

The 1st Runner Up of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Cheng Chung Ki

Name of School : Carmel Divine Grace Foundation

Secondary School

Book Title : *The Rule of Three*

Author : Eric Walters

Publisher : Square Fish

The Rule of Three is an intriguing book about what the world would become if it was suddenly deprived of computers. With the title taken from the law that “humans cannot survive 3 minutes without air, 3 days without water, or 3 weeks without food”, the book describes an apocalyptic world where people in towns and cities can no longer access the supply of water, food, or electricity due to the malfunction of all computers. It all begins as a normal power strike, which suspiciously

also breaks the devices which are not connected to external electricity such as the laptops and cars in the neighbourhood. Adam, an ordinary high schooler, manages to drive his friend Todd and his crush Lori home with his old Omega, which does not come with any computer. After losing connections from the outside world for 3 days, Adam, his police captain mother and his ex-agent neighbour Herb start to believe everything is going wrong.

Soon Adam's mother and her fellow police officers take up patrolling within her police precinct, though inefficiently as there are few vehicles available. Adam's mother is faced with a daunting task – whether to abandon the other areas of the precinct so that she can focus on maintaining the stability of the neighbourhood Eden Mill, where she and Adam live. The idea is strongly supported by Herb, their ex-agent neighbour, but Adam's mother struggles as this means giving up the people

living without it. Humanity or survival? Such a dilemma, or equilibrium, is the most debated topic within the book. At last, with disorder growing exponentially within and without the neighbourhood, Adam's mother succumbs to the situation and retreats the police officers to Eden Mill. This decision helps to restore their neighbourhood to order under the surveillance of the police. Yet it also leaves the other districts prone to arson and riots. Is the decision correct or not, morally founded or practically justified? The book is positive, because only so can the main characters survive. This time survival wins over humanity, as it is impossible to defend so many people with such limited resources.

The second conflict between survival and humanity comes soon as Herb carries out a census in the neighbourhood. It turns out he is planning to evacuate certain people of use to live in a farm near Eden Mill in case the town runs out of food and water. It means

abandoning over a thousand people for the lives of one to two hundreds, which Herb deems necessary if the situation worsens. Adam is strongly against the proposal as he cannot bear leaving the townspeople he loves and the friends he treasures. He thinks it is necessary to retain some semblance of humanity even when it is already falling apart all around. “Just because things are desperate and people are getting ruthless doesn’t mean we have to be ruthless,” explains Adam. Instead, he suggests a plan of moving the farm equipment into the neighbourhood. With the knowledge of the farmers, they will be able to grow crops in the town. At last, Herb approves of the idea, and all the people start working together for the survival of the town.

Why does humanity prevail this time? It is not actually a victory, because only under the basis that there is a plan to ensure survival can humanity be defended. It turns out the difficulty in deciding whether to abandon

humanity is in whether one is sure there is no solution that can save both humanity and survival. If one can think of a plan that is probable to protect both, most people would strive to accomplish it. But many situations in the book show the cruelty of reality. “There is nothing we can do about it,” says Herb often. Preserving humanity is a wish, if not wishful thinking, for most of us, and we must try our best to achieve that. But if reality does not permit, we must consider which solution is better for more people. We must also carry out the solution decisively like Herb, so that we will not find ourselves struggling between both sides and ending up not being able to do anything. Somehow it applies to other real-life situations as well. We should always think of a way to reach a win-win, but if not, we should seek a win for most people, and never be uncertain of our stance.

Another message from the book is the importance of

collaboration and leadership. The town stands no chance of survival without Herb and Adam's mother leading as a mastermind and a rule enforcer respectively. The neighbourhood will also collapse if the people do not do their part of jobs to produce food, repair essential gadgets or scavenge for resources. Leadership and teamwork are dependent on each other, and neither can stand solely by itself. If not for Herb's intelligence and Adam's mother's coordination, the people will go rogue and fight each other for the resources to survive and the neighbourhood will lapse into chaos. If not for the people's cooperation, none of the plans can be carried out and everything will be left in a mess, leading to a similar result. In real life, it is the same. No groups can function well without leadership or teamwork, regardless of the stereotype that leadership is more important.

The book excellently portrays the traits of each character through dialogues, and some of them form

interesting contrasts and clashes. The starkest contrast must be the one between Adam and Herb. Adam is a 16-year-old teenager who has never seen a situation as bad as the one described in the story, and he loves dearly his friends and neighbours. On the contrary, Herb was once an agent, and he has faced many situations that give him no choice but to decide between saving or abandoning people. This leads to Herb being colder yet more rational, while Adam is more considerate in the eyes of the people. It turns out both are needed to maintain the functioning of society, one as an executor for drafting and carrying out plans, and another one as a cheerleader for calming and encouraging souls. Herb has also exclaimed that Adam is very likeable, and that he and the people put much faith in him. Another contrast is between Adam and Brett, a hot-tempered police officer. Brett does not like to restrain himself or listen to others and has repeatedly been ordered to act more carefully. Adam tends to believe in others and give up his idea if

someone has a better one. In the story, the two are not on good terms with each other though frequently having to do things together. Yet both radiate their own charm. People would like to follow Brett as he is brave, while Adam is preferred for his empathy. Such is also the case in real life where people opt for different leaders because they admire the different traits and charisma from each.

The story starts with an engaging conflict and proceeds to show how people react to it, gradually moulding and unveiling each of their personalities. The author is exceptional at shaping the characters through dialogues, depicting their concerns, motives, and flaws. I think it can be done more brilliantly though, with more descriptions of their inner struggles. I would prefer the author to advance the plot with multiple characters' narratives to allow readers to know more about how each thinks and comes towards a resolution. Still, the author has sophisticatedly crafted each character's development

and left readers weighing between humanity and survival, as well as penned the importance of both leadership and teamwork. Although the apocalyptic world is of little possibility to happen, these lessons are incredibly valuable, not to mention that the characters are all very iconic and relatable to the readers.