

Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Cheung Ka Ning

Name of School : Carmel Divine Grace Foundation

Secondary School

Book Title : The Midnight Library

Author : Matt Haig

Publisher : Harper Avenue

“I think your problem was life fright.” These words cut into Nora’s heart like a sharp knife, leaving her shattered. Overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness, she saw suicide as the only viable option. In the blink of an eye, Nora found herself entering the Midnight Library, embarking on a journey of self-discovery.

The story unfolds with a series of misfortunes that befall Nora Seed – the death of her beloved cat, the betrayal of her brother, losing her job, breaking off an engagement, and the list goes on. Each unfortunate event chips away at Nora's will to live. Lost and adrift in the game of life, she turns to drugs in an attempt to numb her pain. But as she slips into unconsciousness after her suicide attempt, she awakens in a vast library with countless bookshelves. There, she encounters Mrs Elm, an old acquaintance from her high school days who serves as the librarian. Mrs Elm introduces Nora to the rules of the Midnight Library: she can explore different lives by opening books that contain alternate choices she could have made. If she finds a life in which she truly finds joy, she can stay there, never returning to the library or her original life. However, if she experiences overwhelming emotional collapse, she will be forced back to the library. Despite Nora's initial insistence on death, she reluctantly embarks on her

journey of life experiences. Nora explores countless possibilities – a married life, a life pursuing her dreams, a life with a dog instead of a cat, and so on. Eventually, she comes to the realization that there is no perfect life devoid of disappointment and sorrow. Nora discovers that the very essence of living lies in embracing these imperfections.

The Midnight Library commences with a thought-provoking scene set in the library from Nora's high school days, 19 years before her contemplated suicide. It depicts a conversation between Nora and Mrs Elm, wherein Mrs Elm suggests various potential paths Nora could have taken in her future, ranging from becoming an Olympian to a glaciologist. This scene resonates with the overarching theme of the story: the only way to truly understand life is to live. Life is brimming with possibilities, ensuring a never-ending well of hope. The foreshadowing employed in this chapter is astounding, as the

possibilities listed by Mrs Elm coincide with Nora's subsequent experiences. The chapter concludes with another foreshadowing – the devastating news of Nora's father's death, which becomes a catalyst for her decision to end her life. Though this chapter spans only two pages, it serves as a crucial foundation for the story, much like a strong root supporting a towering timber. Not only does it reveal the personalities of the two main characters, but it also foreshadows the book's central theme.

As Henry David Thoreau wrote, "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." This quote resonates deeply with me from the book. Before entering the Midnight Library, Nora saw flaws and hopelessness in every aspect of her life. She viewed her existence as flawed. However, during her journey through various lives, she discovers that she possesses the ability to shine in countless ways. As long as she is alive,

there is always hope. Nora's perspective on life undergoes a profound transformation, and she realizes that she can live life to the fullest. Like the Nora of high school, I find myself in the blithe years of exploring my future path. It is not uncommon for me to feel perplexed when standing at the crossroads of life. After reading this book, my "quarter-life crisis" remains, but a new ray of light illuminates my view. I may not be a prodigy or anywhere near perfection, but I see my weaknesses as opportunities for growth. Like Nora, I believe that as long as we seize every possibility for personal development, we are all caterpillars destined to transform into magnificent butterflies.

Never losing kindness is another significant lesson conveyed in the story. Mrs Elm embodies Nora's inner soul because she is the only person Nora remembers as being kind to her.

Additionally, Nora experiences a life closest to her ideal,

where she is married to a kind man who once lent a helping hand to save her deceased cat. Kindness is a language understood by the deaf and seen by the blind. However, in the story, Nora often describes kindness as rare. How genuine, yet sad, this notion is! In Hong Kong, instead of being described as a metropolitan brimming with kindness, it is often characterized as a dog-eat-dog society. Immersed in a materialistic and utilitarian culture, Hongkongers find it hard to be kind. The Midnight Library serves as a powerful reminder that kindness is the key to building a harmonious society.

The story also sheds light on the pervasive issue of the impact of social media. Before Nora attempts suicide, she finds herself scrolling through her social media feed. Unable to resist comparing her life to the aesthetically pleasing images depicting perfectly curated lives of others, Nora feels an

overwhelming sense of inadequacy and failure. This highlights the detrimental effects of social media on mental health and self-esteem. The Midnight Library encourages readers to pause and reflect on the unrealistic standards and comparisons perpetuated by social media platforms. It serves as a reminder that true happiness and self-worth cannot be found on social media platforms, but in embracing one's own unique life journey.

Apart from the aforementioned social issue, the book also enlightens us on the poignant topic of mood disorders. Nora grapples with situational depression. Her employer in her original life cunningly exploits this vulnerability as a justification for terminating her employment. Mood disorders, which are prevalent worldwide, have gained increased recognition and empathy from the public in recent years. Despite the fact that Nora's employer's attitudes may have

generalized the issue from partial to complete, it is essential to highlight the need to address the pervasive lack of knowledge and ongoing discrimination towards mental illness in the workplace. Failure to confront this problem internally risks its collapsing force, akin to a cancerous growth that could ultimately jeopardize our society and result in irreversible consequences.

While I was captivated by the book's brisk pace and heart-rending plot, there is a fly in the ointment that cannot be overlooked. I was deeply moved and entranced by the resounding message of kindness and unwavering hope conveyed throughout the story. However, the transformation of Nora from a self-pitying, middle-aged woman to an optimist occurs somewhat abruptly. Nora's newfound hope emerges when she realizes that her influence can alter others' lives, as evident in the alternate life where the boy she taught

piano lessons became a criminal due to her absence. As a discerning reader, I deem it insufficient to be fully convinced that a deeply pessimistic individual, who has once been eager to end her life, can undergo such a rapid and profound change.

The Midnight Library is a remarkable and compelling read, gripping the attention of anyone facing adversity in their own lives. It serves as a veritable compass, guiding readers on a transformative voyage of self-exploration and acts as a soothing balm for the soul.