

The Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Mok Pik Ching

Name of School : Carmel Divine Grace Foundation

Secondary School

Book Title : *Ice Dogs*

Author : Terry Lynn Johnson

Publisher : Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

“The dogs are always looking at you, you know. Like they’re connected to you. It's cool.” Connection - that’s what this book is about. Written by Terry Lynn Johnson, who is a musher herself, *Ice Dogs* is a riveting, suspenseful and yet also heart-wrenching book, telling an adventure of two teens named Victoria and Chris and their huskies when a fierce snowstorm rolled in.

The story begins with Victoria racing dogs in Alaska.

Victoria is a spunky independent 14-year-old musher who had great enthusiasm for dog sledding. After her beloved father's death, she felt incredibly lost and mad at herself for not being able to stop the tragedy. Without her father's support and guidance, Victoria felt even more lonely when her mother looked down on her passion for dog racing. Her will to win in the competition in order to continue her dad's legacy was adamant in the meantime. Deciding to get better racers from Cook, who lived far away from her town, she embarked on a remote route on her own since her mother would do whatever to stop her.

There she came across an injured city boy Chris, who crashed in a snowmobile accident. After a snowy night, due to the coverage of the track and the loss of their map, they totally lost their way and were forced to confront the callous blizzards and untamed wilderness of Alaska. Throughout the journey, arguments broke out non-stop out of fear, insecurity and disorientation. However, when

it came to heavy storms, severe starvation and threats of hypothermia, they had no choice but to rely on each other and their sixteen huskies to make it out alive. Thanks to her father, Victoria was an expert at surviving outdoors. Facing different obstacles and looking out for each other, the friendship between them eventually burgeoned and they learnt to trust each other when their lives were at stake. The two teens finally found a house abundant in supplies and food. After a day, they set off to seek their way back home again with the dogs.

That was when the real crisis came. Everything good came in a flash but the tough lasted for hours and days. The dogs and teens fell into the same lake which had claimed the life of Victoria's father. It was so implausibly freezing and frosty, leaving their limbs numb. Chris and Victoria used every bit of their energy to save their dogs and each other. Fortunate and life-changing, the accident not only strengthened the friendship between the teens,

but it also led Victoria to realise that her father's death was by no means her fault. They finally reached the yard safely.

Nevertheless, things did not end there. Everyone was drained and the teens were suffering from serious hypothermia, which almost took their lives. Even lighting matches was an impossible task for them. But yet, just almost. The dogs laid on their body and used their own body temperature to warm them up, literally saving the lives of their human friends. Soon the squad was discovered by Cook. No one would be saved without their fraternal bond and unshakable determination to survive.

An important theme of this novel is the bond between individuals. One of the most apparent ones is that between Victoria and her mum. They were initially at odds with each other and their relationship further went

sour upon the death of dad. Since then, Victoria had been resenting her mum for not grieving like she did, which she perceived as disrespect and distrust. This left a vast chasm and a large fracture between them. The voyage shook things up, opening up an opportunity for them to have a heart-to-heart dialogue and Victoria apologised wholeheartedly for being indignant. In our lives, sometimes we just need to break the barriers and start a painful but healing conversation to help us establish good rapport or reestablish wounded relationships with the ones we cherish. Every misunderstanding is caused by the lack of communication, which, if unsolved, would lead to another one. Victoria and her mum in fact teach us a lesson — one should never pile misapprehensions up by avoiding communication. Connection is all about confession.

During the adventure, dissensions also took place constantly between Chris and Victoria due to fear and

they started to become incredulous about each other's actions, which is totally understandable though. Whoever doesn't panic when he is up against dehydration with food gone in the unforgiving wilderness? After all, we can never predict if we are going to be abandoned by our companions in a fight for survival. However, the characters in the book still chose to put their lives in each other's hands because they knew that it was the key to survival. The book illustrates a genuine sense of trust between children. Nevertheless, reality is sometimes reversed. When encountering frightful disasters or attacks, some flee on their own, leaving their peers in an utter abyss of hopelessness. Trust is the most essential part in a bond, even when lives are at stake. Defined as "feeling safe when vulnerable", trust is something which makes people stronger and be able to confront challenges more boldly. We should never ever underestimate the power of trust or abuse its power because it takes years to build and seconds to break. I really appreciate how the

kids in the story chose to have faith in each other. When it is life or death, it is the frailest moment of humanity. It is a straight choice. None of them forsook each other, which exemplifies the beauty of human nature.

Another important one is the intimacy between Victoria and her dogs. It is not just a trainer-and-trainee relationship but a tacit friendship which goes beyond owning pet dogs. Their lives had been intertwined since they were born. Irreplaceably inseparable, they did not have to understand each other by language but just by looking into each other's eyes. The quiet understanding between them had been built by years of company and cordial love. It deeply touched my heart when the dogs tried to extricate the lives of Victoria and Chris by using their body warmth and the scene when Victoria laid her life on the line to get all the dogs out of the water, showing great loyalty and love. Sled dogs know they are being relied on when it comes to racing. But it is totally

not their job to rescue their owner's life. This indeed perfectly demonstrates that bonds are not limited by our identities but only depend on how much we are willing to pay. One will never get an answer if he does not step out to make that call.

The story of Victoria's voyage can keep readers on edge yet also move them. It reflects problems that everyone faces in this modern world full of good and bad guys coupled with the bright and dark sides of humanity. The characters in this book display the most authentic bond between one another. Such sincerity is something that we should keep deep in our hearts.