

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE LOCAL EXAMINATIONS SYNDICATE

Cambridge Checkpoint

MAY 2003

English Paper 2 Insert

Section A: Reading

1 Read this true story of a dangerous accident which happened while the writer and his friends were making their way by canoe past the side of a waterfall in Borneo.

The river twisted and turned and grew narrower, and the giant creepers, tumbling down in profusion from 60 metres above our heads, grew closer. The rapids and cascades became more frequent. We had to jump out into the river more often, sometimes up to our armpits, pushing our long canoe up the shallows, guiding it into a side-channel away from the main crash of the water.

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'Saytu, dua, tiga – bata!' sang Dana, our head boatman, which even we could reconstruct as 'one, two, three – and push'.

Our crew, well used to the round, algae-covered stones on the river-bottom, gripped them easily with their muscled, calloused toes. Our boots, however, slipped into crevices, slithered away in the current, and threatened to break off a leg at the ankle or at the knee. It was only possible to push hard when the boat was stuck fast.

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Back aboard our canoe once more, we entered a wide reach of foaming water. There was an ominous noise of conflicting currents ahead. The preambles to the rapids that we now encountered – foaming white water, swirling whirlpools and noise up ahead – went on longer and louder than they ought to have done.

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With the canoe pitching feverishly, we rounded a sweeping bend; and the reason for the agitated river became obvious. Ahead of us, the water was piling up into waves higher than any we had met. There was a waterfall to the left of the river-course, a huge surging over a ledge. The way to the right was blocked by thrown-up trees that had been dislodged upstream and tossed aside here against a line of rocks. There was, however, one small channel that skirted the seething mass of water up front: a shallow rapid, dangerously close to the boiling waves, but negotiable. It was separated from the waves by three huge boulders.

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Keeping well clear of the great whirlpool beneath the waterfall, we brought the boat to the base of this normal-sized rapid. Then Dana, James and I got back into the river and made our way carefully forward, holding on to the bow-rope of our canoe.

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Dana held the lead position on the rope, I stood behind him and James behind me. We started pulling on the rope while in the rear the other two members of the crew, Leon and Inghai, pushed the boat. The boat moved up and forwards some three metres and then stuck. Leon and Inghai at once walked up the rapid and rolled small rocks aside to clear a channel. We waited at a large rock nearby, pulling on the rope to keep the long boat straight. At last Leon and Inghai were ready. But the channel they had had to make was a little closer to the waterfall. To keep pulling our boat straight, and to avoid the tumbling water of the waterfall, we had to move to our right.

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It was only a stride or two. But the level of the river bed suddenly dipped. James lost his footing and, trying to save himself, let go the rope. I stepped across to catch him, the rope bound round my left wrist, snatching his left hand in my right. His legs thudded into mine, tangled, and then swung free, into the current, weightless, as if a part of him had been knocked into outer space. His hat came off, hurtled past his shoes, spun in an eddy and disappeared beneath the cascading waters of the waterfall.

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His fingernails were very white, and slippery; they could not dig into my palm. He simply looked surprised; his head seemed a long way from me. He was impossibly trying to grip a boulder with his other hand, to get a purchase on a slimy rock polished smooth for centuries by tons of rolling water.

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His fingers bent straighter, slowly, edging out of mine, for what must only have been seconds. His arm rigid, his fingertips finally slipped away altogether. He turned in the current, spread-eagled. Still turning, but much faster, he was sucked under. His right ankle and shoe were bizarrely visible above the surface. He was lifted slightly, a bundle of clothes of no discernible shape, and then he was gone.

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“Hold the boat!” yelled Leon.

James’s bald head, white and fragile as an owl’s egg, was sweeping round in the whirlpool beneath the waterfall, spinning, bobbing up and down in the foaming water, each orbit of the current carrying him within inches of the black rocks at its edge.

Leon jumped into the boat, clambered onto the raised outboard-motor frame, squatted and then, with a long, yodeling cry, launched himself in a great, curving leap into the centre of the maelstrom. He disappeared, surfaced, shook his head, spotted James, dived again and caught him. He made a circuit of the whirlpool until, reaching the exit current, he thrust out like a turtle and went down-river, edging yard by yard towards the bank.

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Obedying Dana’s signs, I helped him coax the boat onto a strip of shingle further down the river’s edge. James, when we walked back to him, was sitting on a boulder. Leon sat beside him, an arm round his shoulder.

“You’ll be all right, my friend,” said Leon. “Soon you’ll be so happy.”

James, bedraggled, looking very sick, his white lips an open *O* in his black beard, was hyperventilating dangerously, taking great rhythmic draughts of oxygen, his body shaking. Just then Inghai appeared, beaming with pride, holding aloft one very wet straw boater.

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“I saved his hat!” said Inghai, “James! James! I’ve saved your hat!”

James looked up, smiled, and so stopped his terrible spasms of breathing.

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He really was going to be all right.

Suddenly it all seemed funny, hilariously funny. “Inghai saved his hat!” We giggled together until it hurt.

Now answer these questions. Write your answers in the spaces provided in the test booklet.

- 1 (a)** Give four impressions that the writer creates of his journey along the river, as it is described in the first five paragraphs (lines 1 to 23). Explain each of your answers. [8]
- (b)** Give four words or phrases that you think best describe the seriousness of James's accident (lines 35 to 50). Explain how each of your choices brings out this seriousness. [8]
- (c)** The writer gives us a clear picture of Leon. Give four examples of this from the passage. Explain carefully the way in which each of your examples brings Leon's character to life. [8]