

Knowles also admits there was a Super Suicide Society, but there were no broken legs or deaths. "In fact, I was the one that got a serious cut on my foot and it was I who was hobbling around all summer on crutches. As a writer, you have to alter the facts to get at the truths. Over the years I've found that I have become more like Finney and that he has become more like me.

"As a model for Brinker Hadley [the most aggressive boy at Devon, the leader in extracurricular activities and school politics] I used Gore Vidal. I never knew him while I was Exeter; he was

two years older than I and an upperclassman so I had no contact with him. But when I came to write the book, I tried to think if there was any politician in the class of '45 and I couldn't think of any. Then I thought of this super-politician in the class of '43. I remember Gore at Exeter, a pale, handsome, very determined purposeful person. Gore made a tremendous impression on me and on everyone at Exeter at that time. He was a brilliant debater."

Are there any changes he would make in the film version? "I have to say the film has been most faithful to the novel. There are moments I would have done differently. But it is so much better than most film versions of books. Larry Pearce transferred the story to the screen with such a beautiful sense of responsibility. But there is just one thing missing. I think you come away feeling terribly sorry for Gene. In the novel what I tried to convey was that, although the tragedy happened, at least out of it came a better human being. It's the study of how an adolescent personality develops, identifying with an admired person, then repudiating that person. This is something that happens with both boys and girls. We are all under the influence of someone, but deep down we resent it. Everyone wants to develop beyond the tyranny of this person and become a separate entity. Finney didn't develop that way and was destroyed."



John Knowles, author of "A Separate Peace"
"In my day life on campus was pretty isolated and in many ways monastic"



John Heyl, as Finney in "A Separate Peace"
"To admit that I had used pot was a great trauma"

Before John Heyl was discovered—walking across the lawn of his Exeter home — by Stephen Barnett, associate producer of "A Separate Peace," he was just another pressured preppe. "The first time I met our director, Larry Pearce," says Heyl, "I laid it right on the line and asked him, 'Just what are you looking for, some unexperienced, naive student who doesn't know anything about acting?' and he quietly answered, 'Yes.'"

He does admit that playing Finney was sheer bliss for him. "We aren't anything alike really. The only thing we have in common is con-artistry. I'm super at things like talking my way out of police tickets and getting through toll booths without paying. One thing I'm not is a leader. And I was never as good an athlete as Finney.

I played lacrosse, hockey and soccer at Exeter, but got opped out of playing on any varsity teams." Heyl feels that Finney's tragedy was inevitable. "A person like Finney can never get older and mature and he knew it. I had a tight friend just like Finney. In a close friendship like Gene and Finney had, you really do love one another, but that doesn't necessarily make you a fag."

One connecting thread between the Exeter classes of '42 and '71 was the War and the draft, two topics which Heyl has definite ideas about. "I would most certainly kill for my country," he says, "if it was invaded, but I refuse to go to Vietnam and kill somebody I don't even know. When I was 18, I was almost drafted, and if it wasn't for my asthma getting me classified 4F, I probably would have had to go. The funny thing was that if I had enlisted I probably would have had a great time, since I'm an expert photographer and probably would have gotten put into classified photography, but the military doesn't attract me at all."