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# Key Stage 3

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 1 Explorations in creative reading and writing  
Year 7 Pack 3

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### Insert

The Source that follows is:

Source A: 20th Century prose-fiction

It is a short story called *Don't Ask Jack* by Neil Gaiman published in 1995.

It tells the story of a group of children who grew up in a large house with a strange toy in the attic.

**Please turn the page over  
to see the Source**

## Source A

This is a horror story set in the past, about some children and their relationship with a rather unusual toy.

- 1 Nobody knew where the toy had come from - which great-grandparent or distant aunt  
had owned it before it was given to the nursery<sup>1</sup>. It was a box, carved and painted in  
gold and red. It was undoubtedly attractive and, or so the grown-ups maintained, quite  
valuable – perhaps even an antique. The latch, unfortunately, was rusted shut, and the  
5 key had been lost so the Jack<sup>2</sup> could not be released from his box. Still, it was a  
6 remarkable box, heavy and carved and gilt.
- 7 The children did not play with it. It sat at the bottom of the old wooden toy box, which  
was the same size and age as a pirate's treasure-chest, or so the children thought. The  
Jack-in-the-box was buried beneath dolls and trains, clowns and paper stars and old  
10 conjuring tricks, and crippled marionettes<sup>3</sup> with their strings irrevocably<sup>4</sup> tangled, with  
dressing up clothes (here the tatters of a long-ago wedding dress, there a black silk hat,  
crusted with age and time) and costume jewellery, broken hoops and tops and  
13 hobbyhorses. Under them all was the Jack's box.

The children did not play with it. They whispered among themselves, alone in the attic  
15 nursery. On grey days when the wind howled about the house and rain rattled the slates  
and pattered down the eaves they told each other stories about Jack, although they had  
never seen him. One claimed that Jack was an evil wizard, placed in the box as  
punishment for crimes too awful to describe; another maintained that he had been  
placed in the box as guardian to prevent the bad things inside it from coming out. They  
20 would not even touch the box, if they could help it, although when, as happened from  
time to time, an adult would comment on the absence of that sweet old Jack-in-the-box,  
and retrieve it from the chest, and place it in a position of honour on the mantelpiece,  
then the children would pluck up their courage and, later, hide it away once more in the  
darkness.

- 25 The children did not play with the Jack-in-the-box. And when they grew up and left the  
great house, the attic nursery was closed up and almost forgotten.
- 26 Almost, but not entirely. For each of the children, separately, remembered walking alone  
in the moon's blue light, on his or her own bare feet, up to the nursery. It was almost like  
sleepwalking, feet soundless on the wood of the stairs, on the threadbare nursery  
30 carpet. Remembered opening the treasure chest, pawing through the dolls and the  
clothes and pulling out the box.

And then the child would touch the catch, and the lid would open, slow as a sunset, and  
the music would begin to play, and Jack came out. Not with a pop and a bounce: but  
deliberately, intently, he would rise from the box and motion to the child to come closer,  
35 closer, and smile.

And there in the moonlight, he told them each things they could never quite remember,  
things they were never able entirely to forget.

The oldest boy died in the Great War. The youngest, after their parents died, inherited

40 the house, although it was taken from him when he was found in the cellar one night with cloths and paraffin and matches, trying to burn the great house to the ground. They took him to the madhouse, and perhaps he is there still.

The other children, who had once been girls and now were women, declined, each and every one, to return to the house in which they had grown up; and the windows of the house were boarded up; and the doors were all locked with the huge iron keys.

45 Years have passed and the girls are old women, and owls and bats have made their homes in the old attic nursery, rats build their nests among the forgotten toys. The creatures gaze uncuriously at the faded prints on the wall, and stain the remnants of the carpet with their droppings.

50 And deep within the box within the box, Jack waits and smiles, holding his secrets. He is waiting for the children. He can wait forever.

Glossary:

nursery<sup>1</sup> – a room in a house where young children were looked after and cared for

Jack<sup>2</sup> – a children's toy in which a clown like figure springs up from a box when the lid opens

marionettes<sup>3</sup> - puppets

irrevocably<sup>4</sup> - forever

**END OF SOURCES**

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Source A: 'Don't Ask Jack' from 'Smoke and Mirrors' by Neil Gaiman, Hodder and Stoughton, Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment, London, EC4Y 0DZ

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