



holes

By Louis Sachar



Synopsis

The Yelnats family is cursed. The curse began with Stanley Yelnats' "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather," Elya Yelnats, and has continued down through the generations to Stanley himself.

Recommended for
everyone age 9
and older

Elya Yelnats, poor, young and in love, has nothing to offer the family of his intended bride. He makes a deal with an old fortune-teller, but she warns him that if he breaks it she will put a curse on him and his family. Elya breaks his promise to the old woman, fleeing to America where generations of Yelnatses will be forced to suffer for his failure.

Years later Stanley, Elya's descendant, is falsely accused of stealing a pair of \$5,000 sneakers. Stanley chooses to go to Camp Green Lake, a juvenile detention center for boys, rather than jail. Camp Green Lake is in the middle of a desert, and each boy there must dig a large hole every day. Life is monotonous and grueling, full of dirt, dust, and sweat.

The Warden of Camp Green Lake is on a hunt for the long-lost loot of the famous outlaw, Kissin' Kate Barlow. Years ago Kate Barlow had been a schoolteacher who fell in love with a man society told her she shouldn't. After the man of her dreams was killed by the townspeople, Kate turned her back on the community that could put a restriction on love, and chose to live a life of crime.

Now, the Warden uses the boys in her care as a means to her own gain. And, although they don't know it, they dig holes to help her find the treasure about which she is obsessed. But the bonds that grow between the boys at Camp Green Lake help Stanley learn that some things, like friendship, are worth standing up for. Stanley manages to find the lost treasure, expose the Warden, and finally break his family's curse by fulfilling the promise made to the fortune-teller.

Resource List

FOR CHILDREN

Heaven Eyes

David Almond

I Am the Ice Worm

Maryann Easley

The Maze

Will Hobbs

The View from Saturday

E.L. Konigsburg

SPOTLIGHT

Dave at Night

Gail Carson Levine

Dave, a feisty and fearless orphan, is sent to the Hebrew Home for Boys where he is treated cruelly and longs for escape. He sneaks out at night and is welcomed into the music- and culture-filled world of the Harlem Renaissance. Wonderful characterization and description capture historical details and the richness of Jewish and Yiddish cultures.

FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

Teens Can Make It Happen: Nine Steps to Success

Stedman Graham

Teens in Turmoil: A Path To Change for Parents, Adolescents and Their Families

Carol Maxym

The Seven-Year Stretch: How Families Work Together to Grow Through Adolescence

Laura Scribner Kastner

SPOTLIGHT

The Tween Years: A Parent's Guide for Surviving Those Terrific, Turbulent and Trying Times Between Childhood and Adolescence

Donna G. Corwin

The author combines personal stories, responses to parents' questions, interviews with psychologists, and simple, practical advice for dealing with "twens."

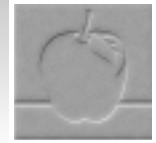
WEBSITES

<http://library.thinkquest.org/J0113061/>

An intensive, interactive site with activities for the book *Holes*.

<http://www.nea.org/readacross/>

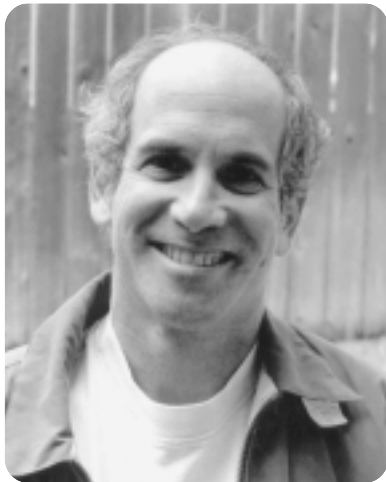
The National Education Association's Read Across America site.



Louis Sachar

On his visit to SCT to see the opening of Sideways Stories from Wayside School last season, Louis Sachar agreed to sit down and talk with us about Holes, the book and the play. Here are excerpts from that interview.

...The idea for the book *Holes* came from me moving to Texas and having to live in that heat. And I was tired of writing about schools. I got this idea about a juvenile delinquent camp and thought that might be interesting... I just wanted to try to write a real fun adventure book with lots of colorful characters. So, right away I made up lizards and Kissin' Kate Barlow. My original idea was that the



Warden was going to be the granddaughter of Kate Barlow.

I thought it would make sense if Kate had poison lipstick and then the Warden has her poison nail polish. I got to a point in the story where I figured I needed to expand on who Kate Barlow was and where her treasure came

from. I started writing and it just exploded off the page; that was definitely the most fun part to write. My initial concept was just for Kate to be some villain, but the more I wrote, the more likable she became. All of a sudden she became a good character, despite being an outlaw, which is why the Warden isn't her granddaughter. The Warden had to be the granddaughter of someone bad. But the story was always Stanley's story, with all the other stuff going on in the background. I wrote it in a different order than what you see but it was always about Stanley...

When Linda [SCT's Artistic Director, Linda Hartzell] approached me to write the play *Holes*, I was reluctant to do it. I had finished the book and then worked on the screenplay; I was just tired of writing *Holes*. But she sent me an outline of how she thought the story should progress, and I was very impressed. It was how I would have done it myself. Then she told me about the "What if All Kids Read the Same Book" program [a literacy project that will encourage families to read the same book, in this case *Holes*, during the same time, to encourage discussions]. That is such a great program. And now that I'm almost done with my first draft of the play I'm really excited about the project...

Normally when I work it is just me, alone, and I never tell anyone about the book. It is a really introverted experience. And it is so much fun to be part of a group, with the set designers who are so creative, and Linda who always has such great ideas. The last time I adapted one of my books for SCT, *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, it was a great experience. Really fun. And I was so sad when it was over. Now, ten years later I'm doing it again....

Activity

- *Holes* is a complex and interesting story that utilizes many everyday objects in unusual and creative ways; like the onions that act as anti-lizard medicine or the Warden's nail polish, which she uses to punish her foes.

Ask your students to pick one thing in the classroom—the flag, a pencil, their desk—and come up with a character who uses that object in an interesting way. For example, *Nick is a sanitation worker who is very short. He uses the dictionary to step up onto the back of his truck.*

Now, have them write a paragraph about that character. See if they can come up with a whole story using their character and objects found right in your classroom.



Trapped by OBSESSIONS



An obsession is a goal carried to such an extreme that it allows for few other interests in life. Obsessions often destroy the lives of those who have them.

In *Holes*, these passions rule the lives of both the Warden and Kissin' Kate Barlow. The Warden is fixated on finding Kissin' Kate Barlow's hidden loot.

And Kissin' Kate Barlow collected that loot in her manic drive to revenge herself on the world.

The flat, dry lake-bed dotted with holes symbolizes the Warden's obsession. She organizes her whole life around one goal—to find the loot of Kissin' Kate Barlow, an outlaw who died long ago. She creates a reform camp, forcing boys to dig holes, hoping one of them will uncover the treasure. She is ruthless, using deception and the force of her will when she can, and physical violence when she must. She has the intelligence to accomplish great things, but her obsession stands in her way. Controlled by her fixation, she leads a joyless life and robs joy from others.

Kissin' Kate Barlow acquired that loot not because she wanted to be rich, but because she wanted revenge on an unjust world. After the local sheriff threatens to hang her lover unless she gives him a kiss, Kate Barlow kills the sheriff and then plants a kiss on his dead lips. Her lover, Sam, is killed because he is black, and she

blames the whole world for his death. However, her acts of murder and robbery make the world no better and give her no pleasure. When Sam's killer—an ancestor of the Warden—tracks Kate down and demands her loot, he warns her that if she doesn't tell him where it is, "you're going to wish you were dead." Kate replies, "I've been wishing I was dead for the last twenty years."

The Warden and Kate Barlow are quite different. The Warden is an evil person who uses the legal system for a sinister purpose. Kate Barlow is a good person driven to banditry by the evil done to her. But both end up trapped by their obsessions—they sacrifice their own lives and the lives of others for their fanatical quests.

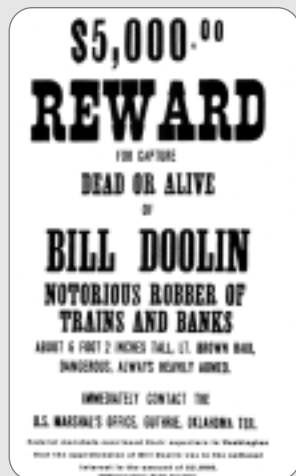
Activity

• CREATE YOUR OWN OUTLAW

Kissin' Kate Barlow's trademark—leaving bright lipstick kisses on the men she kills—springs from the terrible events that drive her to become an outlaw.

Have your students create their own outlaws:

- 1) Create a "Wanted" poster for your outlaw, including a picture, reward and a description of their "trademark."
- 2) What made your character become an outlaw, and what choices could your outlaw have made instead of breaking the law?



WRITING—write for a purpose

COMMUNICATION—communicate clearly

EALRs ARTS—reason, solve problems, communicate



The order of Things



In the animal kingdom there is a power structure, or pecking order, among some animals. In a flock of birds, the weaker ones submit to pecking and domination by the stronger more aggressive birds.

Does this apply to the human world?

You enter a classroom for the first time. Do you think about how you will fit in? Do you wonder what the pecking order is among the students?

If so, you have felt some of the same fear and isolation Stanley feels when he first enters Camp Green Lake and the world of *Holes*.

The boys at Camp Green Lake have their own order. When they line up for water in the hot sun, Stanley Yelnats is last in line, but through the course of the story the order changes. Stanley's actions influence his standing in the social order.

Have you ever done something to change the order in your classroom or among your friends?

There is a larger order at work at Camp Green Lake. The Warden is clearly the person in charge. As Mr. Pendanski, one of the "counselors" at Camp Green Lake, says to Stanley when he first arrives at the Camp, "There is really

only one rule at Camp Green Lake: Don't upset the Warden."

Is there a rule like that at your school? One person no one wants to upset?

As in the book *Holes*, our first impression of where people fit in can sometimes change after we find out more details about them. A person's status, or social standing, can be connected to the office they hold in student council, how many points they scored

in the last basketball game, or even how well they do in school. We need only to look at our own lives to see pecking orders in action everyday.

Activity

- Sometimes what we call someone may indicate what others think about that person. Here is a list of the nicknames for the boys from Camp Green Lake. What can you tell about them from their nicknames? Does their nickname let you know what place they have in the Camp Green Lake community?

Magnet, Armplit, X-Ray, Zero, Caveman, and ZigZag.

- Find examples of a pecking order in your own community. Did the order ever change? If so, how did it change and why?



EALRs

COMMUNICATION—observe

SOCIAL STUDIES—analyze and synthesize, investigate

READING—analyze



If Only...



At the beginning of *Holes*, Stanley Yelnats and his family are cursed with bad luck. Their lives seem ruled by “if only.” If only sneakers hadn’t fallen from the sky and hit Stanley on the head. If only he hadn’t been arrested for stealing them. If only his parents had known Camp Green Lake was such a horrible place. The Yelnats family can trace all of their bad luck back to a family legend—if only Stanley’s great-great-grandfather hadn’t stolen a pig from, and then been cursed by, a one-legged Gypsy in Latvia.

The family even has a song, passed down through the generations, which expresses this belief:

“If only, if only,” the woodpecker sighs,
 “The bark on the tree was a little bit softer.”
 While the wolf waits below, hungry and lonely
 He cries to the moo—oo—oon,
 “If only, if only.”

But the Yelnatses never completely accept this attitude. Despite all the bad things that happen to them, Stanley and his family remain hopeful; they keep trying. And, in the end, their hope and **perseverance** pay off.

D Discussions

• Just like the Yelnats family, many of us have things we wish could come true. Do you have an “if only” in your life? Something that you wish were different, that you think would make your life better? What is it? What is standing in your way of achieving your “if only?”

Make a list of some of the things you could do to achieve your goals.

DEFINITIONS

Latvia—a small country in northeastern Europe, on the Baltic Sea
 Perseverance—sticking to a task

READING—analyze

EALRs

SOCIAL STUDIES—analyze and synthesize, investigate