

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:

- **Finny on David Hackett, who went on to play hockey on the U.S. Olympic team**
- **Brinker Hadley on Gore Vidal – a noted author**
- **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