

The Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Leung Sin Tung

**Name of School : HKBU Affiliated School Wong Kam
Fai Secondary and Primary School**

Book Title : *The Midnight Library*

Author : Matt Haig

Publisher : Viking

The Midnight Library

“What would have happened if I had done things differently?” “I wish I had never done that. Life would have been so much easier.” “Where would I be now if I had chosen a different path?” These thoughts linger in our heads time after time. Regrets — a single word carrying overflowing emotions of sorrow and agony — are intrinsically a part of our day-to-day lives as humans. They are unavoidable, yet are what we humans

desperately try to dodge. Ending the day dwelling on regrets and pondering the things that we could have done otherwise have become a norm. We fantasize about scenarios in which events play out in the way we want them to. In *The Midnight Library*, these thoughts no longer stay as fantasies. The recent fictional novel written by Matt Haig dives deep into the realms of life and death, as well as the countless regrets of the main protagonist, Nora Seed, who is perhaps a simulacrum of every single one of us.

The novel narrates the story of Nora Seed, a 35-year-old woman, whose life had been nothing short of heartbreaking: Nora's dad passed away when she was as young as 16, her mom passed away three months before her supposed wedding, Nora backed out from the said wedding just two days prior, and her tense relationship with her brother. With the addition of her cat dying from a car crash, and Nora being terminated from both of her

part-time jobs as a music shop worker and a piano teacher on the same day, Nora had reached the peak state of helplessness and despair. The devastation resulted in her attempt to end her life, to put herself out of misery. She soon awoke in the Midnight Library, with the librarian whom Nora recognized as her old school librarian, Mrs. Elm. Between life and death situated the Midnight Library, in which every book held an opportunity for Nora to try another life she could have lived, to undo her regrets. With this, Nora tried out almost all the lives she could possibly imagine: a life in which she did not call off her wedding, a life where she kept her cat indoors to avoid the car crash, a life where her dad was still alive... In one life she was an Olympic champion. In one life she was a glaciologist. In one life she was in a popular musical band. However, she shortly realized that her quest to find the “perfect” life remained as elusive as ever. Her married life was not as merry as she envisioned, her cat still died due to an illness, the

loss of her mother was unable to be altered, and she was still on antidepressants despite having a successful career.

It is fascinating how, despite the exploration of profound themes like life and death, plus the constant references to complex concepts of philosophy and quantum physics, a prominent trait the book displays is, ironically, its simplicity. There are no plot twists, no grand writing styles, no usage of highly sophisticated language, just pure straightforwardness. During a life when Nora was researching glaciers in the Arctic Circle, she met Hugo who was also a fellow ‘slider’— a term they used for people who were suspended between life and death. They once discussed how human brains perpetually dumb the world down into an understandable story that keeps things simple, that everything humans see is a simplification. For instance, how humans see the world in three dimensions; how humans look at a tree

with interspersed branches and leaves and call it a ‘tree’; how humans straighten out curved streets in their minds, hence why they get lost all the time. These are all simplifications. Perhaps this is what Haig wanted to accomplish with *The Midnight Library*— simplicity. He brilliantly used a library as a simple representation of the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics, a theory which suggests that there is an infinite number of parallel universes, where every possible outcome is realized in some universe. An insanely complicated concept, yet Haig was able to make it comprehensible for average readers like me. His writing is pared-down and simple, nothing out of this world, but it is what makes it raw and authentic.

Though the plotline is more like a straight line than an anfractuous path, what keeps the story entertaining is the character development of Nora. At the very beginning, Nora was a vulnerable woman living a lackluster life full

of regrets with no reason to keep moving on. Through her different ‘trips’ in the Midnight Library, we get to see a gradual change in her view of life. Before, all she wanted was to bring her life to a halt; after a near-death experience of a polar bear attack, she realized that she actually wanted to live. She realized that there is no way of living that is immune to sadness. Although Nora woke up from the Midnight Library to the exact condition she had been in before—laid off, parentless, and no longer a cat owner, there was a spark of hope. Although her physical environment did not change at all, her perspective did, and this is all that matters.

I believe everyone reading the book will be able to relate to Nora to a certain degree, some more than others. Like Nora, there are times when I wished I had done something different and had hoped that I had the power to turn back time to undo all my mistakes and regrets. My book of regrets may be as thick as Nora’s. It is easy

to miss the friends that we did not make and the events we did not attend and the conversations that we did not take part in. Towards the end, Nora mentioned that “It is not the lives we regret not living that are the real problem. It is the regret itself. It’s the regret that makes us shrivel and wither and feel like our own and other people’s worst enemy.” This struck a chord with me. We often spend time dwelling on our regrets, entangling ourselves with our own minds, enabling our self-destruction mode when we could have used the time to be more productive, to live the future that contains endless possibilities.

Midnight. 00:00:00. It is the end of a day but also the start of a new one— a symbol of renewal and hope. *The Midnight Library* is one of the few novels that is able to tug at my heartstrings. Simple yet profound; succinct yet sentimental; direct yet inspirational. This riveting and thought-provoking tale will be especially comforting for those who seek solace and reassurance.