



NANYANG JUNIOR COLLEGE
JC2 PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION 2013

GENERAL PAPER

8807/2

PAPER 2:

4 September 2013

INSERT

1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

- 1 **What is the purpose of reading fiction?** That is the question lurking behind a recent posting to the New York Times' education blog, SchoolBook. Ann Stone and Jeff Nichols, the parents of twins, wrote about taking their kids' third-grade English Language test. They read a frivolous little story about tiger cubs learning to tear bark off logs, and found to their surprise, that they could not agree on a single answer to the multiple choice question that followed: "What is the moral of the story?" 5
- 2 Tests like this do students a double disservice: first, by inflicting on them such mediocre literature, and second, by training them to read not for pleasure but for purpose - to discover a predetermined reason for immersing themselves in a tale. The problem stems from the standardised testing prevalent in education systems, which forces the learning experience into a pragmatic rigidity. **Even a banal story like this tiger-cub tale requires some moral, some message to be drawn from it, and the need to reduce the work to a single idea does a disservice to both reader and text.** 10
- 3 **Discomfort with fiction — with all its slippery, non-utilitarian qualities — goes back to the beginning of American culture. 17th-century Puritans in America** had big doubts about any kind of non-scriptural storytelling. This meant that other than religious narratives, all other texts were distractions. Their determination to teach their kids to read purposefully was as strong as any modern helicopter parent, if for other reasons: for Puritans, reading the Bible was essential to getting into heaven, rather than into Harvard. As the Puritans saw it, fiction might deflect the reader from more profitable occupation and its purpose was neither white nor black, but something too troublingly colourful: to make one merry or to pass away Precious Time. 15 20
- 4 If you think we have gotten past this starchy point of view, guess again. **Today's parents may anxiously urge their kids to read novels like "Charlotte's Web" or "Fahrenheit 451," but any desire to make their offspring merry is far overshadowed by the belief that reading is essential to getting ahead in life.** You have to be a "good reader" to get good grades and you need good grades to get into Harvard (or wherever) and you need that prestigious degree to get a good job. The Puritan work ethic has not so much forgiven reading fiction for passing away **Precious Time** as it has swallowed it whole. Reading books has become a kind of work, at least for children. 25
- 5 **In adults, the old Puritan attitude of purposeful reading leads us to demand fiction to be the delivery mechanism for instructional or inspirational messages.** Whenever a novel's merits are described in terms of the life lessons that it imparts, you can detect that old uneasiness over the non-utilitarian nature of fiction being appeased. Book club discussions almost always consist of people earnestly investigating the deeper messages to be found within great works of fiction, plaintively announcing that what Fitzgerald (or Hemingway or Shakespeare) is really saying is that you should follow your heart (or face your fears or be true to yourself...). The urge to find a moral, an instruction for productive living, a life philosophy has eclipsed the whimsical rumination or plain old-fashioned fun in just losing oneself in imaginary characters and their imaginary escapades. 30 35
- 6 The weakness of all these approaches to fiction should be obvious: If what you really want is a set of fortifying maxims, why bother with stories about feckless romances or foolish kings? Why not just go straight to the self-help section? Far too many people think that only when we "learn something" from reading fiction can the Precious Time that has passed away have something to show for itself. As a result, fiction is more and more perceived a waste of time, forsaken for other forms of purposeful, non-fictional reading: be they academic textbooks, historical narratives, or autobiographies. **The laughable irony of it all is that most of us will find little practical use for information on quantum mechanics, the military stratagems of World War II or the private life of** 40 45

Eleanor Roosevelt.

- 7 The implication that acquiring facts about, say, the life of Cleopatra, has more value than following the story of an imaginary person like Jane Eyre is perhaps an unintended form of literary snobbishness. Ultimately, all of these attitudes — and the standardized tests that Stone and Nichols complain about — boil down to the belief that reading should only be the means to an end, whether that end is moral betterment or worldly success. 50
- 8 But some of us are content with the less-than-purposeful foray into imaginary worlds. The rewards fiction has to offer are far less tangible, more inconvenient to express in the terminology of gain. It is perhaps best understood as a sudden expansion of the spirit: great literature is an experience and a revelation. It draws us irresistibly into the world of fictional characters where perhaps we discover with great excitement that a book's character is like us or thinks and feels like us. As mundane as that may seem, that is an undeniable part of the charms of fiction. 55
- 9 We become time-travellers and bold explorers as we hop in and out of ancient epochs and futuristic landscapes, traversing a thousand civilisations along the way as we turn the pages. We escape the drudgery of the day-to-day to yield willingly to the embrace of The Character as he walks us through his world, his dilemmas and his life. Our imaginations are unspeakably enriched and our concentration strengthened as we follow The Character through a complex, layered plot that has proved to be an invigorating exercise for the sluggish modern brain, resulting in a mental acuity that far outlives the classroom setting. These benefits are real, but they cannot be calculated or quantified and are happy by-products rather than goals that modern parents strive for when they urge their children to read. 60 65
- 10 For the rest, however, there is that all-encompassing conviction that reading (fiction) is really an end in itself, transcending even the intangible rewards for an inimitable pleasure incomprehensible to those seeking wisdom and wealth from words. Reading may pave the way to an increased real-life capacity for empathy despite the peculiarities of the thousands that may pass us by, but its intent is not always to do so. It is well if we do eventually develop a heightened sense of inclusion, but it need not always be a means to improve humanity. Certainly, like any art, reading can teach or motivate, but it does not have to, and it is often better when it does not. 70

*Adapted from
Stories do not need morals by Laura Miller*