

A separate peace



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A Separate Peace tells the story of a sixteen-year-old boy at boarding school in New Hampshire during World War II, and the mixed feelings of admiration and jealousy he harbors for his best friend and roommate. Things get messy pretty fast, as you might expect from a bunch of ill-supervised adolescents. John Knowles' novel, often compared to *Catcher In The Rye*, he raises a question about competition amongst teens.

Competition is supposed to be healthy, but Knowles questions when do you draw a line between a fruitless rivalry and wanting to win at all costs.

Knowles uses themes of friendship, identity and youth to establish quite clearly that knocking your best friend out of a tree is on the wrong side of that line. A Separate Peace focuses on the friendship between two sixteen-year-old boys, and it's complicated. Friendship is a combination of admiration, respect, jealousy, and resentment.

For all the camaraderie between them, these boys are still driven by good old healthy competition, which at times can end up being, well, less than healthy.

Friendship blurs identity, as one boy begins to assimilate the life of the other. Narrator Gene has an inner struggle with himself trying to decide if he pushed best friend Finn off a tree, shattering his leg and dreams, on purpose or not. In the book he says " It struck me then that I was injuring him again. It occurred to me that this could be an even deeper injury than what I had done before.

I would have to back out of it, I would have to disown it. " There are two ways to interpret this passage. Either this is one of Gene's greatest moments

of honesty or it's yet another moment of justification. Knowles leaves it to the reader to decide if Gene would rather live with his shame than hurt Finny by revealing the truth, or if he is pretending he doesn't want to hurt Finny in order to recant the truth and save himself from persecution. In *A Separate Peace* John Knowles explores the difficulties with understanding one's own identity during adolescence.

Identity is complicated enough as the narrator enters adulthood in a time of war, but a difficult friendship with Finny leads to a further confusion of identity. Attempting to alter identity serves a number of purposes in the book, from escaping guilt to living through others to dealing with insanity. Gene begins abandoning his identity and assimilating that of Finny because of the would be the guilt he feels for ending his Olympic dreams. Finny interested in turning Gene into a version of himself for the very same reason.

During Finny's funeral Gene says " I did not cry then or ever about Finny... I could not escape a feeling that this was my own funeral, and you do not cry in that case. " If Gene did in some way become a part of Finny, then part of Finny lives on in Gene. Gene alludes to this when he says that he still lives his life in Finny's created " atmosphere. " In the book youth exists in its own environment. Knowles physically, mentally, and emotionally isolates it from the rest of the world.

In doing so growing up becomes the transition from the sheltered environment to the harsh realities of things like war, hatred, and fear. In the book while taking a walk Gene does a little introspection stating " levels of reality I had never suspected before, a kind of thronging and epic grandeur which my superficial eyes and cluttered mind had been blind to before. They

unrolled away impervious to me as though I were a roaming ghost. ” Essentially Gene has moved into the adult world. In doing so he is leaving his youth behind.

That sense of emergence is reflected as he considers his old self, his youthful self, dead. Nearly all the major characters in the book attempt to alter identity but these attempts ultimately fail and then the characters are forced to deal with themselves, actions, and personal identities. Knowles cleverly uses the title of the book in order to explain the overall “ It wasn’t the cider which made me surpass myself, it was this liberation we had torn from the gray encroachments of 1943, the escape we had concocted, this afternoon of momentary, illusory, special and separate peace. These lines offer meaning, and this one with a less militaristic meaning.

Essentially in the book Knowles has created a peace that is separate from the rest of the world, isolated somehow, protected. Like the youth at Devon school? The rest of the world is at war, but Gene and the other boys at Devon have achieved a peace outside of that war, a peace that is separate from it.