

The Nine

Jeanne McWilliams Blasberg

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School scandals and the fragile bond between a boy and his mother give The Nine wide-ranging appeal beyond its ivy-clad setting.

Jeanne McWilliams Blasberg's unique coming-of-age novel *The Nine* is set at an exclusive New England boarding school where the ivy-covered walls conceal decades of dark secrets and subterfuge.

At Dunning Academy, legacy students know the shortcuts, while students like Sam Webber are left to navigate new territory without the help of alumni uncles and fathers. Sam finds his inroad by way of Justin Crandall, a legacy student who invites him into the school's secret society, The Nine. Sam soon discovers that The Nine's activities extend far beyond precocious pranks.

Meanwhile, Sam's mother, Hannah, finds herself at loose ends now that her only son is no longer around to give her marriage and life direction. Hannah is drawn to the campus at every opportunity, making the trek from her suburban Boston home for swim meets, parents' weekends, and even to watch Sam on a couple of occasions.

The school setting is one of the novel's strongest attractions. Dunning Academy puts pupils through a rigorous course of study and an even more grueling gauntlet of social and emotional pressures on their path toward Ivy League universities and politically connected careers. Given the headlines coming from real-world campuses in recent years, the school's hidden history and current crimes are all the more believable.

The often painful relationship between mother and son that serves as the novel's secondary story is rendered through Sam's more and more stilted responses to Hannah as the pressures and distance of Dunning drive the two apart. Hannah's desperate conversations convey how her life is beginning to fall apart without Sam as its foundation.

Talk between teens on campus sounds truthful, with exchanges between boys avoiding sentimental subjects. Because of it, Sam's classmates are developed characters who are seen to grow up physically and emotionally. Their individualized faces and feelings raise the stakes, especially when it comes to the malevolent mystery that Sam starts to uncover as he becomes involved with The Nine.

By comparison, Hannah doesn't experience any deep insights about how her own Ivy League ambitions for Sam put him in harms' way, even as Dunning threatens to derail his future. Still, Hannah, who tells part of the story, is easy to identify with, even while being hard to empathize with, because of her unflagging motherly ambition.

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CHARLENE OLDHAM (August 20, 2019)

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