Summer Reading Assignment - English 9H

Dear incoming ninth grade students,

I’m really looking forward to meeting you in September! Let’s keep our fingers crossed that we will have a more normal year than this one has been. In the meantime, I hope you will take advantage of the summer months to read extensively. Below, I will tell you the two books I’ve selected for you to read, and the assignments that accompany them, but you should be reading more than these. You have two full months to explore independently selected titles. If you don’t already have a stack of books awaiting your attention, ask around for recommendations or consult some of the reading lists posted on the high school library page.

If possible, I would advise doing the English 9H reading in August so that you do not arrive in September struggling to recall a book you read at the very beginning of July. Darius the Great Is Not Okay is a fairly quick read; Watership Down will require more time.

In addition to taking notes on the novels, there are assignments related to each book that you must complete to turn in at the beginning of the school year.

Required titles - please purchase and read both; the written assignments are on the next several pages.
Darius the Great Is Not Okay by Adib Khorram (2018)

Watership Down by Richard Adams (1972)

*DO NOT ACCIDENTALLY PURCHASE Tales from Watership Down!

Darius the Great Is Not Okay Assignment: Mirrors and Windows *

When we look into a mirror, we see ourselves reflected; peering in, we can examine ourselves more closely. Books can be like a mirror: we might read them and find our own reality reflected back at us.

Books that mirror ourselves can be very valuable. Students often say they like a book because “it’s so relatable.” Finding a relatable character who mirrors us can be illuminating; it can be comforting; it can be any number of things. However, if we always see ourselves reflected back, we might start to forget how vast and diverse the world is. We might lose our open-mindedness. We might become a bit self-centered.

That is why we should also seek out books that act like windows. When we look out a window, we see the world beyond us. When a book acts as a window, it provides a view into someone else’s reality, someone else’s life. We might find that these other realities match up quite nicely with our own. We might find that they are very different, and that’s okay too. The world does not always look like us.
I am asking you to read *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* and think about the ways that the book acts as a mirror and the ways it acts as a window. Of course, we are all unique individuals, so what one person finds is a mirror of their experience, another might find a window into another life.

The author of *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, Adib Khorram, sets the beginning and end of the novel in the United States, but the vast majority of the story is set in Iran where the novel’s narrator travels with his mother, father and little sister to visit his grandparents. It might be that you find windows into another country’s culture; it might also be that your experience of life in the United States is so different from that of Darius that it is the U.S. sections that are a window you look through. Similarly, it might be that in Iran, Darius’s relationship with his grandparents is just like yours, and in this section that’s where you find the best mirror. There’s no right or wrong to this assignment, and I expect unique and diverse responses.

Jot down notes and reflections as you read, and when you are done, select three total to type up carefully. **Each should be about ¼ of a page**, double-spaced, 11-12 point font.

1. Reflection one: in what way does the novel offer a **mirror** to you?
2. Reflection two: in what ways does the novel offer a **window** to you?
3. Reflection three: Darius develops a friendship with a local boy named Sohrab. In what ways does Sohrab’s experience reflect Darius’s experience, and in what ways does it offer Darius a window onto another person’s reality?

*I did not come up with this metaphor (mirrors and windows), which is, at this point, widely used as one way to think about the value of books in school. It comes from a paper on education published in 1988 by a woman named Emily Style.*

**Watership Down Assignment**

You may find this novel more complex in terms of writing style than *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*. It’s about rabbits - but don’t let that turn you off! I would tell you that you’ll forget they’re rabbits, so much so that you’ll find yourself weeping with both joy and sorrow, but that’s not quite accurate. At least the first part of the statement isn’t quite accurate. These are thinking, feeling, speaking rabbits, and the author uses a variety of techniques to suggest that they are operating a great deal like people who think, feel and speak. And yet…. we’re continually reminded they’re rabbits. They have a specialized language; they view the landscape from a rabbit’s perspective; they nibble the grass and other seasonal vegetation; among their enemies is man. Telling you more is going to confuse you; you’ll just have to get started reading to see what I mean.

Please read the book and do not watch a movie. I realize there is a recent Netflix adaptation, and that it has received reasonably good ratings. There is also a movie from 1978. That single movie is the reason I so rarely watch movie adaptations of novels that I love. I saw it in the theater after I’d fallen in love with the book, and it was a devastating ruination of something I treasured. I’d be surprised if, at this point in your lives, you have not had a similar
experience of some sort. At any rate, read the book and form your own visions: the author conjures up much beauty and terror; work with him to create your own version of this novel.

NOTES
You will be using your notes in September to do some writing. As you read, take notes on the following:

1. Characters - make sure you have a list of names and quotes (with page #s) that reveal character. Keep in mind, especially, the kinds of characteristics that seem to be necessary to good leadership and to creating a successful community. You can copy out your quotations; annotate directly on the page, creating lots of marginalia (that’s my method, but I know some people consider writing in a book defacing a book); or use post-it notes.
2. The author’s characterization of man and his relationship with the natural world, particularly with wild animals.

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Adams writes with great particularity about the landscape, exhibiting a deep attention and love for the environment. I would like you to do some deeply observed writing of your own.

The rabbits are never far from man. Please seek out some place where the manmade and natural worlds intersect. It could be a spot in your backyard, a spot along the Bronx River, a spot you visit while on a hiking or camping trip, etc. The important thing is that you must carefully observe and describe this place. Sit yourself down and write. You have the option of writing one response that is between ¾ page and a page, or writing two shorter responses. Describe this place with as much particularity and attention to detail as you can. Think carefully about language choice and sentence structure.

EXAMPLE #1: From Watership Down itself

Read the first two paragraphs. Note in the first paragraph alone, the presence of man in the “fence,” “cart track,” “brick culvert” (a “culvert” is a tunnel or channel that allows water to flower under a road), “gate” and “lane.” Note the specificity of flora: primroses, dog’s mercury, oak-tree roots, kingcups, watercress, brooklime. (The last page of this assignment provides photographs of these very specific plants to emphasize the author’s specificity. To be able to name something is often a sign of respect and a signal you value it.)

Read the last two paragraphs of the chapter, describing the sign. Note the simile describing the text, “the sharp hard letters that cut straight as black knives,” and the formal, distanced language of the announcement itself.

EXAMPLE #2: My own writing at a very small park in Pleasantville, NY.

The path, littered with the logs of goose droppings, some soft and greeny fresh, others crumbly gray, parallels the old aqueduct before turning to ring the lake. At the water’s edge, in late June, a few wild iris still unfurl their yellow petals, and spiky white water lilies jut up like crowns from among a welter of leafy pads and gloppy algae. Further along, three boys hang over the railing of a small wooden foot bridge, where they have cast their fishing lines, but a few minutes later they pack up and straggle up a trail that runs beneath dark, rubbery power lines. Along the lake bank, a congregation of geese graze through the remnants of fishing forays, methodically tearing at the grass. They move their webbed feet around plastic water bottles, shiny chip wrappers, and one pale blue surgical mask.

EXAMPLE #2: My own writing again, same place, different time.
The perfume of honeysuckle floods the cool evening air. Swallow wings flash over the lake, catching for a split second in the last light of the setting sun before disappearing into the dark patches of shadow spreading over the water. A few red-winged black birds and robins hop through the grass, then flit up to nearby branches. Silhouetted in the middle of the lake, moving towards the far bank, a family of geese glide single file, moving peacefully towards the tangle of nylon fishing line abandoned earlier in the day.

NOTE: You do not have to write about geese :) Or even any animals. Write about whatever’s available (flora, insects, birds…) as long as the place you describe reveals an intersection of man and nature. You also do not need to imagine the interaction between man and nature is sinister. SIMPLY DESCRIBE WHAT YOU SEE.

Try to include specific names of the flora and fauna. A variety of online apps come with free trials that aid in identifying plants, birds, insects, etc. Take advantage of them - or ask a more knowledgeable adult who might know.

(There is one more page.)
Flora mentioned in the first paragraph of the novel. Don’t worry, you do not need to know these plants and their names. I just want to point out what specific knowledge of the natural world Adams brings to his writing.

Primrose

Dog’s mercury

Oak-tree roots

Ragwort

Kingcup

Watercress

brooklime