JURONG JUNIOR COLLEGE

JC 2 Preliminary Examination 2016

CANDIDATE'S NAME			
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General Certificate of Education

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Paper 2 24 August 2016

INSERT 1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

This document consists of **3** printed pages and **1** blank page.

Elizabeth Svoboda writes about the power of stories.

1 Our storytelling ability, a uniquely human trait, has been with us nearly as long as we have been able to speak. Whether it evolved for a particular purpose or was simply an outgrowth of our explosion in cognitive development, stories are an inextricable part of our DNA. Across time and across cultures, stories have proved their worth not just as works of art or entertaining asides, but as agents of personal transformation.

2 One of the earliest narratives to wield such influence was the Old Testament. When we think of this first section of the Bible, we tend to recall its long sequences of 'thou shalt nots', but many of the most gripping Old Testament stories do not contain an overtly stated moral. While the Old Testament certainly reflected the values and priorities of the culture from which it emerged, those values came embedded in powerful tales that invited readers and listeners to draw their own conclusions. When Eve ate the fruit from the Garden of Eden's tree of knowledge, bringing God's punishment upon herself and Adam, the image powerfully illustrated the fate that may await anyone who ignores a divine order. It was no coincidence that, steeped in stories like these, the ancient Hebrews emerged as a unified society of people devoted to God and his commands.

3 Meanwhile, in ancient Greece, a formidable oral storytelling tradition was taking hold – one in which epic stories such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were passed from generation to generation, each storyteller adding tweaks as he saw fit. Though the characters in these epics were larger-than-life figures, often possessed of superhuman abilities, it was still natural for people to identify with them. Epic heroes rarely conquered their foes with ease. Like Homer's Odysseus, who endured a painful and protracted journey to return to his homeland, they faced hardship head-on and persevered against great odds. One reason the epics had such staying power was that they instilled values like grit, sacrifice, and selflessness, especially when young people were exposed to them as a matter of course. In their quest to lead a good life, generations of Greeks looked to the epics for inspiration. The historian J E Lendon points out that the Homeric emphasis on conquering cities by trickery is mirrored in later Greek battle strategy, underscoring the tales' impact not just on minds, but on cultural norms and behaviours.

4 For thousands of years, we have known intuitively that stories alter our thinking and, in turn, the way we engage with the world. But only recently has research begun to shed light on how this transformation takes place from inside. Using modern technology like functional MRI (fMRI) scanning, scientists are tackling age-old questions: What kind of effect do powerful narratives really have on our brains? And how might a story-inspired perspective translate into behavioural change? Our mental response to stories begins, as many learning processes do, with mimicry. In certain essential ways, stories help our brains map that of the storyteller, and imagine other people's thoughts and emotions. What is more, the stories we absorb seem to shape our thought processes in much the same way lived experience does. When research subjects are told moving true stories, their brains revealed that they identified with the stories and characters on a visceral level. The fMRI data showed that emotion-driven responses to stories started in the brain stem, which governs basic physical functions. So when we read about a character facing a heart-wrenching situation, it is perfectly natural for our own hearts to pound.

5 It is this kind of gut-level empathetic story response that can inspire people to behave differently in the real world. Of course, many story messages do not translate into action as neatly as controlled studies might suggest. We respond to *The Diary of Anne Frank* differently at age 42 than we do at 12, in part because of all the *other* stories that have changed our perception in the interim. We argue with stories, internally or out loud. We talk back. We praise. We denounce. Every story is the beginning of a conversation, with ourselves as well as with others. Those kinds of conversations, internal and external,

are exactly what educators are counting on to unleash stories' change-creating potential. The biggest transformations happen when children actively engage – even empathise – with a particular narrative, recognising how it matters to *them*. For instance, one lesson about the 1938 *Kristallnacht* attacks delves into the historical narrative, describing how Nazis burned synagogues and looted Jewish shops while most ordinary Germans just watched. This real-life story prompts class discussion that touches on what it means to be a bystander. Kids consider how they might have reacted when Jewish people were persecuted under Nazi rule, but they are also thinking about similar matters closer to home, such as whether they should stand up for a friend who is being badmouthed. When students explore the significance of stories in this way, their thoughts and choices shift measurably. They show more empathy and concern for others, and they are more likely to intervene when other students are bullied.

6 The stories we tell ourselves are integral to our wellbeing. Depressed people often cling to long-established internal narratives with refrains like 'I'm not good enough to achieve much.' Counsellors who practice psychodynamic therapy help clients recognise that these are stagnant inner monologues which should be discarded and substituted with fresh ones. Of course, some enthralling inner narratives can damage mental horizons. The success of Adolf Hitler's oratory bid to dominate 1930s Germany should convince us that a narrative's surface persuasiveness is not, in itself, a virtue.

7 And sensibly enough, many artists bristle at the idea that they tell stories to get people to think or act in any particular way. In fact, they never write toward a purpose or moral. They just hope that readers take whatever they need. When stories are at their best, the effect is expansive rather than nakedly persuasive. Narratives that tell us point-blank who we should be, how we should behave, are better described as dictates or propaganda. The most enduring stories, by contrast, broaden our mental and moral outlook without demanding that we hew to a certain standard. Whether they describe a meek older woman who shows grit and selflessness after a surprising tragedy (Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs*), or a hotel manager who shelters refugees marked out for death (Terry George's *Hotel Rwanda*), they present us with an arresting alternative to the way we see the world.

8 It is always up to us whether to turn our backs on a story's landscape or to step into the fresh possibilities it offers. But when we do decide to venture into an unfamiliar story, we emerge as revised, perhaps unexpected, versions of ourselves. Stories allow us to travel, time and again, outside the circumscribed spaces of what we believe and what we think possible. It is these journeys – sometimes tenuous, sometimes exhilarating – that inspire and steel us to navigate uncharted territories in real life.

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