living by the rules, why is that "the most false thing, the biggest lie of all" (page 71)?
7. Why can't Finny let Gene tell him what actually happened in the tree? Why does Finny call Gene to apologize for even suspecting him for a "*second*" (page 83)?
8. Finny says the winter loves him, while Gene calls the winter "treacherous" for Finny and his crutches. Finny further explains that "when you really love something, then it loves you back, in whatever way it has to love" (page 111). Why does Gene assert this is false, but should be true?

9. Though Leper does not play a large role in life at Devon, Gene has a lot of sympathy for him. Why is this? Why are the boys so affected by Leper's joining the war? And were you surprised that Leper witnessed Finny's fall?
10. Why does Brinker force Gene and Finny into the trial (page 165)? How do Brinker's changing views of the war influence his behavior at Devon and with Gene?
11. What does Gene mean when he says "wars were made instead by something ignorant in the human heart" (page 201)? Do you believe he has "made [his] escape" from fear (page 10) by the time he revisits Devon as an adult?
12. Do you agree with David Levithan in the afterword that "human nature doesn't change very much over time" (page 205)? How does *A Separate Peace* illustrate this?

Enhance Your Discussion

1. In 1972, *A Separate Peace* was adapted for film. Watch the movie and discuss the director's interpretation of the novel.
2. Choose another coming-of-age classic to read, such as *Lord of the Flies* or *Catcher in the Rye*. Discuss the books' depictions of adolescence and rivalry or the differences and similarities in their main characters in comparison to *A Separate Peace*.