Exercise A: Reading

The story of the cave paintings

He was afraid. He squatted in the yellow dancing firelight next to the other young men in the cave, and he hoped how they would not see how his lips and his fingers were shaking. For the time had come again when he must go down to The Darkness, down into the hungry belly of the earth.

For many days now – ever since this moon was born – the hunting had been bad, and the people from the cave were weak from lack of food. Yesterday an old woman and a young girl had died. The cunning old hunters and the strong young hunters went out early every day, and came back late – with nothing but their dry, clean spears and knives. All the berries and nuts had long ago been stripped from the branches. There were two children who were already too weak to walk, and an old man who once was wise and merry but now slept all day and night.

The men of the cave met together and decided. Some said this moon was a Moon of Weakness, and the hunters would have no power over the animals until the moon grew fat and thin and died, and a new, thin sliver of moon was born in the sky. But others said that the 'Magic' of the cave was all used up, and they should move to a new cave or make more 'Magic'. Then the first ones said that 'Magic' could do nothing under a Moon of Weakness, and the new 'Magic' must be made at the birth of the new moon. And so the decision was that the Healer would dance tonight and the chosen men – an old man and a young man – would go down into the belly of the earth, away from the sight of the Moon of Weakness, and make the Magic of Power. He was the younger man. He was afraid and his hands shook.

Next to him, his younger brother was preparing for tomorrow’s great hunt. He was making a new spear-thrower. He had taken one of the great antlers he and his father had saved from many hunts, and had broken off all the points until he had a fine straight piece of horn. Now he was smoothing it with a beautiful flint blade their father had made. Carefully the boy formed it, a thin rod as long as his forearm, with a little groove and a notch that turned the end of it into a hook. It was hard, but young as little brother was, he was making a good thrower, and he could use it well.

Their father was making spear points. He had a large chunk of flint that he had carefully chipped down into a cone shape – this was the Mother of Blades. Against it he held the tip of a little punch made of bone, and whacked it with the hammer stone, the Father of Blades. Whack! Whack! Whack! Three perfect blades which would make good knives to cut meat. With a little chipping, they could make scrapers to clean the fur and flesh from the animal hides, or punches to make small holes in the hides so they could be sewn together. But now there was no meat or furs, so the father made spear points instead for tomorrow’s hunt.

He looked from his little brother to his father, and then to the objects scattered around his feet. The thin strip of fur. The little bone pot made from a rabbit’s skull, filled with black soot from the fire. Stone pots filled with dried red clay and yellow clay. He crushed the clay into a fine powder using a round pebble. The lamps made from shallow stone basins which burnt animal fats and had wicks made from braided girl’s hair. With these tools he would make the Magic of Power. ‘Come’, said the healer and He followed the Healer and the older man down into the darkness of the cave, using the lamps of animal fat to provide light.

Down in the depths, He noticed pictures painted onto the walls. Outlines of hands, pictures of bison and of deer. The Healer and the old man began to chant the names of the animals, names of nature, names of people, names of weapons; the secret words of Power. In the dim lamplight, the young man started to paint pictures of the beasts who would provide the people with much needed meat. Using the fur strip as a brush and spitting into the dried clay and soot to make a paint, He drew a mighty bison, a swift deer, a strong bear and a slippery fish. All the while the Healer and the old man chanted and danced until the light of the lamps started to dim and flicker. Fearful of being left in the dark, they gathered their things and headed back to their people. If the ‘Magic’ was strong, they would have a good hunt tomorrow. If not...

Source: ‘Primitive man’ by Donald Barr. 1961
Exercise B: Comprehension

1. What is meant by the term ‘The Darkness’?

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2. Describe the problems faced by the people in the cave.

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3. How long is ‘two-handfuls-and-three-more-fingers-of-days’?

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4. Identify and describe the tools and their uses from the story.

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5. According to the story what natural things would these cavemen worshipped? Justify your answer.

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6. Travel forward several thousand years from when the story is set. What evidence could be discovered by archaeologists to prove humans dwelt within the cave?

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Exercise C: Cloze

To obtain food, men had to cover great ______________, following the herds that were constantly moving onto fresh pastures. They had no homes; they slept as best they could wherever the hunt took them, ______________ in caves, in rocky hollows, under bushes and tree branches placed against rocks. When there was little to hunt, men went ______________, and many died.

Once they were able to make ______________, their existence improved for they were able to cook food. With fire they could also frighten away wild ______________, and it helped them to make better weapons. Tired at the end of the day, men gathered around the fire at night and used the light to make things and the time to tell others what they had ______________. Little by little, man’s knowledge grew and they became more skillful in improving their ______________ techniques and tool making by sharing ideas.

This ______________ made hunting large animals less risky. They were able to develop ______________ and better weapons to capture ______________ animals such as the deer or wild horse or overcome ______________ animals such as the bear and the mammoth. Knowledge and ______________ also allowed man to create sturdier shelters, better ______________ and food ______________ techniques which allowed them to keep food for later.

Source: ‘The story of Man’ by Michel Lacre. 1960

Exercise D: Cross curricular

Imagine you are a prehistoric cave painter. In the space provided, draw a picture of a great hunt.