

The Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Tang Kit Fung

Name of School : Carmel Divine Grace Foundation

Secondary School

Book Title : *Crenshaw*

Author : Katherine Applegate

Publisher : HarperCollins

“What bothered me most, though, was that I couldn’t fix anything. I couldn’t control anything. It was like driving a bumper car without a steering wheel. I keep getting slammed, and I just had to sit there and hold on tight,” said Jackson, the protagonist of *Crenshaw*, when describing his tough life helplessly.

Crenshaw is a tough but heart-warming tale of Jackson’s family and his imaginary friend Crenshaw. The

story is narrated from the perspective of Jackson, a fact-like ten-year-old boy who is a scientist wannabe. Back to the end of his first grade, Jackson's parents are both laid off and have no money for the rent. The family moves out and starts their homeless life in a crowded mini-van. At that time, Jackson creates his imaginary friend Crenshaw – a giant, outspoken cat. With Crenshaw's company, Jackson manages to get through his 14-week homeless life. Eventually, the family finds a small apartment to settle down.

When Jackson becomes a fifth-grade student, the family is still experiencing plight. Jackson and his sister Robin do not have enough food and what they can do is play games to distract themselves from hunger. The family still does not get enough money to pay the rent, even though the parents juggle five part-time jobs. Knowing the crippling financial crisis, Jackson feels stressed and helpless as he does not want to become

homeless again, but he can hardly help. At this critical moment, Crenshaw appears to Jackson again after vanishing for years. However, Jackson denies his help, even his existence, as he believes that the concept of an imaginary friend is too childish for him then.

Meanwhile, the family cannot escape from the fate of homelessness, which leaves Jackson devastated. Though unwillingly in the first place, Jackson gradually finds himself relying on Crenshaw's support, which encourages him to share his feelings and thoughts genuinely with his parents. The story closes with the family finding a new apartment to live in and Jackson accepting the presence of Crenshaw.

Overall, *Crenshaw* tells a heart-warming story of a family with a tough life, which makes this book different from others. While other main characters are experiencing exciting and glamorous adventures, the

family of Jackson is leading a monotonous and painstaking life strained by extreme poverty and miserable homelessness. The major conflict of *Crenshaw* brings readers more realistic and common social issues close to life. While navigating the plot, I have been pondering: Is our government and the community doing enough for the homeless? According to the latest figures, there are approximately 1,500 homeless people in Hong Kong. The Covid-19 pandemic certainly exacerbates the number. Although this seems not to be a staggering number, we should by no means ignore the problem as we cannot imagine how tough and appalling their everyday lives are from the data. While the Hong Kong Government is fighting against the pandemic, is it offering sufficient support for the homeless apart from the Consumption Voucher Scheme? As ordinary citizens, we may not make a big change. However, we should break our prejudice and indifference to the homeless, who face obstacles which are hardly comprehensible. We

might not know each of their stories, but we should empathise with their hardships. One of my favourite scenes in the book is that a police officer, who obviously represents the authority, gives Jackson his own money secretly and offers advice and suggestions to the hopeless family. Can our society show more compassion to the homeless?

In my view, *Crenshaw* portrays the power of the imaginary. In the story, Jackson loves facts and believes everything has a logical explanation behind. He strives to find the truth when he spots purple jelly beans in Robin's cup. Meanwhile, Robin believes that is magic. Jackson feels pressured when he learns that his family is suffering from financial constraints. When his imaginary friend Crenshaw appears, Jackson denies its existence. Facts are always true but sometimes cruel. We may face something bad which is unexpected in our lives. At times we are lost and confused while some believe in miracles or put their

faith in religions to seek hope and courage to find a way out. Believing in something provides comfort, respite and joy. For example, people still enjoy magic shows even though we can tell that magic does not exist. On the other hand, one might lose interest if the tricks are revealed. We sometimes need to believe in something imaginary to remain hopeful in our life, escaping from the brutal reality and letting go of stress.

Crenshaw moreover digs deep into the importance of connection and honesty in the family. In the story, Jackson asks his parents for the truth about the financial condition of the family. However, Jackson's parents always make jokes and try to change subjects, unwilling to admit the truth as they do not want to burden their children with the sad truth. Although this is the way they love their kids, I disagree with their choice. Children can be mature and understand more than parents think they do. Hiding the truth might make them feel more anxious

and insecure, if not betrayed. The truth can be cruel, while kindness may hurt. Still, honesty should be held dear as it would be better to tell the truth and share genuine feelings and overcome the obstacles together as a family, who is closely bonded with open hearts and arms. Family is always our haven and shelter when we go through ups and downs in life.

The theme about being truthful to oneself is also explored in *Crenshaw*. The character Crenshaw always appears when Jackson feels it is the end of the world, symbolising the inner desire of Jackson to express his feelings. When Jackson ignores and denies the existence of this imaginary companion, it can be interpreted as the fact that Jackson is not willing to admit and express his genuine feelings of dismay and anxiety. He eventually chooses to leave his home as he is stressed out. This reminds readers that we should not deny our feelings no matter how bad we perceive them to be. Instead of hiding

them in the recesses of our hearts, we should share them with our trusted one or channel them out. Otherwise, the pent-up emotions would erupt like volcanoes one day.

Crenshaw also emphasises the importance of having a true friend. Although Crenshaw is sometimes too outspoken, he is always on Jackson's side, accompanying his human friend throughout the toughest time in his life. Apart from Crenshaw, Marisol is also a good friend and listener to the protagonist. After telling Marisol about his family and Crenshaw, Jackson expects her to laugh at him. However, Marisol does not. She also promises Jackson they will be friends forever no matter where they are. A true friend is somebody we can rely on as they are always there for us. They stay beyond distance and time and their support knows no boundaries.

Apart from presenting thought-provoking messages, the author Applegate crafts the story intricately with

sophisticated techniques. The content of the story is divided into three parts: Part 1 is about the current situation of the Jackson family. Part 2 brings back the time to when Jackson is in first grade and tells the story of the family being homeless. Part 3 continues the story of Part 1. Instead of telling the story according to the timeline linearly, the writer uses flashbacks to add memories of Jackson between plots, which allows readers to be more connected to Jackson as they are following the line of thoughts of the protagonist. It is easier to understand the character development of Jackson as they can compare the past and present Jackson directly. Moreover, narrated from the first person perspective, *Crenshaw* includes many monologues and dialogues. Readers can be immersed into the story easily and understand Jackson with those internal struggles. The dialogues between characters bring the story to the climax and bring up some core messages in the book. Not to mention that Applegate uses a range of figurative

languages (e.g. similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia and symbols), *Crenshaw* is both an entertaining and educational read.

Telling a warm story of a family living a tough life, *Crenshaw* discusses several themes about family and friendship, which are fruitful takeaway messages to readers for sure.