

The Merit Prize of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Chew Ming Ing
Name of School : Heep Yunn School
Book Title : Voices From Chernobyl
Author : Svetlana Alexievich
Publisher : Picador

Contamination.

This is the process of the decay Chernobyl has experienced all these years.

The book tells us about the stories behind the Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster that happened near the Ukrainian town of Pripyat through numerous monologues from people of all walks of life. From the heroic liquidators, who helped clean up the radioactive debris and mess at

ground zero, to a firefighter's wife, who witnessed the heart-wrenching process of ionizing radiation on her husband's body – the total degeneration of his skin; it can be seen that this is not just an informative tale, but a sentimental story that reminds us of our social values. This book is a symbol of humanity's bravery—a story of how people struggled to get back up at even their worse times of life. They wrestled with their emotions of angst, fear, depression, nostalgia and happiness.

It is a tale of death. Although the number of direct casualties was 49, the number of people that died from radiation-induced diseases was more than 60 times that number. Liquidators that worked at ground zero were diagnosed with cancers and sent back home, which was even more heart-wrenching for their families. The irony

was that each liquidator was only allowed to shovel debris for 3 minutes. Valentina Panasevich, the wife of a liquidator, watched her husband exhibit cancerous symptoms one by one, vomiting blood and bleeding through the epidermis, eventually dying months after. The impact of radiation did not only stop at the liquidators and workers, they reached out even to the next generations of these heroes. The active radiation particles shatter our DNA sequences, causing rare birth defects that deterred potential mothers from giving birth. They believed that being pregnant was a sin. Babies were born and unborn without limbs, without heads, without a heart. They weren't soulless nor a sin, just that the radiation deprived them of their chance to live. The invisible murderer - radiation - has contaminated the lives of many.

It is a tale of destruction. Homes were hacked away by the invisible murderer. People evacuated without knowing what had happened in the area. In their eyes, it was simply an unchanged town. But for some peculiar reason, the birds and bugs that lived there left long ago. Radiation destroyed their crops, their farms, their homes and nature without a single sound or a single trace. When people enjoyed the fruits of their labour, they became sick and died shortly afterwards. The land they grew up in had its topsoil dug out and replaced, turning the once-lively hometown into a piece of desolate land that displayed no signs of civilization. Houses that were not buried were trampled on, robbed and torn down. The cries of the refugees seem to echo through the words of the book into my heart. Radiation has destroyed millions of people's lives, homes and work.

It is a tale of prejudice. Refugees from the area were labeled as Chernobylites. They seem to be filled with danger and threat, when all they did was escape from a dangerous area. Children wouldn't sit next to Chernobylites in classes; nor did anyone want to move a Chernobylite's body away from where he or she passed away. Even doctors didn't want to bother with Chernobylites. A liquidator was refused to be seen by a doctor because of his identity. Doctors believed that they couldn't cure or help those radiation-saturated bodies anymore. They lost hope, and gave up on thousands of innocent lives. The Chernobylites did not, however. They encouraged themselves, even when they were bedridden or in horrendous pain.

It is a tale of injustice. Liquidators, everyone who diligently worked to build a better environment for the community at ground zero had absolutely zero idea of the consequences caused by the working. We could see that it was due to the current autocratic political system at that time. That patriotic spirit in political leaders influenced the young men in society. They hired more than 10,000 men to work as liquidators to shove back the contaminated debris into the nuclear plant. Although each liquidator was supposed to work for only 3 minutes with a generous payment which increased as they worked closer to ground zero, the radiation they received was enough to impact them for a lifetime. With regards to the political situation in Russia at that time - the Cold War, the government had to play down this issue, sugarcoating the truth with superficial

words of comfort that greatly swaded the general public, allowing them to believe in this house of deception.

These themes mentioned above get culminated throughout the tale. And I believe that these themes also provide us with important morals that humanity must learn to adopt.

I think that this accident has marked a great milestone in history. I see this as nature's call for us to strike a balance between nature and technology. It is undeniable that technological development has brought great convenience to our lives. But it doesn't mean that we should be turning our backs to nature. Nuclear technology sprang from the idea of the greed for cheap energy. Nuclear power - a solid source of energy from atoms, but the Chernobyl accident tells us that we shouldn't be ignoring

its harms to our basic units of life - our bodies, too. We shouldn't be taking nature for granted, and we shouldn't be risking day after day the health of people in order to satisfy our greed. We should stop using nuclear energy when we cannot afford the potential harms it will cause. Because of our greed for energy, look at what Chernobyl has done to Russia. Rates of thyroid cancer in the children of Pripjat have risen 100 times. We should stop abusing nature's resources and build up sustainable ways of life for good.

I think this accident also tells us to cherish what one has right now. How unexpected was this accident? It happened during the night, where workers at the plant worked to perform a safety check on the reactor. Citizens in the nearest city Pripjat were sleeping and they had no idea at all. Similarly, we will have no idea when a disaster

strikes; a zombie apocalypse could happen tomorrow. Nobody would know beforehand. And thus, we should be looking at the present, not worrying about the future. We should shift our focus to the present, we should think about how fortunate we are to be able to have a family, friends and loved ones around us. Like Chernobyl's worker Boris, little would he know that after he had turned the water valve off, the reactor would overheat and cause a nuclear disaster seconds later.

I think that this accident reminds us of our proneness to failures, too. Sometimes people make mistakes, they fall down and get upset. This devastating Chernobyl incident was a great mistake in history. Many innocent lives were sacrificed. But we can see that Chernobylites never gave up after this mistake. They never lost hope and the sight of

their goals - to fit in society again. It was a difficult and painful process that required avid effort. As mentioned before, the Chernobylites were discriminated against, they were socially isolated because of their horrifying physical conditions. Some struggled with their relationships. A liquidator who had a young wife struggled to love again and again after his traumatic experiences in the reactor. The newlywed couple shared the last few months of their love, and was eventually separated by death. Sometimes circumstances do not allow us to stand where we want to stand, but it does not mean that we should not be trying to reach it. There is no reason to give up hope until you struggle for your very last breath. It is the same right now, for me, as a secondary school student. We all have dreams, dreams that can be achieved if one tries hard enough. Let us take some advice from the liquidators. We should strive,

fight for the best to achieve our dreams. Challenges lie ahead, but we need to try our very best to overcome these obstacles or mistakes. In the end, things may not turn out as one planned, but if we have tried hard, there should be no regrets.

This inspirational book has provided me with a lot of insights into our lives— how vulnerable we are to technology's dangers. Have the threats of Chernobyl ended? No, the multipletonnes of radioactive waste is still located at ground zero. The long-term effects of radiation to Chernobylites are still being investigated by medical professionals. We cannot simply ignore the dangers of technology to mankind. Recently, North Korea has just threatened the world with the use of nuclear weapons. A few years ago, Japan's Fukushima Nuclear Reactor caused

another deadly nuclear accident, endangering thousands of lives. I can only pray that history will not repeat itself after we learn the lessons from this book.

It's not just the book's content that inspired me, the process of creating this book proved the valor of the author, Svetlana Alexievich. The author collected these monologues during the 1990s, where radiation still had a prominent effect. She risked her health trying to seek the truth behind this horrible accident. She conquered the fear of falling sick and went on interviewing people for 10 years despite the constant radioactive irritation. I salute her bravery and spirit of spreading the truth of this accident through a book. We should thus acknowledge the importance of truth and her will of the expression of truth.

Another feature of this eye-opening book is its narrative techniques. Ms. Alexievich decorates the monologues with expressions of interviewees, for example (laughs) or (breaks down completely). It gives readers a sense of reality. To be honest, if I had not known the title of the book, I would have thought this was a novel, depicting the post-apocalyptic world in the eyes of bystanders. These expressions give readers a sense of truth; it highlights that these things really happened in our timelines. They happened to people and the scars that are left can still be identified through these subtle expressions.

All in all, this wonderful story was an enlightenment to me. It has given me all the advice I needed as a puzzled and lost teenager - we have to understand the limits of

nature; we have got to learn to cherish and sometimes it is okay to make mistakes, because they will serve you well in the future. It all comes down to one thing - learning from history. Chernobyl was a deadly accident for the world, and we all need to learn what actually happened there to prevent the loss of innocent lives once again. Effects of the accident may last for generations to come, and thus I hope that all Chernobylites will never ever lose hope. Last but not least, I salute the author Svetlana Alexievich once again for her daring personality to record these fascinating monologues that unravel the truth behind this downsized incident.

Thank you, for writing this compelling tale of contamination for the world to read.