

The Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Suen Wan Ki

Name of School : Carmel Secondary School

Book Title : *Long Walk to Freedom – The Lesson to Strength and Forgiveness*

Author : Nelson Mandela

Publisher : Atria Publishing Group

“*Long Walk to Freedom*” is an autobiography written by Nelson Mandela, the late recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and former President of South Africa. It documented the life story of the celebrated revolutionary leader who led South Africa to change from an autocratic state, where racial discrimination once justified, to a liberal country where peace and inclusion prevail. The book gives readers a full picture of the legendary Nelson Mandela’s life, in his own words.

Mandela described himself as a freedom fighter whose life is the struggle. This statement is highly applicable to the historical context of South Africa in the 20th century when Mandela was born and grew up. The government, dominated by white Afrikaners, imposed the notorious apartheid policy that systemised discrimination against the blacks within the country. Growing up in the Thembu villages in Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, Mandela was nurtured with tribal African culture. This shaped his identity and pride as a black African. After completing his Law Degree at the prominent University of the Witwatersrand, with a growing political and social consciousness, Mandela joined the African National Congress (ANC), which marked a start for his advocacy of racial equality and black liberation. In the following years, Mandela ran campaigns and demonstrations frequently together with a lot of like-minded and loyal friends. The strenuous bonding among them was the key enabling Mandela to

bear the hardship of being a political leader.

The year 1962 marks a turning point in Mandela's life when he was arrested and convicted of high treason. Mandela was sentenced to life prison the next year. While most people viewed this as a sweeping crackdown on Mandela's political path, he did not show fear or flinching. Instead, he faced the challenges heads up. Twenty-seven years in jail refined Mandela's minds and thoughts. He was subsequently released in 1990 along with a growing sentiment of black liberation. He became the first black President of South Africa four years later, in the first multiracial general election which put an end to the apartheid policy. This marked a turning page in South African history, both politically and socially.

The book gives readers a comprehensive and transparent picture of Mandela's life and historical background at that time. Its contents can be divided into

two parts, the life of Mandela before his imprisonment and life after gaining freedom.

By looking at the early life of Mandela, readers learn the power of trivial events and decisions. Mandela recalled his time when studying at the University of Fort Hare. He was nominated to stand for the Student Representative Council. Infuriated with the fact that the Council was merely a rubber stamp for the school administration, Mandela joined the student body to boycott the student election. Nonetheless, on the day of the election, one-sixth of the students voted and elected six members to sit in the Council, Mandela being one of them. Having made his stance clear, Mandela refused to accept the office and decided to resign in light of his promise made before the election against the unjust system. He evened confronted the headmaster and stood firm against the school's defects, although being threatened to be expelled from Fort Hare. It was the first

time Mandela stood against injustice and persisted based on morality. The decision was not easy to make. Yet, the incident has wholly redefined Mandela's course of life.

This little story reminds the readers never to underestimate the impact of things that seem to be minor. The Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg becomes the symbol of the teen power of Generation Z at present. The campaigns she leads has touched the hearts of millions of adults. Still, when she made her first speech at the 2018 United Nations Climate Change Conference, hates and doubts came along. Critics treated her as a random child, regarding her effort as naive and casting contempt on her campaigns. Nevertheless, little did Greta back down; she impressed the world with her fortitude and willpower, most essentially, her commitment to environmental protection. More and more people echoed her call and joined the league of conserving nature. It is manifest that Greta's strength and

determination ought not to be omitted, even being an eighteen-year-old young lady. Never should we underestimate the impact and power of the trivial and “insignificant”, for Mandela preached in his book, “a nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but it’s lowest ones”.

Vigorously denouncing the social injustice of apartheid in the first half of the book, readers might be stunned to see the change of Mandela in the second half. He turned to a subtle and forgiving side, calling for reconciliation and forgiveness between the black and white. His experience in Robben Island added a lens to how Mandela viewed humanity. When Mandela became the President of South Africa, holding real political power in hand, he never thought of fencing revenge, given that he spent approximately one-third of his life in jail for an unjust reason, with property, family, freedom, and dignity robbed away. He chose to forgive. He let his

white predecessor, de Klerk, to be his deputy. Mandela has frequently addressed his will to cooperate with the whites during the office. He even pacified the black, asking them to shake hands with the past enemy. The altitude of Mandela's tolerance stuns and inspires readers profoundly.

Perhaps this personal trait of Mandela can be extended worldwide and inspires millions more. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement, people protest against police brutality and racial violence against the black. The movement comes from goodwill as people are fighting for righteousness. Nonetheless, the movement underscored opposing values in society and hatred grew. Fights and violence were reported; some even brought guns to the streets; some protestors threatened pedestrians to voice support for the movement, despite the fact that they enjoyed the freedom of speech. This was indeed a saddening scenario to see. Mandela wrote,

“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” Neither racial discrimination nor hatred is natural, yet no one can deny the existence of both. The only way problems can be resolved is to forgive. Forgiveness does not mean compromise. Instead, it might be the alternative to reach a win-win situation for both sides when they have leeway to talk peacefully. Understanding and negotiations should come first than actions.

“Long Walk to Freedom” inspires beyond political figures or activists, the ordinary can also learn fruitful lessons from Mandela’s life. He might have faded from our time, yet his wisdom and spirit are timeless and will forever touch people’s hearts. This book, written by a national hero honoured by South Africans, whereas the

world regards as an international mentor and a freedom fighter, is definitely worth people's time and thoughts.