

Summer Reading Book Descriptions
English 9/English 9 Honors
These book reviews were taken from Amazon Editorial Reviews

ENGLISH 9

Nothing but the Truth

Avi

In this thought-provoking examination of freedom, patriotism, and respect, ninth-grader, Philip Malloy, is kept from joining the track team by his failing grades in English class. Convinced that the teacher just doesn't like him, Philip concocts a plan to get transferred out of her class. Breaking the school's policy of silence during the national anthem, he hums along, and ends up in a crisis at the center of the nation's attention. (208 pages)

The Pigman

Paul Zindel

For sophomores John and Lorraine, the world feels meaningless; nothing is important. They *certainly* can never please their parents, and school is a chore. To pass the time, they play pranks on unsuspecting people. It's during one of these pranks that they meet the "Pigman"--a fat, balding old man with a zany smile plastered on his face. In spite of themselves, John and Lorraine soon find that they're caught up in Mr. Pignati's zest for life. In fact, they become so involved that they begin to destroy the only corner of the world that's ever mattered to them. Originally published in 1968, this novel by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Paul Zindel still sings with sharp emotion as John and Lorraine come to realize that "Our life would be what we made of it--nothing more, nothing less." (192 pages)

Make Lemonade

Virginia Euwer Wolff

Grade 7-12-- "This word COLLEGE is in my house,/ and you have to walk around it in the rooms/ like furniture." So LaVaughn, an urban 14-year-old, tries to earn the money she needs to make college a reality. She and her mother are a solid two-person family. When LaVaughn takes a job babysitting for Jolly, an abused, 17-year-old single parent who lives with her two children in squalor, her mother is not sure it's a good idea. How the girl's steady support helps Jolly to bootstrap herself into better times and how Jolly, in turn, helps her young friend to clarify her own values are the subjects of this complex, powerful narrative. The themes of parental love, sexual harassment, abuse, independence, and the value of education are its underpinnings. LaVaughn is a bright, compassionate teen who is a foil for Jolly, whose only brief role model was a foster parent, Gram, who died. The dynamics between the two young women are multidimensional and elastic--absolutely credible. LaVaughn's mother is a complete character, too, and even Jolly's kids become real. The tale is told in natural first-person, and in rhythmic prose arranged in open verse. The poetic form emphasizes the flow of the teenager's language and thought. The form invites readers to drop some preconceptions about novels, and they will find the plot and characters riveting. Make Lemonade is a triumphant, outstanding story. (208 pages)

Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes

Christopher Crutcher

Such superlatives as "riveting" and "powerful" can only hint at the craftsmanship on display in this transcendent story of love, loyalty and courage. While probing such issues as friendship, free speech and moral values, Crutcher (Chinese Handcuffs ; Stotan!) tells a tale whose mordant humor, poignancy and suspense pack a breathtaking wallop. A social outcast in junior high due to his excessive weight, narrator Eric Calhoun found a kindred spirit in Sarah Byrnes, whose face and hands were hideously disfigured in a childhood accident. Now a senior and considerably slimmed down through competitive swimming (though still aptly called "Moby"), Eric remains fiercely devoted to his friend, whose caustic tongue is her only protection from life's inequities. When Sarah abruptly stops talking and is committed to a mental ward, Eric is compelled to take action to help her, but quickly finds that he is in over his head. He risks their friendship by breaking his vow of secrecy and enlisting others' aid--help that comes from such unlikely quarters as a former bully, Eric's swim coach and, most surprisingly, his mother's seemingly wimpy boyfriend. A subplot centering on a self-righteous teammate drives home the point that nothing is as it appears on the surface, and leads to Eric being caught between his menacing vice-principal and the even more malevolent Mr. Byrnes--with spine-tingling results. Superb plotting, extraordinary characters and crackling narrative make this novel one to be devoured in a single unforgettable sitting. (304 pages)

Breathing Underwater

Alex Flinn

It was only one slap, well maybe more than one. And maybe Nick used his fist at the end when the anger got out of control. But his girlfriend Caitlin deserved it--hadn't she defied him by singing in the school talent show when he had forbidden her to display herself like that? Even though he'd told her that everybody would laugh at her because she couldn't sing and was a fat slob? Both were lies. Because Caitlin was so beautiful, the only person who understood him. Out of his desperate need for her came all the mean words and the hitting. But now Caitlin's family has procured a restraining order to keep Nick away, and the judge has sentenced him to Mario Ortega's Family Violence class, to sit around every week with six other angry guys who hit their girlfriends. And to write a journal explaining how he got into this mess. (272 pages)

Big Mouth Ugly Girl

Joyce Carol Oates

While horsing around in the high school cafeteria, Matt Donaghy makes some remarks that land him in a world of trouble. Yanked out of fifth-period study hall by plainclothes policemen, he learns that he's suspected of plotting to bomb the school. In this day and age that's no joking matter. His friends are advised by their parents not to get involved, lest they fall under suspicion themselves. Only the resolutely individualistic, somewhat frightening Ursula Riggs, a girl he barely knows, is willing to speak up on Matt's behalf. With a combination of clear-sightedness and bravado she gets the principal to rethink Matt's suspension--and that's just the beginning of Oates's novel. The next three-quarters of the book become even more interesting, as the author explores the subsequent social pressures placed on the teenagers and adults in a fictitious, affluent suburb of New York City. Oates has a good ear for the speech, the family relations, the e-mail messaging, the rumor mills, and the easy cruelties waiting just beneath the veneer of civility. Matt's character and especially the heroic Ursula's are depicted with a raw honesty. Readers will be propelled through these pages by an intense curiosity to learn how events will play out. Oates has written a fast-moving, timely, compelling story. (288 pages)

ENGLISH 9 HONORS

The Book Thief (HONORS 9)

Markus Zusak

Zusak has created a work that deserves the attention of sophisticated teen and adult readers. Death himself narrates the World War II-era story of Liesel Meminger from the time she is taken, at age nine, to live in Molching, Germany, with a foster family in a working-class neighborhood of tough kids, acid-tongued mothers, and loving fathers who earn their living by the work of their hands. The child arrives having just stolen her first book—although she has not yet learned how to read—and her foster father uses it, *The Gravediggers Handbook*, to lull her to sleep when she's roused by regular nightmares about her younger brother's death. Across the ensuing years of the late 1930s and into the 1940s, Liesel collects more stolen books as well as a peculiar set of friends: the boy Rudy, the Jewish refugee Max, the mayor's reclusive wife (who has a whole library from which she allows Liesel to steal), and especially her foster parents. Zusak not only creates a mesmerizing and original story but also writes with poetic syntax, causing readers to deliberate over phrases and lines, even as the action impels them forward. Death is not a sentimental storyteller, but he does attend to an array of satisfying details, giving Liesel's story all the nuances of chance, folly, and fulfilled expectation that it deserves. An extraordinary narrative.—Francisca Goldsmith, Berkeley Public Library, CA (550 pages)

Twisted (HONORS 9)

Laurie Halse Anderson

Tyler Miller thinks his senior year of high school is going to be a year like no other. After being sentenced to a summer of character building physical labor following a graffiti prank, his reputation at school receives a boost, as do his muscles. Enter super-popular Bethany Milbury, sister of his tormentor, Chip, and daughter of his father's boss. Tyler's newfound physique has attracted her interest and infuriated Chip, leading to ongoing conflicts at school. Likewise, Tyler's inability to meet his volatile father's demands to be an asset, not a liability adds increasing tension. All too quickly, Tyler's life spirals out of control. In the wake of an incident at a wild party that Bethany has invited him to attend, he is left feeling completely isolated at school and alienated at home, a victim of twisted perception. Tyler must tackle the complex issues of integrity, personal responsibility, and identity on his own as he struggles to understand what it means to be a man. His once humorous voice now only conveys naked vulnerability. With gripping scenes and a rousing ending, Anderson authentically portrays Tyler's emotional instability as he contemplates darker and darker solutions to his situation. Readers will rejoice in Tyler's proclamation, *I'm not the problem here...I'm tired of feeling like I am*. Teenage concerns with sex, alcohol, grades, and family are all tackled with honesty and candor. Once again, Anderson's taut, confident writing will cause this story to linger long after the book is set down. (272 pages)

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime (HONORS 9)

Mark Haddon

Boone, the autistic 15-year-old narrator of this revelatory novel, relaxes by groaning and doing math problems in his head, eats red-but not yellow or brown-foods and screams when he is touched. Strange as he may seem, other people are far more of a conundrum to him, for he lacks the intuitive "theory of mind" by which most of us sense what's going on in other people's heads. When his neighbor's poodle is killed and Christopher is falsely accused of the crime, he decides that he will take a page

from Sherlock Holmes (one of his favorite characters) and track down the killer. As the mystery leads him to the secrets of his parents' broken marriage and then into an odyssey to find his place in the world, he must fall back on deductive logic to navigate the emotional complexities of a social world that remains a closed book to him. In the hands of first-time novelist Haddon, Christopher is a fascinating case study and, above all, a sympathetic boy: not closed off, as the stereotype would have it, but too open-overwhelmed by sensations, bereft of the filters through which normal people screen their surroundings. Christopher can only make sense of the chaos of stimuli by imposing arbitrary patterns ("4 yellow cars in a row made it a Black Day, which is a day when I don't speak to anyone and sit on my own reading books and don't eat my lunch and Take No Risks"). His literal-minded observations make for a kind of poetic sensibility and a poignant evocation of character. Though Christopher insists, "This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them," the novel brims with touching, ironic humor. The result is an eye-opening work in a unique and compelling literary voice. (226 pages)

Native Son (HONORS 9)

Richard Wright

Bigger Thomas is doomed, trapped in a downward spiral that will lead to arrest, prison, or death, driven by despair, frustration, poverty, and incomprehension. As a young black man in the Chicago of the '30s, he has no way out of the walls of poverty and racism that surround him, and after he murders a young white woman in a moment of panic, these walls begin to close in. There is no help for him--not from his hapless family; not from liberal do-gooders or from his well-meaning yet naive friend Jan; certainly not from the police, prosecutors, or judges. Bigger is debased, aggressive, dangerous, and a violent criminal. As such, he has no claim upon our compassion or sympathy. And yet...

A more compelling story than *Native Son* has not been written in the 20th century by an American writer. That is not to say that Richard Wright created a novel free of flaws, but that he wrote the first novel that successfully told the most painful and unvarnished truth about American social and class relations. As [Irving Howe](#) asserted in 1963, "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. It made impossible a repetition of the old lies [and] brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture."

(432 pages, Perennial abridged edition 1987)

House of Spirits (HONORS 9)

Isabel Allende

A best seller and critical success all over the world, *The House of the Spirits* is the magnificent epic of the Trueba family -- their loves, their ambitions, their spiritual quests, their relations with one another, and their participation in the history of their times, a history that becomes destiny and overtakes them all.

We begin -- at the turn of the century, in an unnamed South American country -- in the childhood home of the woman who will be the mother and grandmother of the clan, Clara del Valle. A warm-hearted, hypersensitive girl, Clara has distinguished herself from an early age with her telepathic abilities -- she can read fortunes, make objects move as if they had lives of their own, and predict the future. Following the mysterious death of her sister, the fabled Rosa the Beautiful, Clara has been mute for nine years, resisting all attempts to make her speak. When she breaks her silence, it is to announce that she will be married soon.

Her husband-to-be is Esteban Trueba, a stern, willful man, given to fits of rage and haunted by a profound loneliness. At the age of thirty-five, he has returned to the

capital from his country estate to visit his dying mother and to find a wife. (He was Rosa's fiance, and her death has marked him as deeply as it has Clara.) This is the man Clara has foreseen -- has summoned -- to be her husband; Esteban, in turn, will conceive a passion for Clara that will last the rest of his long and rancorous life. We go with this couple as they move into the extravagant house he builds for her, a structure that everyone calls "the big house on the corner," which is soon populated with Clara's spiritualist friends, the artists she sponsors, the charity cases she takes an interest in, with Esteban's political cronies, and, above all, with the Trueba children...their daughter, Blanca, a practical, self-effacing girl who will, to the fury of her father, form a lifelong liaison with the son of his foreman...the twins, Jaime and Nicolas, the former a solitary, taciturn boy who becomes a doctor to the poor and unfortunate; the latter a playboy, a dabbler in Eastern religions and mystical disciplines...and, in the third generation, the child Alba, Blanca's daughter (the family does not recognize the real father for years, so great is Esteban's anger), a child who is fondled and indulged and instructed by them all. For all their good fortune, their natural (and supernatural) talents, and their powerful attachments to one another, the inhabitants of "the big house on the corner" are not immune to the larger forces of the world. And, as the twentieth century beats on...as Esteban becomes more strident in his opposition to Communism...as Jaime becomes the friend and confidant of the Socialist leader known as the Candidate...as Alba falls in love with a student radical...the Truebas become actors -- and victims -- in a tragic series of events that gives *The House of the Spirits* a deeper resonance and meaning.

(448 pages, Bantam 1986 edition)

Wuthering Heights (HONORS 9)

Emily Bronte

From the publisher: "My greatest thought in living is Heathcliff. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be... Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure... but as my own being." *Wuthering Heights* is the only novel of Emily Bronte, who died a year after its publication, at the age of thirty. A brooding Yorkshire tale of a love that is stronger than death, it is also a fierce vision of metaphysical passion, in which heaven and hell, nature and society, are powerfully juxtaposed. Unique, mystical, with a timeless appeal, it has become a classic of English literature.

(336 pages, Bantam classics 1983 edition)