BERRIS Didn't go to school. No school could keep him. When he was younger he sometimes went to school; some days he was just there. The teacher would look round from the blackboard to find that Berris had appeared, as if from nowhere, and was sitting near the front, a serious solemn look on his face. It was just as likely that when she turned her back again, he'd disappear. It didn't matter whether Berris was there or not really; he wasn't any trouble. He never did or said anything at school. He wasn't stupid, far from it, but he never said a word. The only sound he ever made was to laugh, but he laughed really quietly and his whole face would laugh. His eyes, his cheeks and his mouth, would crease and stretch into a look of pure pleasure and delight and make everyone else laugh too. But then the laugh would die away, the serious solemn look would return, and his eyes would have this far away look, so you sometimes never knew whether he recognised you or not, even if he was looking right at you. Now, Berris didn't go to school at all. No one was quite sure how old he was, but it was assumed he was too
old to have to go to school, which saved anyone the bother of having to make sure he did.

Until he was six, Berris lived with his mother and was a normal, happy little boy, always talking, laughing and playing with other children. But just before his seventh birthday, his mother died and Berris disappeared. They went to bed one night, and the next morning a neighbour, noticing no movement from the house, went in and found Berris's mother dead in the bed, and Berris gone. The autopsy said she'd had a heart defect which had gone unnoticed. Then, three days after the funeral, Berris appeared again, sitting on the steps of his mother's house. After that he went to live with his father and grandfather but from that day on, he never said a word. I heard all this from the sweetie man who knew everything about everyone.

I got to know Berris better, because his grandfather came to cut the grass for us. We didn't have a lawn mower; if your grass got too long you cut it with a machete. Berris's granddad came and did it for us. He was a tall, proud man with a long bushy beard and long hair like a Rasta. Many people were scared of him, and he did look fairly fearsome, but really he was the kindest, gentlest man you could meet. He did everything with the minimum of effort. He walked quite quickly, but his feet barely left the ground and when he chopped the grass he would take off his shirt, lean on a stick with his left hand and swing the machete in long easy swathes with his right. The muscles in his back were knotted and hard, glistening with sweat. He talked in a slow measured way, as though he was thinking carefully about everything he said before he said it. Everybody called him Brother John. He must have had a surname, but I never heard anyone use it.

Berris would come with his grandfather sometimes, and when he did, we would leave whatever we were doing and go off into the fields or down to the river with him. He taught us how to swim like Tarzan, fight like Ninjas and hunt like Indians. He taught us how to make radios out of matchboxes by making holes in the front to let

He did everything with the minimum of effort.

the sound out, carefully drawing in control knobs with a pencil, and sticking a grass stalk down the side for an aerial. Then you had to catch a wasp to put inside it, so that every time you shook the box the wasp would start buzzing, and it sounded like static on the radio.

The more I knew Berris, the more he amazed me. He was so clever. Everything he did always worked, and as I spent more and more time with him, I began to find out things about him that others didn't know. For a start, I found out that he could talk. He spoke quietly, and never wasted his words. He never made exclamations or asked questions; he only said what was necessary. The day I first heard him speak was a bit of a shock, not only because I'd never heard him speak before but because of what he told me. We were sitting in the shade of some guava trees by the river, and Berris was sharpening thin bamboo sticks to make traps for birds. I was idly flicking little off-cuts of bamboo into the water and watching them drift away downstream, when in a very soft, far away voice he said, "Me father dead this week."

I was so surprised to hear him speak, I stopped mid flick and just stared at him. He looked at me with that sad, solemn expression, and I tried to regain my composure and answer him as well as I could. I couldn't think of anything better to say than "How come?"

"Him drown," he said in that same far away voice; "de big turtle kill him."

"How you mean, de big turtle kill him?" I asked lamely. "Turtle can't kill nobody."

He didn't say anything for a while, he just kept cutting the bamboo with short clean flicks of his machete, then he stopped, looked up, and for a few seconds stared ahead of him with that curious distant look in his eyes.

"Him want to kill dat big turtle," he said softly. "But dat turtle going to kill him first."

I didn't understand but I didn't say so. I thought about Berris's father. He was a tall man with the same face as Berris and that same vague distant look in his eyes. I'd seen him last Saturday standing waist deep in the water by his canoe, selling red mullet strung through the gills on lengths of palm leaf. His canoe was called Independence.
and it was long and slender with the black, green and gold of Jamaica painted round it. It didn’t seem possible that he could now be dead. The unfamiliar sound of Berris’s soft voice broke into my thoughts.

“Him go fishing last Tuesday,” he said, “and him don’t come back yet.”

I did a silent calculation. Today was Saturday. That meant four days, five if you counted today.

“Maybe him gone to Black River or Bluefields or ...,” my voice tailed off.

I couldn’t really cope with this, but Berris seemed unconcerned. He went back to cutting his sticks while I tried desperately to think of something to say.

“How you know him dead?” was all I managed to come up with. Once again there was a long silence before Berris stopped cutting sticks and looked up.

“Listen Jobe, before me mada dead me did know. When she lay down on the bed, I did know that she will never get up again. So me run, because me never wan’ dead as well. Last week me faada tell me that him going to shoot the big turtle and kill him.” He paused, “Brother John tell me this same thing like you. Him say, ‘Don’t worry Berris, him soon come’, but I know him not coming back.”

As he said these last few words, he looked away into the distance and closed his eyes. His lips moved silently, as if he was praying, and I gave up trying to think of anything more to say.

On Monday at school I saw Johnny Gopal outside the canteen at break time,

“Hey Jobe,” he shouted across the crowd of staring third years, “you hear ‘bout George Bedford?”

“Who?” I shouted back.

“George Bedford. You know, Berris’s father.”

“Dem find im?” I asked.

Across the canteen, Johnny nodded, and I could read the rest in his face. He pushed his way through the hungry crowds towards me.

“Zebby Williams’ father catch a big turtle in im net, and when im pull de net out of de water im pull up George Bedford body. It looked

like George shoot de turtle, get all tangled up in the line on the spear, and de turtle pull im down and drown im.”

Johnny’s voice carried on describing the body, and the crowds who had gathered round Dave Williams’s boat, but I didn’t really hear any of it. In fact I didn’t hear anything. It was as if I’d entered a soundproof, glass box which allowed me to still be surrounded by people, who I could see were laughing, talking and joking, but I couldn’t hear anything. Deep inside my head, I could hear Berris’s voice saying quietly over and over again, “de turtle a go kill im first.” Gradually, the glass box melted away, and I heard Johnny’s voice again filtering through into my consciousness.

“... and Zebby say de body all swell up with de water and the skin all tight and shiny like shoes leather.” He looked at me with a grimace of disgust on his face. “You see Berris?” I asked him.

“No. Dat is another thing. Nobody see Berris at all since Sunday morning. ‘im gone!’ That figures, I thought to myself; in fact nobody saw Berris for a week. Brother John told me that he’d come back when he came to cut the grass, but Berris wasn’t with him. I didn’t see him again for about three months. There was no rain, the grass didn’t get very high, so Brother John didn’t come, and thoughts of Berris and his father faded, until early one morning in July at the beginning of the summer holidays.

I was down by the river fishing. There wasn’t much river left now. In the dry season, it almost disappeared except for the big, deep pools which ended up full of fish. Fishing was easy; you didn’t even need bait. As soon as you threw the line in, and pulled it slowly out again, there’d be a fish on the end of it. We never ate these fish; the idea was to see how many you could catch, keep them in a kerosene tin and then throw them back in again. I’d been by the river for about an hour and I had a tin full. As I was contemplating tipping them all back in and going home, Berris came cycling down the lane on a rusty
old bike with a huge black box on the back. He saw me and slowed down, then he steered the bike in under the trees and stopped.

“What happen Berris?” I greeted him, “I don’t see you fe a long time, you alright?”

Berris didn’t answer; he just nodded and grinned. He got off the bike, leaned it up against the tree, and still without a word, unlocked the black box on the back with a key that was attached to a string round his neck. He motioned to me to come and look. I tipped the tin of fish back into the pool, and ran over to the bike. In the black box were a dozen or so old machetes. Their wooden handles were smooth and dark with wear and sweat, and they had been file sharpened so many times there was hardly any blade left. They looked like very short, sharp daggers.

“What you going to do with dem Berris?” I asked.

Berris looked at me, still grinning. “Sell dem,” he said quietly.


He reached into the box and from under the pile of machetes; he pulled out a piece of cardboard. On it, in red paint, were the words,

**NATIVE WEAPONS $5**

“Americans,” he said, “down Bluefields beach. You want come?”

He put the sign back, shut and locked the lid of the box, while I hid my kerosene tin in the bushes. Ten minutes later, we were out of town and heading towards Bluefields. I was sitting on the crossbar, and Berris peddled strongly and smoothly; neither of us spoke. I was remembering the last time Berris went to Bluefields to sell things to tourists. He had walked, pushing a home-made cart full of little cages, and in each cage was a mongoose. He’d sold them for $5 each, and the Yanks had fallen over each other to buy them. I couldn’t believe it. As soon as they go to Customs at the airport, they’d be confiscated, but they still bought them. Crazy people, but like Berris had said at the time, “American tourist don’t got no sense, dem will buy anything.”

When we got to Bluefields, Berris leaned his bike under the trees, opened up the box, and waited for customers. I went off swimming for a while, and when I came back about an hour later, Berris was standing silently, watching an extremely fat American tourist showing his even fatter wife, one of the machetes.

“Just think Honey,” he was saying, “This knife was used to kill a lion. Now ain’t that something?”

His wife was nodding enthusiastically and making little squealing noises of delight.

“Gee Honey, it’s so exciting I can’t wait to tell Marge and the girls.”

“I can’t wait to show it to the guys at work, and so cheap, only $5.”

Berris stood motionless, his face solemn and serious. I stood behind the two tourists, trying very hard not to laugh out loud. I looked at Berris and he winked at me, but his face never cracked.

He took the $5 bill, and with a subservient nod of his head said, “Tank you sah, God Bless you sah,” and the fat pair waddled off ecstatic. I couldn’t hold the laughter any longer, and I doubled up and could hardly speak.

“You really tell him dat somebody use dat knife to kill a lion?” I spluttered.

Berris smiled, “Yeah,” he said quietly. “You can tell American anything at all, and dem will believe you.”

“How much you sell?” I asked, peering into the box.

“Four,” he answered. “Dat will do fe today. Come, we go buy some patty and cocobread.”

We made our way slowly back towards the town. We stopped at a shop and bought some food, which we ate sitting under the trees at the top of Pelican Hill looking out across the sea which sparkled and dazzled in the afternoon sun. It was a perfect Saturday. Berris sat with his back to a palm tree, looking out to sea. His face was calm and thoughtful, and we ate in silence. When he’d finished his food, Berris leaned forward, and picking up a stick began to scratch some marks in the dust at his feet. I leaned forward to look at what he was writing. In large, neat print he had scratched the number 18.

“Why you write dat?” I asked.

Berris took a long time to answer. He idly flicked his hand in the dust and the number disappeared.
"Because tomorrow is my birthday, the 12th July. I will be eighteen years old, and 18 is my number."  

"How you mean, 18 is your number?" I asked as I didn’t understand.  

"Come here Jobe," said Berris, "Give me you hand."

He took my right hand in both his, turned the palm up towards him, and looked intently at it. He held it gently and began to trace lines with his fingers, whispering quietly to himself. Finally he let go of my hand and leaned back against the tree, his eyes shut, his lips moving silently as if he was praying. Then he leaned forward and put his face close to mine.

"Listen Jobe," he said in a hushed voice, "Brother John uncle, who live up in the bush, back of Negril, tell me dis. When you born, God write a number in you hand. Dat number is how long you will live. Most people can’t see it, but some people like me can read de number. Me see de number in me mada hand, and in me faada han’. Dat is why me did know dat dem going to dead soon. First of all me couldn’t see no number in my hand but now me can see it, 18."

I stared at Berris in disbelief. I had hoped he was joking, but from the tone of his voice and the look on his face, I knew he wasn’t.

"What number you read in my hand?" I asked hesitantly. I didn’t want to hear the answer, but I had to ask the question. Once again, he took a long time to answer.

"You number not too clear Jobe," he said quietly. "But it’s a big number so don’t worry."

Relief flooded through me like the first breath you take when you come up from a dive.

"You sure about your number, Berris?" I asked. "Maybe you don’t read it right, maybe it say 81."

I tried to sound light-hearted and optimistic but Berris shook his head.

"No mistake Jobe," he said. "But don’t worry, Brother John number say 50, but him long past 50 now, so it don’t always work out. Anyway, me no ‘fraid, Me can dead anytime, you know what the song say, ‘One bright morning when my work is over, I will fly away home.’ Everybody have fe dead sometime.”

Berris picked up the stick he’d been scratching with and threw it out over the wall that marked the edge of the cliff. It cartwheeled away, out of sight, down towards the sea below, and we watched it in silence. Neither of us mentioned the subject again. The days went past, turned quickly into weeks, and before I had time to talk to Berris seriously again, we were back at school and I hardly saw him at all.

Christmas came and went, and still I didn’t see Berris. Brother John told me he was fine. He had a job working for a rich doctor who lived up at Frome near the sugar factory, and sometimes he stayed with an aunt in Grange Hill when he was working late. By the time the summer had come round again, I had almost forgotten about Berris’s number, and I hadn’t seen him to talk to for almost a year.

The day after we broke up, I was standing by the school gate with Boysie and Errol. They stayed with us during term time because they lived so far away from school, but now they were waiting for the minibus that would take them home to their families for the summer holidays. A truck rumbled in our direction, travelling towards the market in the town. It was overloaded, and the back was swaying alarmingly from side to side. It took the left-hand bend very wide. As it disappeared round the corner, I heard a scream, which sent a prickle of fear down my neck, and a riderless bicycle rolled into view and toppled over in the middle of the road. The screaming turned to sobbing and a woman’s voice was crying, “Lord have mercy, de bwoy dead, him dead, him dead.”

Everything seemed to slow down. I got that feeling again. I was in an invisible box, seeing everything but not hearing anything; this time, everything was happening in slow motion. I recognised the bicycle. The black box on the back had fallen open, and the contents spilled all over the road. There was a machete, a file, and a tin Thermos flask that rolled silently across the road and into the gutter. Errol and Boysie began to run towards the voice round the corner, but I was rooted to the spot. It was the 12th July and in my head Berris’s voice kept repeating over and over again, “One bright morning, when my work is over, I will fly away home.”
Fly Away Home

STRATEGIC READING/LISTENING
- Read aloud / in silence
- Read alone
- Read with a friend / in a group
- Look up words
- Listen only
- Listen first, read afterwards
- Listen while you read
- Get all the details
- Get the big picture

What happened?
Find the answers in the story.
1. How do Berris and Jobe become friends?
2. Why is Jobe shocked when Berris talks for the first time?
3. What is the purpose of putting the wasps in the matchboxes?
4. How does Berris' father lose his life?
5. Why does Jobe find it difficult not to laugh out loud on the beach with Berris and the Americans?
6. Why does Berris write the number 18 in the sand?
7. What causes the road accident?

Reading between the lines
Analyse the story and make interpretations. Be prepared to motivate your answers.
1. What impression do you get about the school?
2. Why do you think Berris stopped talking?
3. "Relief flooded through me like the first breath you take when you come up from a dive." This is what Jobe feels when Berris tells him about the number written in his hand. What does he mean?

What do they mean?
Explain, translate or find a synonym for the highlighted words and phrases. Use these strategies to help you:
- Does the word remind you of a word in Swedish or any other language?
- Are there any clues in the text that can help you?
- What sort of a word is it (e.g. noun, verb, adjective, adverb)?

WORDS
1. … Berris had appeared, as if from nowhere, and was sitting near the front, a serious solemn look on his face.
2. His eyes, his cheeks and his mouth, would crease and stretch into a look of pure pleasure and delight …
3. … but it was assumed he was too old to have to go to school …
4. The autopsy said she'd had a heart defect which had gone unnoticed.
5. We didn't have a lawn mower; if your grass got too long you cut it with a machete.
6. The muscles in his back were knotted and hard, glistening with sweat.
8. Gradually, the glass box melted away, and I heard Johnny's voice again …
9. … so Brother John didn't come, and thoughts of Berris and his father faded, …
10. As I was contemplating tipping them all back in and going home, Berris came cycling down the lane …
11. I was sitting on the crossbar, and Berris pedalled strongly and smoothly …
12. I looked at Berris and he winked at me, but his face never cracked.
13. He took my right hand in both his, turned the palm up towards him, and looked intently at it.
15. The screaming turned to sobbing and a woman's voice was crying, …
PHRASES
1. He wasn't stupid, far from it, but he never said a word.
2. He spoke quietly, and never wasted his words.
3. He pushed his way through the hungry crowds ...
4. It looked like George shoot de turtle, get all tangled up in the line on the spear, and de turtle pull im down and drown im.
5. He'd sold them for $5 each, and the Yanks had fallen over each other to buy them.
6. I couldn't hold the laughter any longer, and I doubled up and could hardly speak.
7. "Listen Joe," he said in a hushed voice ...
8. I heard a scream, which sent a prickle of fear down my neck ...
9. ... a riderless bicycle rolled into view and toppled over in the middle of the road.
10. Errol and Boyse began to run towards the voice round the corner, but I was rooted to the spot.

Understanding literature – The title

When writing a short story, the author will give a lot of thought to the title. The title captures the attention of the reader and gives us a clue as to the meaning of the story and how to interpret it. Often the title will be a word or phrase from the story itself.

1. Where in the story do you find the phrase, 'Fly away home'? What does it mean?
2. Is the choice of title a good one, do you think? What makes a good title?

Over to you

Discuss: Tourists got no sense.
The phrases “American tourists got no sense. They will buy anything” and “You can tell them anything” indicate something about Berris’ attitude to tourists.
- What do you think of his attitude?
- Do you think it is a common attitude among local people in tourist resorts?
- How do some people transform when they go abroad?

Jamaican English
- Berris and Jobe speak Jamaican English. Pick a passage where you think the accent is particularly strong. Read it aloud as you think it might sound and then rewrite it in "standard" written English. Compare with a partner.

Do the listening activity connected to the short story (audio/video) and find further study material on the website.

Nativ Weapons $5