

every direction. Your shovel is your measuring stick. Breakfast is served at 4:30.” This punishment supposedly builds character, but Stanley soon figures out the real reason for all the digging: The Warden is searching for something buried in the lakebed.

Stanley is assigned to Group D, run by a counselor named Mr. Pendanski, otherwise known as Mom. Nearly everyone at Camp Green Lake has a nickname, and Stanley soon becomes Caveman. At first Stanley seems to adjust well to camp life. The work is exhausting and the shoveling gives him terrible blisters, but he gradually grows stronger. “He figured that in a year and a half he’d be either in great physical condition, or else dead.” As an accepted member of Group D, Stanley even begins to enjoy a sense of belonging he has never known before.

Then one day Stanley unearths something interesting: a small golden tube engraved with the initials KB. As promised, he turns the cylinder over to X-Ray, the group’s leader; X-Ray pretends to find it in his own hole and hands it over to the Warden, hoping for a reward. It’s clear that the tube is a clue to what lies buried at the bottom of Green Lake, but Stanley knows “whatever they were looking for, they were looking in the wrong place.”

As it happens, the tube comes from a lipstick that belonged to Kissin’ Kate Barlow, the outlaw who robbed Stanley’s great-grandfather and left him stranded in the desert. This is just one of many coincidences that occur in *Holes*. (A coincidence is a chance happening or meeting.) Sachar braids his plot together from three different story lines, or narratives, two of which occur in the past. Part of the fun of reading this book is seeing how cleverly the author brings these different story lines together.

One of the stories from the past concerns Stanley's great-great-grandfather Elya. This narrative may remind you of a folktale, because it uses many of the elements of this kind of story. As a young man in Latvia, Elya made a promise to a woman named Madame Zeroni. In return for her help, Elya agreed to fulfill three tasks: He would carry Madame Zeroni up a mountain, help her drink from a magical stream, and sing her a special song. But Elya forgets to keep his promise when he sails off to America, and the Yelnats family is cursed for generations to come.

The second story tells how a beautiful and kindhearted schoolteacher becomes a notorious outlaw. Katherine Barlow was the teacher in the town of Green Lake, before the lake dried up. Katherine fell in love with Sam, the onion man. Because she was white and Sam was black, their love had tragic consequences. Charles Walker, a man who wanted Katherine Barlow for himself, shot Sam to death. "Three days after Sam's death, Miss Katherine shot the sheriff while he was sitting in his chair drinking a cup of coffee. . . . For the next twenty years Kissin' Kate Barlow was one of the most feared outlaws in all the West." We also learn that Kissin' Kate buried her loot somewhere in the lakebed. She died from a yellow-spotted lizard bite before she could tell anyone where she'd hidden it.

More than a century later, the Warden wants desperately to find Kate's buried treasure. Meanwhile, Stanley has made a deal with a camper named Hector Zeroni, or Zero. In exchange for reading lessons, Zero will help Stanley dig his hole each day. This arrangement stirs up resentment among the other boys, who bring it to the Warden's attention. The Warden and Mr. Pendanski confront Stanley and Zero, demanding that the

lessons stop. "It causes him stress," said Mr. Pendanski. "I know you mean well, Stanley, but face it. Zero's too stupid to learn to read." These insults are the last straw for Zero. He smashes his counselor in the face with a shovel and runs off into the desert.

As the chances for Zero's survival dwindle in the days that follow, Stanley can't ignore the nagging of his conscience. "What worried him the most, however, wasn't that it was too late. What worried him the most . . . was the fear that it *wasn't* too late." Finally Stanley escapes into the desert to search for Zero and, miraculously, finds him alive. They set off together toward a rock formation sticking up in the distance like a giant thumb. Stanley recalls that after being robbed by Kate Barlow, his great-grandfather claimed he "found refuge on God's thumb," and he hopes that Big Thumb may offer salvation to him and Zero, too.

Zero is so sick that Stanley has to carry him up the mountain. At the top, they find water to drink and wild onions to eat. As Zero sleeps, Stanley sings him a lullaby that his father used to sing to him. Without realizing it, Stanley has succeeded in fulfilling the promise his great-great-grandfather Elya failed to keep.

In the shadow of Big Thumb, Stanley and Zero eat onions and regain their strength. They decide to sneak back to camp and find the treasure still believed to be buried there. Unfortunately, the Warden catches them in the act and demands that they hand over the metal suitcase they have unearthed. The hole where the suitcase was buried turns out to be a nest of deadly yellow-spotted lizards, which swarm all over Stanley and Zero. The boys don't move and the Warden and the counselors don't grab the loot for fear of being bitten. This standoff lasts until the law

arrives. The Attorney General of Texas and a lawyer named Ms. Morengo, hired by Stanley's father, show up with the news that Stanley has been cleared and is free to go. The Warden claims the suitcase belongs to her, but Zero can read the letters on its side, which spell out STANLEY YELNATS.

However, Stanley won't leave Camp Green Lake without Zero. During their ordeal in the desert, the boys formed a real friendship. Since Mr. Pendanski has erased Zero's files from the computer system, Stanley knows his friend is in danger of being erased, too. The Attorney General can't even determine why Zero has been sent to the camp, so the two boys get to leave Camp Green Lake along with the metal suitcase.

Stanley and Zero inadvertently succeed in bringing the whole brutal system of the camp to an end. As they leave the camp, Ms. Morengo gives Stanley more good news: His father has invented a wonderful product that smells like peaches and eliminates foot odor. At the book's conclusion there is reason to hope that both Stanley's family and Zero will lead better lives, thanks in part to the contents of the suitcase.

### **Thinking about the plot**

- What are the different stories told in *Holes*? How do these stories relate to one another?
- What is the relationship of the past to the present in this book?
- What types of holes exist in the story?

## Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"There is no lake at Camp Green Lake. There once was a very large lake here, the largest lake in Texas. That was over a hundred years ago. Now it is just a dry, flat wasteland.

"There used to be a town of Green Lake as well. The town shriveled and dried up along with the lake, and the people who lived there."

-*Holes*

**Y**ou can tell that setting is important in *Holes* because that is where the author begins. At first glance, this setting seems like a realistic place: somewhere in the Texas desert, in the present time. However, the novel constantly reminds us that appearances can be deceiving. In the world of *Holes*, the reader soon discovers that the real and the imaginary coexist and sometimes even blur together.

Sachar locates Camp Green Lake in a dry lakebed in Texas, a place where no rain has fallen in more than a century. The punishing heat and uncomfortable conditions make this the

perfect spot for a prison. No guard towers or fences are necessary because anyone attempting to run away would quickly die of thirst and end up as “buzzard food,” as Mr. Sir puts it. The only animals that can survive here are dangerous desert creatures: scorpions, rattlesnakes, and the deadly yellow-spotted lizards that everyone fears.

However, Green Lake wasn't always dry, which is something else we learn in the revealing opening paragraph. The fossil fish that Stanley digs up serves as a reminder that this was once a beautiful lake, which “sparkled like a giant emerald in the sun.” *Holes* contains three stories, all intersecting in one place. One of these stories tells how the lake, and the town named after it, became a wasteland.

Stanley's first impressions of Camp Green Lake sketch out a stark picture for the reader: “The land was barren and desolate. He could see a few rundown buildings and some tents. Farther away there was a cabin beneath two tall trees. Those two trees were the only plant life he could see. There weren't even weeds.” Sachar, who lives in Austin, says that the blistering Texas summers gave him the first ideas for this book. On Stanley's second day at the camp, “The only thing that got him out of bed was knowing that every second he wasted meant he was one step closer to the rising of the sun. He hated the sun.”

These descriptive details seem realistic enough, but there are also signs that Camp Green Lake is not an actual place. Pockmarked with holes, the dry lakebed reminds Stanley of the surface of the moon, an unearthly setting. The yellow-spotted

lizards we hear about do not really exist but are inventions of the author. Big Thumb, the strange rock formation where Stanley's great-grandfather found refuge in the desert, marks a spot where water miraculously runs uphill. This magical spring irrigates a secret onion field, the source of a tonic that supposedly can cure illness and prolong life. According to Sam, the onion man, a steady diet of onions has helped his donkey, Mary Lou. She lived to be almost fifty, "extraordinarily old for a donkey."

The combination of realistic details and imaginary elements in the setting of this book may remind you of a fable or a folktale, demonstrating how Sachar borrows from these traditions in *Holes*. Folk narratives typically include both real and fanciful elements (think of the Paul Bunyan stories, for instance), and are part of the culture of the American West.

In the stories in *Holes* that take place in the past, things are not what they appear to be, either. The town of Green Lake seems too good to be true—and it is. The narrator first describes it as a "heaven on earth" where the sky is "painted pale blue and pink—the same color as the lake and the peach trees along its shore." Like the mirage that confuses Stanley in the desert, making him believe that he sees a pool of water as he searches for Zero, the placid little town of Green Lake is a beautiful vision that disappears when we look more closely. Before long, we witness the ugliness of racism and violence that lurks beneath the surface of the community.

Finally, in this book we must remember that what isn't there is as important as what is. A hole, after all, is a space where

something is missing, and this is also true of Camp Green Lake. Read the first paragraphs of the book again and you'll hear more about what is missing from this setting than what is there. The absence of water influences much of what happens to Stanley at the camp. As Mr. Sir makes clear, the lack of water means that escape from Camp Green Lake is practically impossible: "Nobody runs away from here. We don't need a fence. Know why? Because we've got the only water for a hundred miles."

### **Thinking about the setting**

- Where does *Holes* take place?
- Which parts of the setting seem realistic to you? Which ones do not?
- How does the setting influence what happens in the story?

## Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"The reader might find it interesting that Stanley's father invented his cure for foot odor the day after the great-great-grandson of Elya Yelnats carried the great-great-great-grandson of Madame Zeroni up the mountain."

-*Holes*

### **"Whatever goes around, comes around"**

This expression means that, over time, all human actions have appropriate consequences: Bad deeds are eventually punished, and good deeds ultimately rewarded. A more complicated version of this theme plays out repeatedly in the plot of *Holes*. The family curse of the Yelnatses, the fate of the town of Green Lake, and Stanley's willingness to risk his life for a friend, all show that in life, things come full circle. Throughout the story, objects from the past keep turning up. The fossil fish Stanley unearths, Sam's rowboat, Katherine's lipstick tube and spiced peaches, and Stanley's great-grandfather's fortune are all reminders that nothing stays buried forever, especially the truth.

After Elya Yelnats forgets his promise to Madame Zeroni and sets sail for America, he is plagued by misfortune. “Elya worked hard, but bad luck seemed to follow him everywhere. He always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Back in Latvia, Madame Zeroni had warned Elya that if he failed to keep his promise to her, “he and his descendants would be doomed for all of eternity.” Sachar leaves it to the reader to decide whether curses really have any power. But the facts are these: Trouble haunts the Yelnats family until Stanley manages to fulfill the terms of his great-great-grandfather’s promise by carrying Hector Zeroni up the mountain.

Elya’s failure to keep his promise results from his forgetfulness. Like his descendant Stanley, he is a good-hearted, well-meaning young man, and when he realizes his mistake, he feels genuinely sorry. “He wasn’t afraid of the curse. He thought that was a lot of nonsense. He felt bad because he knew Madame Zeroni had wanted to drink from the stream before she died.” In comparison, the lynching of Sam is a much more terrible offense. The citizens of the town of Green Lake condemn Katherine and Sam—a white woman and a black man—for daring to fall in love. After Sam’s brutal murder, rain stops falling on Green Lake. When the lake that sustained the community eventually evaporates, so does the town. A century later, Trout Walker’s descendant, the Warden, must still pay for her ancestor’s crimes.

Good deeds create a kind of fallout, too. By agreeing to teach Zero to read, Stanley ensures they will both escape the Warden’s clutches when Zero correctly identifies the name on the metal suitcase. When he commits himself to stealing the water truck

and takes off in search of his friend, Stanley finally seizes control of his own destiny, assumes responsibility for another person, and sets in motion a series of events that results in the closing of the camp.

## **Inheritance**

A related theme in *Holes* is inheritance, or what gets passed down from one generation to the next within a family. This may mean everything from money and property to physical characteristics like eye or hair color, or even things that aren't visible, such as responsibilities and character traits. You've probably noticed that many of the characters in *Holes* are related to one another. Characters in the stories that take place in the past turn out to be ancestors of characters in the present. This gives the reader a chance to see how the process of inheritance plays out over time.

The book's main character, Stanley Yelnats IV, has a name that has been passed down for generations within his family. In the Yelnats household, it's a family joke to blame anything bad that happens on "Stanley's no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather," the alleged source of the family curse. This curse is supposedly why Stanley's great-grandfather lost his fortune in the desert, Stanley's father perpetually fails as an inventor, and Stanley gets shipped off to detention camp.

While Stanley may believe his bad luck stems from being a Yelnats, his family also affords him certain advantages. One feature of the family legacy is a certain kind of optimism:

“Despite their awful luck, they always remained hopeful. As Stanley’s father liked to say, ‘I learn from failure.’” This hopefulness enables Stanley to persevere even when things look bleak.

While he has no friends at school, Stanley is rescued from real loneliness by the love of his parents. His mother’s letter cheers him up at camp; he has happy recollections of his father singing him a lullaby that has been passed down in his family for generations. When Stanley finds himself in the lizards’ nest and expects to die at any minute, he finds comfort in memories from his childhood.

Zero, on the other hand, is mostly alone in the world until the book’s conclusion. He has inherited the penetrating eyes and piercing intelligence of his great-great-great-grandmother Madame Zeroni, along with a smile too big for his face. Before abandoning him in a park, his mother taught Zero how to provide for himself: “‘We always took what we needed,’ Zero said. ‘When I was little, I didn’t even know it was *stealing*. I don’t remember when I found out.’”

In *Holes*, Zero, a homeless African-American kid with no family to care about what happens to him, can be erased without a trace, which is exactly what the Warden plans to do. Stanley may be poor but compared with Zero he has many advantages, starting with his skin color.

Another case of inheritance in the book concerns the Warden, Ms. Walker. She is related to Charles “Trout” Walker, the wealthy

son of the family who owned land around Green Lake. The Warden has inherited the task of searching for Kate Barlow's buried loot: "When I was little I'd watch my parents dig holes, every weekend and holiday. When I got bigger, I had to dig, too. Even on Christmas." Finding this out may make you feel a little differently about this character. Ultimately Ms. Walker has to sell her family's land after the camp is closed down.

## **Bullying**

Bullying is another important theme in *Holes*. A boy named Derrick Dunne bullies Stanley at the middle school they both attend. "The teachers never took Stanley's complaints seriously, because Derrick was so much smaller than Stanley." However, bullies are not necessarily larger than their victims; a bully can be anyone who tries to frighten, intimidate, or torment another person by using physical threats, teasing, or other forms of verbal abuse.

This book also shows that bullying doesn't just happen between kids, but can occur between adults as well. Stanley witnesses the Warden bullying both Mr. Pendanski and Mr. Sir. An adult may also bully a child, as Mr. Pendanski does with Zero, constantly picking on him and insulting him. Mr. Pendanski never misses a chance to tell Zero how stupid and worthless he is. When the counselor finds out that Stanley has been giving Zero reading lessons, he says scornfully, "You might as well try to teach this shovel to read! It's got more brains than Zero." Stanley is also bullied at camp, especially by Mr. Sir and by a boy named Zigzag.

As Stanley begins to feel accepted by the other campers in his group, he has revenge fantasies. “Stanley played the scene over and over again in his mind, each time watching another boy from Group D beat up Derrick Dunne.” If you have ever been bullied at school or in your neighborhood, you can probably identify with Stanley and his daydreams.

Being bullied can be a terrible experience, and the sense of powerlessness and humiliation it causes may be hard to forget. Ironically, Derrick Dunne is ultimately responsible for clearing Stanley, by giving him an alibi. Dunne tells Ms. Morengo, the attorney, that Stanley was in the boys’ bathroom at the time of the crime, trying to retrieve his notebook from the toilet: “Stanley felt his ears redden. Even after everything he’d been through, the memory still caused him to feel shame.”

### **Thinking about the themes**

- What do you think is the main theme of *Holes*? What are some other themes in the book?
- What are some of the things—either positive or negative—that have been passed down in your family?
- Have you ever bullied anyone, or been the victim of a bully?

## Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



Since there are a few different story lines in this book, there are a lot of different characters, many of whom are related to one another or whose lives somehow cross. The main characters are Stanley Yelnats and Hector Zeroni (“Zero”).

Here is a list of characters, divided into those in the present and those in the past. Following that is a brief description of each of the two main characters.

### **Characters in the present**

Stanley Yelnats IV	tall, heavy, camper in Group D, main character
Hector Zeroni (“Zero”)	small camper in Group D
X-Ray	leader of the Group D campers, wears thick glasses
Armpit	tall camper in Group D
Magnet	camper in Group D
Zigzag	Group D camper with frizzy blond hair
Squid	camper in Group D
Twitch	fidgety camper in Group D
Mr. Pendanski	counselor for Group D

The Warden, Ms. Walker	woman who runs Camp Green Lake
Mr. Sir	camp director
Stanley's father	inventor
Stanley's mother	homemaker
Derrick Dunne	middle-school bully
Clyde "Sweet Feet" Livingston	famous baseball player
Ms. Morengo	patent attorney
Attorney General	head lawyer for the state of Texas

## **Characters in the past**

### **In Latvia**

Elya Yelnats	Stanley's great-great-grandfather
Myra Menke	beautiful but empty-headed girl
Madame Zeroni	Zero's great-great-great-grandmother
Myra's father	decides who Myra will marry

### **In America**

Sarah Miller	Stanley IV's great-great-grandmother
Katherine Barlow	a.k.a. Kissin' Kate, schoolteacher turned outlaw
Sam	"Onion Sam," an onion seller
Mary Lou	Sam's donkey
Charles "Trout" Walker	rich man
Linda Walker	Trout's wife

**Stanley Yelnats:** The protagonist, or main character, of *Holes*, Stanley, is a quiet, friendless boy who has grown up in a poor family with loving parents. You may have noticed that many of the characters in the book have a “signature”—a habit, gesture, or phrase they repeat throughout the story, which tells you something important about them. (For example, how many times does Mr. Sir say, “This isn’t a Girl Scout camp”?) Stanley’s signature is his shrug. When you read the book again, pay attention to how often the author mentions that “Stanley raised and lowered one shoulder.” A shrug lets Stanley respond without really committing himself. Stanley often uses this gesture as a way to deal with other people. After the Warden scratches Mr. Sir with her poisonous fingernails, Stanley keeps quiet about what he witnessed in the cabin: “Out on the lake, the other boys asked Stanley what he knew about Mr. Sir’s face, but he just shrugged and dug his hole. If he didn’t talk about it, maybe it would go away.”

At the middle school he attends, Stanley gets teased for being overweight. He has no friends and although he is big, Stanley is frequently bullied by smaller kids. Even his teachers treat him unkindly. Stanley can’t seem to stick up for himself, which is one reason he winds up at Camp Green Lake.

Stanley comes from a poor family. Unsuccessful inventors like Stanley’s father don’t earn much money, and Stanley and his parents are “crammed in a tiny apartment” because they cannot afford a bigger home. As a child, Stanley had fantasized about going to summer camp, a luxury beyond his family’s means. When Stanley is sent to Camp Green Lake, he and his parents

“tried to pretend that he was just going away to camp for a while, just like rich kids do.”

It's clear that Stanley has been raised in a loving environment, and he is a loving and dutiful son. He promises his mother that he will write home once a week, and he keeps that promise.

*“Today was my first day at camp, and I've already made some friends. We've been out on the lake all day, so I'm pretty tired. . . .”*

The little lies that Stanley tells in his letters from camp seem to be as much for his mother's benefit as for his own: He doesn't want her to worry about him. When Stanley thinks he may die at Camp Green Lake, his main concern is how this will affect his folks: “For him, at least, it would be over. For his parents, the pain would never end.”

In the Yelnats family, bad luck is an inherited trait, but so is the ability to remain hopeful. His hope that Zero may still be alive prompts Stanley to set out after him: “*It's too late*, he told himself. Zero couldn't have survived. *But what if it wasn't too late?*” Hope keeps Stanley heading toward Big Thumb, even when all logic says there can be no water there.

Stanley's decision to go after Zero is a critical moment in the evolution of his character. His willingness to commit himself to Zero, the first real friend he has ever had, shows us that Stanley is finally capable of taking control of his own destiny.

**Hector Zeroni (“Zero”):** Like Stanley, Zero is sent to Camp Green Lake for stealing a pair of shoes. (As it turns out, he actually stole the shoes Stanley is accused of stealing.) A

homeless African-American boy abandoned by his mother in a city park, Zero is a thief by necessity rather than by choice. While at first Zero might seem like a minor character, he becomes important in the second half of the book when a friendship develops between Stanley and him.

If Stanley's signature is a shrug, Zero's signature is his silence. When you reread *Holes*, notice how often the narrator tells you "Zero said nothing." By repeatedly calling attention to Zero's silence, Sachar makes the reader very aware of it.

Zero is the smallest of the campers in Group D. His size and his silence make him easy to overlook. Everyone at Camp Green Lake underestimates Zero, especially Mr. Pendanski. While the counselor appears friendly enough at first, his true nature emerges in response to Zero. "You know why his name's Zero?" asks Mr. Pendanski. "Because there's nothing inside his head." Even Stanley dismisses Zero at first: "He didn't care what Zero thought. Zero was nobody."

Zero turns out to be extremely smart, however. Although he cannot read, he has a natural talent for mathematics that quickly impresses Stanley. One early clue to Zero's intelligence is his eyes, which seem to look right into people's souls. In fact, Zero has the same dark and penetrating eyes as his great-great-great-grandmother, Madame Zeroni. "When she looked at you, her eyes seemed to expand, and you felt like she was looking right through you." Zero can see right through Mr. Pendanski's act and recognize him for the heartless person he really is. "If anybody had X-Ray vision, it was Zero."

When Stanley finally agrees to give him reading lessons, Zero makes rapid progress. By the end of the book Zero can read well enough to know that the letters on the suitcase spell out Stanley's name.

As the relationship between the two boys develops, Zero proves he can be a loyal, brave, and generous friend. He defends Stanley from Zigzag's attack even though he is much smaller than Zigzag. Later, when Stanley finds him under the overturned rowboat, Zero gives Stanley half of his last jar of sploosh. When they climb out of the lakebed, Zero helps hoist Stanley out with his shovel, even though it means injuring his own hands.

Zero's memories of his childhood make up some of the saddest passages in *Holes*. Up on the mountain Zero tells Stanley about the day his mother disappeared.

"And then one day she didn't come back," Zero said. His voice sounded suddenly hollow. "I waited for her at Laney Park."

"Laney Park," said Stanley. "I've been there."

"You know the playscape?" asked Zero.

"Yeah. I've played on it."

"I waited there for more than a month," said Zero. "You know that tunnel that you crawl through, between the slide and the swinging bridge? That's where I slept."