

Behind the Bamboo Screen

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 15 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about four 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.

Mai had watched the water puppets a hundred times from the front, sitting cross-legged on the bank with the other children of the village. Tonight, for the first time, she was going to watch them from behind.

Her grandfather, Ông Tâm, had been a puppeteer on this pond for forty-one years. He handed her a pair of rubber waders and a long bamboo rod. “Hold it the way you hold a fishing pole,” he said. “Loose. If you squeeze, the dragon looks frightened.”

They waded in together. The water came up to Mai’s waist and was warmer than she had expected. In front of them hung the screen — a curtain of split bamboo painted with red roof tiles, so that from the bank it looked like a small temple floating on the pond.

Through the gaps she could see the audience: fifty people, paper lanterns, and a boy selling roasted peanuts. None of them could see her at all.

The orchestra began — a drum, a two-stringed fiddle, and a woman who sang the story in a high, bright voice. Mai’s dragon was lacquered green and gold, and it weighed more than she had guessed. Underwater, her rod ran out from her hands, under the screen, and into the open.

“Now,” said her grandfather.

Mai pushed. The dragon broke the surface, scattering silver drops, and the children on the bank shrieked. She turned the rod and the dragon turned too. She lifted, and it reared. For eleven whole seconds she forgot that her arms ached.

Then the rod caught on something — a root, or a stone — and the dragon stopped dead in the middle of the pond. Mai’s stomach dropped.

Behind her, quite calmly, her grandfather slid his own puppet out through the gap: an old fisherman in a straw hat. He had the fisherman walk slowly around the frozen dragon and peer at it, as though it were a very strange fish he had never seen before. The audience laughed. Nobody guessed.

By the time Mai had worked her rod free, the fisherman was bowing. “That,” said Ông Tâm, “is the part nobody teaches you.”

Cover the passage before you start.

Looking back turns this into a copying exercise. Getting it slightly wrong from memory is what makes it work.

PART A Tell it back

Write down everything you can remember about Mai's first night behind the screen. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 5 questions

1 How long had Ông Tâm been a puppeteer, and where did the puppeteers stand while they worked?

2 What three things made up the orchestra?

3 What was Ông Tâm's own puppet, and what did he make it do?

4 Why did Ông Tâm send the fisherman out at that exact moment?

5 Mai's dragon was *lacquered* green and gold. What does *lacquered* mean?

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 • Forty-one years. They stood in the pond behind the bamboo screen, in water up to Mai's waist.
- ☐ 2 • A drum, a two-stringed fiddle, and a woman who sang the story in a high, bright voice.
- ☐ 3 • An old fisherman in a straw hat. He walked it slowly around the stuck dragon and had it peer at the dragon as though it were a strange fish.
- ☐ 4 • To cover Mai's mistake. By making the motionless dragon look like part of the story, he kept the audience entertained and gave her time to work her rod free without anyone noticing.
- ☐ 5 • Coated with a hard, glossy varnish, which gives it a shiny surface and protects the wood from the water.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 5

DATE

THE STRATEGY Ask as you go

At the end of each paragraph, turn it into one question — the sort a teacher might ask — and then answer it in your head without looking back. You are not testing yourself on the words, you are checking whether the fact actually went in. A paragraph you can question is a paragraph you have understood.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

When a friend tells you a long story, what kinds of questions do you find yourself asking them halfway through?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains recall, not reading speed. Resist prompting during Part A — the effort of retrieving a half-remembered fact is exactly what builds the memory, and a child who is rescued too early never does that work. Compare the Part A count across several sets rather than chasing a score on any single one.