

The Drum Keeps the Count

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 25 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about eight minutes.
- 2 Turn to the next page and cover this one. No looking back.
- 3 Write what you remember, then mark it on the last page.

The stable trained on the beach north of the bridge, where the sand was coarse and the wind came off the river in the late afternoon and dried the sweat before it reached your chin. Aïssatou kept the counts. Nobody had asked her to; the trainer, Papa Yade, had simply discovered one evening in the second week of the season that if you wanted to know what a wrestler had done in his last three bouts, you asked the sixteen-year-old sitting on the upturned pirogue with her chin on her knees, and she told you, in order, without pausing.

The stable had no notebook. Papa Yade said notebooks got wet, and that in forty years of *laamb* he had never seen a notebook win anything, which Aïssatou thought was a strange argument for a man who could not remember what he had eaten at midday. So she held it all in her head: fifty-two bouts that season, who had gone down, and how. A throw over the hip. A sweep behind the knee. Six that ended with a shoulder in the chest and both men flat and the drummers stopping mid-beat.

Her brother Moussa was due to meet a wrestler called Birane on the last Sunday of the dry season, in the arena behind the fish market, and the whole stable had decided Birane was a problem. He was shorter than Moussa by a head, built like a doorway, and he had not lost in nine months. Papa Yade's plan was for Moussa to keep his weight back and wait. It was not much of a plan, and everyone could hear that it was not.

Aïssatou had watched Birane three times. She went back over it that week in the way she always did, lying on the roof after the heat had gone out of the tiles, running each bout from the drums to the fall. And the third time through she found it. All three bouts had turned at the same moment — not at a particular minute, but at a particular sound. When the *sabar* drummers dropped from the fast pattern into the slow one, Birane feinted to his right, let his opponent follow him, and swept the left leg. Every time. Nine months of winning, hung on a change in the rhythm.

She told Moussa on the Thursday, sitting on the sea wall with their feet over the drop. He listened without interrupting, which he did not always manage, and then asked her to say

it again, and then a third time with the dates. Then he was quiet for a while. “The drummers decide when,” he said eventually. “Not Birane.”

“The drummers decide when,” she agreed.

On the Sunday the arena was full by four, and the sand had been raked flat and watered at the edges. Birane came in to his own praise-song, rubbed sand up both arms to the elbow, and circled. For eleven minutes nothing happened that anybody would pay to watch. Then the fast pattern thinned out, the lead drummer leaned back, and the slow beat came down — and Moussa, who had been drifting left for eleven minutes for no reason at all, was already not where Birane's sweep expected him to be. Birane's leg went through empty sand. He was still recovering his balance when Moussa took him under the arms and put him down on his back, and the drums stopped mid-beat, the way they do.

Afterwards, in the dark, with the crowd thinning towards the bridge and somebody's radio going in the fish market, Papa Yade found Aïssatou on the upturned pirogue. He sat down on the sand beside it, which she had never seen him do, and he said: “Fifty-three now. Say them.” And she started at the first Sunday of the season, and the drummers began packing up behind her, and she kept going.

- 5 How does the writer handle Moussa's victory, and what is the effect of telling it that way?

- 6 How far does the story suggest that Aïssatou's advantage came from the stable having no notebook? Weigh the evidence.

- 7 Papa Yade's plan was for Moussa “to keep his weight back and wait”. Evaluate that plan against what Aïssatou worked out.

PART C Mark your own work

Now go back to the passage. Tick every answer you got right. You do not need the same words as the answer below — if you wrote the same idea in your own words, it counts.

- ☐ 1 • She had watched three of his bouts, and noticed that in all three he fainted to his right and swept with the left leg at the moment the sabar drummers dropped from the fast pattern into the slow one.
- ☐ 2 • He was positioning himself in advance. Knowing the sweep would come when the drumming slowed, he moved gradually so that the change would not look sudden, and by the time the slow beat arrived he was already standing somewhere Birane's practised sweep did not account for.
- ☐ 3 • Sitting down on the sand beside her — something she had never seen him do — and asking her to recite the fifty-three bouts shows he now treats her memory as the stable's record rather than as a curiosity. He has not changed his mind about notebooks; he has decided he already has something better, and is making that official.
- ☐ 4 • He means the timing of Birane's attack is not Birane's own choice but a response to the music. Because the drummers control the change in rhythm, the one thing Birane does best happens on a signal anyone in the arena can hear — which turns his strength into something predictable.
- ☐ 5 • Flatly and briefly, with the ordinary details left in: eleven minutes of nothing worth watching, the lead drummer leaning back, a leg going through empty sand, the drums stopping “the way they do”. Refusing to dramatise the throw keeps the attention on the noticing rather than the winning, and the understatement makes the result feel earned instead of triumphant.
- ☐ 6 • There is a real case for it. Because nothing was written down she carried all fifty-two bouts in her head and went over them repeatedly on the roof, and it was on the third pass through the same three bouts that the pattern surfaced — a kind of review a notebook might have made unnecessary. Against that, the absence of a notebook is clearly presented as a weakness: Papa Yade's reasoning is mocked, and he himself cannot remember what he ate at midday. The better reading is that the missing notebook did not give her the ability, it only forced her to use it, and a record plus her habit of rehearsing would have been stronger than either alone.
- ☐ 7 • The two are not opposites, which is what makes the ending satisfying: Moussa does wait, for eleven minutes. The difference is that Papa Yade's version has no information in it — it is caution in place of a plan, and the passage says everyone could hear that. Aïssatou's version tells him what he is waiting for and when it will arrive, which converts waiting from a way of surviving into a way of winning. Judged by outcome her reading is plainly better; judged more carefully, it is better because it answers the question the trainer's plan left open rather than replacing it.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 7

DATE

THE STRATEGY Self-explanation

After each paragraph, say out loud or write in a few words why what just happened happened — not what occurred, but what made it occur. Why does the rhythm matter? Why does drifting left work? Explaining it in your own words exposes the places where you only think you understood,

which rereading never does. The gaps you find are the parts that would have vanished first from memory.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Where do you already explain something to yourself as you go — following a recipe, learning a piece of music, working out why a team conceded a goal? What do you notice when you try to put the reason into words?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your teenager read the passage once, then cover it completely before Part A — no glancing back and no prompting, because the effort of hauling a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level mark the thinking rather than the wording: the answers given for the inference, tone and analysis questions are one good response each, not the only one.