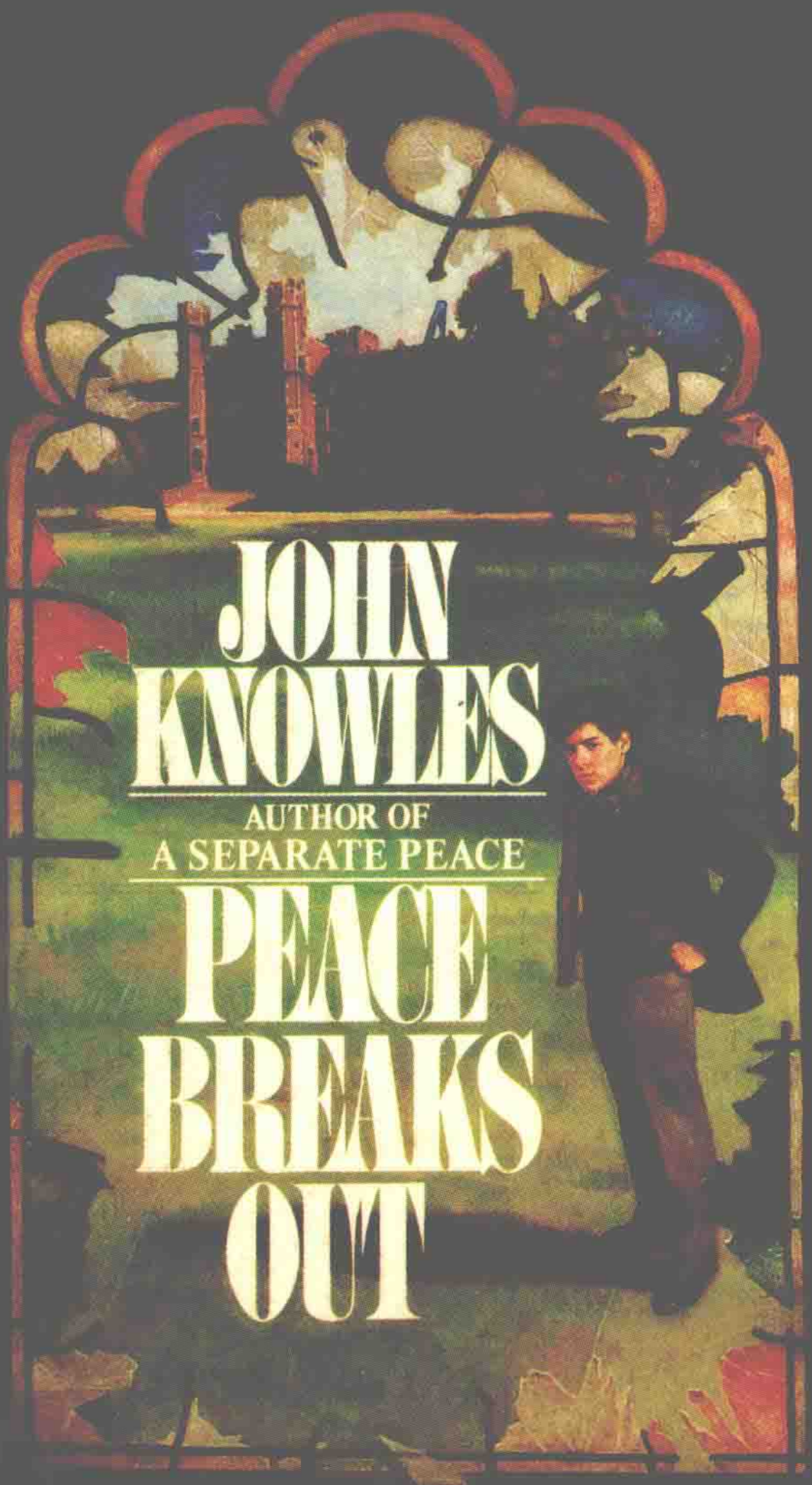

JOHN KNOWLES

AUTHOR OF A SEPARATE PEACE

PEACE BREAKS OUT

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JOHN KNOWLES

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In Memoriam:

THORNTON WILDER

Novelist, Playwright, Inspiring Teacher

MOTHER COURAGE: Bells! What are the bells for, middle of the week!

CHAPLAIN: What are they shouting?

YOUNG MAN: It's peace.

CHAPLAIN: Peace!

MOTHER COURAGE: Don't tell me peace has broken out—when I've just gone and bought all these supplies!

—*Bertolt Brecht*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN KNOWLES, a graduate of Phillips Exeter and Yale, now lives in Southampton, Long Island. He is the author of seven novels, a book on travel, and a collection of stories. Mr. Knowles is a winner of the William Faulkner Award and The Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He lectures widely to university audiences.

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The Devon School had endured in the mind of Pete Hallam throughout his combat years in Italy as a close-held memory of peacetime. Its balanced eighteenth-century houses, its red-brick no-nonsense nineteenth-century dormitories, its elaborate neo-Georgian twentieth-century class buildings stood in his infantryman's recollection as untainted and unthreatened and reassuring, a valued part of his past back in New Hampshire. He could never lapse so far into sentimentality as to think he was "fighting for Devon" or for anything else as a matter of fact except self-survival and an end to fighting, but the image of the halcyon lanes and broad-sweeping Playing Fields was a steady focus for his memories of peacetime as he had known it, his particular microcosm, serene and unchanged.

And now, in September 1945, here he was literally returning to Devon as an instructor in American History and a member of the Physical Education staff.

At the town of Hampton he turned off Route 1 and headed the few miles inland from the Atlantic coast to the village of Devon. He drove his 1940 Ford station wagon with a particular sense of contentment through the rolling, wooded country. It still

faintly surprised him to see a countryside totally untouched by the defacements of war. His eyes had grown so used to buildings reduced to shambles, roads like quagmires, fields blasted into hellholes, that these vistas of rich meadows, neat farmhouses and orderly woods looked fake to him, stage scenery.

So the dreary, ferocious years he had spent in the Infantry, the shrapnel holes in his left leg, the searing months as a prisoner of war, could at least be thought to have some redeeming meaning: this whole continent had escaped unscathed from a world at war. Only North American people had been damaged, killed; all the buildings and all the fields remained untouched. That, he had to admit, was something to show for what he and everyone else overseas had had to go through.

And, after all, he had survived it far better than many others: he was not crazy as two men in his company had become; he had not gone deaf; his hands still shook but not very much; he no longer had so many nightmares.

Pete drove down a slope and into the little village, crossing the small bridge which spanned the Devon River just before it fell over a small waterfall and mingled with the tidewater Naguamsett River. He circled the lacy, cast-iron bandstand in the center of town and turned left, very soon passing into the precincts of the school.

Of course it looked smaller than he had visualized it. Everything looked smaller. Perhaps life itself was going to be smaller now, now that the great and terrible drama was over, all of the dead were buried, and the victors of the Second World War were commencing to see one another as enemies, the earlier enemies having been vanquished.

The school was just as beautiful as he remembered it. The great trees, the dignified commons and courtyards, the gray-white Gothic Chapel, a miniature

cathedral with its imposing bell tower which reached a little higher than the competing cupolas of the First Academy Building and the Administration Building, all so exactly like themselves that once again he thought involuntarily: A stage set: men will strike it and cart it off in a minute.

But the school had been here for a century and a half and seemed likely to endure at least another century or so. It was not a snobbish school; it did not rely on the rich for its continuity, although several philanthropists had heavily endowed it. Devon was larger—seven hundred students—and much older and more deeply rooted than the St. Grottlesex schools, those Episcopalian imitations of Eton and Harrow. Devon was sort of Congregationalist when it came to religion, which it did not often do, with a predominantly Protestant student body mixed with numerous Catholics and a sprinkling of Jews.

Pete pulled up in front of Pembroke House, a four-square white colonial manse fronting a large ell where the students lived. Mr. Roscoe Bannerman Latch of the Latin Department lived here in the principal faculty quarters with his wife, and there was a small annex apartment on the ground floor which would now become the sole and perhaps permanent domicile of Mr. Peter Hallam, Devon '37, soldier home from the wars.

The first thing he noticed, entering his apartment, was a fair-sized fireplace in the far wall, and he felt a small, atavistic ripple of pleasure at the sight of it, the hearth: barracks and bivouacs didn't have them. There were three scatter rugs on the floor, a rather battered desk and chair, a worn and comfortable-looking easy chair by the fireplace, bookshelves, lamps, a couple of tables, two framed prints of Harvard scenes, narrow sash windows, a low ceiling, and a general sense of old-fashioned functionality. Off the living room–office were a small kitchen and

a bedroom which, while modest, outstripped anything the Army had provided.

He carried in his bags and boxes and put them in the middle of the floor. Opening the first box, which had been stored at his parents' home in Western Massachusetts all these years, he found staring up at him a photograph of the Dartmouth hockey team, 1940. Pete lifted it out; he looked then very much as he looked now, high cheekbones and firm features; with his brown-black hair and light blue eyes and normal expression of decisiveness he supposed he looked like the typical Ivy League hockey player. He still looked today very much like that twenty-one-year-old college boy in the team photograph; the only significant change was a masked fatigue behind the firm-featured face now; he still looked just like a bright hockey player, who had, however, been what the French called *excédé*, pushed beyond all normal limits of exertion and stress. On the surface he seemed just as athletic and energetic as ever; behind that appearance were concealed the damaged leg and the psyche of which too much had been asked.

Standing next to him in the photograph, looking slightly maniacal, was Mel Hendrickson, the best, fastest skater on the team, also the practical joker and general cutup, the one who saw the comedy in everything. He was killed by a land mine soon after the American Army crossed the Rhine River. By that time in the European campaign it was obvious that the war in Europe was won. But it was not yet over, and that discrepancy destroyed Mel Hendrickson.

Behind them in the picture stood Brooks Brewster, second-string goalie, looking squat and rather mean. His nickname was The Mole. He left his meanness on the ice and was just another jokester: perhaps they had all been. Pete's eyes swept the ranks of the hockey team and almost all of them in his memory seemed to be chuckling or whooping or grinning. At

least that was how he remembered them. Mole Brewster's B-17 went down in flames over the Ruhr.

In the front row was Joe Raynor, at the time absolutely bent on becoming a reporter, journalist, foreign correspondent, columnist, newspaper pundit. He died in a hospital in New Guinea of some virulent infection.

Pete put the photograph on the shelf and reached for another in the box. It was of an extremely pretty blonde young woman gazing rather purposefully out at him from a silver frame: his ex-wife, Joan. He hated to look at that face; he had once loved it, her. It was unsettling to look at her now. Why was she so pretty? How could nature allow her to be so pretty, promising, idealistic-looking? The picture had been taken four years earlier and no doubt she was still just as pretty, she of the slightly husky, captivating voice, of the superb legs, of the treachery. He plunged the photograph back in the box.

The last picture he lifted out was a triptych, three linked frames of family pictures. On the left were his mother and father at their twentieth wedding anniversary party, he looking more like a diplomat than a successful businessman in his dinner jacket, his mother in a long lace dress looking just like the Lady with a capital *L* that she always had been. The center picture was the Birches, their home in Lenox, brick, neo-colonial, spacious, with many wooded acres around it, an ideal place for four sons to grow up.

His three brothers were in the final photo: Mike, three years older than Pete, Yale, Naval commander, now about to enter law practice in Providence; George, one year Pete's senior—4-F because of poor eyesight, otherwise the "Perfect Specimen" as his football buddies had dubbed him—now a doctor in Bangor, Maine; and finally Teddy, two years younger than Pete, supposed to be the most gifted of them, played

the piano very well, liked to paint, swimming star, lover boy according to his classmates.

He was dead. Teddy had been killed liberating Cannes, picked off by a sniper as he and his squad were advancing cautiously along the Croisette from the Palm Beach Casino toward the Carlton Hotel. He had been a very good boy, Teddy, reflected Pete, a very promising, ardent, talented kid. And now Cannes was free.

There was a knock at the door. Before he could reach it the door swung ajar and Mr. Latch's slightly mad head thrust in—hooked nose, overstimulated watery blue eyes, uncontrolled white-red hair, flushed, excited expression. "My boy, my boy, am I interrupting anything? Come over to our digs, will you? Glass of sherry. Debo's worried you're lonesome already. Are you? Of course not. Sentimental woman, too many novels. Flaubert, *Anna Karenina,* Henry *James*. Ugh. Come on over, want to? Not finished unpacking? Do that later."

There was no stopping Roscoe Latch once set on a course, whether it was dragging Pete away for a glass of sherry or undermining the previous Headmaster's authority. He had been Pete's Latin teacher during his Upper Middle year at Devon. From him Pete had learned what the words "discipline" and "precision" and "ceaseless energy" and "personal authority" really meant.

Roscoe Latch ushered him across the little entrance hall and Mrs. Latch welcomed him with a bright, intellectual smile. Her brown-gray hair was parted in the middle and pulled back into a bun. This set off her patrician, prowlike features and her aware green-gray eyes.

"Mrs. Latch—" he began.

"Do call me Deborah, now we're house-sharing. *Don't* call me 'Debo.' Only Roscoe inflicts that on

me. It sounds like an Italian water closet or something."

Their living room had the low ceiling of the eighteenth century. Undoubtedly this large room had once been two or three small ones. One of the original fireplaces survived, as did the wide-plank flooring. The furniture consisted of bits and pieces, old, new, mostly small, well kept but worn, like, as a matter of fact, the two Latches. September sunshine shone through sash windows looking toward the Chapel.

Pete accepted a glass of sherry and took a small wooden chair, Roscoe sat in another and Deborah established herself on a couch next to the fireplace.

"Here you are back from the wars!" Roscoe exclaimed cheerily in his swallowed, marbles-in-the-mouth British voice. "And I'm sure you'll find little old Devon a risible backwater after the great world and the great war."

Thank God there are people still left in the world using the word "risible," thought Pete. Maybe if I'm really lucky I'll never have to hear that eternal army four-letter word or any of its variations again. He had not until this moment realized how bone-tired he was of GI talk, its poverty, its repetitions, its glumness.

"It's good to be back," Pete said energetically, "and a little unreal. Is that really the Chapel over there where I sat every morning for four years, or is it cardboard? Are the bells really still in that tower, and do they still ring? It's a little hard to believe somehow."

Deborah was squinting sympathetically across at him. "But doesn't all seem trivial here to you now, beside the point, *precieux*?"

"Not at all," said Pete, grinning. "I'm just so damn glad places like this are left, after so much got blasted away."

"Doubtless," began Roscoe in his trickiest and most urbane tone, "Latin has revealed itself to you in all its unutterable irrelevance."

"Sir," Pete said reflexively and was then struck with the thought that now that he too was a Master at Devon "sir" might be inappropriate, "to read Latin you have to know how to think and to keep complicated rules in your head and to relate some things to other things, and, well, I never have been better trained anywhere for using my mind than in your Latin class."

Roscoe chortled and coughed, flushing. Had Pete embarrassed or touched the impermeable Roscoe Latch?

Recovering, Roscoe looked across at him in his birdlike way. Then he said with his usual cheerfulness, "I fear fewer and fewer people—students, faculty, trustees—will agree with you and me. Latin will go the way of Moral Philosophy and Alchemy and reading entrails. You and I know it is superb conditioning of the mental muscles, we know how simple it makes learning the Romance languages, we are aware of its impact on everyday English. But they, the new men? This is the Century of the Common Man, everyone says so. The Common Man, studying Latin? Not bloody likely. But I," an accepting sigh, "shall be retired in three more years and . . ."

"And," Deborah took up the sentence, "you have had a remarkable and valuable career, and Peter here is one more proof of it."

"I hope I am," said Pete a shade uncomfortably.

Consciously and firmly closing off that subject by shifting in his chair and putting his chin in his hand, Roscoe said, "You're going to find the students rather different from your day, you know."

"Am I?" said Pete. "How?"

"Rather more serious, funnily enough, a bit 'traumatized,' in the cant psychiatric word, by the war

they have just missed becoming involved in. The world has been an amazing and stupefying and extremely dangerous place all through their adolescence and it has left its brand on them. They're not as happy-go-lucky as you boys were, Depression or no Depression. They're tougher, somehow." He chortled. "They *are* boys, of course, and boys *will be* boys. Two of them climbed the Chapel steeple last year, on the outside, belaying, I believe it's called." He ran his fingers through his scrappy hair. "But all the same, they have been marked by this war. I believe they feel that anything, anything at all, may possibly happen to them in their lives after all that. The sky's the limit, and so is hell. If I had to put it in one word, the difference between students of your day and of today, the word would be 'aware.' You weren't aware; they are."

"Well I guess I'm aware now!" Pete burst out with a laugh. Too bad I had to walk the length of Italy through the bombs and the rain, get shot up and captured to become aware, he added to himself.

"You were rather good at sports, I seem to remember," Roscoe observed with suave vagueness.

Knows every position I ever played on every team here, Pete suddenly realized with amusement. Full of tricks, sir, aren't you? "Not bad," Pete concurred.

"And ah," put in Deborah, "you'll be doing coaching as well as teaching. The whole man," she added with a kind of abstract admiration. "*Mens sana in corpore sano.*"

"I was hoping," Roscoe observed dryly, "that you were going to spare us that most overworked of all Latin clichés."

"Not bloody likely," she shot back pleasantly, preempting one of his favorite phrases.

"I liked hockey best, I think," cut in Pete. "The river . . . the black ice . . ." and his memory drifted to the Devon River in frigid midwinter, its swath of

ice curving through the stripped bordering woods, the shiny ice black; he visualized days when all the players were out energetically clearing the ice after a snowstorm, the winter winds sometimes howling down the river from the far north country like some call of the ultimate wilderness; the punishing practice sessions, the bump and hurtle and near mayhem, the fatigue of total effort in air seemingly too cold and thin to breathe. He'd loved that, and the bruises and the pains and the chipped front tooth as well.

It had all been violent, but it had not been serious.

After a pleasant half-hour, Pete said, getting up, "I'd better get back and finish unpacking."

"Do come to supper later this week," said Deborah, "any night that suits you. We don't want you to get too lonely . . . a bachelor . . ."

He took his leave, and went out and across the entrance hall to his quarters. A bachelor, that's what he was again, his marriage a false start. He had always detested false starts. Pete could think of nothing else in his life which had been one.

• • •

That night might have been as good as any to accept their invitation to supper—a pleasant hour with "Roscoe" and "Deborah" and would he ever get really used to calling those two icons those two names—but joining them tonight might seem too hurried, as though the hounds of bachelor loneliness were indeed at his heels. The school dining halls would not open until the following day, so that left him with two places to dine in the town of Devon, the Devon Inn, pure preparatory-school gentility, and the townie bar and glorified diner. He chose the latter.

The little bar attached to the dining room there was darker than dim. It was more like a black hole with a few points of light. Very possibly the local drinkers and the occasional fugitive from the school

like himself were not anxious to be seen here. Or perhaps the murkiness was merely due to thrifty Yankee minimizing of the electricity bill.

Pete groped his way to an empty stool at the far end of the bar and from a singularly plain barmaid ordered Scotch. Was it true that the basic raw material of femininity in New England was simply plainer than elsewhere? Perhaps because of the rugged winters? Vestigial Puritanism? Poor nutrition? Basic cussedness?

"You want water with that?" she asked, looking past his ear.

"No," he answered her emphatically.

There was no doubt that he was even more drawn to pretty, attractive and beautiful women than other men seemed to be. It was superficial of him, he supposed, immature. He should take their *character* more into consideration. Had he done that, gotten past the dazzling surface presence of Joan, he might never have married her. But to ask that kind of perspicacity or maturity or whatever it was of himself, he realized ruefully, was like asking himself to become a vegetarian. It just wasn't in the genes.

He ordered, and "ordered" was the word, a second Scotch. The sallow, long-faced barmaid eyed him sourly as she poured it. Honey, he wanted to say to her, you don't like me. Do you know something? I don't give a sh—, a damn. Must get those GI obscenities out of my mind. Government Issue, from combat boots to cusswords, was suddenly and exhilaratingly out of date, on the junk heap.

He sipped the Scotch and realized that at some point in the abrasiveness of war his youthful eagerness to please, to be popular, had been almost totally scraped away. Perhaps he had cared too much, once, here at Devon as a student for instance, and this urge by its very intensity had finally been burned out of him. He certainly had wanted the other guys