

*A Separate Peace*, John Knowles  
STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

**Chapters 1 – 3**

1. What two sites did the narrator go back to see at Devon?
2. Who is Phineas?
3. What unusual thing did Phineas talk Gene into doing?
4. Why were the boys not punished for jumping out of the tree?
5. Identify Mr. Prud-homme and Mr. Patch-Withers.
6. What was the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session?
7. Gene said, "I didn't need to feel any tremendous rush of gratitude towards Phineas." Why not?
8. Why did Gene continue jumping out of the tree and going along with Phineas even though he didn't want to?
9. What was blitzball?
10. In what way does Gene describe his memories of the war years?
11. What does the swimming record incident show about Phineas?
12. "Exposing a sincere emotion like that at the Devon School was the next thing to suicide." What had Phineas just told Gene?

**Chapters 4 – 5**

1. What two realizations does Gene have about his relationship with Phineas?
2. Over what did Gene and Phineas argue?
3. What happened to Phineas?
4. Why didn't Gene tell Phineas the truth (that he bounced on the limb and caused the fall) at the infirmary?
5. What is Phineas' reaction when Gene does confess?

**Chapters 6 – 7**

1. "If you broke the rules, then they broke you." What did Gene mean?
2. Identify Cliff Quackenbush.
3. How did Gene lose his job of Assistant Crew Manager?
4. From whom was Gene's long-distance call?
5. Why did Gene feel a sense of freedom when Phineas said, "Listen, pal, if I can't play sports, you're going to play them for me"?
6. What idea does Brinker Hadley introduce?
7. Why did Gene leave the Butt Room without smoking a cigarette?
8. What "good deed" did the boys do?
9. What does Gene say about Brinker as he tries to spare Leper's feelings when the gang meets him after the railroad work is done?
10. Who decided to enlist?
11. Why did Gene not enlist?

## **Chapters 8 – 9**

1. Of what did Finny try to convince Gene about the war?
2. For what event did Finny want to train Gene? What was wrong with that plan?
3. Why did Phineas decide that Mr. Ludsbury didn't know the war was just propaganda from fat old men?
4. Who was the first of Gene's gang to actually enlist?
5. What effect did Leper's enlistment have on the boys at Devon?
6. What winter event did Phineas invent?
7. From whom was Gene's telegram, and what was the message?

## **Chapters 10 – 11**

1. What happened to Leper?
2. How did Gene react to Leper's description of what happened to him?
3. Why did Gene want to see only Phineas?
4. Brinker said, "What's the matter with our class anyway? It isn't even June yet and we've already got two men sidelined for the Duration." Who was he talking about? For the duration of what?
5. How did Leper's illness affect Phineas?
6. Contrast Brinker's view of Finny's disability with Gene's view.
7. Where did Brinker take Gene and Finny? Why?
8. Why did Finny rush out of the room?
9. What happened to Finny after he ran out of the room?

## **Chapters 12 – 13**

1. Why didn't Gene do anything to help with Phineas after his second accident?
2. Why did Gene sneak into the infirmary?
3. Gene told Phineas, "you wouldn't be any good in the war, even if nothing had happened to your leg." What did he mean?
4. What finally happened to Phineas?
5. What was ironic about Gene's part in the war?

## Topics & Questions for Further Discussion

1. Gene says, “I was subject to the dictates of my mind, which gave me the maneuverability of a strait jacket” (page 34). Where do Gene’s rules for himself come from? Why are they so strict?
2. Why does Phineas choose the pink shirt for a school flag, his emblem? And why does Gene so envy his ability to “get away” with this (page 25)?
3. Gene thinks Finny’s secret swim record is “too unusual for—not friendship, but too unusual for rivalry” (page 45). Why does this shock Gene? Why is rivalry so essential at Devon? What does it say about the dynamics of Gene and Finny’s friendship?
4. How do the school’s rivers, the Devon and the Naguamsett, represent innocence and experience in the boys’ lives?
5. How is it that Gene “becomes” Finny alone in their room after Finny’s fall (page 62) and the next day he’s “pretty sure I didn’t know Finny at all” (page 63)? What is the truth?
6. When Gene tells Finny he won’t start living by the rules, why is that “the most false thing, the biggest lie of all” (page 71)?
7. Why can’t Finny let Gene tell him what actually happened in the tree? Why does Finny call Gene to apologize for even suspecting him for a “second” (page 83)?
8. Finny says the winter loves him, while Gene calls the winter “treacherous” for Finny and his crutches. Finny further explains that “when you really love something, then it loves you back, in whatever way it has to love” (page 111). Why does Gene assert this is false, but should be true?
9. Though Leper does not play a large role in life at Devon, Gene has a lot of sympathy for him. Why is this? Why are the boys so affected by Leper’s joining the war? And were you surprised that Leper witnessed Finny’s fall?
10. Why does Brinker force Gene and Finny into the trial (page 165)? How do Brinker’s changing views of the war influence his behavior at Devon and with Gene?
11. What does Gene mean when he says “wars were made instead by something ignorant in the human heart” (page 201)? Do you believe he has “made [his] escape” from fear (page 10) by the time he revisits Devon as an adult?
12. Do you agree with David Levithan in the afterword that “human nature doesn’t change very much over time” (page 205)? How does *A Separate Peace* illustrate this?