

LITERATURE – 2B

Soloman has been a **slave** for many years on Mr Epps' **plantation**. Here he describes the slaves' traditional Christmas celebrations.

START THINKING ...

1 Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- Which special occasions do you celebrate?
- How do you celebrate them?
- Talk about the best / worst celebration you've been to.

TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE (1853) Soloman Northup

The only rest from a slave's constant hard work comes at Christmas. Master Epps allowed us three days off. Other slave masters allow four, five or six days according to their **generosity**. It is the only time of the year that slaves look forward to with interest or pleasure. They are glad when night comes not only because it brings them a few hours repose, but also because it brings them one day nearer Christmas. The young and the old welcome it with equal **delight**. It is a time of **feasting**, dancing and music – the carnival season for slaves. These are the only days they can enjoy a little **restricted** liberty, and they really enjoy it.

It is the custom for one master to give a Christmas supper and to invite the slaves from neighbouring plantations to join the festivity. Usually three to five hundred people come together and they dress up in their best clothes: they wash their coats, clean their shoes and if they're lucky enough to possess a hat, they wear it, but people without a hat or shoes are just as welcome. As a general thing, women wear scarves on their heads, but if their mistress has given them one of her old hats or a bright red ribbon, this is the occasion to wear it. Red is definitely the favourite colour among the slave women I know.

There is a table outside loaded with a variety of different meat and mountains of vegetables. There are roast chickens, ducks and turkeys as well as biscuits and cakes with peach jam and all sorts of different pies. Only slaves who have lived for years on their small rations of **corn meal** can appreciate a supper like this. Males sit on one side of the table and females on the other and friends try to sit opposite or next to each other. There are happy, smiling faces around the table and there's lots of fun and laughter.



After the supper, the Christmas dance begins. My business on these days is to play the violin. Africans are a music-loving people and many of my companions can sing or play the banjo. At the risk of being immodest, I was the musical star of the neighbourhood. My master often received requests for me to play my violin at a ball or festival. I always came back with some money in my pocket from the people who enjoyed my music.

My beloved violin helped me **survive** those twelve long years as a slave. It introduced me to great houses and saved me from many days' work in the fields. With the money I earned, I bought a few little **luxuries** for myself, like a pair of shoes or some **tobacco**. It took me away from a cruel master to places of happiness and fun. My violin was my best friend – making loud, joyful music when I was happy and soft, melodious consolation when I was sad. On Sundays, when I had an hour or two of leisure, I used to sit under a tree by the river bank and play my favourite tunes. My violin was why I always got the loudest welcome at the Christmas dance. The Christmas dance! If you want to see true happiness, go down to Louisiana and see the slaves dancing in the starlight of a Christmas night!

Glossary

slave someone who is owned by someone else and has to work for them

plantation a large farm, especially in a hot part of the world, on which a particular type of crop is grown

generosity the quality of being generous

delight happiness and excited pleasure

feasting eating a large meal, especially to celebrate something special

restricted when something is limited

corn meal rough, yellow flour made from maize, used to make bread, tortillas, etc.

survive to continue to live after almost dying because of an accident, illness, etc.

luxuries things that you like having but do not need

tobacco dried leaves that are inside cigarettes

2 **▶▶ 2B.1** Read the text and listen.

3 Read the text again. Answer the questions.

- How long did Master Epps allow the slaves to take off for Christmas?
- How is the Christmas party for the slaves organised?
- What do the slaves wear to the party?
- How does the Christmas meal compare to the slaves' normal food?
- How does Soloman occasionally earn extra money?
- What does Soloman buy with his money?

4 **READ BETWEEN THE LINES** Circle the correct answer.

- The slaves had a little freedom *once a year / every night*.
- Master Epps is *unkind / generous*.
- The violin was Soloman's best friend because it helped him to *express his feelings / run away*.

5 **VOCABULARY** Complete the sentences with the correct words from the glossary.

- I saw Corey and Jess _____ on turkey, potatoes and pumpkin pie – a traditional Thanksgiving meal!
- Imagine their _____ when their son came home for the first time in three years.
- Emily can't live without her _____ of chocolate, chewing gum and of course wi-fi.
- Could you _____ for ten days on a desert island?
- Let's make a tortilla! We need _____, flour, oil, water and salt.
- I visited a sugar _____ in Cuba last year.

6 **ROLE PLAY** Work in pairs. Student A is Sarah, another slave, Student B is Soloman. Complete the dialogue with the words in the list. Then act it out.

no point in | I'd love to be | Will you be angry
When you are free | What are your plans
I'll be happy when

SARAH _____, what will you do?

SOLOMAN I just want to see my family.
_____ I see my wife and children again.

SARAH _____ with Master Epps?

SOLOMAN No. There's _____ being angry forever.

SARAH _____ for the future?

SOLOMAN _____ a musician, playing my violin in the city. I also want to learn the trumpet.

7 **LISTENING** **▶▶ 2B.2** Listen to the next part of the story where Soloman is rescued from slavery. Match the names with the phrases.

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1 Platt | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 Henry Northup | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 Mr Bass | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| a An old friend of Solomon's | |
| b The man who met Solomon and contacted his friends | |
| c Solomon's slave name | |

WRITING Describing a scene8 **WRITING** Imagine the scene when Solomon is reunited with his family. Describe the scene from Solomon's point of view. Write 120–150 words.

- Physical surroundings: where does the scene take place? *Soloman's family were ... when he ...*
- People: who is present? What do the people look like? *The first person he saw was his wife. She looked older ...*
- Feelings: how does the main character feel? *At first, Soloman felt ... because ...*
- Dialogue: what do the characters say to each other? *The first thing Soloman's wife said was, '...'*

THINK MEMOIRS

A memoir is a type of autobiography. It is a collection of memories of a time in the writer's life.

An autobiography looks at the writer's whole life; a memoir often gives information about a shorter period in the writer's life. Memoirs are based on fact and are usually written in the first person (beginning with *I*). Important politicians often write their memoirs when they retire.

Some examples of memoirs include *If This is a Man* by Primo Levi, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell.

9 Which of the memoirs in the list above do you know? What are they about? Then do some research to match the author with the title and the theme below.

Maya Angelou	<i>Boy</i>	The Second World War
Robert Leckie	<i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i>	Growing up
Roald Dahl	<i>Helmet for my Pillow</i>	Racism in the USA