Cambridge International Examinations
Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education

FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH **0500/22**

Paper 2 Reading Passages (Extended) **May/June 2017**

2 hours

READING BOOKLET INSERT

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READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Reading Booklet Insert contains the reading passages for use with **all** questions on the Question Paper.

You may annotate this Insert and use the blank spaces for planning. This Insert is **not** assessed by the Examiner.

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Part 1

Read **Passage A** carefully, and then answer **Questions 1** and **2** on the Question Paper.

Passage A: Abracadabra

The mother of a ten-year-old boy arrives unexpectedly at his school. She enters his classroom whilst he and his classmates, including his friend B, are being shown a documentary film during their geography lesson.

Our teacher had a whispered conversation with Mama. I took advantage of the welcome interruption to stop playing Hangman[1] with B (one more mistake and I was hanged). What was Mama doing here? Shouldn't she be at work or helping Papa with the court case? Maybe she'd come to pay my school fees and stopped by to say hello.

'Get your things, you've got to go,' said my teacher.

I made a covert, triumphant gesture. B, robbed of victory, looked annoyed and filled in the missing letters. The solution it turned out was simple: 'abracadabra'[2]. And with that my old life disappeared…

At this point it's essential to dwell for a moment on the merits of the car in which we made our getaway.

If Mama's lime-green car had crashed into marshmallow it would've crumpled like an accordion. Its flimsiness was obvious as soon as it was in motion. On sharp bends it listed to port or starboard – it felt like sitting in a bowl of custard. Fortunately, the squealing engine was incapable of reaching any great speeds. The gearstick, a uniquely-designed metal lever embedded in the dashboard, looked as if it belonged in the control panel of a flying saucer. The aluminium-framed seats bit savagely into your flesh. Sleeping stretched out on the back seat felt like lying on a bed of nails. But Mama's car was a noble beast. It never failed her.

My kid-brother was waiting for us in the car. He was wearing his pre-school uniform and having one of his frequent naps. Mama slipped another mint into her mouth and twisted the gearstick. Everything was fine until I mentioned going to B's that evening.

'You're not going to B's tonight,' Mama said, turning off the radio as the news came on.

'But it's Thursday!' I pointed out.

'I know, but you're not going. We're going … to a friend's house,' said Mama. 'Then, on a … trip.'

'On a trip? In term time? How long for?'

'Papa can tell you that,' said Mama, her tone suggesting it was his turn.

'Are we leaving as soon as we get to your friend's house or staying there for a while?'

'We're staying until Papa gets there.'

'Then why can't you just drop me off at B's and pick me up later?'

'Because I say so.'

'That's not fair!' Nothing annoyed Mama more than this pet phrase. My obsession with justice infuriated her – just like your father, she'd sigh.

The Squirt woke up to ask where his things were: his pyjamas, his cup, his Goofy.

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Mama glanced over her shoulder, silently pleading with me to help limit the devastation caused by the Squirt's inevitable explosion. He couldn't get to sleep without his toy Goofy.

I glared, then deliberately betrayed her: 'Why now? How will I catch up? Why can't we stop by our house even to just get his Goofy?' This last question, I knew, would set off the Squirt.

At some point in the silence that followed I realised the car had stopped. We were in a huge traffic jam. Metres ahead, two black limousines, parked across the avenue, were creating a funnel through which only one car could pass at a time. Mama was tapping the wheel. This intimation that she was on the brink would usually have made me wary, but I'd nothing to lose – or so I thought. I'd been temporarily deprived of my precious possessions. I wasn't even allowed to go to B's. I kept nagging her, the Squirt's voice providing counterpoint. Mama endured our litany of complaints in suspicious silence as our car inched towards the roadblock, like a grain of sand flowing towards the neck of an hourglass.

'Why can't we pick up my Goofy?'

Ahead, men peered into each car at the neck of the funnel. Though I was scared of them and instinctively hated them, right at that moment the person I hated most in the world was Mama.

Mama stared straight ahead, her knuckles white.

'It's not fair…'.

It was my thoughtlessness that saved us. I imagine the men saw only a hassled mother and screaming kids. They waved us on.

When the roadblock finally disappeared in the rear-view mirror Mama reached back, but I pushed her hand away. All I could think about was B, the TV episode I'd miss that evening and being forced to go on a holiday I didn't want to go on, wearing my school shoes.

Mama must have felt terribly alone.

[1]*Hangman*: a spelling game often played by children

[2]*abracadabra*: the word traditionally used by magicians when performing tricks, e.g. when making something appear or disappear

Part 2

Read **Passage B** carefully, and then answer **Question 3** on the Question Paper.

Passage B: Playing Houdini

The writer of this letter has written a script for a musical about the life of the famous escape artist and illusionist Harry Houdini and wants a particular actor to play the main role.

Dear Mr Jackman,

I'm hoping your agent will have passed this email on to you, together with the script for my proposed stage play 'Houdini'.

No, don't stop reading – I know there's history here. I'm not connected to the other theatre team who were trying to plan the musical you pulled out of. Like you, I can see plans to base that show on Houdini's crusade to prove that mediums claiming psychic powers were fakes was never going to make a great story anyway. You had a narrow escape there yourself! It's just that we both know there was so much more to the man. I think you'll like my ideas for how a new musical might work, if you were to agree to play Houdini after all.

I've not made much of his Hungarian birth, rabbi father and the whole name thing – much of that is covered already in books like the Silverman biography, 'Houdini! The Career of Ehrich Weiss'. I've really kept the focus post 1899 when he'd abandoned traditional magic to concentrate on his escapes and tricks. Let's face it, they were amazing – we all want to know even now how he did them. You've got the same physical strength and athletic build he had so you could perform the tricks relying on those qualities for real, though you might have to practise if you're going to emulate his skill in swallowing and regurgitating keys for escape purposes or holding your breath under water for over a minute!

To build to his death at the end, I've left hints of the theories throughout and included facts that support them. I've made it clear he was suffering ill-health, supporting the appendicitis argument. The death threats will be obvious of course, hinting at murder whether by arsenic or not. I've underplayed the student-punching-him-in-the-stomach-before-he-was-ready claim, so that audiences realise later that if true, it might've been the fatal blow. The whole death-bed scene we can do through original newspaper releases on the one hand and his wife's reactions on the other – 'Mr H was operated on at 3 o'clock this afternoon for an obscure abdominal condition which proved to be appendicitis … first twinge of pain was felt last week' … and so on, leading to 'Mrs. Houdini is said to have affidavits from three students … in Houdini's dressing room at the Princess Theatre … struck the magician a friendly blow in the abdomen … rupture of the appendix,' etc.

It's not all heavy though – I think the potential for contrast and humour was missed with the original stage script. Amusing details are included: his pet parrot, Pat, allegedly escaping by picking the lock on his cage, and Houdini's assertion he started picking locks as a child to raid his Mum's pie-cupboard. Brilliant! You'll know Houdini had more than one brush with the law, so there's slapstick running all the way through with police trying to curb his activities and so on. The scene where he impersonates a medium to help a struggling show is based on a real occasion in Kansas. I loved the idea of recreating that wonderment and puzzlement as his audience on stage get more and more spooked by how much he can tell them of their dead relatives, sucking us all in too. I've set the silent-movie screen at the back of the stage – partly as a reference to Houdini's own ill-fated ventures into movies – so that we can see, as he's fooling his audience, what he's been up to earlier in the day, snooping round cemeteries for information and drawing out the gossips. Classic!

Houdini was no ordinary entertainer: his impossible escapes and illusions would amaze audiences again. Hopefully, you'll like what you read and agree to bring our hero back to life one last time.

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