

# Holes

by Louis Sachar

## About the Book

In this funny yet poignant story, a boy embarks on a personal journey that changes his life, as he spends the summer paying for a crime he didn't commit.

Stanley Yelnats, falsely arrested for stealing a pair of sneakers, is sentenced to serve time at Camp Green Lake, a juvenile detention facility in the middle of a Texas desert. Having never attended summer camp, Stanley naively believes this to be a new opportunity. He is soon faced with a group of unhappy, unaccepting campers (inmates) and an evil warden who uses the boys to dig holes in search of buried treasure.

As the summer progresses, Stanley makes some startling discoveries about himself, the true meaning of friendship, and the ancient curse that has haunted his family for generations. In a parallel story about Stanley's "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather," the mystery of the curse is unveiled and Stanley, in his efforts to help a friend, suddenly finds himself in control of his own destiny and the fate of his unlucky family.

## Praise for the Book

"A dazzling blend of social commentary, tall tale and magic realism."  
— *Publishers Weekly*, Starred

"There is no question, kids will love Holes."  
— *School Library Journal*, Starred

"A smart jigsaw puzzle of a novel."  
— *The New York Times Book Review*

"Imaginative plotting and memorable characters make this novel a winner."  
— *Book Magazine*

*Courtesy of Random House*

## About the Author

Title: Louis Sachar

American Children's writer ( 1954 - )

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### PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Surname is pronounced "Sack- er"; born March 20, 1954, in East Meadow, NY; son of Robert J. (a salesman) and Ruth (a real estate broker) Sachar; married Carla Askew (a school counselor), 1985; children: Sherre. Education: University of California, Berkeley, B.A., 1976; University of California, San Francisco, J.D., 1980; attended Antioch College. Avocational Interests: Softball, bridge, chess, rugby, watching the San Francisco Giants. Memberships: Authors Guild, Authors League of America, Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Addresses: Home: Austin, TX.

### CAREER:

Writer, novelist, and attorney. Beldoch Industries (manufacturers of women's sweaters), Norwalk, CT, shipping manager, 1976-77; attorney, 1981-89.

### AWARDS:

Ethical Culture School Book Award, 1978, and Children's Choice, International Reading Association and Children's Book Council, 1979, both for *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*; Parents' Choice Award, Parents' Choice Foundation, 1987, Young Reader's Choice Award, Pacific Northwest Library Association, and Texas Bluebonnet Award, Texas Library Association, both 1990, and Charlie May Simon Book Award, Arkansas Elementary School Council, Georgia Children's Book Award, University of Georgia College of Education, Indian Paintbrush Book Award (Wyoming), Golden Sower Award, Iowa Children's Choice Award, Land of Enchantment Children's Book Award, New Mexico Library Association, Mark Twain Award, Missouri Association of School Librarians, Milner Award, Friends of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library (Georgia), Nevada Young Reader's Award, and West Virginia Book Award, Wise Library, West Virginia University, all for *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*; Parents' Choice Award, 1989, Garden State Children's Book Award, New Jersey Library Association, 1992, and Arizona Young Reader's Chapter Book Award, 1993, all for *Wayside School Is Falling Down*; nominee, Golden Archer Award, 1996-97, Garden State Children's Book Award, 1998, Indiana Young Hoosier's Book Award, Massachusetts Children's Book Award, and

Young Reader's Choice Award, all for *Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger*; National Book Award, 1998, Best Books list, *School Library Journal*, 1998, Fanfare list, *Horn Book*, Books in the Middle: Outstanding Titles of 1998, *Voice of Youth Advocates*, Blue Ribbons selection, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, and Newbery Medal, all 1999, Mark Twain Award, 2001, Readers' Choice Award for Teen Books, *READ* magazine, 2002, and Rebecca Caudill Young Readers' Book Award, 2002, all for *Holes*; Schneider Family Book Award, American Library Association, 2007, for *Small Steps*.

#### WORKS:

#### WRITINGS:

- *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, Follett (Chicago, IL), 1978, reprinted, Morrow Junior Books (New York, NY), 1998, revised edition, illustrated by Adam McCauley, HarperTrophy (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Johnny's in the Basement*, Avon (New York, NY), 1981, reprinted, Morrow Junior Books (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Someday Angeline*, Avon (New York, NY), 1983, reprinted, Morrow Junior Books (New York, NY), 1998.
- *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1987.
- *Sixth Grade Secrets*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 1987.
- *Wayside School Is Falling Down*, Lothrop (New York, NY), 1989, revised edition, illustrated by Adam McCauley, HarperTrophy (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Sideways Arithmetic from Wayside School*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 1989.
- *The Boy Who Lost His Face*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1989.
- *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Monkey Soup*, illustrated by Cat Bowman Smith, Knopf (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger*, illustrated by Joel Schick, Morrow Junior Books (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Holes*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Stanley Yelnats' Survival Guide to Camp Green Lake* (sequel to *Holes*), Dell Yearling (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Small Steps* (sequel to *Stanley Yelnats' Survival Guide to Camp Green Lake*), Delacorte (New York, NY), 2006.

#### "MARVIN REDPOST" SERIES

- *Marvin Redpost: Kidnapped at Birth?*, illustrated by Neal Hughes, Random House (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Marvin Redpost: Why Pick on Me?*, illustrated by Barbara Sullivan, Random House (New York, NY), 1993.
- *Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl?*, illustrated by Barbara Sullivan, Random House (New York, NY), 1993.
- *Marvin Redpost: Alone in His Teacher's House*, illustrated by Barbara Sullivan, Random House (New York, NY), 1994.

- *Marvin Redpost: A Flying Birthday Cake?*, illustrated by Amy Wummer, Random House (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Marvin Redpost: Class President*, illustrated by Amy Wummer, Random House (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Marvin Redpost: A Magic Crystal?*, illustrated by Amy Wummer, Random House (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Marvin Redpost: Super Fast, Out of Control!*, illustrated by Amy Wummer, Random House (New York, NY), 2000.

## OTHER

- (With Brent Hanley) *Holes* (screenplay; based on Sachar's novel of same title), Disney, 2003.

## MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

*Holes*, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, and *Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger* were all adapted to audiocassette by Random House (New York, NY). *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* and *Wayside School Is Falling Down* were adapted to audiocassette by Listening Library. *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* has been adapted to a play and performed at the Old Courthouse Theatre in Charlotte, NC.

## Sidelights

Though he graduated from law school, passed the bar exam, and practiced law part-time for a number of years, Louis Sachar is best known as the author of poignant, humorous stories for children and young adults. Sachar began his writing career with the zany *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*. The book is a collection of thirty stories, each one corresponding with a floor in the thirty-story Wayside School. The inspiration for *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* came from Sachar's experience as a teacher's aide while an undergraduate at University of California, Berkeley.

Sachar's popularity as an author of young adult and children's literature stems, in part, from his choice of characters. "The protagonists of his books are often outcasts who learn about themselves and gain social acceptance through their relationships with other children and adults," noted a *Children's Literature Review* contributor. In *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, Sachar recounts the antics of teachers and students in a crazy, one-classroom-per-story school. The names of the students in the book are the actual names of children in the class where Sachar worked as a teacher's aide. Sachar even threw himself into the book, as the character of Louis, the yard teacher.

*Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger* is another collection of wacky stories about what happens when Mrs. Jewls, the teacher on the thirtieth floor, goes on maternity leave. In

her place are some of the most outrageous substitutes ever, including one whose third ear lets her read the children's thoughts. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer predicted that readers will be "turning the pages eagerly, awaiting the next twist of plot or play on words. Sachar's supply of both seems inexhaustible." Reviewer John Sigwald of *School Library Journal* wrote that while the stories "lack a few strong characters to bind the slapstick and the absurd together," the book is "fun and full of the kind of 'grossness' that middle schoolers love." Sachar has authored other "Wayside" books, including *Wayside School Is Falling Down* and *Sideways Arithmetic from Wayside School*.

Sachar's novels *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, *Someday Angeline*, and *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes* all feature protagonists who are outcasts, but who learn to accept themselves for who they are. In *Someday Angeline*, an eight-year-old genius is out of place when she is bumped up to the sixth grade. *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes* is about Gary "Goon" Boone, a jokester who covers up how he really feels by telling jokes. Both characters overcome their awkwardness and become comfortable with who they are. A reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* remarked that *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes* has "strong, realistic characterization," and believed "Sachar's gracefully told story will please his longtime fans and gain him new followers as well."

Sachar earned critical praise for *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, in which fifth-grade class bully Bradley Chalkers is befriended by the new kid in class, Jeff Fishkin. Like the protagonists in other Sachar tales, Bradley is an outcast, disliked by his classmates. However, through his friendship with Jeff and the help of a school counselor, Bradley transforms himself into a more positive person, and even gets invited to a birthday party. The book won many awards, including the Parents' Choice Award.

A *Children's Literature Review* contributor considered Sachar's novel *Holes* "the greatest critical success of Sachar's career." *Holes* tells the story of Stanley Yelnats, a boy who is sentenced to go to Camp Green Lake, a punishment camp for bad boys, after being falsely accused of stealing a star athlete's sneakers. The boys at the camp dig five-foot-by-five-foot holes in the dried-up lake bed all day long, under the hot Texas sun. Stanley figures out that the warden has her own motives for wanting the holes dug. As the book moves back and forth between past and present, a story about treasure, poisonous nail polish, yellow-spotted lizards, and a whole cast of crazy characters unfolds. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called *Holes* "a dazzling blend of social commentary, tall tale, and magic realism." Roger Sutton remarked in *Horn Book*, "Sachar has shown himself a writer of humor and heart, with an instinctive aversion to the expected." Betsy Hearne, in the *New York Times Book Review*, observed that Sachar "abandons conventional plot for a more innovative mix of realism and legend, with elements of mystery that keep the surrealistic events suspenseful."

In an interview with Joan Novelli of *Instructor*, Sachar said that he thinks so many kids relate to the character of Stanley in *Holes* because he isn't a hero. "He's a kind of pathetic kid who feels like he has no friends, feels like his life is cursed. And I think everyone can identify with that in one way or another," explained Sachar. In a *Writing!* interview, Sachar told Kate Davis, "You always have to imagine what your character would be

feeling and thinking, to see yourself as the character. Then you try to come up with characteristics that are interesting to the reader." Anne Dingus, in *Texas Monthly*, commented on the "tightly woven plot" of *Holes* and said that "Sachar leaves not one thread untucked at novel's end." Sachar explained in *Writing!*: "Tying everything together neatly in the end wasn't hard, because I knew how everything was going to relate. The tricky part was getting all that stuff out in the story without the reader getting bored." Sachar cowrote the screenplay version of *Holes*, which was released by Disney in 2003.

Sachar has also achieved success with his "Marvin Redpost" series. The first book in the series, *Marvin Redpost: Kidnapped at Birth?* has nine-year-old Marvin questioning the origin of his birth. His red hair and blue eyes make him different from everyone else in his family, and Marvin becomes convinced that he is the long-lost son of the King of Shampoo. In *Marvin Redpost: Class President*, Marvin and his class receive a surprise visit from the President of the United States on the same day that everyone is wearing clothes with holes in them. Anne Knickerbocker commented in the *School Library Journal*: "Through a perfect blend of humor and thoughtful prose, [Sachar] drives home the point of what good citizenship is without being didactic." In *Marvin Redpost: A Flying Birthday Cake*, the new kid in Marvin's class, Joe Normal, is actually an alien. A reviewer in *Horn Book Magazine* commended the story for its "smart, funny twist on the new-kid theme, reminding us that everyone feels alienated at one time or another."

In *Marvin Redpost: Alone in His Teacher's House*, Marvin is asked by his teacher to take care of her dog while she's away. Marvin agrees, and his teacher gives him a key to her house. In addition to the responsibility of taking care of the older dog, Marvin has to cope with the mental adjustment necessary to see his teacher as a real person in a context other than the classroom. His assignment brings him the admiration and envy of all his classmates, but the situation takes a tragic turn. His teacher's dog suddenly refuses to eat, and soon dies. Marvin feels a powerful guilt and shame, thinking himself to blame for the dog's death. Even worse, the other kids and the substitute teacher turn against him. Soon, Marvin must decide how he's going to break the bad news to his teacher, and how he's going to deal with her reaction. Sachar successfully conveys the "humor of having to confront your teacher as a person and the sorrow at the death of a beloved pet," commented Hazel Rochman in *Booklist*.

Sachar returns to the world of *Holes* with *Stanley Yelnats' Survival Guide to Camp Green Lake*. Told in Stanley's distinctive narrative voice, the book offers insider advice for new arrivals to Camp Green Lake. Speaking from the vantage point of hard-won wisdom, Stanley describes hole construction, gives warnings about potentially dangerous desert wildlife, and explains how the system at Camp Green Lake works. He also expands on stories of fellow inmates featured in *Holes*. *School Library Journal* contributor Elaine E. Knight remarked favorably on this "highly unusual sequel, which both explains and extends the adventure" from the original novel.

Other characters from *Holes* get their chance *Small Steps*. The book focuses on Armpit, a young African American male and a former Camp Green Lake inmate. Two years after being released from Camp Green Lake, Armpit is now digging holes as an employee of a

landscaping company. He knows that the people around him expect him to fail, but he is determined to recover his dignity and his grip on life, and he is willing to put in the small steps necessary to succeed. He has become best friends with Ginny, a ten-year-old neighbor with cerebral palsy, and is at last experiencing what it is like to have someone admire him and look up to him like Ginny does. Against his better judgment, Armpit gets involved in a scheme with his friend X-Ray, also a former Camp Green Lake detainee. X-Ray thinks they can make a lot of money in scalping tickets to a concert by teen pop sensation Kaira DeLeon. Armpit lends X-Ray the money to start, and decides to take Ginny to the concert. There, he meets the lovely young Kaira, and the two quickly fall for each other. Soon, Armpit is once again in trouble after being framed by Kaira's stepfather for an attempt on the young singer's life. Armpit "is a genuinely sympathetic character, as is the teen singing phenom Kaira," observed a *Kirkus Reviews* critic. *School Library Journal* reviewer Connie Tyrrell Burns called *Small Steps* a "story of redemption, of the triumph of the human spirit, of self-sacrifice, and of doing the right thing," and named Sachar a "master storyteller who creates memorable characters."

Sachar's books blend social commentary with humor. His underdog characters often triumph in the end, and most of his works have a deeper meaning hiding beneath the surface of his witty writing. Though his works are mostly for children and young adults, critics believe that they are also amusing to adults. "I think what makes good children's books is putting the same care and effort into it as if I was writing for adults," Sachar explained in an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth on *Newshour*. "I don't write anything, put anything, in my books that I'd be embarrassed to put in an adult book," he added. Sachar touched on the same subject in an interview with *Austin Chronicle* writer Barbara Strickland: "I just try to write books that are fun to read. That's my first goal with all my books, to make reading fun."

#### FURTHER READINGS:

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#### BOOKS

- *St. James Guide to Children's Writers*, 5th edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1999.
- *Writers for Young Adults*, Supplement 1, Scribner (New York, NY), 2000.

#### PERIODICALS

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- *Booklist*, September 1, 1983, Ilene Cooper, review of *Someday Angeline*, p. 91; November 1, 1987, Ilene Cooper, review of *Sixth Grade Secrets*, p. 484; May 1, 1989, Carolyn Phelan, review of *Wayside School Is Falling Down*, p. 1553; April, 1990, Carolyn Phelan, review of *Sideways Arithmetic at Wayside School*, p. 1645; July, 1991, Randy Meyers, review of *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes*, p. 2046; April 15, 1992, review of *Monkey Soup*, p. 1539; December 1, 1992, review of *Marvin*

- Redpost: Kidnapped at Birth?*, p. 680; March 15, 1993, review of *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, p. 1369; May 1, 1993, review of *Marvin Redpost: Why Pick on Me?*, p. 1592; September 1, 1993, review of *Wayside School Is Falling Down*, p. 73; November 15, 1993, review of *Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl?*, p. 626; June 1, 1994, Hazel Rochman, review of *Marvin Redpost: Alone in His Teacher's House*, p. 1822; April 1, 1997, review of *Sideways Arithmetic for Wayside School*, p. 1342; June 1, 1998, Bill Out, review of *Holes*, p. 1750; March 15, 1999, review of *Holes*, p. 1302, p. 1309, p. 1317; April 15, 1999, review of *Marvin Redpost: Class President*, p. 153; April 15, 2000, Jeanette Larson, review of *Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger*, p. 1561; January 1, 2006, Jennifer Mattson, "A Sequel, Step by Step," review of *Small Steps*, p. 101.
- *Book Report*, November, 1991, review of *The Boy Who Lost His Face*, p. 65; May, 1999, Lee Gordon, review of *Holes*, p. 66.
  - *Bookseller*, November 12, 2004, "Louis Sachar," p. 27; June 30, 2006, Harriet Dennys, "Sachar Digs Deep: Louis Sachar's Adventure Classic *Holes* Made a Deep Impression on Books Are Us," p. 28.
  - *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, April, 1987, Betsy Hearne, review of *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, p. 155; October, 1991, review of *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes*, p. 47; October, 1992, review of *Marvin Redpost: Kidnapped at Birth?*, p. 52, February, 1993, Deborah Stevenson, review of *Marvin Redpost: Why Pick on Me?*, p. 167; June, 1994, review of *Marvin Redpost: Alone in His Teacher's House*, p. 334; March, 1995, Deborah Stevenson, review of *Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger*, p. 248; September, 1998, review of *Holes*, p. 29; April, 1999, review of *Marvin Redpost: Class President*, p. 293.
  - *Catholic Library World*, September, 1999, review of *Holes*, p. 28.
  - *Childhood Education*, spring, 1992, review of *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes*, p. 176.
  - *Children's Book Review Service*, November, 1989, review of *The Boy Who Lost His Face*, p. 36; spring, 1992, review of *Monkey Soup*, p. 136; December, 1998, review of *Holes*, p. 47.
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  - *Cincinnati Post*, July 19, 2000, "Book Draws Flak in Forest Hills," p. 14A.
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  - *Hollywood Reporter*, August 1, 2003, Todd Coleman, "The *Holes* Story: How a \$30 Million Gamble Paid off for Newcomer Walden Media and Partner Phoenix Pictures," p. 15.
  - *Horn Book*, September, 1998, Roger Sutton, review of *Holes*, p. 593-595; May, 1999, audiobook review of *Holes*, p. 358; July, 1999, Louis Sachar, "Newbery Medal Acceptance," transcript of Newbery Medal acceptance speech, p. 410, Sherre Sachar and Carla Sachar, profile of Louis Sachar, p. 418; January, 2000, review of *Marvin Redpost: A Flying Birthday Cake*, p. 83, and review of *Holes*, p.

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- *Instructor*, July, 1992, review of *Wayside School Is Falling Down*, p. 14; May, 1993, review of *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes*, p. 24; September, 1998, review of *Wayside School Is Falling Down*, p. 10; May, 1999, review of *Marvin Redpost: Alone in His Teacher's House*, p. 16, review of *Holes*, p. 16; January, 2001, Louis Sachar and Joan Novelli, "Settings Take You Places," p. 53.
  - *Kirkus Reviews*, February 1, 1987, review of *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, p. 224; July 15, 1991, review of *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes*, p. 934; December 1, 1992, review of *Marvin Redpost: Why Pick on Me?*, p. 1508; April 15, 1995, review of *Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger*, p. 562; June 15, 1998, review of *Holes*, p. 900; March 15, 1999, review of *Marvin Redpost: Class President*; December 1, 2005, review of *Small Steps*, p. 1279; March 1, 2006, review of *Small Steps*, p. 14.
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## Author Interview

### **Author Louis Sachar at Home in Austin, Texas**

Interview by Suzanne Freeman

From *Scholastic.com*

**Q: The first set of questions I am going to ask you came from high school students at KidsPeace, a national hospital for kids in crisis, and their high school English class, that is right outside of Allentown, Pennsylvania. They are reading *Holes* right now. I asked them to come up with some questions for you that they are interested in because they are loving this book and having a great time with it. So, they want to know where you got the idea for the story?**

Louis Sachar: Well, this is always hard to answer, where ideas come from. Initially, I moved to Austin, Texas, from San Francisco in 1991, and one of the hardest things to get used to was the long, hot summers here. And when I started writing *Holes*, I had no idea what I was writing, but it was sort of a reaction to the heat. And I came up with this place, Camp Green Lake in Texas that was so hot that even the lake dried up. And I decided to make it a juvenile, a kind of boot camp, for juvenile delinquents, and into that I placed Stanely Yelnats, the boy who was wrongfully convicted of a crime. And I just sort of put all those elements together, not really knowing what was going to happen. And as I wrote, the story slowly emerged.

**Q: Even the complicated, twisted plot of the many-years-ago curse?**

Louis Sachar: Right, and somewhere along the line, I got the idea that Stanely's family was cursed. And I am sure when I got the idea, I knew that Stanely was going to end up doing something to break the curse. So it is really hard to remember in what order the ideas came. I only write about, at most, an hour a day when I am doing the first draft of a book. The first draft took about six months. It just sort of developed slowly and gradually. And then I rewrote it and rewrote it and rewrote it about five times, and every time I rewrote it, the ideas sort of changed and shifted and new scripts were added and things like that.

**Q: They also want to know where specifically you got the idea for the yellow, spotted lizard?**

Louis Sachar: Again, that was something I threw into the mix at the very beginning, figuring it would make it more exciting. I wasn't quite sure how I would use him in the story. But I began by creating what I thought was an intense and colorful setting, and added the lizard just to throw an element of danger in. I figured I would use him somewhere, somehow.

**Q: And this is a question I really love from them: Is this a story that has any meaning or is it just for entertainment?**

Louis Sachar: It's written for entertainment, but part of my definition of entertainment, especially with reading, is to have meaning. At least the books I love are ones that really make me think and provoke all kinds of feeling. And so there are meanings there. I didn't

set out to teach a lesson, I set out to entertain, and whatever messages are there grew out of the story.

**Q: What are some of those messages, in your mind?**

Louis Sachar: I would say the importance of trusting yourself, standing up for your friends, then the broad issues of racial equality, anti-discrimination, and the importance of learning to read. I always have trouble saying what the messages are because as I mentioned, I don't set out to teach a message. Whatever messages are there are ones that I already believe, I guess, and are just naturally part of the story, so it is just part of the story. So I am almost just going by what other people tell me what the messages are.

**Q: Do you have any experience with juvenile facilities yourself?**

Louis Sachar: No.

**Q: So how did you know how to write about that?**

Louis Sachar: It's not a very realistic place. I mean, I don't think there is a juvenile facility where the kids have to dig *Holes* all day and have such crazy guards and wardens. So it is very fictional. I didn't feel like I had to research it. Since I wrote the book, I actually have visited a few juvenile facilities, but it was never my intention to write a story about a juvenile detention facility. It was my idea to write an adventure story about a boy escaping such a place.

**Q: Well, I have to tell you, to these kids at KidsPeace, it's realistic enough to them, I mean, this is a really, really nice facility at KidsPeace, but they feel like they are being made to dig *Holes* and deal with crazy wardens.**

Louis Sachar: Well, I think those feelings are universal. I think even kids in school feel like they have to put up with authority all the time. Teachers tell them what they have to do and some of it seems pointless to them. So I think Camp Green Lake is this sort of extreme of that.

**Q: Are your characters based on people you know?**

Louis Sachar: No, they are not.

**Q: Did you have any say in the making of the movie? They are really interested in what you did with the movie.**

Louis Sachar: I was very involved with the movie. I wrote the screenplay and I was there on the set 80 percent of the time, giving my opinions. I didn't have the final say, that's the director's call, but I certainly had his ear. I was also in a scene.

**Q: What scene?**

Louis Sachar: That's my favorite thing to talk about. Kind of like, you always hear about baseball pitchers always wanting to talk about their at-bats. It was a real short scene. I was on the screen for maybe two seconds at the most. But in the Old west, Sam, the onion seller, sells me a jar of onion juice to make my hair grow, to rub on top of my head.

**Q: Well, now, I have seen pictures of you, you are not bald. Do they make you wear one of those bald caps?**

Louis Sachar: Well, no, I am not completely bald, but I have a lot more hair on the side of my head than I do on top. It's funny too because every time I look at myself in a picture, you know, people take pictures of me all the time, I always think, "Gosh, am I really that bald?" And then, when I saw the scene of the movie, I said, "I don't look bald in that."

**Q: Do you feel the movie has the same impact as the book?**

Louis Sachar: I hope so. It's very true to the book. As the writer of the book, I can't tell what the impact is anymore because I know the story too well and I am so involved with the movie. I can't tell what the impact is, except that it has been very well received by audiences.

**Q: The last question by the boys is why did Zero admit to Stanely about stealing the shoes when Stanely had no clue that Zero really stole them?**

Louis Sachar: Zero felt guilty all along. When Stanely got there and Zero found out that he was there because he supposedly stole these shoes, and Zero realized from the beginning that he was innocent and it was all his fault, he kind of felt a responsibility to Stanely. But you can see he kind of was too conflicted to just go right out and say, "You didn't do it, I did." That is a hard thing to do, so it was just bubbling inside him all that time. He felt guilty about it. That's why, when Stanely got in trouble for stealing the seeds, Zero finished digging his hole for him. And then when Zero finally admitted everything to Stanely, Zero thought he was going to die. Zero was really sick and he wanted to get it off his chest before he died.

**Q: The rest of these questions are mine. When *Holes* won both the '98 National Book Award and the Newberry Medal, which was the first children's book to do so, what did that mean for you, personally and professionally?**

Louis Sachar: It was a great satisfaction to be recognized like that, but awards don't mean as much to me as just people liking the book. You know, it means some committee likes the book, and that is nice, but it also means more if kids like the book.

**Q: What do you think makes *Holes* so special?**

Louis Sachar: I think it is a very entertaining story, very exciting story, thought provoking, and a puzzle. And it's not written down to kids, I write for my enjoyment, things that I like, so it respects its readers, treats its readers as intelligent, caring, smart people, and I think it brings out the best qualities of the reader.

**Q: What do you mean it brings out the best qualities of a reader? That's an interesting statement.**

Louis Sachar: Well, some children's books I feel try to pander to kids, make, you know, jokes that are somewhat in bad taste or, I mean, it's hard choosing a word, let me think about it a minute. I think it is the attitude the author has of its reader, it presents characters that caring people should care about. And the book is a puzzle that intelligent people will enjoy solving and the humor grows out of the story and is not directed at any

of the characters. They're not laughing at the people. So the qualities it brings out are people's natural compassion for other people and imagination and intelligence.

**Q: I've read that you don't write for an audience, but for yourself. What do you mean about that and how would you apply it to what you were just saying?**

Louis Sachar: What I mean is I don't think, "What will kids like, what will kids think is funny?" I write what I like and what I think is funny. Now it's not 100 percent that I don't write for an audience. I am aware as I am writing that this is going to be read by a kid, and so I have to make sure that it is accessible to kids of many ages.

**Q: What made you start writing children's books?**

Louis Sachar: I think I was 22 when I started writing. I was right out of college. I guess I would have been 23. But anyway, it was my last year of college, I had helped out at an elementary school. And when I signed up to do that, I did it, not because I had any interest in kids because I didn't have any kids. I just did it as an easy class my senior year of college. But it turns out I just loved it. My favorite thing to do every day was to be with those kids, and so I thought I'd try and write a children's book. I had always been interested in writing before that, I just never considered young people.

**Q: Had you written anything before that that was published?**

Louis Sachar: No. I had written lots of short stories, basically for creative-writing class.

**Q: While you were in law school and still struggling with the question of whether you were going to write full-time or study law, what kind of law were you studying?**

I worked for a criminal-defense attorney after my second year of law school. So I may have been leaning in that direction, but so many people in law school, it kind of depends on who you happen to work for the first few jobs is where you head, especially somebody like me who really wasn't all that interested in pursuing a law career. I just went to law school because I wasn't sure what else I wanted to do. And writing was always my real interest, but I didn't expect to make a living as a writer.

**Q: Do you find that having a second degree helped you out with your writing? What I am really trying to get at here is encouraging kids who want to be writers to get an education and what kinds of educations, how has it helped you to have been involved in both education and law?**

Louis Sachar: I think the more you can experience and the more you can learn, the better writer you will be. I draw on my law background because that is something I have. If I had spent years working on an assembly line building cars, that would be something I would draw on. There is this other writer, I forgot his name, who used to work building cars. I think everything you do in life helps you add to your knowledge, your experiences, and that is what you draw upon when you write. So law helped, but any other field would help as well, and work experience helps.

**Q: Do you have a favorite children's book?**

Louis Sachar: *Charlotte's Web*.

**Q: What is it you like about *Charlotte's Web*?**

Louis Sachar: I like the way E.B. White writes. I think it's funny and tender and it draws you in. You really care about Wilbur. And then there are sort of the satirical comments on society as well in there: If you see something in writing, then it must be true, even if it is written by a spider on a web.

**Q: Of all the books that you have written, do you have a favorite?**

Louis Sachar: *Holes* is my favorite.

**Q: And why is that?**

Louis Sachar: It was a much more challenging story to write; it was a much bigger story than my other books, and by bigger, I don't mean longer in words. I mean it spanned four generations. Part of it took place in Latvia, part of it in the Old West, part of it in current day. Lots of characters, the plot was kind of a great adventure with people escaping from prison and digging up buried treasure. Most of my other books are more character studies rather than big, plotted books. There's *There's a Boy in The Girls' Bathroom*, which is another one of my favorites, which is really about the story of a troubled kid in school.

**Q: Are you going to tackle another one that big?**

Louis Sachar: I think so. As I write, with each book I always try to learn from what I have written. I always learn while I am writing. I always try to make the next one better.

**Q: Are you working on the next one already?**

Louis Sachar: I started something a little while ago, but I don't like talking about what I am writing. Not even to my wife or my daughter.

**Q: I know, but I thought I would try to trick you.**

Louis Sachar: I do have a book that has just come out.

**Q: Oh yeah? What is that?**

Louis Sachar: It's *Stanely Yelnats's Survival Guide*. As you can tell from the title, it's not a big novel, it's sort of a companion piece to go with *Holes*. But it's very funny.

**Q: How do you prepare yourself for writing? How many hours do you spend writing, compared to what you spend thinking about it? I want you to talk to kids a little bit about the art of writing and your writing habits. How important is that to actually producing something?**

Louis Sachar: Well, to me, the most important thing is my routine. I don't wait for new ideas or inspiration to come out of the sky. I sit down at my desk every day and I write for about an hour a day. That is when I am doing the first draft of the book. I am making up the story, trying to figure out who the characters are and what happens and how they get from place to place and chapter to chapter. With each subsequent draft, and I normally do about five drafts of a book, I am able to write longer. I know the story better, and so the second draft, I might write an hour and a half. The third draft, I might write two hours a day, then maybe three or four hours a day for my fourth and fifth drafts.

**Q: I understand your dogs don't let you write for too long.**

Louis Sachar: Well, they have changed me now. It used to be after two hours they would say, "Okay, it's time for a walk." But now they have taught me to take them for a walk before I even begin writing. When things are going well, when I am really excited about what I am writing, I usually think about what I am going to write while I am on the walk.

**Q: So how much thinking do you do, compared to writing?**

Louis Sachar: It's hard to answer because I don't just sort of sit in a chair and think. When the story is going well and I am really into it, part of my mind is thinking about it all the time. And probably even when the story isn't even going very well, I'm sure part of my mind is thinking about it all the time, because I will often be stuck at a part and not quite sure know what I am going to write next and don't consciously think about it. But the next morning when I wake up and take the dogs for a walk and sit down to write, suddenly I have all these ideas and I have to wonder where they came from. So clearly some part of my mind has been working on that problem.

**Q: Do you write early morning or late afternoon?**

Louis Sachar: Early morning.

**Q: What advice would you give to kids who are interested in making a career in writing, how to get started, even at an early age?**

Louis Sachar: Well, the best advice I can give is what they don't like hearing, and that is you need to rewrite. I understand, I used to hate rewriting when I was their age. But my first drafts are absolutely awful. I would be embarrassed to show them to anyone. It's not until I start really knowing the story, rewriting it to make it better, that it turns into something.

**Q: Do you ever get bored with your story while you are working on it?**

Louis Sachar: I imagine there are parts that are boring, especially during the first draft, where I am just trying to figure out what happens, when I'm taking the character through the daily process. I know he is going to do this today and then he is going to do that. And so I have to kind of put it all down. And then when I rewrite, I might decide to skip past a day and just go right to the good part. But that first draft, I'm kind of not quite sure when the good part is going to happen or what is going to turn out exciting, so I write a lot of mundane stuff that sometimes bores me.

**Q: What do you consider the good part?**

Louis Sachar: It's just what strikes me as interesting to read. The part that, when I rewrite it, I am going to center that section around. It's the focal point.

**Q: So it's not necessarily the action?**

Louis Sachar: No. It could be how the character is feeling, it could be, it tends to be action, but I don't think in those terms, I just think in terms of what's interesting to read, how I am going to get the character. I have a basic story of: This is going to happen in the story, but somehow you have to get from the beginning to the middle to the end to keep

the reader interested without jumping to the end. So it is whatever those things are that keep things interesting.

**Q: And backing up to your routine, you have two dogs?**

Louis Sachar: Right.

**Q: And they are the only people you let, or the only living things, you let into your office?**

Louis Sachar: Yeah, I like to speak to them as people.

**Q: I do that with my cats. So tell me about your dogs, their names, and how they help inspire you. Why are they the only ones you let in there?**

Louis Sachar: They're Lucky and Tippy. Lucky is 12 years old and Tippy, I think she is 5, maybe 6.

**Q: What kind of dogs are they?**

Louis Sachar: We got them both from the pound, so they are not any particular breed. I don't know that they really inspire me. They just come in and they seem to take comfort in being in my office while I am writing and they don't bother me. I think I say that when I put that in my bio that they're the only ones allowed in my office as sort of humorous. But the main thing is that I can't write with somebody I know, you know, a person in my office. And it would be impossible if my wife or my daughter were sitting in the corner reading a book because it would be too distracting. And I guess, maybe it's because the dogs don't have any clue about what I am doing. To them, me, sitting at my desk, writing is no different from sitting in front of the TV and watching a show. They both are meaningless to them, but they don't question it.

**Q: Are your wife and daughter fans of your work?**

Louis Sachar: Yes.

**Q: How old is your daughter now?**

Louis Sachar: She's now 16.

**Q: What do you do when you are not writing?**

Louis Sachar: Well, my biggest passion is bridge. I play duplicate bridge, usually two or three times a week. I often will also go to tournaments around the country.

**Q: How did you get into that?**

Louis Sachar: I have always enjoyed games, and I met someone after moving to Austin. I met someone who played duplicate bridge, which is a lot different than regular bridge. It is a lot more competitive. I mean, everyone who has played is very serious about the game. And I used to play in chess tournaments. Bridge tournaments are a lot more fun and equally as challenging.

**Q: How do you relate to Stanely Yelnats and why do you think kids relate to him?**

Louis Sachar: Well, I think every kid, especially when you are in middle school or high

school, you feel like it's just a real hard time. You feel like you are not cool enough or you are not smart enough or you are not good enough in sports or you are not good looking enough. And Stanely is sort of the epitome of that. He is an unpopular kid; he has bad luck. Bad as everyone else in his family and he has it worse because he has been convicted of a crime he didn't commit and sent to this horrible place. But you can tell from the things he thinks that he is a nice kid, a smart kid, funny. So I think people can identify with him, and when he rises out of his situation, people rise with him.

**Q: Has your idea of what a hero is changed since 9/11?**

Louis Sachar: No, no it hasn't. Heroes are just everyday people, just like Stanely or just like the firemen or the policemen.

**Q: Any chance of any of your other books becoming movies? Is there talk about that?**

Louis Sachar: There is talk about *Wayside School* becoming a television show, a cartoon. But I don't know if it will happen or not.

**Q: *Wayside School* is actually at a lower reading level, right?**

Louis Sachar: Yes, but what surprises me is all my books have a wide range of readers. Like, *Holes* is read in some third-grade classrooms and is read in high school classrooms. And *Wayside School*, maybe the youngest is second grade or first grade. I mean, probably there are kindergarten classes that read it. But I still get letters from kids in middle school who read it there or write book reports on it in middle school and occasionally high school.

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<http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=5867>*

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is the saying "You can't judge a book by its cover" a good one for this story? For example, what do you expect Camp Green Lake to be like based on its name? What is it really like?
2. What do you think the title *Holes* means? What might be another reason other than the holes the boys dig in the lake? What hole (or holes) is in Stanley's life when he first arrives at Camp Green Lake? Are the holes still there when he leaves?
3. Stanley's father, an inventor, says, "I learn from failure." What do you think this means? In what ways have you learned from failure?
4. Why do the boys call Mr. Pendanski "Mom"? How does this name fit his personality? In what ways is it not a good name for him?
5. What do the boys' nicknames tell about each of their personalities? Do you think a name changes the way others see a person and the way the person sees him- or herself?
6. Why do you think Stanley lies to his parents in his letters home? Would you do the same?
7. Stanley and his family half-jokingly blame their misfortunes on Stanley's "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great grandfather." Do you believe in fate — that people are lucky or unlucky — or do you believe, as Mr. Pendanski tells the boys, that we are all responsible for our selves and our destinies?
8. As Stanley becomes stronger and his skin becomes tougher from digging the holes, how is he changing inside? What are the causes of those changes?
9. Why do you think Stanley gives X-Ray the lipstick tube? What would you have done if you were in Stanley's place?
10. Why do you think Stanley lies and says he stole Mr. Sir's sunflower seeds? If you were in Stanley's position, what would you have done?
11. At home, Stanley did not have friends. But at Camp Green Lake, he forms a special friendship with Zero. How did Zero and Stanley prove their friendship to each other? In what way does Zero fill a hole in Stanley's life?
12. How is Stanley's friendship with Zero similar to Kate Barlow's friendship with Sam? In each case why don't people approve of the friendship?
13. Why don't the other boys like Stanley and Zero's agreement that Zero will help Stanley dig and Stanley will help Zero read? Do you think it is fair to both Stanley and Zero? Do you think it is fair to the other campers?

14. *Holes* is really three stories tied together. One is about Camp Green Lake. The second is the tale of Stanley 's great-great grandfather and the "curse" put on him by Madame Zeroni. The third story is of Kissin' Kate Barlow - the outlaw who robbed his great grandfather. How do these three stories fit together within the larger story of *Holes* ?
15. Stanley always seems to find humor even in the worst situations. He laughs on the bus to Camp Green Lake thinking about his "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather." While walking across the hot, dry lake, he laughs at the sight of the boat, Mary Lou. Climbing Big Thumb, he even makes Zero laugh. What does this say about Stanley ? How does his attitude help him?
16. What is the significance of Stanley 's name being a palindrome - a word that is spelled the same way forward and backward?
17. Where does Stanley find the strength to carry Zero up the mountain? Why did he do it even though he didn't know what he'd find at the top? Describe something you've done that at first seemed impossible. What did you learn from the experience?
18. Even though his fate is uncertain, Stanley is suddenly very happy as he lies awake on the top of the mountain, staring at the stars. Why does he feel this way? How has his life changed from the start of the story?
19. Why do you think Stanley starts to call Zero by his real name, Hector?
20. When Hattie Parker sees Katherine and Sam kiss, she says, "God will punish you!" Based on the events later in the book, whom do you think God punished?

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<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/holes-discussion-questions>*