

A Separate Peace Study Guide

A Separate Peace by John Knowles

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Plot Summary

A Separate Peace is a novel by award-winning author John Knowles. In this novel, Gene Forrester is a preparatory school student whose best friend is an outgoing and much beloved athlete named Phineas. Gene finds himself struggling beside Phineas and comes to the conclusion that Phineas wants to sabotage Gene so that he can be the star of the school. When this assumption proves to be false, Gene becomes confused. Gene causes an accident that will end Phineas' athletic career and derail his plans to join the war overseas. Gene will struggle with this single episode for months until finally Phineas learns the truth. A Separate Peace is a story of coming of age and of young men who struggle to find out who they are and what motivates them in a time of uncertainty and fear.

Gene Forrester returns to Devon, the preparatory school he once attended, fifteen years after graduation. As he walks across the campus, Gene begins to recall the year that changed his life. It was 1942, and Gene is part of the first summer term at Devon, a term designed to prepare the young men of his class for service in World War II. Gene's roommate and best friend is Phineas, Finny, an outgoing character who can talk his way out of just about any situation. Over this summer term, between classes, the boys create a club centered around those brave enough to jump into the Devon River from a tree and create a new ball game that centers on Finny's own unique rules.

One afternoon, Finny questions Gene's dedication to his studies. Finny accuses Gene of wanting to be the top of the class at graduation. As Finny jokes about this, Gene finds himself wondering if Finny is really jealous of him and if he has been sabotaging his studies in order to be the top student himself. This thought causes Gene to work harder at his studies and to ignore Finny's frequent pleas to go play. One day, Gene finally tells Finny that he is interrupting his studies. Finny is surprised and expresses a belief that Gene did not need to study, that his good grades came naturally to him. This confuses Gene and makes him angry with Finny. As the two boys prepare to jump from a tree limb into the river below, Gene shakes the limb and causes Finny to fall too early. Finny fractures his leg badly on the river bank below.

Gene finishes the summer term and returns home for a brief visit. When Gene comes back, he stops by Finny's house to speak with him. Gene tries to tell Finny that he caused him to fall from the tree intentionally, but Finny does not believe him. Gene returns to school alone as Finny recovers. Others seem to think Gene caused Finny's accident, but Gene brushes off the accusations and no one pushes it. In a few months, Finny comes back to school and the rumors are put to rest.

Finny returns to his same old antics, but they are tinged with some bitterness. Finny insists that the war is not real and he trains Gene so that he might take Finny's place in the 1946 Olympics. In the middle of the winter term, one of their friends, Leper, joins the Army. A few months later, during a winter carnival that Finny has planned, Gene gets a telegram from Leper telling him he has escaped. Gene goes to see Leper only to learn that he has gotten a discharge from the army for mental instability.



One of Gene's classmates has been bothered all along by Finny's accident. In the middle of the night, this boy and several of his friends kidnap Gene and Finny from their room and place Gene on trial. Finny cannot recall what happened that night, but Leper, who has returned recently to the school, remembers every detail. Leper tells them Gene shook the limb, causing Finny's accident. Finny leaves the hall in anger and falls down the marble steps.

Finny's leg is broken again. Gene goes to visit him, but Finny is angry with him. Gene returns the next morning to apologize again. Finny accepts his apology and tells him how he had wanted to join the military, but no one would take him now. The doctor comes and asks Gene to return later because they need to set Finny's leg. When Gene returns, he learns that Finny has died from escaped bone marrow that traveled to his heart. Gene graduates months later and enters the Navy, wiser and with the understanding that everyone deals with war in their own way.



Chapters 1-2, A Separate Peace

Chapters 1-2, A Separate Peace Summary

A Separate Peace has been a bestseller since its release in 1959. The author is a highly educated, award-winning writer who died in 2001.

Chapter 1. Gene Forrester returns to Devon, the preparatory school of his youth, fifteen years after his graduation. Gene visits a tree a short distance from the gym that played an important role in his final year at Devon. The tree was once a symbol of bravery when Gene was young. The senior class of Devon reportedly would jump from one of its limbs into the river to prove their preparedness to go to war. In the summer of 1942, during the first summer session at Devon to prepare the students to go to war, Gene's roommate thought that they should prove their own courage by jumping from the tree. Phineas, Finny, jumps first. Gene follows, determined to prove his own courage. The others, however, refuse to jump. The boys then become aware of the late hour and rush back for dinner. Finny, however, does not like to conform to other's rules, so he leads Gene around the campus on a tour of sorts. Later they return to their room and study.

Chapter 2. The temporary dorm master comes to Finny and complains about him missing dinner more often than not. Finny comes up with a wild story that not only keeps him and Gene out of trouble, but makes the dorm master laugh. Gene notes this odd behavior and realizes that most of the masters at Devon are easy on the students that summer. Gene thinks this might have to do with the fact that it was summer, but later believes that it had more to do with raging war in Europe.

That day Finny wears a pink shirt that would normally cause teasing from the other students. However, Finny concocts a story about how it is a symbol of triumph for the first bombing of Central Europe by the allies. That afternoon is a tea at the head master's house, and Finny entertains everyone with news of this bombing, which Gene suspects never happened. At the tea, the wife of the temporary head master notices that Finny is wearing the school tie as a belt. Outraged, she demands an explanation. Finny comes up with such a wild story that no one can remain mad at him. Gene is somewhat disappointed that Finny does not get in trouble.

Finny and Gene go back out to the tree to jump into the river. Finny suggests they start a club at the tree called the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session. This club's purpose is to meet at the tree and to leap from its branches into the river below. Gene agrees. In the tree, Gene steps out on the limb and turns to hear something Finny said. In turning, Gene loses his balance and begins to fall. Finny grabs him and saves him from falling, possibly saving his life.



Chapters 1-2, A Separate Peace Analysis

These first two chapters introduce the narrating character. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator is an unnamed, middle-aged man who has returned to Devon, the preparatory school of his youth, to revisit his past. This man remembers the fear under which he lived those years of his life. The reader is not sure what fear this man felt, but assumes it has something to do with his classmates. The man then begins to recall a specific time at Devon, going back in time to a summer session in which he began jumping from a tree with his friend, Finny, to prove his bravery. As the narrator presents the situation, the reader comes to the conclusion that the reason he jumped from the tree was because Finny did it, not because it was something he chose to do.

Finny is a bigger than life personality, a young man everyone loves. Finny can talk his way out of nearly any situation. Gene watches Finny talk his way out of trouble with the masters of the school and finds himself amazed that these people do not see through Finny like he does. There seems to be a little resentment in Gene when it comes to Finny. The reader is not clear where this resentment comes from; perhaps it is jealousy that Finny is so well liked, but it is a resentment that could potentially cause Gene and Finny some trouble in the future.

The fear the man mentions in the first chapter has something to do with both Devon and perhaps the time period the novel is set in. The year is 1942. Most readers will realize that World War II was raging in Europe in that year, still several years from its conclusion. This could account for some of Gene's fear because he was sixteen in that year, only two or less years from being drafted. This fear could also have come from the habit of jumping from a tree that Gene and his friend Finny develop, a tree that the reader already knows is important to Gene because as an adult this is one of two things he specifically wishes to see again at Devon.



Chapters 3-4, A Separate Peace

Chapters 3-4, A Separate Peace Summary

Chapter 3. Finny goes full speed ahead on the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session. They meet every night. Gene goes along each night, never even attempting to beg off. During this same time, Finny becomes annoyed with the choice of sports to be played on campus, so he creates his own game with his own rules. Finny calls it blitzball, and Gene thinks that kids continue to play it now.

One afternoon, while swimming in the school pool, Finny notes the name of a young man who holds the record for the 100 yards freestyle. Finny is annoyed no one from their class has broken the record, so he asks Gene to time him. Finny breaks the record, but he does not want anyone to know. Finny just wants the satisfaction of knowing he could do it; he does not want his name on a plaque. Gene is deeply disturbed by this. That same afternoon, Finny asks Gene to bike to the ocean with him. Even though Gene has an important test the next day, he agrees. The boys spend the afternoon at the beach and sleep there that night. As they walk on the boardwalk, Gene thinks the locals are admiring Finny while Finny believes it is Gene they are staring at.

Chapter 4. The next day they ride back to school. Gene barely arrives in time for his test, and he fails. That night Finny tells Gene he works too hard and asks if he is trying to graduate head of the class. Gene sees nothing wrong with this, but begins to suspect Finny does not like it. In fact, Gene gets it into his head that Finny has been trying to sabotage him in his studies and this is why he has been dragging him to the ocean and to play his made up games. This pushes Gene to work harder on his studies to spite Finny. Gene thinks getting good grades somehow makes him even with Finny.

For several weeks they get along and things seem better. However, one night Finny tells Gene to go to the tree with him because Leper, one of their friends, is going to jump. Gene becomes angry and accuses Finny of interrupting his studies on purpose. Finny denies this, suggesting that he thought Gene got good grades without studying too hard. This shocks Gene and makes him realize his idea that his assumption that Finny is out to sabotage him was wrong. Gene becomes angry and confused. When he and Finny climb the tree together to do a double jump, Gene shakes the tree limb and causes Finny to fall.

Chapters 3-4, A Separate Peace Analysis

Finny's character is overwhelmingly humble and gentle. Gene is blown away when Finny one day creates a new game and the next beats a swimming record without having trained in the sport for very long. Gene is annoyed when Finny refuses to tell anyone that he broke the record. Finny is simply too good to be true for Gene.



Gene is jealous of Finny; he thinks Finny is well loved and perfect at sports. This makes Gene want to do something just as well as Finny. Gene thinks he finds this when he comes to believe that Finny is sabotaging his academic career with all his new games and trips to the beach. Gene decides to be head of the class, to show himself to be good at something too, to make him even with Finny. Gene simply wants to be as beloved and perfect at something as Finny.

When Gene comes to realize that Finny never had a jealous bone in his body and that he never sabotaged Gene, Gene becomes confused and angry. Gene purposely causes Finny to fall from the tree in a moment of thoughtless revenge. This becomes a pivotal point in Gene's life, a moment he will look back on many times in the future, explaining why one of the places an adult Gene wanted to visit was this tree.



Chapters 5-6, A Separate Peace

Chapters 5-6, A Separate Peace Summary

Chapter 5. Finny has a badly broken leg and Gene learns that he will never participate in sports again. The best Finny can hope for is to walk again. Gene visits Finny in the infirmary and tries to tell him what he has done, but is interrupted before he can. Finny is taken home to Boston by ambulance. The summer session ends and Gene returns home in the south for a month. When Gene returns to the Boston area, he stops by Finny's house on his way to Devon. Gene tells Finny that he intentionally made him fall, but Finny will not accept his view of the accident.

Chapter 6. School begins again. Gene settles back into a routine. For his athletic grade that semester, Gene has signed up to be an assistant to the crew manager. However, Gene does not get along with the crew manager, Cliff Quackenbush, and they end up fighting in the river. On the way back to the dorms, Gene is chastised by the regular dorm master, Mr. Ludsbury, for some of the card games that took place during the summer. Back at the dorm, Gene receives a call from Finny. Finny wants to know if Gene let another student take his place in their room. When Gene tells him that they are still roommates, Finny tells Gene that this news proves they are still friends.

Chapters 5-6, A Separate Peace Analysis

Finny has broken his leg and will never play sports again. This is a sad event and changes who Finny is as a character. Gene is filled with guilt and tries to tell Finny the truth, but Finny will not listen. In fact, Finny appears to have grown a deep need for Gene as his friend. Perhaps it is this need that keeps Finny from listening to Gene's confession of guilt. Gene, however, feels as though he has made a proper confession and that everything can go forward from this point.

Gene returns to school and appears to be adjusting. Gene's decision not to do a sport is interesting and his anger at being called maimed again shows his deep sense of guilt over Finny's injury.



Chapters 7-8, A Separate Peace

Chapters 7-8, A Separate Peace Summary

Chapter 7. The room across the hall is no longer Leper's but now instead belongs to Brinker Hadley. Brinker comes into Gene's room and accuses him of causing Finny's injury so that he could get the room all to himself. Brinker and Gene go down into the Butt Room, the smoking room, and Brinker makes his accusation in front of everyone. Gene laughs it off, making a younger student feel stupid for taking the accusation seriously.

The war begins to intrude on Devon. One late fall afternoon, the students are enlisted to pick apples for farmers who have gone to war. Another afternoon, the students are asked to volunteer to dig out the railroad tracks after a heavy snowfall. On his way to the buses that will take them to the railroad yard, Gene runs into Leper. Leper is off to search for a beaver damn in a creek shoot-off from the river. Gene speaks to him for a moment and then goes to join the others. The work is hard, but when they are done, the trains are able to move. One train is filled with young men off to war. As they return to Devon, Gene and Brinker come across Leper. Gene goes out of his way to make what Leper has spent the day doing sound meaningful to Brinker.

As Brinker and Gene walk back to the dorms, they discuss the war. Brinker announces that he does not see a reason to wait to enlist. Gene finds himself agreeing, excited by the sight of the new soldiers and the experiences waiting for them. Brinker and Gene decide to enlist the following morning. However, when Gene gets to his room, he finds Finny has returned.

Chapter 8. Finny talks to Gene all evening. Gene thinks Finny is still talking as he falls asleep. The next morning Brinker comes by to drag Gene to the enlistment offices. Finny reacts poorly to the idea of losing Gene, and for this reason Gene backs down on his decision to enlist. Brinker also backs down. Over the next few weeks, Gene throws himself into caring for Finny, helping him navigate the slippery halls and steps of the school buildings. On the first day Finny is to go to class, he talks Gene into skipping with him. Instead, they go to the gym. Finny has a momentary moment of bitterness that both he and Gene pretend it did not happen. It is then that Finny begins promoting his idea that there is no war going on; it is just a story being put forward by rich men who are trying to control the young men of the country. Not only this, but Finny insists that the 1944 Olympics will take place and that Gene should train for them in Finny's place.

Chapters 7-8, A Separate Peace Analysis

Gene defends himself to accusations that he caused Finny's injuries. While the accuser and the jury appear to believe the whole thing is a joke, Gene worries that underneath the jokes there is some truth. Gene is frightened that someone will eventually learn that



he is responsible for Finny's injuries. This foreshadows a time when someone will accuse Gene with much more seriousness.

Finny returns at a time when Gene was prepared to enlist in the military. Finny clearly needs Gene, so Gene decides to remain in school to help Finny. Finny is dependent on Gene, while at the same time he appears to be dealing with his injury in a sort of fantasy world. Finny decides the war is a farce and that the Olympics will take place. Finny had once planned to participate in the Olympics, so he now decides that Gene should take his place. To the reader, this is clearly a fantasy Finny has created. The reader is unclear what the reason is for this fantasy, but assumes it has something to do with Finny's attempts to deal with the truth of his injury.



Chapters 9-10, A Separate Peace

Chapters 9-10, A Separate Peace Summary

Chapter 9. In January, Leper enlists in the United States ski troops because the recruiter made it look like so much fun. Leper is the first of the class to enlist, and this causes a strange ripple among the students. Brinker begins making up little stories about Leper's heroic actions, making him something of a hero at the school.

Finny decides they should have a Winter Carnival. Finny plans it all out and recruits other students to help with the planning. They set up a ski jump and a prize table and Brinker mans an area where he has hidden strong cider. Everyone looks to Brinker when Finny delays the start of the carnival, allowing Finny to make Brinker look like a fool when he gives a signal that causes everyone to steal Brinker's cider. Gene gets into it, stealing a bottle and force feeding it to Brinker. Later they participate in the ski jump and other games. When Gene wins the decathlon, he receives a telegram that has just arrived from Leper.

Chapter 10. Gene takes the train to Vermont and walks to Leper's house. Leper tells Gene all about Section 8 discharges, making it clear that he has had a nervous breakdown of some sort. When Leper mentions Finny's accident, implying that Gene was behind it, Gene knocks over his chair. Leper's mother comes down and rescues her son, but Leper insists Gene stay for lunch. After lunch, Leper and Gene go for a walk. Leper describes basic training and how he began to see things that were not real. After a while, Gene becomes emotional and tells Leper to shut up, before walking away and leaving him in a snowy field.

Chapters 9-10, A Separate Peace Analysis

Leper enlists in the United States ski patrol. Leper is the first to enlist at the school, making him something of a hero. However, Leper is a gentle person who does not adjust to the military well. Leper has a nervous breakdown and receives a Section 8 discharge. When Gene hears of this, he becomes emotional. The idea that Leper, someone he knows, had this reaction to the military leaves Gene frightened because he knows he will one day be drafted if he does not enlist. It is a frightening time for all boys Gene's age, and Leper's experience only makes it more real.

At the same time, Finny continues to perpetuate his fantasy world and to draw the other students into it. Gene goes along freely, happy to forget about the war and other things that frighten him, including the truth about Finny's injury.



Chapter 11, A Separate Peace

Chapter 11, A Separate Peace Summary

Chapter 11. Gene returns to Devon to find Finny in the middle of a snowball fight with other seniors. When it is all over, after everyone turns on Finny because he keeps switching teams, Gene worries that Finny should be this active with his leg still in a walking cast. Finny tells him that Dr. Stanpole says he can be active, but he should be careful not to break the leg again. Later, Gene tells Finny and Brinker about Leper's nervous breakdown. Finny reacts by ending his fantasy regarding the war and the Olympics. The recruiters begin coming to the school more and more. More and more of the seniors begin to enlist.

Brinker comes to Gene and suggests that everyone face the truth of Finny's injury to help him adjust to the future. Gene worries about what Brinker might be planning. At the same, Gene helps Finny with some Latin homework. Finny tells Gene that he saw Leper on campus, hanging around the head master's house. Later that night, Brinker and a few of his friends come into Finny and Gene's room and take them away. They go into the Assembly Room of the First Building. Brinker announces that he is putting Gene on trial in Finny's injury. There are several other boys in the room, some of them setting up on a platform at the front of the room. Brinker takes Finny first and places him in a chair to be used as a witness chair. Finny, however, cannot remember details of the day he was injured. In fact, Finny cannot remember if Gene was in the tree with him.

Brinker learns that Leper has come back to Devon and that he was there the day of the accident. Everyone knows that Leper has a good memory, so Brinker sends some boys to get Leper. Leper tells exactly what he saw, that two boys were in the tree, one boy shook the tree and the other fell. Finny becomes angry and announces it does not matter. Finny walks out of the room only to tumble down the outer stairs.

Chapter 11, A Separate Peace Analysis

The moment Gene has dreaded since Finny's accident finally comes. Brinker places Gene on a sort of trial for the accident. Finny is forced to testify, but he does not remember anything. Leper does, however, and he tells the truth despite the insanity that makes it sound somewhat fantastic. Finny finally realizes the truth and rushes out of the room. It is then that Finny is injured again. Gene is now in a position that he has dreaded, has finally come face to face with his worst nightmare. The reader wonders how Gene will deal with this situation now.



Chapters 12-13, A Separate Peace

Chapters 12-13, A Separate Peace Summary

Chapter 12. The boys go for help and Finny is soon taken to the infirmary. Gene follows and waits outside Finny's room. When it is quiet, Gene climbs in through the window. Finny is angry and screams at him, falling out of bed in his attempt to hurt Gene for his actions. Gene apologizes and leaves. Gene spends the night sleeping outside the gym. When he gets to his dorm room, Gene finds a note from the doctor asking for some things for Finny. Finny brings the suitcase. Finny asks Gene if his action was a momentary act of blind impulse, and Gene agrees it was. Finny forgives Gene, even though Gene's actions made it impossible for Finny to go to war, something he desperately wanted to do.

Gene spends the rest of the day attending classes and attending to his other responsibilities. Early in the evening, Gene returns to see Finny. Gene waits in the hall because Finny had his leg set that day and might still be under anesthesia. However, when Dr. Stanpole finds Gene, he tells him that Finny is dead. Some bone marrow from the break escaped the leg and went to Finny's heart, causing his death.

Chapter 13. At graduation, Gene and Brinker watch the Air Force Parachute Riggers unload their gear outside one of the rarely used buildings at Devon. The war has finally come to their small world. Brinker takes Gene to the Butt Room to meet his father. Brinker's father expresses envy that both these boys are now headed to war, Gene in the Navy and Brinker in the Coast Guard. Later, Brinker marvels that his father could be envious of something so potentially fatal. Gene looks back on the year and realizes how fear has motivated each of them, Brinker, Gene, Leper, and even Brinker's father, but never Finny. They all were searching for their own separate peace, but none of them found it but Finny.

Chapters 12-13, A Separate Peace Analysis

Finny reveals that his fantasy about the war was just a way to hide the fact that he desperately wanted to fight in the war. It turns out that Finny was passionate about the military, more so than sports, but that was taken from him with his accident. Finny wanted what everyone else was afraid of. Finny was facing fear straight on rather than hiding like the others. However, his chance was taken by his best friend.

Finny dies as an indirect result of Gene's actions. Gene was afraid and he responded, ending one boy's hopes and dreams. It is a reality that finally causes Gene to grow up. Gene finally faces his own fears and realizes that all the other boys at Devon were trying to face the same fears. In the end, they all dealt with it in their own ways.



Characters

Gene Forrester

Gene Forrester is a sixteen-year-old boy about to enter his senior year of school at Devon Preparatory School in New England. Gene is young and frightened by the talk of war that is beginning to find its way into the school. Overshadowed by his best friend, Finny, Gene finds he is afraid of not achieving his goals. Gene becomes confused and upset one day and causes a fall that leaves Finny with a badly broken leg. This broken leg leaves Finny unable to participate in sports.

Gene lives with what he has done poorly. Gene is worried that someone will learn the truth and expose him for the horrible person he really is. When this finally happens, Gene seeks forgiveness and gets it. Nothing seems to change for Gene after this truth is exposed; however, Gene loses Finny's friendship through his death. This causes Gene to grow up and become a mature adult looking forward to war with courage that he did not have before.

Phineas

Finny is a funny, imaginative young man who is a strong athlete and a favorite with all his teachers. Finny often talks his way out of trouble and he also manages to find ways to win the hearts of his fellow students. Finny is also a naturally gifted athlete who can break records but does not need the ego boosting plaques and trophies that other athletes thrive on.

Finny falls from a tree and breaks his leg so bad that he will never participate in sports again and cannot go to war. Finny is depressed by this and creates a fantasy behind which he hides for a time. When Finny learns the truth about his injury, he forgives the boy who caused it almost immediately. Finny is a kind, understanding boy.

Brinker Hadley

Brinker Hadley is a loud, outgoing boy who also attends Devon. Brinker has a room directly across from Gene and Finny's room. Brinker becomes suspicious of Finny's accident from the beginning, but school activities and the war keep it off his mind for a time. However, eventually Brinker decides that Finny must face the truth of his injury in order to go on with his life. For this reason, Brinker puts Gene on trial of sorts and forces Finny to face the truth. As a direct result, Finny falls and breaks his leg again.



Elwin

Leper is a gentle soul who likes to collect bugs and snails and spends his weekends looking for beaver dams. Leper is the first at Devon to enlist in the military. Leper is too gentle, however, and the stress of basic training drives him over the edge. Leper is given a section 8 discharge. However, Leper is sane enough to tell Finny and Brinker what happened the day of Finny's accident.

Dr. Stanpole

Dr. Stanpole is the doctor at Devon. Dr. Stanpole treats Finny's initial injury and later treats his second break. It is Dr. Stanpole who tells Gene about Finny's death. Dr. Stanpole is a peripheral character in this novel, but he is important because he is the first to discuss the multiple deaths of young men in the war and to express an adult's view of this situation.

Cliff Quakenbush

Cliff Quakenbush is the crew manager. Quakenbush is a difficult person to get along with and often keeps to himself. When Gene goes to work with Quakenbush as part of his athletic training at Devon, they get into a fight when Quakenbush calls Gene maimed. Quakenbush later shows up again in the novel when students from Devon work to clear the railroad tracks. Quakenbush again shows himself to be unpleasant, but Gene later puts this down to fear of the war.

Mr. Ludsbury

Mr. Ludsbury is the dorm master of Gene's dorm. Mr. Ludsbury is very strict and he is not happy when he learns that the students were allowed to run wild during the summer. Mr. Ludsbury represents a parental type figure to Gene and his friends, but a parental figure who is often ignored or overlooked.

Mr. Patch-Withers

Mr. Patch-Withers is the temporary headmaster during the summer session. It is during tea with him and his wife that Finny wears the pink shirt and talks about a bombing in Central Europe that never actually took place. Mr. Patch-Withers' wife is scandalized when she sees Finny wearing a Devon necktie for a belt, but Finny once again makes up a story to calm her, disappointing Gene.



Mr. Prud'homme

Mr. Prud'homme is the temporary dorm master during the summer session. Mr. Prud'homme lets the students get away with many things Mr. Ludsbury would frown on. Gene puts this behavior down to the relaxed attitude of the summer session. However, he later thinks that it might be because of the war. The masters are more relaxed because they want the students to enjoy their final summer of freedom.

Mrs. Lepellier

Mrs. Lepellier is Leper's mother. When Gene goes to visit Leper after he leaves the army, he becomes angry with Leper, knocking him out of a chair. Mrs. Lepellier is very upset by this and wants Gene to leave, but is later made happy when Gene shows that he enjoys her cooking. Mrs. Lepellier is a sad woman who sees what the war has done to her son and wants to ignore it.



Objects/Places

School Books

Gene is often reading his school books in order to prepare for his classes, but Finny does not spend as much time on his studies.

Casts

Finny has multiple casts on his leg the winter after he breaks it while the leg repairs itself.

Cane

Finny walks with a cane when he progresses to a walking cast on his broken leg.

Bicycles

Gene and Finny ride bicycles to the ocean in order to swim for an afternoon.

Sewing Machines

Gene and Brinker watch the parachute riggers unpack sewing machines to be used at an empty building on Devon's campus.

Recruiting Films

Multiple recruiters come to Devon and show the students films that are designed to make them want to join the military.

Trains

Gene and multiple other students from Devon help dig snow off of train tracks after a heavy snowfall.

Gym

Finny breaks a swimming record in the gym pool, but refuses to let Gene tell anyone.

Infirmary

Finny spends a great deal of time in the infirmary after he falls from a tree and again later when he breaks his leg a second time. Finny dies in the infirmary.

Devon

Devon is a prep school in New England.

Boston, Massachusetts

Boston is where Finny lives. Boston is also the largest city to Devon.

Vermont

Leper lives in Vermont. It is in Vermont where Gene visits Leper after he is discharged from the military.



Themes

War

The novel is set in 1942-43, during World War II. Although the war is in another country, hundreds of miles from Devon, the students there find themselves living with the war hanging over their head. The age of enlistment has been lowered to seventeen, which means most of the boys in Gene's class can enlist in the military before they have graduated.

The novel begins in what appears to be a carefree summer. However, the narrator tells the reader almost immediately that this is the first summer session at this school. This is because the school is attempting to prepare their older students before they reach the age of enlistment. It does not appear that the war is that big of a deal to the students, but the war continues to intrude into their little world.

Military recruiters begin coming to Devon, showing films designed to inspire students to enlist. It works with one of Gene's friends, Leper. However, it takes time before the other students begin to show interest in the military. In the end, they all enlist in one way or another, but the fear of enlistment has had a large toll on all of them than anyone has noticed until the end of the novel.

Competition

Finny is an athlete and the idea of athlete suggests to the reader that he would be highly competitive. Even Gene, his best friend, thinks that Finny is competitive. However, it turns out that Finny is the least competitive person on campus. In fact, Finny will often invent games that cause people to battle against one another, not each other as teams.

Gene sees Finny as competitive and this causes him to compete with him academically in order to feel equal in their relationship. When Gene learns that Finny is not competing with him, he becomes confused and causes Finny to break his leg. If not for the idea of competition, Gene might not have acted as he did, making competition a theme of the novel.

Friendship

Finny thinks of Gene as his best friend. Gene sees Finny as his rival, as someone who is always better than him. However, when Finny breaks his leg and loses his advantage over Gene, Gene begins to see him as a good friend. To Gene, he can only be friends when they are equals. The fact that Gene becomes something of a nursemaid to Finny is in part to make amends for what he did and in part because it makes him superior over Finny.



There are few true friendships in this book. In this book there are more acquaintances and the appearance of friendship. However, friendship plays an important role in the novel because it is Finny's honest friendship with Gene that places him in a vulnerable position and allows Gene to injure him. For this reason, friendship is a theme of the book.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The novel is written as though the main character is a middle-aged man looking back on a specific section of his childhood. The narrator is remembering the four years of World War II that changed his life. The narration then changes as though the man is a child again, but the author occasionally makes comments that remind the reader that this is a flashback from the perspective of an older man.

The point of view of this novel is an intimate point of view that allows a reader to connect closely with the main character. The reader cares what happens to the narrator even though he has committed an act that is distasteful. The point of view also allows the author to inject his own opinions into the narration and to expand on the events taking place around the main character without having to move out of character or interrupt the flow of the narration. For these reasons, the point of view works well with this novel and the author's writing style.

Setting

The novel is set primarily at a preparatory school in New England in 1942-43. The setting of this novel is important because the time period is in the middle of World War II. The main characters of the novel are sixteen, soon to be old enough to enlist in the army. For this reason, the setting of the novel has a strong impact on the characters because they live constantly in fear of dying in the war.

The setting of this novel works well with the plot. At first the reader is not aware that the threat of going to war is a major motivator to the students. However, as events unfold at Devon, the war continuously leaks into the consciousness of the students. Even though the primary plot of the novel focuses on Finny's injury and Gene's involvement in it, the reader soon realizes that it is fear of the war that has motivated most all the characters in the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is somewhat stiffer than the language readers of modern novels might be used to. Although the language of the novel is not formal, it uses language that has begun to go out of modern daily usage. The language is from the fifties and forties, when the novel is set. The language is educated, strong and descriptive enough that it creates a flow that leaves the reader impressed with the words as much as the plot when the novel is done.



The language of the novel is appropriate to the plot because it is accurate to the characters in the novel and the education level of the writer. The novel is not in love with its own words, but it is descriptive enough that the reader finds enjoyment in the words as well as the plot. The language is not difficult to understand, however, and everything is clear in its context. For this reason the language of the novel fits well with the plot of the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into thirteen chapters. Each chapter is ten to twenty pages long. The chapters tell the story both in exposition and dialogue. The author also injects his own voice at the beginning of several chapters, giving his opinion of the events surrounding the setting of the novel as well as the actions taking place within the plot.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows Gene as he first injures his friend and later hides from the truth. One subplot follows Gene's neighbor, Brinker, as he attempts to find the truth about Finny's accident. Another subplot follows Finny's attempts to pretend the war is not real. All these plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"I went back to the Devon School not long ago, and found it looking oddly newer than when I was a student there fifteen years before."

Chap. 1, p. 9

"It was hypnotism. I was beginning to see that Phineas could get away with anything."

Chap. 2, p. 25

"Blitzball was the surprise of the summer. Everybody played it; I believe a form is still popular at Devon."

Chap. 3, p. 39

"It was surprising how well we got along in these weeks. Sometimes I found it hard to remember his treachery, sometimes I discovered myself thoughtlessly slipping back into affection for him again."

Chap. 4, p. 55

"Not in this conversation, not in this room. I wished I had met him in a railroad station, or at some highway intersection. Not here."

Chap. 5, p. 69

"I hit him hard across the face. I didn't know why for an instant; it was almost as though I were maimed. Then the realization that there was someone who was flashed over me."

Chap. 6, p. 79

"But this was a clue they soon seemed to forget. I detected no Sherlock Holmes among them, nor even a Dr. Watson. No one showed any interest in tracking me, no one pried, no one insinuated."

Chap. 7, p. 91

"This was my first but not my last lapse into Finny's vision of peace."

Chap. 9, p. 123

"That night I made for the first time the kind of journey which later became the monotonous routine of my life: traveling through an unknown countryside from one unknown settlement to another."

Chap. 10, p. 138



"Loyalties became hopelessly entangled. No one was going to win or lose after all."
Chap. 11, p. 154

"When Dr. Stanpole arrived there was silence on the stairs. Wrapped tightly in his blanket, with light flooding down on him from the chandelier, Finny lay isolated at the center of a tight circle of faces."
Chap. 12, p. 179

"All of them, all except Phineas, constructed at infinite cost to themselves these Maginot Lines against this enemy they thought they saw across the frontier, this enemy who never attacked that way—if he ever attacked at all; if he was indeed the enemy."
Chap. 13, p. 204

Topics for Discussion

Who is Gene Forrester? Why has he come back to Devon? What does he visit upon his arrival? Why? What does Gene recall about his childhood? What is the most important moment in Gene's life as later described in a later chapter? Why is this important? How does it change Gene's life?

Discuss the relationship between Gene and Finny. Are they friends? Is their competition in their relationship? How does Finny feel about Gene? How does Gene feel about Finny? Why does Gene think he is in competition with Finny? What does he do about it? What happens to Finny? Does Gene tell him the truth? Explain.

How does Finny break his leg? What does this mean for his future? How does Finny react emotionally to this change in his life? Why does Finny decide the war is a fake? Why does he train Gene to be in the Olympics? What causes Finny to break free of these fantasies? What does the reader later learn was the cause of these fantasies? How did Finny really feel about the war?

Who is Brinker? Why does he attempt to find out who is responsible for Finny's broken leg? Why does Brinker think that Gene is responsible? Why does Brinker want to enlist in the military? Why does he back down? How does Brinker feel about the war? How does the reader know this? Is Brinker responsible for Finny's death? Explain.

Who is Leper? Why does he enlist? Where does he go? What happens? What does his telegram to Gene say? Why does Leper chose Gene to talk to in this time of difficulty? What does Gene learn? Why does Gene become upset while visiting Leper? What does Leper know about Gene? How does Leper give away his secrets to Finny? What happens?

Why does Finny invent a new game? What is it? What is unique about the rules? What does this say about Finny's character? Why does Finny throw a Winter Carnival? What is the purpose of this? What does this say about Finny? Why does Finny create so many fantasies? How does this impact the students around him?

Discuss the war. What impact does the war have on the characters of the novel? How does it motivate them? Why is the war an issue to these students? Does the war have anything to do with Gene's actions against Finny? What impact does it have on Brinker's desire to expose the truth? How does each character learn to deal with the war?