

Essay 2

John Knowles on *A Separate Peace*

Reflections of John Knowles about his Novel

The following is the first part of a series of reflections by John Knowles. Knowles graduated from Exeter in 1945 and is the author of *A Separate Peace*, now a movie about Exeter students in the forties.

All the faculty here 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 just were too old, too tired, and too busy. One of the reasons that Gene and Finny 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, they only had each other. All the students really had to relate to each other.

I was happy to be on the swimming team and Dan Fowler was the only faculty man I could begin to think I had any connection with as far as rapport. A faculty member might drop in once a term to a club or organization meeting, but that was rare. The master of Sleeper House was inaccessible. I was in Peabody with Mr. Galt and Mr. Bissell. This situation of the faculty explains a lot about the book. The students were thrown back upon themselves. One faculty member I mentioned in the book is a reference to a real person. I wrote about old Mr. Wittman, Doc Wittman, as Mr. Patchwithers. He is the very old professor who gives the party in the book. I think Doc Wittman is no longer living.

Also the school minister in the book was George Carhart. Mr. Carhart was in the English department, but I liked the sound of the name.

Mr. Galt might be construed as having said the remark: "Is it raining in your part of town?" in the book.

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 someone for Brinker, and myself for Gene, I had to, as most novelists do, draw from myself for everyone in the book. David Hackett never went through all the experiences of Finny, and I had never spoken to Gore Vidal. So that is what a novelist has to be: someone with many facets.

I did OK here at Exeter academically. I was not a really good student. I was not Gene Forrester in that department. I do think I could have been, but I wasn't interested in studying. All I wanted to do was to get through. I didn't want any trouble from my family, the Dean, or anybody. There were certain things I was interested in. I really

liked French and other languages. I enjoyed English. I was the only person in my senior year English course. They made a special class for me.

The character of Brinker in the book is based on Gore Vidal. I know Gore quite well now, but I didn't know him when I was at Exeter. I think I did rather a good job on Gore. I was a lower-middler and Gore was a senior as I observed him. He made an impression on me and I said, "Now that's a very unusual and thriving person." And when I had to write about that kind of person, I used what I imagined Gore to be like. Years later he is quite a good friend of mine and he is very much like that.

David Hackett was a full-time Milton student but was my model for Phineas. But he was here at Exeter. He came here in the summer of 1943 for the six weeks that the book is really based on. That was when we had the Super Suicide Society of The Summer Session. Hackett wasn't my roommate since there were so few students in the summer session everyone had their own room. Hackett lived across the hall. In effect, though, he was my roommate.

David Hackett did recently see the film before it opened in New York. He lives in Washington and was very close to the Kennedys. I had invited David to several private showings, but he chickened out every time. I think he was afraid to face the film for complex reasons which I understand. One night Ethel Kennedy said, "And now we are going to see the latest Jerry Lewis movie." The guests, including David, went to the projection room at Hickory Hill and they walked in and there was *A Separate Peace*. I think David Hackett liked it very much.

John Heyl and David Hackett do not resemble each other physically on the screen, but they are the same type.

There was a boy who died while I was here, Bob Tait. He died on the operating table. The PEAN was dedicated to him. I knew him but I wasn't using him as a model. It is a question of the subconscious. Gore reminded me of Tait, a wonderful human being who died on the operating table during his senior year on Christmas day. I never knew what he was being operated on for. So, maybe I did subconsciously remember him, but I never thought of him directly when I was writing the book. Tait died when the marrow escaped from his broken leg. I might have known that, but I never remembered until Gore Vidal reminded me.

Actually, I didn't have anyone in mind specifically for Leper. I just knew there was a Leper somewhere, although I put him together from different impressions. Let's face it, there are Lepers in this world, so I felt I didn't need a model for that character.

I never went through old PEANs to write *A Separate Peace*. It was an uncalculated, subconscious creative process.

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