

CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION 2016/17

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Title: Young Samurai-The Way of the Oarsman (Based on the Young Samurai series by Chris Bradford)

Word count: 500

There was a buzz of excitement throughout the Niten Ichi Ryu, the prestigious school for Samurai in Kyoto. Today was the Tenjin Matsuri festival. The trees were bedecked with lanterns. The streets were lined with stalls selling colourful flags, bowls of steaming ramen and pillowy sweets. Jack, the young British sailor, now a Samurai-in-training, was especially excited about that evening's boat race.

The day before the race, Hamida-Kun, the champion oarsman, had arrived from Edo to brief them on the principles of 'botoresu'; Jack had topped the test that followed. He was confident of victory but he was equally confident that his arch-rival Kazuki would try everything to make him lose face in front his Senseis and hundreds of spectators.

When the moment finally arrived, Jack's heart was in his mouth. He stepped on to the pier to loud booning. He had no reason to be popular; he was after-all an alien, a white-skinned foreigner. He was a Gaijin. He saw his only three friends, Akiko, Yamato and little Yori wave to him. 'Be safe!' they called. Now Jack's mind shunned all other thoughts. Only Hamida-Kun's words resounded in his head. "Before you calm the waters of the river, you must calm the currents of your mind." A few seconds later Jack heard the 'Toot' of Sensei Yamada's whistle.

Jack had been maintaining a comfortable lead for the last five minutes. Through the haze and fog, the finish line beckoned to him tantalisingly. His arms were burning. From the corner of his eyes he could see Kazuki inching closer, eating into his lead. He couldn't falter, not now! Kazuki was now right behind him. Without warning, Jack felt a sickening impact and found himself flying head-first into the icy waters of the Kamo river. He must have been underwater for a less than a minute but it felt like a lifetime. He surfaced, shuddering with cold and inhaled lung-fulls of precious air. Hauling himself back into his boat, he realised with a sinking feeling that his oars had been washed away. Ahead, he could see Kazuki turning back to leer at him as he pulled away.

Jack's mind was a whirlpool of emotion. Defeat was now certain. How could he possibly steer without oars? He cursed Kazuki under his breath. How would he face his friends, his teachers? He could almost hear Kazuki's malicious laughter ringing in his ears. His critics were right - he was not worthy of being called Samurai. Out of the chaos of his thoughts, Hamida-Kun's words came back to him. "Unsheath the sword of your intellect. Cut away at the unnecessary". Unsheath the sword. His sword! He pulled out his broad Katana and sliced into the water, pulling with all he had. The boat cut through the waters like a shark. He was gaining on Kazuki. Now they were neck and neck. Jack slashed furiously, blindly at the river. With a final heaving effort, he edged past Kazuki and towards the finish, where his friends waited.