

Teachers Notes

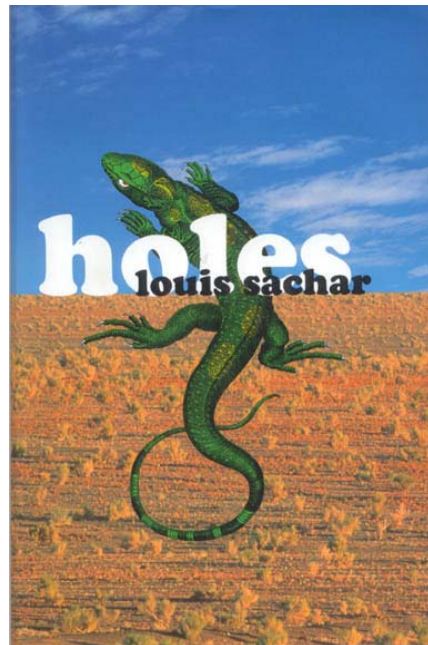
Holes by Louis Sachar

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Recommended for ages 12+

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SYNOPSIS

Stanley Yelnats's family has a history of bad luck. So when Stanley is sent to a juvenile correction centre for a crime he did not commit, it seems like just one more thing to blame on the family curse and his 'no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather'.

Camp Green Lake is in the middle of a desert, beside a dried-up lake, and every day the inmates have to dig one hole, five feet wide and five feet deep, in the baking sun. But before too long, there's a lot more going on at camp than just digging holes. There's the Warden, who seems remarkably interested in any discoveries they might make. There's Kissin' Kate Barlow, the notorious outlaw who lived in the area 100 years ago, whose story is mysteriously linked to Stanley's. And there's Zero, the boy who says little but digs perfect holes . until he decides he's had enough and takes off into the desert.

When Stanley decides to go after Zero, he has no idea that his actions will have consequences that weave threads from the past into the present. Outlaws, onions, spotted lizards and a cure for smelly feet - every tangle in the plot untangles as all the threads are finally tied together in a deliciously thrilling end that dispels ghosts from the past and fills in all the holes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louis Sachar writes:

"I was born in East Meadow, New York, in 1954. My father's office was on the 78th floor of the Empire State Building, which I still think is pretty cool. When I was nine, we moved to Tustin, California. I went to college at the University of California at Berkeley and graduated in 1976, as an economics major. The year after I graduated from college, I wrote my first book, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*. I was working at a sweater warehouse during the day and wrote at night. Almost a year later I was fired from the job. I decided to go to law school. "I attended Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. My first book was published while I was in law school. I graduated in 1980. For the next eight years I worked part-time as a lawyer and continued to try to write children's books. Then my books started selling well enough so that I was able to quit practicing law."

Louis Sachar lives with his wife and daughter in Austin, Texas. He has written eighteen books for children, including *Holes* and the *Wayside School* books.

ON WRITING 'HOLES'

Louis Sachar writes:

"I've been interviewed quite a lot in the past several months, and one of the questions I kept being asked was, 'Where did you get the idea for *Holes*?' And when I answered, 'From the hot Texas summer,' the interviewer always looked at me oddly, as if I misunderstood her question, or she misunderstood my answer. I'm not sure what kind of

answer the interviewer expected - that I lived next door to a juvenile correction facility? But my neighbours who saw me on the 'Today' show knew what I was talking about. Anybody who has ever tried to do yard work in Texas in July can easily imagine Hell to be a place where you are required to dig a hole five feet deep and five feet across day after day under the brutal Texas sun."

"While every other story I'd written had begun with a character, this story to me has always been about a place. Camp Green Lake - where there was no lake, and hardly anything was green. I thought of the place first. The characters and plot grew out of that place."

"But it was never my intention to write a grim story, I wanted it to be fun and adventurous. I had the idea of the boys in the book digging holes because I liked the thought that while they were ostensibly doing this to build character, the camp warden was really looking for buried treasure."

"It happens every once in a while when you're writing that certain characters seem to leap off the page and take over the book, and that's what happened with the story of Kate and Sam. I expected to make Kissin' Kate a complete villain, but when I started writing about her I ended up making her someone else entirely; it surprised me."

"People often ask me how I managed to tie everything together at the end, but that wasn't the hard part. I knew how everything was going to fit together. The hard part was laying out the strands throughout the story; of telling the story of Kate Barlow, and of Elya Yelnats, and Elya's son, without it getting in the way of Stanley's story. And then trying to make Stanley's story interesting, when all he does is dig holes, all day, every day. How many times did I write, 'He dug his shovel into the dirt?'"

THE WRITING PROCESS

Sachar says:

"I never talk about a book until I'm finished writing it. It took me a year and a half to write Holes, and nobody knew anything about it, not even my wife or my daughter. I think that is helpful for writing, as well as for anything else that takes a lot of self-motivation. The more you talk about something, the less you tend to do it. By not permitting myself to talk about Holes, I was forced to write it. The story was growing inside me for a year and a half, and I had no other way to let it out.

"I write five or six drafts of each of my books. With each draft, the story changes and the ideas are transformed. What amazes me is that most days feel useless. I don't seem to accomplish anything - just a few pages, most of which don't seem very good. Yet, when I put all those wasted days together, I somehow end up with a book of which I'm very proud."

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

THEMES

Themes for discussion could include:

- courage, strength and survival
- brutality versus kindness
- ancestors and identity
- Coincidence, fate, luck, destiny
- Outlaws, adventure, buried treasure
- Redemption, karma, consequences

QUESTIONS WHILE READING

- Can you spot what's special about Stanley's last name? Find out the name for a word which reads the same backwards and forwards.
- Think up some other palindromes. (Children could work in small groups to create lists, and then report back to the class.)
- What other types of reversals are there in the book, e.g. in the plot or in people's characters?
- Think about the book's title, *Holes*. Why do you think it is called that? Are there other 'holes' in the book apart from the ones the boys dig? Why is the last chapter called 'filling in the holes'?
- Why do you think the boys use nicknames rather than real names? How did Stanley get his nickname, Caveman?
- How did Zero feel about his nickname?
- Do you have a nickname? How do you feel about it? (This question could form the basis of a writing exercise.)
- Many of Stanley's actions seem random at the time, but turn out to have dramatic consequences. How might things have turned out differently if he had acted differently? For example, if Stanley hadn't run when the sneakers landed on his head, what might have happened? If he hadn't taught Zero to read, what would have happened when they found the suitcase? What if the boys hadn't eaten the onions?

SETTING, LANGUAGE AND IMAGES

Holes is larger than life, just like its Texas setting. The Bloomsbury edition of *Holes* has maintained the American spelling of the original USA edition, to preserve its colourful, 'tall tales' feel. The setting, spellings, language and imagery in the book could provide the basis for extensive discussion and written exercises:

- Point out some American spellings (eg "Mom").
- What about American images (eg the Warden with her cowboy boots and rattlesnake nail-polish, Mr Sir with his sunflower seeds and rifle, Kissin' Kate Barlow who shoots the sheriff and turns outlaw)? How do these add to the mythical, larger-than-life mood of the story?
- Are there other places where you have come across American spellings and images (other books, films, commercials, songs)?
- Think about books set in other countries, and how different words and images are used in them. (For example, the Harry Potter books use English terms like "firm" instead of "company", and the characters have English-sounding names like "Aunt Petunia".)
- What are some words and images which you might find in books set in Australia?
- Do you think *Holes* would work as well if it were set in Australia? What might need to be changed? Make lists of some of the words, character traits and settings you would use if you were writing a story like this set in Australia.

EXTENDING THE DISCUSSION OF THEMES

- Do you think what happens to Stanley is coincidence or fate? Do you believe in fate or destiny? How is this different from luck?
- Is Kate Barlow a 'bad' character or a 'good' character? What about Mr Pendanski? The Warden? Zero? The other boys? (Why do characters behave 'badly'?)
- Why do the townspeople pursue Kate and Sam? Has there ever been a law against a black man kissing a white woman in Australia? What about people's attitudes? (Could what happened to Sam have happened in Australia?) Is the conflict between the boys at the camp because of their skin colour, or other issues?

CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR 'HOLES'

'A smart jigsaw puzzle of a novel . tough, truehearted and ultimately tender' ***New York Times***

'The plain uninflected telling has the quality of a fable, the bright clarity of the narrative being shadowed by an atmosphere hard to define but unmistakably powerful.' **Philip Pullman, *Guardian***

'Once started, this story demands to be finished.' **Nicholas Tucker, *Independent***

'The stories pull together in a tightly knit pattern with a glorious and satisfying conclusion . the goosepimples fairly sprang up when I read this book, the best one in ages, and I didn't put it down until I'd finished.' **Tara Stephenson, *The Bookseller***

'. one of those books that everyone should read and, once they have, will want to recommend to others . Totally absorbing and beautifully written.' **Patricia Britton, *The Bookseller***

'We haven't seen a book with this much plot, so suspensefully and expertly deployed, in too long a time.' ***The Horn Book Magazine***

'a dazzling blend of social commentary, tall tale and magic realism.' ***Publishers Weekly***