

BOOKNOTES

READERS GUIDE

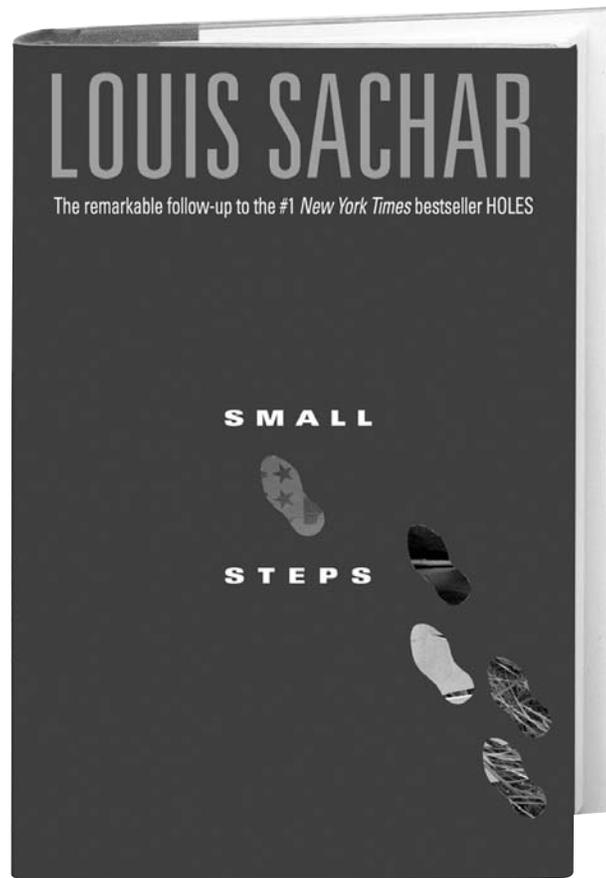
taking small steps

Armpit learned the art of digging ditches when he served time at Camp Green Lake in *Holes*, and author Louis Sachar has now given him a second chance. This time, Armpit learns there are small steps and giant steps in life, and sometimes making the choice to take a giant step leads to serious consequences. By his side is Ginny, a ten-year-old disabled neighbor who needs him as much as he needs her, and together they take small steps in the right direction.

about the book

In this poignant novel, Armpit, a character from the critically acclaimed novel *Holes*, takes lessons learned at Camp Green Lake and sets out to turn his life around one small step at a time.

Armpit has been home from Camp Green Lake two years, and he is still trying to prove that he can turn his life around. He manages to get a job digging trenches for a landscape company, save a little money, enroll in school, and avoid violent situations. In spite of his efforts, he finds that he is the victim of his past. The only person who truly believes in him is Ginny, a ten-year-old neighbor with cerebral palsy. When X-Ray, a buddy from Camp Green Lake appears with a get-rich-quick scheme, Armpit succumbs to the plan of his fast-talking friend, and winds up in a brawl at a Kaira DeLeon concert. This leads to a chance encounter with the teen pop sensation, a glimpse at her behind-the-scenes music world, and another chance to gain control of his life one small step at a time.



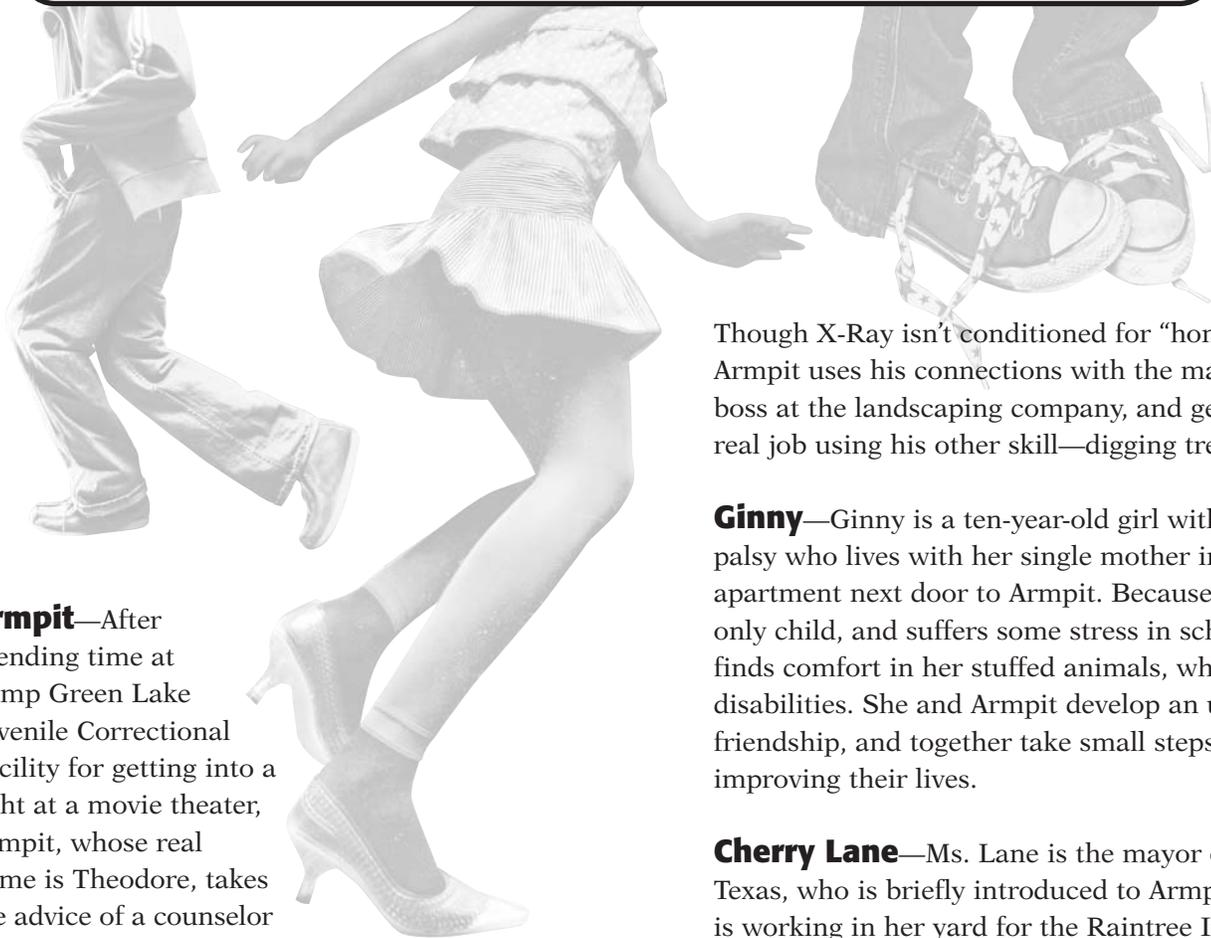
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pre-reading activities

Ask students to write a journal entry about a time when they had to make a tough choice between right and wrong. Have them include the following points: What contributed to their decision? How did their decision affect others? Was the outcome worth it? Encourage them to share their journal entries in class.

Instruct students to read the newspaper for several days and bring in articles where people have been in situations that required them to make a personal choice that could have a life-changing impact on them or others. Share the articles in class, and discuss whether the choices they made were positive or negative.

introducing the characters



Armpit—After spending time at Camp Green Lake Juvenile Correctional Facility for getting into a fight at a movie theater, Armpit, whose real name is Theodore, takes the advice of a counselor and makes a conscious effort to turn his life around. Though he makes a brief detour when a friend from his past involves him in a money-making scheme, he manages to regain focus and change his life, and those around him.

Kaira DeLeon—Kaira is a spoiled teen pop sensation who is blind to the corruption of her team, managed by her stepfather, El Genius. Off stage, she is often lonely staying in hotel suites and rarely meets her public. But when a commotion in the audience delays her concert in Austin, Texas, she meets Armpit and Ginny. She invites Armpit to California, which leads to an adventure that nearly ends in disaster for both of them.

X-Ray—Like Armpit, X-Ray has served time at Camp Green Lake. He has a talent for “verbal persuasion” and reenters Armpit’s life with an illegal moneymaking scheme that temporarily pulls Armpit off course.

Though X-Ray isn’t conditioned for “honest” work, Armpit uses his connections with the mayor and his boss at the landscaping company, and gets X-Ray a real job using his other skill—digging trenches.

Ginny—Ginny is a ten-year-old girl with cerebral palsy who lives with her single mother in a duplex apartment next door to Armpit. Because she is an only child, and suffers some stress in school, she finds comfort in her stuffed animals, which all have disabilities. She and Armpit develop an unconditional friendship, and together take small steps toward improving their lives.

Cherry Lane—Ms. Lane is the mayor of Austin, Texas, who is briefly introduced to Armpit when he is working in her yard for the Raintree Irrigation and Landscaping Company. She recognizes him at the Kaira DeLeon concert and comes to his defense when he is the victim of police brutality and racism.

getting to know the characters

Armpit and Ginny are both taking small steps in their lives. Write a letter that Armpit may write to Ginny from California explaining to her the consequences of taking a giant step.

Armpit tells Ginny, “I don’t know what they can do with someone with no heart and soul.” (p. 91) Write the lyrics for a blues song that focuses on the heart and soul of one of the above characters (e.g., The Heart and Soul of X-Ray).

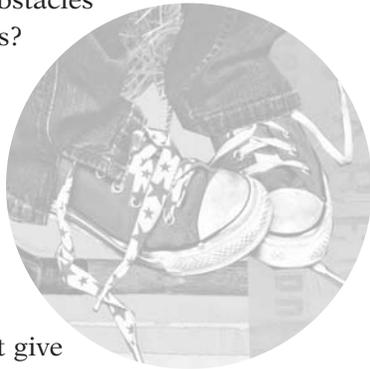
questions for group discussion

FOR SMALL STEPS

Achievement

Armpit feels that the way to turn his life around is to set goals. His five goals are: graduate from high school; get a job; save money; avoid violent situations; and lose the name Armpit. Ask students what Armpit's greatest obstacles are in achieving his goals?

Explain the metaphor "his life would be like walking upstream in a rushing river." (p. 4) At what point does the river appear to be rushing out of control? How does Armpit almost give up hope of achieving his goals?



Racism and Prejudice

Discuss the difference between overt and covert racism. Find examples of each type of racism in the novel.

Armpit's parents have an image of the type of people who go to rock concerts. Armpit tells them, "Just because people have tattoos or pierced tongues doesn't mean they're crazy." (p. 94) Discuss the relationship between labeling, image, and prejudices. How are Armpit's parents expressing a prejudice?

Trust

Armpit takes Ginny to the Kaira DeLeon concert. Why is his mother more worried for Ginny's safety than her own mother? Discuss why Armpit's mother hesitates when Ginny's mother says, "You must be very proud of Theodore"? Why does the mayor's telephone call at the end of the novel help Armpit's mother look at him differently?

Discuss ways X-Ray has proved to be untrustworthy. Why does Armpit allow himself to become involved with X-Ray's get-rich scheme when he knows that he can't trust him?

Honesty and Betrayal

Armpit knows that Coach Simmons has the reputation for giving better grades to football players. When he tells the coach that he intends to go out for football, Tatiana responds, "So you lied to him. Isn't that kind of cheating?" (p. 29) How does Armpit justify his lie?

X-Ray is hauled to police headquarters about the counterfeit tickets, and tries to blame Armpit. He says, "Armpit is not someone you can say no to. I'm talking big, and mean, and tough." (p. 183) Why doesn't he tell X-Ray that he heard the entire conversation? Debate why he doesn't realize that one betrayal leads to another with X-Ray.

one step beyond

1. Explain what Armpit means when he says, "It wasn't Camp Green Lake that released him from his anger. It was coming home and meeting Ginny." (p. 117) What might Armpit and Ginny teach the other characters in the book about taking small steps?
2. Discuss how making bad choices are sometimes driven by temptation and peer pressure. Role-play a conversation between Armpit and X-Ray where Armpit refuses X-Ray's get-rich scheme.
3. Read aloud the entire song that Armpit hears Kaira DeLeon sing on radio at the end of the novel. How does her song make him think about his new goals? The last two lines read:

*Then maybe I'll discover
Who I am along the way . . .*

What is the most important discovery that Armpit has made about himself?

a conversation with **louis sachar**

I'm sitting in my office, which is located over the garage of my house in Austin, Texas. My dogs, Lucky and Tippy, are here with me. They are the only people allowed in my office when I'm writing.

Lucky seems to understand that. He growls at my wife or my daughter if they try to enter. Maybe he senses me growling on the inside. I don't like being interrupted. Writing is a kind of self-hypnosis. Interruptions break the spell, and it's sometimes hard to get back.

You used to be a teacher, as well as a lawyer, but now you write full-time. How often do you write?

I generally write for about two hours a day, the first thing in the morning. After two hours, I find myself losing energy and concentration. It's best to quit while I'm still excited about the story. Then it will be easier to get started tomorrow. I couldn't write for a longer period, even if I wanted. Tippy has learned my schedule. After two hours, she taps me with her paw, barks, howls, and otherwise lets me know it's time for her walk.

Do you discuss what you've written each day, or wait until the manuscript is complete before sharing it with someone? Can you tell us how you write?

I never talk about a book until it is finished. It took me a year and a half to write *Holes*, and I never told anyone anything about it during all that time. I do this for a variety of reasons, but mainly motivation. By

not allowing myself to talk about it, the only way I can let it out is to finish writing it.

I write five or six drafts of each book. I start with a small idea, and it grows as I write. My ideas come to me while I'm writing. The story changes greatly during the first few drafts. By the time a book is finished, it is impossible for me to say how I got the various ideas.

You dislike hot Texas summers. Have you always lived in Texas?

I was born March 20th, 1954, in East Meadow, New York. My father worked on the seventy-eighth floor of the Empire State Building. When I was nine, we moved to Tustin, California.

I went to college at the University of California at Berkeley. During my last year there, I helped out at an elementary school—Hillside School. It was my experience there that led to my first book, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, which I wrote in 1976.

I attended Hastings College of Law in San Francisco and graduated in 1980. I worked part-time as a lawyer for eight years as I continued to write children's books.

Tell us about your family.

My wife's name is Carla. When I first met her, she was a counselor at an elementary school. She was the inspiration behind the counselor in *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*. We were married in 1985. Our daughter, Sherre, was born in 1987.

She was four years old when I started writing the Marvin Redpost series. That's why Marvin has a four-year-old sister.

Stanley dug holes in his free time, which was all the time. What do you like to do?

In my spare time, I like to play bridge and tennis. I'm a much better bridge player than tennis player. The other evening, I played tennis with a teacher. She clobbered me. When I found out she was a fourth-grade teacher, I told her who I was. She was very impressed. She couldn't wait to tell her class she had killed Louis Sachar playing tennis!

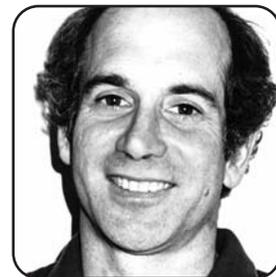
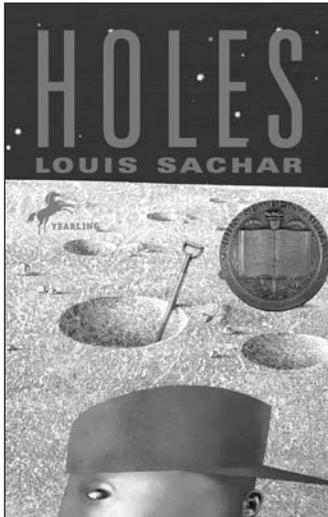


Photo © courtesy of author

about the author

Louis Sachar is the best-selling author of the award-winning novel *Holes*, as well as *Stanley Yelnats' Survival Guide to Camp Green Lake*, *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes*, and the Marvin Redpost series, among many others. *Small Steps* is his latest novel.

about **holes**



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Praise and Awards

★ "There is no question, kids will love *Holes*."

—Starred, *School Library Journal*

- Winner of the Newbery Medal
- Winner of the National Book Award
- Winner of the *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*
- Winner of the Christopher Award
- An ALA Best Books for Young Adults
- An ALA Notable Book
- An ALA Quick Pick

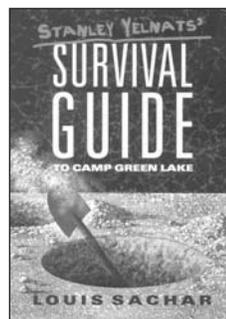
In this funny yet poignant story, Stanley Yelnats is sent to Camp Green Lake, a juvenile detention center in the middle of a Texas desert, after being falsely arrested for stealing a pair of sneakers. As the summer progresses, Stanley makes some startling discoveries about himself, and the true meaning of friendship.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts—Remind students that tall tales are often based on facts and are always characterized by exaggerated humor and whopping lies. How does the story about Kate Barlow resemble a tall tale? Ask students to write the story of Kate Barlow, embellishing it with their own exaggerated humor and lies.

Social Studies—Ask students to discuss how the study of juvenile crime fits under the topic of social studies. Why are child abuse and homelessness considered social problems? Ask students to make a booklet describing local agencies and organizations dedicated to fighting juvenile crime and helping the homeless.

Science—Stanley's father is an inventor. Although it is said that an inventor must have intelligence, perseverance, and a lot of luck, Stanley's father never seems to have any luck. Have student research inventors such as Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, and the Wright brothers. How did luck play a role in their inventions?



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Also from Louis Sachar

Should you ever find yourself at Camp Green Lake—or somewhere similar—this is the guide for you. Stanley Yelnats (Caveman, to some of you) offers anecdotes and advice on everything from digging the perfect hole to identifying and avoiding the wildlife (scorpions, tarantulas, rattlesnakes, yellow-spotted lizards, Mr. Sir) to help make your stay a more pleasant one.



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questions for group discussion

FOR HOLES

1. The Yelnats family blames their bad luck on their “no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grand-father.” How does a belief in luck change the way a person reacts to good or bad fortune? Discuss whether Stanley’s father uses his family’s bad luck as an excuse for this failure as an inventor.
2. At times, Stanley feels that his life is controlled by destiny, or fate. A thesaurus offers *luck* as a synonym for *fate*. How is luck different from fate? How much of what happens to Stanley is because of fate? How might a person control his or her own destiny?
3. Stanley has no friends and is an easy target for bullies. Trace the development of Stanley as a character from a naive, friendless, overweight kid to a more self-confident boy who understands and appreciates the true meaning of friendship.
4. Sachar considers every detail in revealing the inner and outer conflicts of his characters. How does he use nicknames to reveal the personality and underlying conflict of each boy at Camp Green Lake? Why is Stanley called Caveman? Discuss how a name like Zero might further damage an already fractured self-concept.
5. There are nuances throughout the novel that are symbolic of a developing friendship between Stanley and Zero. For example, Stanley calls Zero by his real name when they are in the desert together. Discuss other times in the novel when Sachar uses subtle variations in plot and character to symbolize a special occurrence.
6. Discuss the obvious and the symbolic meanings of the titles *Holes*.
7. Each event in the novel is related and eventually reveals its own purpose. However, Sachar leaves three questions unanswered: Who are the Warden’s parents? Why did Zero’s mother never come back to him in the park? And why were the jars of peaches in the boat? Try to figure out the answers to these questions, taking clues from the novel.
8. What is the significance of the lullaby in the story? Compare Stanley’s father’s version (p. 8) and the Zeroni family version (p. 231). How do these two differing versions reflect an attitude or a belief regarding a predestined life?
9. *Stanley Yelnats* is a palindrome, a word or phrase that is the same spelled forward or backward. Why do you think the author named his main character in that way?
10. *Holes* has been described by *Publishers Weekly* as a “dazzling blend of social commentary, tall tales and magical realism.” What are the social messages in the book? What are the literary differences between a tall tale and a story that uses magical realism? How does Sachar use a tall tale, the parallel story in the novel, to further define the social messages?
11. *Holes* has been described as “darkly humorous.” Describe dark humor. How is irony used as a literary mechanism to convey humor? How does Sachar combine humor and compassion to create characters that leave an indelible mark on readers? What is the irony in the fate of Camp Green Lake?
12. What defines a classic? Discuss the distinguishing literary elements of *Holes*. How might it become a literary classic?

on the web

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