



Cambridge Lower Secondary Checkpoint

ENGLISH

0861/02

Paper 2 Fiction

April 2023

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1 hour 10 minutes

INFORMATION

- This insert contains the reading passage.
- You may annotate this insert and use the blank spaces for planning. **Do not write your answers** on the insert.



This document has **4** pages. Any blank pages are indicated.

Text for Section A, an extract from *The Mermaid of Black Conch* by Monique Roffey

David Baptiste, now an old man, is remembering when he met a mermaid while out fishing in the Caribbean Sea.

David Baptiste's dreads¹ are grey and his body wizened to twigs of hard black coral, but there are still a few people around St Constance who remember him as a young man and his part in the events of 1976, when those men from Florida came to fish for marlin and instead pulled a mermaid out of the sea. It happened in April, after the leatherbacks² had started to migrate. Some say she arrived with them. Others said they'd seen her before, those who'd fished far out. But most people agreed that she would never have been caught at all if the two of them hadn't been carrying on some kind of flirty behaviour.

Black Conch water's nice first thing in the morning. David Baptiste often went out as early as possible trying to beat the other fishermen to a good catch of king fish or red snapper. He would head to jagged rocks, taking with him his guitar, which he didn't play too well, an old beat-up thing his cousin, Nicer Country, had given him. He would drop anchor near those rocks, lash the rudder, and strum to himself while the white, neon disc of the sun appeared on the horizon, pushing itself up, rising slow slow, omnipotent into the silver-blue sky.

David was strumming his guitar and singing to himself when she first raised her barnacled, seaweed-clotted head from the flat, grey sea, its stark hues of turquoise not yet stirred. Plain so, the mermaid popped up and watched him for some time before he glanced around and caught sight of her.

She ducked back under the sea. Quick quick, he put down his guitar and peered hard. It wasn't full daylight yet. He rubbed his eyes, as if to make them see better.

'Avvy,' he called across the water. 'Dou dou. Come. Come, nuh.'

He put his hand on his heart because it was leaping around inside his chest. His stomach trembled with fear and wonder because he knew what he'd seen. A woman. Right there, in the water. A red-skinned woman, not black, not African. Not a blue woman, either, blue like a fish. Red. Or anyway, her top half was red. He had seen her shoulders, her head, and her long black hair like ropes, all sea mossy and jook up with anemone and conch shell. A merwoman. He stared at the spot of her appearance for some time. He shook himself and gazed hard at the sea, waiting for her to pop back up.

'Come back,' he shouted into the deep greyness. The mermaid had held her head up high above the waves, and he'd seen a certain expression on her face, like she'd been studying him.

He waited.

But nothing happened. Not that day.

It was April, time of the leatherback migration south to Black Conch waters, time of dry season, of poui trees exploding in the hills, yellow and pink, like bombs of sulphur, the time when the flamboyant begin to bloom. From that moment, when that red-skinned woman rose and disappeared as if to tease him, David ached to see her again. He felt a bitter sweet melancholy, a soft caress to his spirit. He felt a sharp stabbing sensation, right there in the flat between his ribs, in his solar plexus.

'Come back, nuh,' he said, soft and gentlemanlike. Something had happened. She had risen

from the waves, chosen him, a humble fisherman.

'Come, nuh, dou dou,' he pleaded, this time softer still, as if to lure her. But the water had settled back flat.

Next morning, David went to the exact spot by the jagged rocks and waited for several hours and saw nothing. Day after, the same thing. Four days he went out to those rocks in his pirogue³. He cut the engine, threw out the anchor, and waited. He told no one what he had seen. He avoided Ce-ce's parlour, the property of his kind-hearted, bigmouthed aunt. He avoided his cousins in St Constance. He went home to his small house on the hill, the house he'd built himself, surrounding banana trees, where he lived with Harvey, his pothound. 45 50

Then, day five, around 6 o'clock, he was strumming his guitar, humming a hymn, when the mermaid showed herself again.

This time she splashed the water with one hand and made a sound like a bird squeak. When he looked up he didn't frighten so bad, even though his belly clenched tight and every fibre in his body froze. He stayed still and watched her good. She was floating port side of his boat, cool, like a regular woman on a raft, except there was no raft. The mermaid with long black hair and big, shining eyes, was taking a long suspicious look at him. She cocked her head, and it was only then David realised she was watching his guitar. Slow slow, so as not to make her disappear again, he picked it up and began to strum and hum a tune, quietly. 55

Glossary

¹dreads: a type of hairstyle

²leatherback: a type of turtle

³piroque: a type of canoe

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