

## Meet John Knowles



*All of my books are based on places, places I know very well and feel very deeply about. I begin with that place and then the characters and the plot emerge from it. . . . A Separate Peace began with a playing field at Exeter Academy.*

—John Knowles

Author John Knowles was born in 1926 in Fairmont, West Virginia, deep in the heart of coal-mining country. Although some of his works reflect his West Virginia roots—in *A Vein of Riches*, for example, he tells the story of an early twentieth-century miners strike—Knowles's best-known works are set in New England. His father and mother were originally from Massachusetts, and the family often spent summer vacations there.

Knowles's love of New England stems from his experiences as a student. At the age of fifteen, he applied to an elite New Hampshire boarding school, Phillips Exeter Academy. Much to his surprise, he was admitted. At first, Knowles felt out of place. He has said that his classmates seemed "too eastern for me, too Yankee, too tough," and that he found the New Hampshire winter "breathhtakingly cold." Moreover, his grades were not the best. He admits:

*It quickly seemed probable that I would flunk out. . . . Then somehow or other I*

*knuckled down, learned by myself how to study, discovered I had a brain which had more potential than a knack for writing, and by the end of that first term, I was passing every course comfortably. . . . Meanwhile, I was falling in love with Exeter.*

Knowles's affection for the school is reflected in his first—and most famous—novel, *A Separate Peace*.

Shortly after Knowles entered Exeter, the United States 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. He trained to be a pilot in the United States Army Air Force aviation program, but when the war ended he decided to go back to school. He attended Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, where he received a bachelor's degree in 1949.

During his twenties, Knowles traveled and earned a living as a freelance writer. He wrote the stories "Phineas" and "A Turn in the Sun," which were to form the core of *A Separate Peace*. Knowles then took a job as an associate editor of a travel magazine. Early each morning, before going to the office, he worked on *A Separate Peace*.

The novel, which was first published in England in 1959 and the United States in 1960, proved to be a success—so much that Knowles was able to resign from his job and devote his time to writing and to travel. Since then, Knowles has written a variety of novels, a short story collection, a travel book, and several essays. None of these works has been as successful as *A Separate Peace*, but the fact does not seem to trouble him. He says that because he does not write with a particular audience in mind he is delighted that he has found any audience at all. Knowles may be too modest. He is likely to continue to have an audience for many years to come. Today, Knowles lives in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where he still writes.

# Introducing the Novel

*To read A Separate Peace is to discover a novel which is completely satisfactory and yet so provocative that the reader wishes immediately to return to it.*

—James Ellis, "A Separate Peace: The Fall from Innocence"

It is unusual for an author's first novel to earn awards and a wide audience, yet John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* did just that. In 1960, the year that the novel was first published in the United States, the book won both the William Faulkner Award and the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award. About ten years later, the story was adapted for the screen and made into a movie. Today, *A Separate Peace* is standard reading in many high schools. Why is the novel so popular and so well respected?

One reason may be the time in which the novel is set. The action takes place during the early years of America's involvement in World War II, a period in which many teenaged boys faced a difficult decision: Should they enlist or wait to be drafted into the armed services? As a teenager during World War II, Knowles himself faced this decision, and he drew on memories of this experience and others to portray what it is like to be a young man during wartime. Many critics consider the portrayal to be sensitive and convincing. In the words of Warren Miller:

*Mr. Knowles has something to say about youth and war that few contemporary novelists have attempted to say and none has said better.*

Although World War II affects the lives of the characters in the story, it would be wrong to call *A Separate Peace* a novel about the war. The story does not take place overseas, in the thick of battle, but rather in the United States, at a fictional New England boys' school named Devon. Knowles based Devon School on Phillips Exeter Academy, the school he attended as a teenager. The author affectionately recalls a summer that he spent there:

*The great trees, the thick clinging ivy, the expanses of playing fields, the winding black-water river, the pure air all began to sort of*

*intoxicate me. Classroom windows were open; the aroma of flowers and shrubbery floated in. We were in shirt sleeves; the masters [teachers] were relaxed. Studies now were easy for me. The summer of 1943 at Exeter was as happy a time as I ever had in my life.*

Similarly, Knowles based many of the characters on former classmates of his. He has said that Phineas ("Finny") was, in part, inspired by David Hackett, a classmate who went on to play hockey on a U.S. Olympic team. The inspiration for Brinker Hadley was Gore Vidal, an Exeter graduate who today is a noted author. Knowles loosely based the central character, Gene Forrester, on himself. In fact, there is a little bit of Knowles in all the characters. The author says:

*It is true that I put part of myself into all four main characters in A Separate Peace: Phineas, Gene, Leper, and Brinker. In addition to using [Gore Vidal] for Brinker, and myself for Gene, I had to, as most novelists do, draw from myself for everyone in the book.*

As summer turns into fall, the characters experience conflicts that many readers have found to be absorbing and true to life. If the conflicts seem real, it is because they represent the kinds of inner struggles that everyone experiences. Like real people, the characters discover that the most challenging battles in life are often the battles within.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

The central story of *A Separate Peace* begins less than a year after the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. Shortly after the surprise bombing, which claimed the lives of more than 2,000 U.S. soldiers, the United States entered World War II.

During the 1930s, when international conflicts began to erupt in Asia, most Americans did not want the United States to become involved in conflicts overseas. As other conflicts erupted and spread, many Americans sympathized with the plight of longtime allies, and their fight against Nazi Germany. However, recalling the pain and horror of World War I, most Americans still

wanted the United States to remain neutral. With the bombing of Pearl Harbor, however, the opinion of the American public almost immediately shifted to favor U.S. involvement, and the people quickly readied themselves for war.

In 1940, when the U.S. government instituted the first peacetime draft in the nation's history, all men aged twenty-one through thirty-five were required to register for military service. After the United States entered the war, the registration age was lowered to eighteen. Many young men did not wait to be drafted; patriotism was at an all-time high, and teenagers often felt that it was their duty to enlist.

The war brought changes to the American economy and lifestyle. The military needed weapons, and this need created jobs. The American people did all they could to aid the country. They attended rallies, bought war bonds, conserved fuel and rubber by car pooling, and planted "victory gardens" to supplement the sometimes meager supply of fresh fruits and vegetables. Americans tolerated the sometimes frustrating lack of everyday items such as shoes, but found other shortages considerably less tolerable. For

example, in a popular song of the time, "They're Either Too Young or Too Old," a woman laments the shortage of eligible men.

John Knowles, in an article about his school days, describes how the "man shortage" at home, in the States, changed the makeup of the Exeter faculty:

*All the faculty . . . were between fifty and seventy years old when I first entered Exeter in the fall of 1942. I had a young French teacher and one other young teacher but they had left for the war by midyear. All of the faculty on the campus were so much older than we were, that we had no connection with them. They were just too old, too tired, and too busy. One of the reasons that [the main characters in *A Separate Peace*] develop this intensely close friendship is that they had no one to relate to; no older person to pattern themselves on, to look and talk things over with. . . .*

In short, American life, as it had been, changed "for the duration"—a phrase that meant "until the end of the war." To the characters in *A Separate Peace*, "for the duration" seems very long indeed.

### Did You Know?

Boarding school is less familiar in the United States than in Europe, where it began. Boarding schools are often called preparatory schools because they are intended to prepare students for some form of higher education.

In the United States, most preparatory school students enroll at age fourteen. The course of study is often challenging, and most students eventually go on to college.

Many boarding schools have their own teaching philosophies. Phillips Exeter Academy uses what it calls the "Harkness Plan," in which twelve students work around an oval table in each classroom. This is

intended to encourage collaboration and the sharing of ideas. Exeter and many other preparatory schools also encourage students to pursue knowledge on their own.

Some parents worry that boarding school students face too much around-the-clock pressure and miss out on the opportunity to spend time with their families. Students live in a competitive environment, and must deal with peer pressure that other students can leave behind at the end of a day. Those who prefer boarding school say that students thrive in small classes, get more involved in sports and activities, and learn at a young age how to get along with a variety of people.