

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for A Separate Peace by John Knowles

Book Information

John Knowles, A Separate Peace
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Two adolescents come to understand each other and themselves after a tragic accident.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Family Life, Growing Up; Popular Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters

Bobby Zane an Upper Middler with Gene and Finny

Brinker Hadley an Upper Middler who organizes the mock trial at the First Academy Building

Chet Douglass an Upper Middler with Gene and Finny

Cliff Quackenbush crew manager for the rowing team

Dr. Stanpole Finny's doctor

Elwin (Leper) Lepellier a classmate of Gene and Finny, who enlists in the army and escapes when he faces a Section Eight discharge

Gene Forrester the person who relates the story

Mr. Carhart the school chaplain

Mr. Ludsbury the Devon Master for whom Mr. Prud'homme substituted

Mr. Patch-Withers the substitute Headmaster for the summer

Mr. Prud'homme the substitute Devon Master for the summer

Mrs. Patch-Withers the wife of the substitute Headmaster

Phil Latham the wrestling coach

Phineas (Finny) Gene's roommate at Devon School, who is a natural athlete and suffers a badly broken leg when he falls from the tree

Vocabulary

collaboration cooperation with the enemy

inveigle to win over by flattery

regimen a regulated course of diet, exercise, rest, and general hygiene intended to improve health

Synopsis

Gene Forrester returns to Devon School fifteen years after his graduation. Two sites, the First Academy Building and the tree along the river, hold particularly fearful memories connected to events of the summer of 1942.

Gene tells about his relationship with Phineas (Finny) and the events that lead to Finny's death. The Upper Middlers watch as the seniors, the seventeen-year-old students, are prepared to join the armed forces in World War II. The accelerated courses, first-aid program, and physical hardening courses are not required of the Upper Middlers. Finny, however, comes up with the plan to jump from the tree along the river, which is a part of the senior physical hardening regimen. Those who jump from the tree become the members of the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session. Members make one jump each night.

As the summer goes on, Gene becomes convinced that Finny is trying to prevent him from graduating at the top of his class. One night, as Finny and Gene are going to make a double jump, Gene bounces the tree branch. Finny loses his balance and falls. He suffers a shattered leg, which prevents him from participating in sports.

Finny's recuperation is long, and Gene is not sure Finny will return to Devon. The day the students help clear snow from the railroad tracks, Gene decides to enlist. When he returns to his room that day, he finds Finny has returned as his roommate.

Finny convinces Gene to remain in school, and he denies there is a war. He claims that it is fabrication of fat old men who don't want to be crowded out of

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their jobs by young men. Instead, he focuses on training Gene for the Olympics.

Questions continue to surface regarding Finny's accident. Brinker organizes a mock trial to clear the air at the First Academy Building one night. Finny leaves the trial before its completion, falls down the marble steps, and rebreaks his leg.

When Gene visits Finny in the hospital, Finny tells Gene how he had tried to enlist all winter but was refused. Finny dies as Dr. Stanpole tries to set the new break.

Gene graduates and enters the service, but doesn't see any action.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What events did Gene cite to prove to himself that Finny was trying to prevent him from becoming the head of the class?

Gene was convinced that Finny was trying to wreck his studies by distracting him with activities such as blitzball, the nightly meetings of the Super Suicide Society, and going to the beach. Gene came to this conclusion when Finny said that he would kill himself out of jealous envy if Gene were the head of the class.

Literary Analysis

The author chose to write the book in the first person from Gene's point of view. How might the feeling of the book and the reader's response be different if it were told from a different point of view?

It would be more difficult to convey Gene's feelings of envy toward Finny. Gene is able to convey the boys' attitudes and feelings regarding the war very subtly. The reader might not empathize as much with characters if the story were told from a different point of view.

Inferential Comprehension

Which things at the beginning of the story lead the reader to believe that Finny's goal is to enlist in the military?

He doesn't wear pajamas because they are unmilitary. He makes up a game using a medicine ball, which the seniors use for their regimen. He organizes a group to jump from the tree, a training method that is also part of the senior physical hardening regimen.

Constructing Meaning

Think of someone you know who reminds you of Finny as he was before the accident. How are they alike?

Finny was self-assured, popular with the other students, and willing to try almost anything. He pushed himself to his limits, and he didn't need others' approval when he exceeded the school record. He was satisfied to know for himself that he could do it.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Finny makes up blitzball as a substitute for playing badminton. Gene later observes that blitzball seemed to be made specially for Finny because the skills required for the game were his strengths. Identify your personal strengths. Make up a game in which your strengths would give you an advantage. The game can be played with a ball, or it can be a board game--anything that reflects your strengths.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Finny's fall from the tree shattered his leg, making it impossible for him to participate in sports. According to Dr. Stanpole, he died from bone marrow traveling in his blood stream to his heart. Research the medical treatments available during the forties. What technology do we have now that would have made a difference in Finny's recuperation or prevented his death? Share your findings with the class.

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Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The story is set in the 1940s during World War II. In the story, the readers learn that the seniors are "draft-bait" and are being prepared to go to war. Leper opts to enlist rather than be drafted into the army, so he has a choice of the unit in which he serves. Drafts have been used in several wars in which the United States was involved. Research three wars of the 1900s in which the United States was involved. Find out what the draft policies were for each war. List benefits and drawbacks of enlisting versus being drafted. Create a poster that shows comparisons of these for each war.

Responding to Literature Finny falls from the tree when he and Gene are going to make a double jump. As a result, his leg is shattered, and he is no longer the athlete he had been before the accident. What would have happened if Gene had reached out to balance Finny? What would have happened if Finny had died from his fall? Rewrite the scene to reflect a different outcome.