

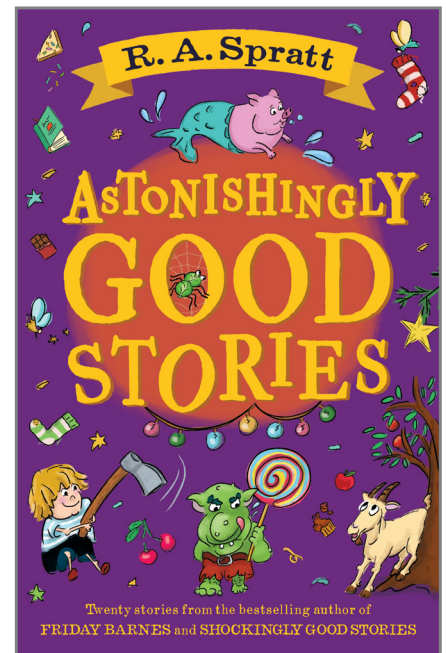
Astonishingly Good Stories

AUTHOR
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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid to Upper Primary



SYNOPSIS

A lovestruck merpig, a peppermint-stick Parthenon, a vegetarian spider and so much more!

From R.A. Spratt, bestselling author of *Friday Barnes* and *Shockingly Good Stories*, comes this collection of twenty terrific tales perfect for fans of Roald Dahl, David Walliams and Paul Jennings.

Featuring Greek myths and fractured fairytales as told by Nanny Piggins (the world's most glamorous flying pig), a mystery investigated by Friday Barnes (girl detective) and a series of tales so tall they will give you altitude sickness.

This book will delight children from four to one hundred and four. Just the thing for reading at bedtime, when you're supposed to be doing your homework or when you've been chased up a tree by an escaped rhinoceros and you're waiting for the zookeeper to arrive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

R.A. Spratt is the author of *Friday Barnes*, *The Peski Kids* and *The Adventures of Nanny Piggins*. When she isn't writing stories she is telling them on her podcast *Bedtime Stories with R.A. Spratt*.

R.A. lives in Bowral, NSW, where she has three chickens, five goldfish, many tadpoles and a desperately needy dog called Henry. She also has a husband and two daughters.

STUDY NOTES

BEFORE READING

- Take a close look at all the illustrations on the cover. What do they tell you about the stories that might be inside?
- The illustrations are just one element that makes up the front cover—what are some other elements that create the full cover?
- Read the blurb on the back. What more have you learned about the contents of the collection? What do you think the tone of the blurb and the way it's been written say about the reading experience you're about to have?

WRITING STYLE

Short story format

- Pick one of the short stories in the book. Can you identify the main events of the story? What events are part of the beginning? What about the middle and end?

- Good stories are driven by characters. For example, in ‘The Scorpion and the Frog’, Nanny Piggins and the children only build a chocolate boat because Nanny Piggins wants to outdo Nanny Anne. Pick one of Nanny Piggins’ stories and make a list of every time a character does something that influences the story.
- The Nanny Piggins and Friday Barnes stories feature in full-length novels as well as the short stories in this collection. Read either *The Adventures of Nanny Piggins* or *Friday Barnes: Girl Detective*. Compare the novel you read to the relevant short stories. What do you think the author considered when deciding the format of the novel and short stories? Which format do you prefer? Why?

Humour

- Here are some of the techniques the author employs that you may want to use in your own writing:
 - Irony: The expression of one’s meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect. A simple way of putting it is that irony usually signals a difference between the appearance of things and reality.
 - Hyperbole: Exaggeration used to evoke strong feelings or create an impression which is not meant to be taken literally. Often involves a surprise or unexpected event or consequence.
 - Parody: The opportunity to imitate the style of an individual, place, object or institution with a nonsensical approach.
 - List the five moments in a story from the book that you consider to be the funniest. Then pair up with the person next to you and narrow your lists down to the top three moments. Next, determine which humour technique the author used.
 - Write about a short humorous event that has happened to you at school or at home using the three types of humour listed above. Next, rewrite the story using only one type of humour. Is it as effective?
 - Choose a paragraph from the book and consider which technique (eg. irony, hyperbole, parody) could be used to make this paragraph even funnier. Then rewrite the paragraph using this technique.

Characterisation

- *Astonishingly Good Stories* features short stories told about three different sets of characters—Nanny Piggins and the Green children, Tammy and Mum, and Friday Barnes and her friends. How does the author make each of these characters feel unique? Consider the use of voice and stereotypes.
- Which characters in the stories were your favourites? Why?
- Close your eyes and listen to your teacher read a section of dialogue aloud. Can you tell which character it is? How did you know?
- Pick a character from one of the stories and choose a voice that you think brings that character to life. Create a short speech that that character might give and then present it to the class. Could they guess which character you were from your speech and the voice you used?
- Nanny Piggins’ stories often feature her relatives, who are interesting characters in their own right. Think about the differences between Iolaus and Ariel Piggins. How do you think things would have turned out differently in ‘Hercules and the Augean Stables’ if Ariel had been Hercules’ niece and there had been cake about?
- Pick three stories from Nanny Piggins’ myths and Mum’s tall tales and create a list of characters. Which are protagonists, antagonists or supporting characters?
- Nanny Piggins’ myths and Mum’s tall tales feature stories within stories. Can you identify the main and supporting characters within the stories told by Nanny Piggins and Mum?

TV-writing axioms

- R.A. Spratt’s writing style is influenced by her experience writing for television. Behind your favourite TV show is usually a whole team of writers who are frantically writing the next episode, with your entertainment at the front of mind. Here R.A. shares her top writing tips, as learned from writing for TV:
 - Paint Your Drainpipes Red. This means if something is going to be pivotal to the plot later on, make sure you put it in and make it noticeable so the audience won’t miss it.
 - Kill Your Darlings. When you write for TV it’s really important to be concise. Every line of dialogue should either progress the plot or develop a character, preferably both. If it doesn’t, you cut it. It doesn’t matter how good or

clever the line is: everything in the script needs to be functional.

- Show, Don't Tell. When you're introducing a character, try not to describe them. Show what they are like through their actions. For example, don't say 'Boris was a very sensitive bear', instead show Boris interrupting Nanny Piggins mid-story by bursting into tears and giving her a bone-crushing hug because a story about a troll who had never eaten cake is the worst thing he has ever heard.
- Think visually. It sounds strange to talk about what things 'look like' when you're writing a book. But you want your reader to imagine a picture in their mind, and you want that image to be as powerful or as emotional or as cool as possible. Take your audience with you to look at the coolest thing you can imagine.
- Write for your audience. Storytelling is a form of communication to another person, or a group of people: those people should always be in your mind. You're writing to entertain them. If you were telling your story to a friend would they get bored, would they be offended, would they hate your characters? Think about your audience – even if it is just your teacher marking your assignment—and write for them.
 - Take one of the short stories you've written for one of the other activities in this study guide and examine it with these writing tips in mind. Can you spot places where you can make important things more noticeable, cut down on words, show your reader details instead of telling them, make your writing more visual or better entertain your audience?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- Pick a time period and culture and research some of the most prominent tales from that area at that time. Had you heard of them all? Pick one and share it with your class.
- Pick one of the myths in *Astonishingly Good Stories* and list out the key points, looking at the broad strokes of the story—what the lesson is, and what the consequences were. Don't worry about noting down the details. Now, take those broad strokes and see if you can find a similar story in a different culture's mythology. Compare the two stories. How are they similar? How are they different?
- Research the history of one of the tales, myths or legends Nanny Piggins tells the Green children. What's the earliest written version you can find? How is that different from a more recent version of the tale? How are they both different from the tale Nanny Piggins tells?
- Watch *Frozen* and find a written version of 'The Snow Queen' to read, then read Nanny Piggins' version. Can you see the difference between the written tale and Nanny Piggins' version, which is a retelling, and between the written tale and *Frozen*, which has been reimagined? *Frozen* is still based on 'The Snow Queen'—what stays the same in each tale?
- What other tales or myths can you think of that have been remade into a different form? This could be a tale that has become a movie, like the Hercules myths and the Disney film *Hercules*, or a tale that has inspired a new story like 'The Snow Queen' and *Frozen*.
- Why do you think adults read stories to children at bedtime? Do you like being read to when you're about to go to sleep?
- What is it about reading stories that is comforting? Do you think it's more comforting to read stories that keep coming back to the same key characters, like the stories in these collections do?
- Consider one of Tammy and Mum's tall tales and note each time Mum uses facts or logic to justify the things she's saying. Does each individual point make sense? Fact-check some of the points she makes.
- Write your own snowball story. Think of an absurd statement (eg. there's a sock-cleaning fairy) that you can link to a fact (eg. dirty socks smell) and write it down. Use something simple as a starting point, like a picture from the paper, something you've found or something you've overheard. Now repeat this, linking your first idea to another idea and building off the statement and fact you've already written down. Use this as a starting point to plan out a story—let it grow until you end up with something big and crazy. Then try and tie it back to your starting point to bring the story full circle.
- Re-read 'Friday Barnes and the Case of the Stolen Star' and focus on the ending, where Friday explains how she solved the case. Write down each of her key clues, then read the story again. Can you see where the author inserted

these clues into the text? Notice how the clues are woven into the story to try and make them less obvious when you first see them.

- Plan a detective story of your own. What is the mystery that is going to be solved? Now think about what your detective is going to do to solve it. What kind of clues can you plant to help them? Where will you plant these clues? It can be tricky to insert clues into a narrative in such a way that they don't stick out to the reader. How will you manage this? R.A. Spratt's top mystery-writing tip is to plot backwards. This means figuring out the solution first, and then all the clues your main character will need to find. When you write your story, include each clue carefully so as not to give away too much too soon.
- Consider the ways in which the stories in this collection are written. Do you think they lend themselves to an auditory format? Find one of the stories in the book on the podcast. Read it, then listen to the episode. Did listening to the story versus reading it change the way you engaged with the narrative?
- As a class, brainstorm ideas for your own podcast. What kind of stories might you tell? Would one person read them out, or would you read them like a play, with different students reading the lines of different characters?