

# INSIDE THE TEACHER'S COMPANION

## Background

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This section is an in-depth study of the key concepts of the novel. It includes carefully chosen background information on the author, essential historical information on the book and related topics and events, explanations of specific issues discussed in the book, and explorations of the elements of the novel.

## Setting the Stage: Prereading

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The preparation that occurs even before students begin reading is important to their understanding and appreciation of what they read. **Setting the Stage** offers a selection of techniques for “hooking” students so that their reading of the book will be meaningful. Various options for “setting up” the novel include informal writing activities, storytelling, simulations, discussion, and games based on issues students will encounter in the novel. **Setting the Stage** also includes suggestions for ongoing activities that will help keep students focused on the text.

## Inside the Novel

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**Inside the Novel** offers chapter-by-chapter commentary and suggestions for thought-provoking discussion topics and inventive activities. Key concepts are highlighted in brief yet informative sidebar essays, giving you the background information you need to explore complex issues in the novel.

## An A Separate Peace Study Guide

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The Teacher's Companion includes an easy-to-use yet comprehensive study guide. A brief “facts” section helps students review the reading quickly; *Focus on Thinking* challenges students to use higher-level thinking skills to write clearly and cohesively about the novel. Concise *Words and Language* lists highlight key words and concepts in the text.

## Beyond the Text: Project Possibilities

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This section gives suggestions for projects that extend students' understanding of the novel. Interdisciplinary in nature, the activities ask students to draw from what they have read to explore the relationship between literature and their understanding of the world.

## Suggested Essay Questions

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These thoughtful essay questions may be used either as tests or as guides for students' creative and expository writing. You may wish to use them as homework assignments in order to evoke as complex and focused a response as possible. Questions address students' whole knowledge and understanding of the novel, challenging them to think deeply and creatively.

# THE TEACHER'S COMPANION

A RESOURCE GUIDE *for* TEACHERS, *by* TEACHERS

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## A SEPARATE PEACE

by

John Knowles

MILLIKEN PUBLISHING COMPANY

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## —APPROACHING A *Separate Peace*—

*A Separate Peace* is a good novel to teach because it connects. Adolescence and young adulthood are times to learn to develop relationships, find a place in the world, and formulate a sense of self. That's why the novel teaches well: it deals with the inner lives of teenagers.

*A Separate Peace* also suggests the transition from the pre-existential to the contemporary existential world. We see, through the character of Gene, the narrator, a person living with and trying to conquer the fear of not being able to understand himself or his environment. Gene encounters himself at the eve of the relativity of truth. What he finds is that the institutions of civilization that once offered people the truths necessary to locate themselves within that civilization no longer offer guidance. Truth has become relative. *A Separate Peace* is an antiwar novel, not so much in the sense of what war does to the combatants, but in the effect it has on an individual's—and indeed, a nation's—psyche.

Through its richness of language, indeterminate plot, and multiple levels of meaning, *A Separate Peace* is challenging, yet still accessible for students to appreciate and enjoy. And while all too many novels lend themselves to a dispassionate critical reading, it is impossible to read this one without laughter and a sense of poignancy. Students may perceive through this reading something of the relationship between feeling and thought: that one doesn't exist without the other.

Its curious point of view makes *A Separate Peace* an interesting novel to discuss. One of the problems that students have in understanding literature is that they expect conventions to remain constant; for example, they expect a first-person narrative always to function in the same way. But the point of view in *A Separate Peace* doesn't function like Huck Finn's narration, for example, where the tale tells on the teller. Instead, it is a reconstruction of the tale as a self-satisfying explanation and confessional.

*A Separate Peace* readily connects to other pieces of literature and art. It is a good companion piece for *Catcher in the Rye*, for the recent film *Dead Poet's Society*, which carries the same kind of ambience, and for Ambrose Bierce's short story "Mockingbird" (and the subsequent film by Renoir of the same title). All can be used to develop a thematic unit to study perceptions of self and self-growth.

Finally, *A Separate Peace* is fun. It is a curious little novel, with a richness of language, motif, and imagery. Because it has a good number of highs and lows—at points it is extremely poignant and rich; at others, it becomes slow and flat—it is valuable to compare the peaks and valleys and examine why the novel works at some points and not at others. The interesting side-roads it sometimes takes occasionally leave open-ended questions; this might bother some readers, but the resulting opportunities for discussion and self-examination far outweigh the issues the novel leaves unresolved.

A gentle warning: this novel has a way of developing its own study. Discussion, projects, and essays often stray from what the teacher may believe to be the mainstream of the book into tangential side currents, eddies and tributaries. That's okay. The nature of this novel is to take side trips; and many of these excursions, particularly the discussions of values and personal response, can be enlightening and valuable. The approaches, questions and activities herein are flexible and beg customizing to meet the needs of your class. The activities in this book should lead students to construct thematic statements

## SETTING THE STAGE: PREREADING

*A Separate Peace* is not a “plot” novel. Most of the action is internal and mental, and it is important that students understand this beforehand. A discussion of the possibilities for mental action, and the ability of memory and imagination to be as powerful as physical action, may help students get started.

Three approaches to setting the stage for *A Separate Peace* are suggested here. Whatever approach you choose, it will be helpful for students to know your expectations for the study of the novel. *Why are we reading this? What’s in the book for me? What will I be expected to do on a daily, weekly, or long-term basis, and how will I be expected to demonstrate what I’ve learned at the end of the book?* These are some of the questions students will have; their answers will, of course, depend on the approach you choose to pursue and the activities and end products that approach produces.

### Setting Up

- **Relationships.** You may want to begin with a short lecture or discussion on the definition of relationship “bonding”—particularly things adolescent males seem to do to and for one another as a relationship develops.

Brief, informal writings that can be shared with a small group or the class on one or more of the following questions will give students an idea of the self-examination aspect of developing relationships:

What makes two people become friends?

What are the different levels of friendship?

What does brotherhood mean?

Describe a time that a difficult situation caused you to develop or further a relationship.

Literary connections to this aspect of *A Separate Peace* include the Ambrose Bierce short story “Mockingbird,” and Jean Renoir’s film based on that story. Both are excellent pieces to show how war and the hostile environment it creates affect relationships. Also, Holden Caulfield’s ambivalence toward his environment and his inability to form relationships in Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* make him an effective precursor to Eugene Forrester.

- **Social Setting and Environment.** You may want to begin with a short lecture or discussion on the environment and ambience of a private school for boys. The isolation, the sense of tradition and conformity, and the idea of a classical education may be foreign to some of your students. The film *Dead Poets’ Society* offers an excellent point of departure for considering the private school environment.

Many students may not have a working knowledge of the social environment of America during World War II. An introduction may be helpful. They should have an understanding of the pervasive nationalistic spirit of the time, when all phases of American life were dedicated to or affected by the war effort. Depending on how elaborate you want to be, this background can be accomplished in a short lecture using as aids some of the pictorial histories of the era (*Life Goes to War* and *We Americans* are two good possibilities).

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# INSIDE THE NOVEL

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## Chapter 1

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Chapter 1 has two main parts. The first part sets the framework for the story; we see the narrator return to Devon after a fifteen-year absence to examine events from his past. In the second part, we are introduced to the relationship between Phineas and Gene, during which the first jump from the tree occurs.

In this first chapter, the form of narration establishes itself, and we see the beginnings of the bonding of the relationship between Phineas and the narrator.

### Things to Notice

- **Motifs: Memory vs. Truth; War and Games.** Many of the major motifs begin in this chapter. The dichotomy between memory and truth is established; we see the overriding concern with the war—the fear it causes and the fact that it takes its form in games at Devon. Nature is another motif that emerges; it appears in the novel particularly in classical allusions and Garden of Eden imagery, and begins in Chapter 1 in the form of the “leafless ivy” that clings to and will consume the red brick walls of Devon.
- **Setting: Elements in Opposition.** This first chapter is important, too, in that it introduces the setting which will frame the novel: Devon, both the town and the school—a place where small areas of order live “together in contentious harmony.”
- **Setting: School as Fortress.** At first, Devon is described as a bastion keeping the war at bay. Inside the school, “the calmest, most carrying bell . . . in the world” tools “civilized,” “calm,” and “invincible.” As the war begins to encroach upon the school, by Chapter 6, the character of Devon takes on a more warlike atmosphere. Finally, in Chapter 13, Devon will become a fortress of war, as the jeeps roll in.
- **Narration: Understanding and Confessing.** We know the narrator is looking at events fifteen years past, over which memory has perhaps laid “a coat of varnish.” We begin to see his desire to narrate. It is two-fold: the narrator wishes to come to terms with his past memories; and secondly, the narration serves as a confessional.
- **Opposites.** Immediately the polarities are evident: in the second paragraph the narrator juxtaposes feeling and thought; in the fifth, he discusses joy and fear. Such forces in opposition occur throughout the novel.
- **The Existential Hero.** We are introduced to the character of the existential hero, our narrator, who faces an environment that was once hostile but with which he has come to an uneasy truce. This is a rite-of-passage novel, and the games that serve as practice for war become the rites of passage into manhood and the modern world.
- **Setting: November.** The time element of the book is also a natural passage. The narrator returns in bleak November, and the time of the critical action runs from summer to summer. Each season possesses its own distinctive environment that affects the action and development of the characters.

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## INSIDE THE NOVEL

### Things to Do

First chapters are difficult. It is important, particularly with a book as multi-leveled as this, to establish a pattern of reading for the students. You may want to read this chapter aloud, stopping at the transition between the beginning of the narration and the actual story of Phineas and Gene.

- **Writing: Memory and Change.** Have students write a reaction to one or more of the following: the process of memory; the quality of the narrator's remembrances; how it seems the narrator has changed over the preceding fifteen years; why the narrator is telling the story.
- **Listing: Key Words.** Since the language of this novel may be difficult for the varied levels you find in your class, it might also be a good time to ask if there are particular words or phrases that students find curious or for which they need explanation. Then have students underline or enter in a journal phrases or words that they find key to understanding why the narrator is telling the story.
- **Journal: Fear.** It is important for students to understand the fear that the narrator feels. In either a journal entry, a five-to-ten-minute in-class writing, or perhaps as a small group activity, have students explain a dare they've taken for which they had to overcome some fear. Ask them to try to explain how that experience may have changed them.
- **Discussion: Why People Tell Stories.** After reading this first chapter, have students discuss or write their opinions of why people tell stories.

### Chapter 2

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The "careless and wild" flavor of the summer session is established in the scene between the boys and Mr. Prud'homme. Phineas wears his new pink shirt as an emblem, and Gene's envy begins to emerge. Phineas and Gene attend tea with the Patch-Witherses at the headmaster's home. The Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session is established, and Finny saves Gene from falling out of the tree.

### Things to Notice

- **Conflict Between the Civilized and Uncivilized World.** "I thought that, from the Devon Woods, trees reached in an unbroken, widening corridor so far to the north that no one had ever seen the other end, somewhere up in the far unorganized tips of Canada. We seemed to be playing on the tame fringe of the last and greatest wilderness."
- **School as Metaphor for Civilized Tradition and Conformity.** Consider the contrast between the boys' wild play in Chapter 1 and the "tea" with Mr. Patch-Withers.
- **The Innocence of Finny.** ". . . a student who combined a calm ignorance of the rules with a winning urge to be good, who seemed to love the school truly and deeply, and never more than when he was breaking the regulations, a model boy who was most comfortable in the truant's corner. . . . We were careless and wild. . . ."

# —An A Separate Peace STUDY GUIDE—

## Chapter 1

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“Changed, I headed back through the mud. I was drenched; anybody could see it was time to come in out of the rain.”

### The Facts

1. What is the point of view of the novel?
2. How long has it been since the narrator left the Devon School?
3. Where is Devon located?
4. What “fearful sites” does the narrator visit?
5. During what season of the year does the narrator return to Devon? In what season of the year does the action of the narrator’s remembrance begin?
6. What is the year of the action that the narrator is recalling?
7. Who jumps from the tree?

### Focus on Thinking

Answer *two* of the following questions thoughtfully and thoroughly.

- Why is the jump from the tree dangerous?
- How does the narrator feel about jumping from the tree?
- Which words and phrases in the opening of the chapter best explain how the narrator feels on returning to Devon?

### Words and Language

capacious Greek Revival temples  
convalescence  
specters

contentious  
ramshackle  
salient

irate  
prodigious  
inveigle

reverberant  
toll  
West Point stride

## Chapter 2

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“We seemed to be playing on the tame fringe of the last and greatest wilderness.”

### The Facts

1. Why does Mr. Prud’homme stop at the boys’ room?
2. What is the “emblem” that Finny wears?
3. Where do Finny and the narrator go to tea, and at whose invitation?
4. What does Finny use for a belt?
5. What does Finny propose they do after leaving the tea?
6. How does Finny save the narrator’s life at the end of the chapter?