A Separate Peace: John Knowles

- Born in West Virginia in 1926
- His best-known novels are set in New England
- Parents originally from Massachusetts and the family often spent summer vacations there
- At 15, he applied and was admitted to an elite New Hampshire boarding school, Phillips Exeter Academy
- He felt out of place and expected to fail in his first year
- Shortly after he entered Exeter, the U.S. declared war on Japan and entered World War II
- Like other young men of the time, Knowles went into the military after he graduated from high school
- After the war he went to Yale
- During his 20’s, he traveled and earned a living as a freelance writer
- A Separate Peace was first published in England in 1959
- The novel was so successful, Knowles was able to resign from his job and devote his time to writing novels and travel.
- Today, he lives in Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Setting and situation:

- The early years of the U.S. involvement in WWII
- A difficult decision for many teenage boys: should they enlist or wait to be drafted into the armed services.
- This was the very decision Knowles himself faced during his own high school years
- He used his own experience and those of his friends to portray what it was like to be a young man during wartime
• Although the war affects the lives of the characters in the story, the story does not take place overseas: rather at a fictional New England boys’ prep school.

• Similar schools throughout New England prepared an elite group of young men for ivy league colleges like Harvard and Yale. These young men were privileged by wealth and family connections and destined to join places reserved for them in the business world and in the highest social circles.

• Many of the characters are based on former classmates of his:
  o Finny on David Hackett, who went on to play hockey on the U.S. Olympic team
  o Brinker Hadley on Gore Vidal – a noted author
  o Gene Forrester on himself

Conflicts:
• True to life
• Inner struggles that everyone experiences
• That the most challenging battles are often the battles within ourselves

Background
• World War II resulted from the threat of aggressive expansion in Europe by Germany and in the Pacific by Japan.

• On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked the U.S. base at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii. 2,000 U.S. soldiers were killed in the surprise attack. This was the event that brought the U.S. into WWII

• Remembering the pain and horror of World War I, most Americans wanted the U.S. to remain neutral in the war up until this point

• In 1940, the U.S. institutes the first peacetime draft in the nation’s history. All men, aged 21 – 35 were required to register for military service. Once the U.S. entered the war, the age was lowered to 18.
Patriotism was at an all-time high. Most teenagers felt it was their duty to enlist and not wait to be drafted.

The virtual certainty of young men being drafted into a bloody war once they graduated from school sets the background of *A Separate Peace*.

- More than 10 million
- 500K+ killed or wounded

**Changes during War**

- The need for weapons created jobs
- Millions $$ needed to support the war effort. People bought war bonds, conserved fuel, endured rationing and planted “victory gardens” to supplement low supplies

**Setting:**

1. Write a clear statement about the setting of the novel.

2. Setting often provides a background for a story’s plot and characters or it may affect them directly

3. In ASP, in what way does the setting of the novel affect the characters or the plot?

4. List the several settings in the novel.

**Atmosphere**

Setting often contributes to the atmosphere or mood of a story. In ASP, the mood is very troubled and tense and much of that mood comes from the novel’s setting.

There is a friction created between the calm peacefulness of Devon, a private school steeped in beauty, tradition and privilege and the fact it is sheltered from the horrors of WWII.
* RE-read the description of the beach setting at the beginning of Chapter 4. What details does Knowles choose to highlight? How would you describe the atmosphere at the beginning of this scene?

A Separate Peace: themes

- The value and dangers of rivalry
- The effects of war
- The search for inner peace
- The fragile nature of the human heart
- The effects of the denial of truth
- The relationship between fear and hatred
- The nature of friendship