

Read the following short story "Do You Speak English?" written by Michael Collings and answer the questions below.

Manuel had passed the fish on his way up the road. It was eighteen to twenty inches long and its silvery scales were covered with dirt. The gill flaps opened like two gash wounds on the sides of its head as it thrashed helplessly in the gutter. Next to it a boy leaned against the railings, his rod and line dangling out over the floating garbage and the stream of brown, stinking waste which trickled from a pipe in the wall below. The boy wore a faded pair of football shorts. He was perhaps nine or ten years old, barefoot and grubby, and his skin was marked with insect bites.

The fish gasped, then made one last convulsive leap, throwing itself in the direction of the river, and landed on the pavement with a thud. There it lay motionless for a moment, exhausted no doubt by the effort. The boy looked down at it, turned and kicked it back into the gutter.

Manuel had not paid much attention to the fish as he was preoccupied. He had just been to look at an apartment and he was considering how he could afford the rent. Accommodation was hard to find in the city and a place like this didn't come up very often. The apartment he and his wife were currently living in was so small their six-year-old son had to live with his wife's parents during the week. They had been trying to move for two years. He took out a cigarette and leaned against the railing, looking down the street at the boy fishing.

Further along the quay two figures were approaching. He watched as they wandered slowly towards him. They looked to be in their early thirties and were obviously tourists, Americans he would guess. The woman had shoulder-length reddish hair and pale freckled skin. She was slim and athletic looking. Her partner was tall and flabby, his stomach protruding from under his T-shirt. He wore knee-length shorts, sunglasses and his long hair was tied in a pony tail. They came slowly along the dusty street of warehouses. Tourists were not uncommon in the city but they usually kept to the old port with its rococo churches and stately customs house, or took the organized cruises along the reef. It was rare to see them in this district and Manuel assumed they were lost.

'Look at the poor thing,' said the woman, stopping beside the fish, which lay where the boy had kicked it, probably now gasping its last breaths. She spoke with a lazy, nasal drawl. The boy had not turned around but he had noticed their presence. He stared fixedly across the glittering surface of the water towards the lines of washing in the narrow streets on the opposite bank, waiting for them to go.

'It ought to be thrown back,' the woman was saying. 'Do you think he wants it?' She turned to her companion who shrugged. He looked nervous.

'I don't like the look of this neighborhood,' he said. 'I think we should get back.' But the woman wasn't going to let it pass. She stood there looking from the fish to the boy and back again.

'You could try asking him,' the man said. The woman stepped around the fish and approached the boy, who was still looking out across the river. The child's body tensed as the woman came up to him.

'Do you know that fish is dying?' Manuel heard her ask. The boy looked up at her blankly and then shook his head. 'Dy-ing,' she repeated, drawing out each syllable, but the boy remained dumb, uncomprehending. He fidged awkwardly with his feet.

'I don't think he understands,' said the woman to her partner. The man shrugged as if to say 'I told you we shouldn't get involved'. She looked around for assistance and noticed Manuel watching her. She stared at him for a moment, taking in the cream-coloured linen suit, the shoes. She was obviously unsure what to make of him.

'Do you speak English?' she asked, this time with a more respectful tone than she had used with the boy. Manuel said that he did but in a voice which gave her no reason to expect his help. She held his gaze for a few moments.

'Can you ask this boy what he means to do with the fish? It seems so cruel, it ought to be thrown back.' He looked across at the boy and then at the woman. He wondered if he should tell her about the kind of life this boy led, about the squalid shacks down by the beach from where he had probably come that morning, about the parents struggling to make ends meet. Two days earlier he had read in the local paper about a fishing community a few miles up the coast which was being evicted to make way for a new hotel. The boy was watching them anxiously.

'*Esta senhora quer saber o que voce vai fazer com o peixe,*' he said to the boy. He treated the boy gently, with consideration. The boy wiped a dirty hand across one eye and looked at Manuel.

'*E para vender,*' he responded.

'He intends to sell it,' he told the woman. He tried to make his answer sound final, as though that was the end of the matter. The woman hesitated, perhaps uncertain how to interpret the lack of encouragement in his voice. Manuel observed her confusion. Her eyes searched his face as though looking for some clue. Her companion shifted nervously behind her.

'Honey, I think we should go,' he said. But the woman ignored him. He shuffled uncomfortably. 'You know I really don't think you should interfere.'

'How much does the boy want for the fish?' the woman asked. Manuel glanced at her companion with his stooped shoulders and useless bulk. The woman's determination amused him but he did not smile.

'*A senhora quer comprar o peixe. Quanto e?*' The boy named a price which was five times what he would have got for it locally. His expression was deadpan. Only a slight clenching of his right hand betrayed the tension he was probably feeling. Manuel told her the price, adopting the same tone of voice with which he had addressed her previously, but this time he could not help smiling. She seemed to interpret this as friendliness. She opened her purse and took out some money, peeling off a note of twice the value the boy had asked.

'Does he have any change?' she asked.

Manuel translated. Again the boy's right hand twitched slightly but otherwise his face wore the same expression of innocence it had before. He shook his head. The woman hesitated for a moment and looked across at the fish. Then she held out the note to the boy who took it. She stooped down, picked the fish up carefully between forefinger and thumb and threw it into the river. Without looking at either Manuel or the boy she turned to her companion and they went on up the road together. The man produced a handkerchief and offered it to the woman to wipe her fingers but she refused it. They appeared to be arguing. The boy stood holding the note. His expression had hardly changed. Manuel watched the couple until they disappeared out of sight. They did not once look back. He lit another cigarette and returned to his former position against the railings.

The fish had not survived its lengthy time out of the water and was now floating amidst the debris a few feet out from the bank, washed in against the shore by the backward eddy of the current. The boy climbed over the railings and down onto a ledge just above the water line. He began dragging the dead fish towards him with a stick. When it was finally within reach he caught hold of it and tossed it up onto the road. As he clambered over the railings he grinned at Manuel. The boy gathered up his rod and the fish and set off up the street. Manuel watched him while he finished his cigarette. Then he threw the butt down into the dirty water and made his way back the way he had come.

1. Can you figure out the right definitions for the following words? The text might help you.

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| 1) deadpan | A) foul and run-down and repulsive |
| 2) to hesitate | B) to force out |
| 3) squalid | C) to intervene or intrude in the affairs of others; meddle |
| 4) to interpret | D) lodging or board and lodging |
| 5) quay | E) dirty; grimy |
| 6) accommodation | F) to pause in uncertainty; waver |
| 7) grubby | G) a channel at the edge of a street or road for carrying off surface water |
| 8) convulsion | H) to behave or move nervously or restlessly |
| 9) anxious | I) a blank, expressionless face |
| 10) gutter | J) an intense, paroxysmal, involuntary muscular contraction |
| 11) to evict | K) to conceive the significance of; construe |
| 12) debris | L) a landing place, especially one of solid masonry, constructed along the edge of a body of water |
| 13) to interfere | M) a unit of pronunciation uttered without interruption |
| 14) syllable | N) carelessly discarded refuse; litter |
| 15) to fidget | O) uneasy and apprehensive about an uncertain event or matter; worried |

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15

2. Are the following statements true (T) or false (F)?

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|---|-------|
| 1) Manuel wanted to buy a new house. | _____ |
| 2) The woman felt sorry for the boy and wanted to help him. | _____ |
| 3) The woman paid less for the fish than what it was worth. | _____ |
| 4) Manuel did not like the woman. | _____ |
| 5) The boy intended to sell the fish again. | _____ |

3. Why, do you think, did the author write this story?
