

May 2008



English
Department

Dear Future English III Advanced Placement Students,

You have been selected as a member of the English III Advanced Placement course for the 2008-2009 school year. For your summer reading assignment, you will need to close read the following works by the first class meeting in August: *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, *Bird by Bird* by Annie Lamott, and *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller. Please note that any edition of the works is acceptable, and they can be purchased at any local bookstore or through the Mitty website. You may read used copies of these books; the Amazon.com link through the Mitty website can help you locate used copies.

***The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck** is one of the best-known, most highly regarded works in American Literature. Set in the 1930s during the Great Depression, the novel tells the story of the Joads, an Oklahoma family that has taken to the road in search of a better life in California. Don't be confused by the novel's structure. Steinbeck intersperses the Joad story with chapters that comment directly and symbolically with the plight of dust bowl migrants and on the causes and consequences of a world in which the distance between the haves and the have-nots has grown too large. In the end, *The Grapes of Wrath* is both story and social commentary. Any good read of it will likely alter your understanding of this country and your place in it.

***Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller** is a drama that is recognized as a milestone in American theater. In the person of Willy Loman, the aging failing salesman who makes his living riding on a smile and a shoeshine, Arthur Miller redefined the tragic hero as a man whose dreams are at once insupportably vast and dangerously insubstantial. Miller has provided us with a figure whose name has become a symbol for a kind of majestic grandiosity—and a play that compresses epic extremes of humor and anguish, promise and loss, between the four walls of an American living room.

***Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Annie Lamott**

Lamott's miscellany of guidance and reflection should appeal to writers struggling with demons large and slight. Among the pearls she offers is to start small, as their father once advised her 10-year-old brother, who was agonizing over a book report on birds: "Just take it bird by bird." Lamott's suggestion on the craft of fiction is down-to-earth: worry about the characters, not the plot. But she's even better on psychological questions. She has learned that writing is more rewarding than publication, but that even writing's rewards may not lead to contentment. As a former "Leona Helmsley of jealousy," she's come to will herself past pettiness and to fight writer's block by living "as if I am dying." She counsels writers to form support groups and wisely observes that, even if your audience is small, "to have written your version is an honorable thing."

I encourage you to close read all three texts so that you will become more involved in these works and will be able to find and share your ideas about them more easily. You will be asked to take a test, to discuss, and to write about these books upon your return to school in the fall. If, by chance, you have already read any of these books, please reread them so that the details are fresh in your mind. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me either via email (bmadia@mitty.com) or via phone (408-342-4311). I look forward to working with you next year.

Sincerely,
Beth Madia