

**Summer Reading Assignment 2018**  
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**American Literature/11<sup>th</sup> Grade English**  
**Visitation School**

**The Method:**

All students **must** read *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck **and** *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. Then **choose one** of these three books to read as well: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith **or** *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand **or** *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown. Note: You **MUST** read the adult version of *Unbroken* (with a gold and brown cover), not the young adult version, if you choose to read this book. Failure to follow this last guideline will result in an automatic F.

**About the Required Books:**

*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck is a beautiful, sad story about two men, George and Lennie, who are laborers trying to save enough money to buy their own farm. As the men pursue this dream, they encounter many obstacles, including Lennie's intellectual disability, a lack of money, an angry boss, and discrimination in multiple forms. In spite of the sad storyline, John Steinbeck creates some of the best and most realistic characters I have ever read. Please note that we will be discussing this book during the year, so take good notes on it.

*Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson is about the author's legal work to liberate people who have been wrongly imprisoned and are facing the death penalty. The main story is about Walter McMillian, a black man from Mississippi who is sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. Alternating chapters focus on other cases or policies that demonstrate problems with America's criminal justice and incarceration system. This is a sad, important, eye-opening work. I hope you learn a lot from it.

**About the Choice Books:**

*The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown is another book I love. While the book tells the engrossing story of a crew of rowers from the University of Washington who hoped to compete in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the main focus of the book is Joe Rantz. Joe's story is almost unbelievable: his mother dies, his father abandons him twice, he must support financially himself when he is just a child, and he must learn to trust in his teammates completely. Mentored by two rowing legends and buoyed by the love of his devoted girlfriend, Joe learns to give himself over completely to the difficult work of rowing and the soul-trying efforts of trust. I kid you not when I say that each chapter of this book brought tears to my eyes. I loved it. (By the way, if you like audiobooks, this book and *Unbroken* are narrated by Edward Herrmann, my absolute favorite audiobook narrator. As my father says, "I could listen to that man read a grocery list.")

*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith is the story of Francie Nolan and her childhood in Brooklyn, New York, in the very early 1900s. Francie and her brother, Neely, are poor. Their mother is a janitress, and their father is tormented by alcoholism, but the children grow up in an atmosphere of love and with the knowledge that education and hard work will help them escape their poverty. This is a beautiful coming-of-age story about Francie, and it is a great study on the complexity of relationships within families. When I was your age, it was one of my favorite books – and it still stands up well over time.

*Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand: I also loved this book about Louis Zamperini, an Olympic athlete-turned-World War II soldier. Hillenbrand weaves a fascinating tale about Zamperini's wild childhood, his development as one of the world's best runners, and – most fascinating of all – his time as a castaway on the Pacific Ocean after the plane he was flying in crashed. Indeed, it is astonishing to think that Louis and his pilot survived their arduous ordeal with no food and very little water. But the book doesn't end there. In fact, there are two more major chapters in his life: Zamperini's time as a POW in a Japanese prison camp and his life as a recovering alcoholic after his rescue. This work reads like fiction, and I couldn't put it down. That said, by its very nature as a book about POWs in a Japanese prison camp during World War II, the book contains violence. In addition, the book very candidly addresses Zamperini's alcoholism and post-traumatic stress disorder following his release from the prison camps. Therefore, some readers may want to read other selections as their summer reading option.

### **The Assignment:**

When you return to school, you will be expected to write an in-class essay on the works read. Since students may use their texts during the essay test, you will find it helpful to mark up your copies of the books to help you easily find quotes or ideas.

I will supply the final essay prompt on the day of the in-class essay, but the essays might reflect on the following ideas:

- How is the idea of loneliness treated in these works?
- What is the American Dream of each main character or person, and how does he or she pursue it? (If you don't know what the American Dream is, perhaps search Google.)
- Fortitude may be defined as “mental and emotional strength in facing difficulty, adversity, danger, or temptation.” How is fortitude demonstrated in these works?
- Examine the contrast between the desire for escape and the awareness of responsibilities as presented in these works.
- What are common challenges people face? What character traits are necessary for overcoming life's challenges?
- Is life fair? Is it possible to overcome unfairness when one encounters it?
- If a theme is a lesson the author wants the reader to learn, what is a common theme shared by the works you read for this assignment?

**How to Approach This Assignment:**

- Read these books whenever the spirit moves you this summer, but I would advise reading them once and then skimming them all again just before school begins.
- Take notes in your books as you read, indicating important lines and passages – especially those that relate to the prompts listed above.
- Perhaps keep a brief reading journal in which you record summaries of each chapter (no more than 1-2 sentences). In general, find a way to help you jot down important information so that you can recall the works more easily.
- On the day of the essay, you may have these works on your desk.
- Please know that you will need to be able to discuss *Of Mice and Men* in class in the spring when we cover *The Grapes of Wrath*.
- If you have questions or concerns, please email Ms. Arnstein at [earnstein@vischool.org](mailto:earnstein@vischool.org). Have a great summer! I can't wait to see you in the fall; it's going to be a great year!