

Holes by Louis Sachar

Book Information

Louis Sachar, Holes
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As further evidence of his family's bad fortune which they attribute to a curse on a distant relative, Stanley is sent to a hellish correctional camp in the Texas desert.

Award: ABC (Assoc. of Booksellers for Children) Choice; ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Bilby Award; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Christopher Award; Edgar Award/Honor Book; Horn Book Fanfare; National Book Award/ Honors; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Medal; SLJ Best Book; State Award; YALSA Top Ten

Topics: Community Life, Homeless; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Mysteries, Treasures; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Power Lessons AR, Grade 4; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 7 & Up; Read Now Power Up Recommended Lists, Take a Stand: Leadership; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 6-8 (Theme: Surviving); Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, NY Times Editor's Choice; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; Recommended Reading, YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant YA

Main Characters

Clyde Livingston a famous baseball player who donated his shoes for a fundraiser

Hector Zeroni, or "Zero" a homeless boy who was sent to Camp Green Lake and becomes Stanley's friend

Kissin' Kate Barlow an outlaw from the past who robbed people and often left a lipstick kiss on her victims

Mr. Pendanski the counselor in charge of Stanley's group at Camp Green Lake

Mr. Sir a cruel guard at Camp Green Lake

Stanley Yelnats IV, or "Caveman" a boy who is sent to Camp Green Lake as punishment for stealing Clyde Livingston's shoes

the Warden, Ms. Walker the manipulative director of Camp Green Lake, who is set on locating treasure

Vocabulary

authenticated legally verified with proper papers or forms

dawdle to waste time

fossil an imprint of an ancient plant or animal in a rock

incarcerated confined in a jail or other facility for punishment of a crime

mirage an optical illusion that makes an oasis in the desert appear very near

Synopsis

The story begins as Stanley Yelnats is being transported to Camp Green Lake as punishment for stealing the shoes of Clyde Livingston, a famous baseball player. The shoes had been donated to a homeless shelter to be auctioned off to raise money. Stanley maintained his innocence and had testified the shoes "fell from the sky." Nevertheless, Stanley was sentenced to either jail or Camp Green Lake, and his parents chose the camp. When he arrives at the camp, he finds it is not the type of place his parents envisioned. The camp is located on a dry lake bed, and the boys who are sent there must dig

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a hole every day. The hole must be five feet deep by five feet in diameter, and digging it is meant to build character. If, by chance, a boy finds something interesting while he digs, he must report it to the Warden. The potential reward for an interesting discovery is receiving the remainder of the day off.

Stanley blames his situation on his great-great-grandfather, Elya Yelnats who was said to have broken a promise to an old Egyptian woman, Madame Zeroni. Elya promised to carry Madame Zeroni to the top of a mountain to drink from its water, but left for America before he realized that he had not fulfilled his promise. While Elya did feel guilty about breaking his promise and tried to rectify the situation, he did not put much weight in the woman's threat that "his descendants would be doomed for all eternity." Yet as Stanley looks back on his family history and events, the Yelnats family does seem "doomed."

During his stay at Camp Green Lake, Stanley quickly finds life to be hard and monotonous. Even so, he tries to reassure his mother that he is okay by writing to her and lying about his experiences, making it seem more like a typical camp. During one dig he discovers a fish fossil that he finds interesting. However, the guards say the Warden, who is apparently looking for something else, would not find it interesting. Stanley must keep digging. Another boy, X-Ray, persuades Stanley to give him anything he finds. X-Ray claims he deserves a day off from digging since he has been at the camp longer.

Weeks later, Stanley unearths a small, gold tube with the initials "KB" on it. In hope of avoiding conflict, Stanley hands over the find to X-Ray. The Warden finds it to be very interesting and instructs the boys in the group to dig for days in the area where X-Ray was digging. They find nothing more, since the artifact had actually been found in Stanley's hole. This causes the Warden to return to her usual foul mood and leads to Stanley being wrongfully punished for a theft. However, because of this confrontation with the Warden, Stanley figures out what she was looking for: the buried treasure of

Kissin' Kate Barlow, a former resident of Green Lake and a notorious criminal.

Upon Stanley's realization, the narrator takes the reader back to Green Lake, Texas, 110 years earlier. Katherine Barlow was a respectable school teacher who was known for her prize-winning peach preserves. Young men sought her interest, though none moved her as much as Sam, the onion man. Sam was popular in Green Lake as well, since his onion-based remedies appeared to work well for the townspeople. Both individuals, however, became unpopular the moment the white Katherine Barlow kissed Onion Sam, a black man, in a public street. While the two attempted an escape in his boat, Sam was killed and his trusty mule, Mary Lou, was shot on shore. Miss Katherine sought vengeance on the sheriff and thereafter became a feared outlaw in the West--Kissin' Kate Barlow. Twenty years later Kate Barlow returned to Green Lake. There, her former student Linda Miller and a former suitor, Trout Walker, beat Kate in an attempt to find out the whereabouts of her loot. Kate refused to tell them anything. At this point she was bitten by a poisonous lizard and took her secret to her death.

Returning to the main plot of the story, the hole-digging routine continues for the boys. Stanley begins to teach Hector Zeroni, or Zero, to read in exchange for Zero digging part of Stanley's holes. Eventually this arrangement causes irritation among the other boys, who begin to tease Stanley and accuse him of making Zero, who is black, his slave. Stanley is unable to convince the group of his good intentions and is attacked by Zigzag. This prompts Zero to attack Zigzag and draws the attention of the guards and the Warden. In the end, Zero decides he will dig no more and runs off into the vastness of the empty, dry lake bed. Worried about his friend, Stanley steals the water truck several days later in an attempt to rescue Zero, but he crashes the truck in a hole. As his friend had done, Stanley runs off into the endless distance.

Amazingly, Stanley finds Zero hiding under an old boat named Mary Lou. He helps get him to the mountain, where they hope to find water. Stanley

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calls the mountain "Big Thumb," as it reminds him of the story of his great-grandfather, who said he "found refuge on God's thumb" after he had been robbed by Kate Barlow. With this hope of refuge and a determination to save his friend, Stanley carries Zero a great distance up the mountain. There he nurses Zero back to health by feeding him spring water and wild onions over several days. As he gains strength, Zero shares his life story with Stanley, and the two plan to return to Stanley's hole to search for more hidden treasure.

After a challenging return trip, they reach the hole and manage to dig out a suitcase, but are caught by the Warden and guards. The situation becomes a "waiting game" while poisonous lizards crawl on the boys in the hole. Stanley and Zero are able to hold out until a lawyer and state official arrive. Stanley's parents had hired a lawyer who had proven Stanley did not steal the Livingston shoes.

They gain his release and claim the discovered suitcase, which ironically has his great-grandfather's name in large letters: STANLEY YELNATS. Unwilling to leave without his friend, Stanley persuades the lawyer to take Zero with them. Since the Warden had all records of Hector Zeroni destroyed, there is no just cause to keep Hector at the camp, so he leaves with Stanley and the adults, who promise a full investigation of Camp Green Lake.

When they return home, Stanley learns that his father has invented a cure for foot odor, and Hector reunites with his mother. The families share the monetary benefits from the trunk they recovered in the lake bed. And the family curse, it seems, has been lifted by Stanley Yelnats, who carried Hector Zeroni up the mountainside.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Though it is proven later that Stanley could not have been the person who stole Clyde's shoes, explain how he was presumed guilty. Why was the truth not discovered before Stanley was sent to camp?

Stanley had the shoes in his hands, he was running, and he had a poster of Clyde in his bedroom. These factors plus Clyde's testimony were enough to convict him. The reason his innocence is not proven earlier is most likely that his parents could not afford a lawyer to defend Stanley at the time of the trial.

Literary Analysis

Holes could be described as a framework story, in which there is a story inside a story. In this case there are at least two stories inside the story. Which story serves as the main story and what other stories are woven into it?

The story of Stanley Yelnats IV is the main story. This involves his experiences at Camp Green Lake. Woven inside this story are the stories of Kissin' Kate Barlow and Stanley Yelnats I and II.

Inferential Comprehension

What assumptions could the reader make about the area that Stanley's great-grandfather referred to as "God's thumb?"

It was where Sam gathered his onions. It was the same place Stanley and Zero sought refuge. It may have held some special powers to those who came near it. Its waters had some special nutrients. It had existed for hundreds of years. Generations later, this location pulls the three storylines together.

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Constructing Meaning

When Stanley arrives at Camp Green Lake he is told that he would be digging a hole every day. Adults at the camp claim this activity was meant to "build character" in the boys. What else might this activity do for the boys?

This could help the boys realize what strength they had inside themselves. This could also teach them that life was not easy and that they must learn how to cope with those things that life throws at them that are difficult. It could give the boys a better understanding of the value of what they had previously taken for granted in their lives. On the other hand, it could also build resentment. The physical aspects of the work and the conditions could destroy their health as well.

happens after Stanley and Hector leave the camp. Based on what the author did reveal, though, it would be fairly easy to write an additional chapter for the book. Have your students reread the last chapter and then write their own version of what probably happens to the main characters in the story.

Responding to Literature When Hattie Parker saw Katherine and Sam kissing in the rain, she whispered, "God will punish you!" Just a few pages later it is told that, after Sam was killed, no rain ever fell on Green Lake again. The narrator then said, "You make the decision: Whom did God punish?" Have the students reply to this question by either holding a discussion or writing papers defending their positions.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors While Stanley and Hector are on the mountain, Hector explains how he became homeless and how he lived without his mother. This makes Stanley realize that his family might be homeless if the landlord had kicked them out because of the smelly shoes his father had in their home. Stanley's and Hector's stories help to show how easily any individual or family could become homeless. Have your students visit a homeless shelter or have students locate current articles on the problem. Have them try to find out a variety of reasons people become homeless. Discuss if and/or how this experience has changed their views of the homeless population.

Understanding the Author's Craft Many of the characters in this story have nicknames. These nicknames generally are chosen to signify a character trait. Discuss the significance of their names; for instance, Zero barely exists in some ways. He is homeless and some think he is stupid. Using the system of naming that the boys do, think of nicknames for other characters in other stories.

Making Predictions The author does not answer all the questions the reader may have about what