

Dear New 9th Grade Parents:

I will be your child's English teacher next year and I look forward to meeting you all when we reconvene next year. As the academic year winds down, my colleagues and I are planning for next year. As you know, your students have a summer readings assignment that includes a choice of four novels. I have discussed their responsibilities and outlined the novels very briefly with them, but I would like to offer you a bit more information so that you and your child can make an informed decision about which novel he or she chooses. As I told them, the assignment can be found online at <http://sites.crossroadscollegeprep.org/summerreading/>

I have chosen books that have thematic elements that will connect directly to the texts we encounter next year. They are diverse in length, style, and content, so I include the notes below to help you select a book that is right for your child's reading level, emotional maturity, and personality. If possible, I highly recommend you read the book with your child, or, if you have concerns about content and comprehension, before your child has begun. Sarah has also offered to recommend a selection based on her knowledge of your child's skills and predilections as she observed them in 8th grade, and I would be happy to expand on any of the descriptions below if you like. They are listed in order of least challenging to most challenging.

- *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card is an action-packed science fiction novel. Although not gratuitous, there is some violence, both on an individual and planetary scale; the novel revolves around a military academy in space and the fear and fruition of a war between humans and an alien species. Themes include the nature and responsibility of government and individuals, xenophobia, indoctrination vs. education, and basic human nature. The writing style is simple and straightforward and the plot is exciting, but the ideas Card tackles are some of the most important and fundamental questions of human existence. At about 350 (depending on your copy) fast-paced pages, this book is best for those interested in science fiction and/or philosophy and history, those that are sometimes reluctant readers, and those for whom the other texts might be too challenging based on maturity or reading level.
- *The Secret Life of Bees* by Susan Monk Kidd relates a girl's journey to find herself and her mother. Like *Ender's Game*, this book features an adolescent as a protagonist. Central to Lily's quest for identity is understanding the mystery of her mother's identity and death, and in addition to addressing how we construct our own identity, Kidd portrays the vicious realities of race relations in the 1960s South, the power of community, and the importance of finding out the truth for oneself. A book that explores femininity and communities of women as well as African-American culture and racial cooperation, *The Secret Life of Bees* is appropriate for almost all readers in content and is a relatively easy 330 pages; it is also widely read and will be released as a major film in October.
- *The Natural* by Bernard Malamud is the mythic story of a gifted baseball player. Although thoughts of the iconic theme song and Robert Redford's role from the 1984 movie might come to mind, the novel was written in 1952 and differs in a few important ways from the movie. (I recommend students not see the movie until they have finished the book.) Based loosely on the legend of King Arthur, the story revolves around Roy Hobbs, a hot young pitcher from rural America who, after a seemingly career-ending off-field incident, reemerges much later to become a power-hitting outfielder. The book has been referenced by both the local and national media in comparison to the resurrected career of Rick Ankiel, and many students might be drawn to it because of that. Although it does include a lot of baseball, it also deals with betrayal, the American Dream, the rigors of fame, and temptation. Although written fifty-six years ago, it does include some sexual content, adult language, and an ending that can be disillusioning; I recommend it for careful readers who are prepared to familiarize themselves with the basics of the King Arthur legend and who are emotionally mature enough for an adult novel.
- *Wicked* by Jeffrey Maguire offers a different view of *The Wizard of Oz* by focusing on the Wicked Witch. By offering a pro-feminist, anti-xenophobia reading, Maguire provides an introduction to an increasingly popular genre: the parallel novel in which the characters and setting of a different (usually

canonical) text are retained, but the point of view is altered to encourage "reading against the grain". (We will look at two versions of the Beowulf story that do the same thing, as well as several poems that offer different perspectives on our classical texts.) Despite the impression one might get from the original Oz and the hit musical, *Wicked* is not a children's book: in both theme and content, it requires a level of maturity that makes it a great choice for a student prepared to ask tough questions about the world, endure a magical world far less idyllic and innocent than Hogwarts, Narnia, or Middle Earth, and respond with maturity to sexual content. I especially recommend reading this one ahead of time if you have any doubts about whether you or your child will be uncomfortable or offended by these aspects.

I have chosen the above books because they are popular, well-regarded texts that are generally reading-level and age-appropriate. Each ties into one or several of the themes we will discuss in class, and each will hopefully provide an interesting, insightful, and rewarding reading experience this summer.

As always, please feel free to email me at [josh@crossroadscollegeprep.org](mailto:josh@crossroadscollegeprep.org) or call me at the number listed below.

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