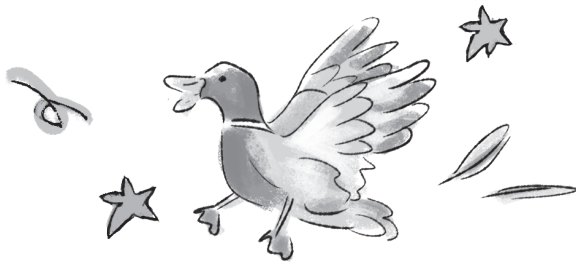


ASTONISHINGLY GOOD STORIES

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Books by R. A. Spratt

The Adventures of Nanny Piggins
Nanny Piggins and the Wicked Plan
Nanny Piggins and the Runaway Lion
Nanny Piggins and the Accidental Blast-Off
Nanny Piggins and the Rival Ringmaster
Nanny Piggins and the Pursuit of Justice
Nanny Piggins and the Daring Rescue
Nanny Piggins and the Race to Power
The Nanny Piggins Guide to Conquering Christmas

Friday Barnes: Girl Detective
Friday Barnes: Under Suspicion
Friday Barnes: Big Trouble
Friday Barnes: No Rules
Friday Barnes: The Plot Thickens
Friday Barnes: Danger Ahead
Friday Barnes: Bitter Enemies
Friday Barnes: Never Fear
Friday Barnes: No Escape
Friday Barnes: Undercover

The Peski Kids: The Mystery of the Squashed Cockroach
The Peski Kids: Bear in the Woods
The Peski Kids: Stuck in the Mud
The Peski Kids: Near Extinction
The Peski Kids: The Final Mission

Shockingly Good Stories
Astonishingly Good Stories

R. A. Spratt

ASTONISHINGLY
GOOD
STORIES



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In Memory of Madeleine K. Albright
(First woman to serve as US Secretary of State)
1937–2022

Secretary Albright was kind enough to endorse my first book, *The Adventures of Nanny Piggins*. She had absolutely no idea who I was and, despite being a retired secretary of state and a college professor (so presumably busy), she took the time to read my book about a flying, talking pig. She then wrote a lovely letter with a quote to go on the back of my book.

At the time I was a new mother. My daughter was almost exactly one year old. I remember being exhausted. I was almost always exhausted back then. One morning I got up, went to my computer and saw an email from the office of Madeleine Albright. I had read her book *Madam Secretary* the previous year and found it inspiring. I love books about women working really hard and then being triumphantly successful. Anyway, being an egomaniac, I had sent her a copy of *The Adventures of Nanny Piggins* and asked her if she would endorse it. I never actually expected her to respond. But she did. I was so shocked and excited I couldn't breathe.

It is really hard making a living as a writer. Especially when you have a child and you realise that you are now inflicting your total lack of job security on another human being, a tiny human being. Madeleine Albright's faith in me in that time meant so much and it still does. I will always be grateful for her kindness.

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Foreword

Last year I wrote a book called *Shockingly Good Stories*. It was a collection of tales created to spread joy in a challenging time.

Here we are twelve months later and times are still challenging, so I have written down twenty more stories.

The world is in desperate need of silliness and outrageous fabrications – I have written this book to serve that purpose. Now it is your job to read it. So gather your children around you and take them on a journey to a world of imagination. I hope you enjoy the adventure.

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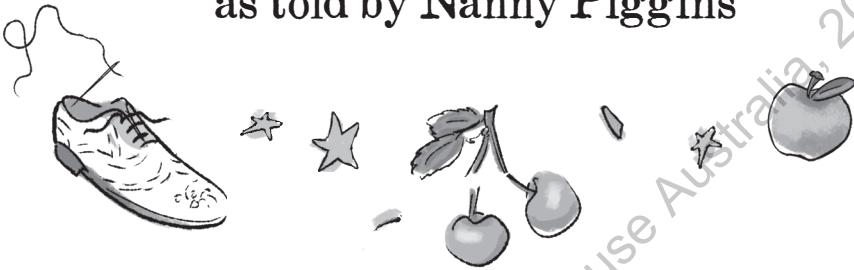
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‘The Elves and the Shoemaker’ as told by Nanny Piggins



‘Did I ever tell you the story about my cousin the cobbler?’ asked Nanny Piggins.

Nanny Piggins, Boris and the children happened to be eating apple cobbler at the time. Apple cobbler is a delicious dessert made with stewed apples and sweet dumplings baked on top. Nanny Piggins’ version of apple cobbler was particularly delicious because she had tweaked the recipe. Instead of just apples, she added chocolate. In fact, five kilos of chocolate for every one kilo of apple. She said this was necessary to ‘balance’ the flavour. And the children did not argue. After just one serving, Derrick, Samantha and Michael were too sugar-addled to say anything rational anyway. So when Nanny Piggins said

she was related to a cobbler, this did somewhat confuse poor Michael.

‘You’re related to a fruit-based dessert?’ he asked.

This was not such a ridiculous question. Nanny Piggins was a pig and yet she managed to be related to a bear (her brother) and, they had recently discovered, a goat (a distant cousin). To be related to dessert might seem strange for a normal person, but Nanny Piggins was in every way so extraordinary it was just the type of thing she’d find some way of doing.

‘No, of course not,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘I do have a distant aunt who claimed to be a pavlova, but it turned out that she was simply the ballet dancer the pavlova was named after, so we stopped being impressed.’

‘Right,’ said Michael. Although he still did not understand in the least.

‘No, this relative was a cobbler, as in a person who makes shoes,’ said Nanny Piggins.

‘Ooooh,’ said the children, catching on.

‘Of course, her life was terribly hard,’ said Nanny Piggins.

‘Was she bad at making shoes?’ asked Derrick.

‘No, quite the opposite,’ said Nanny Piggins. **‘Her life was hard because of the rampant pigism in the shoe industry.’**

‘The what?’ asked Samantha.

‘Pigism,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘You’ve got to understand that back in the olden story days, people were not as forward-thinking as they are today. People were so narrow-minded that they preferred to wear shoes that had not been made by a pig.’

The children thought about this for a moment. Nanny Piggins had raised them to know that pigism was wrong.

But, that said, they could understand someone having a preference for a shoe made by an animal with opposable thumbs. They realised, however, that saying this to Nanny Piggins would not be wise.

‘So anyway, my poor cousin Madge and her husband struggled year-after-year to make ends meet,’ continued Nanny Piggins. ‘It got to the point where they had so little money, they could not even afford to buy . . .’ Nanny Piggins got emotional here and struggled to continue.

‘It’s all right, Nanny Piggins,’ said Samantha kindly. ‘If it’s too hard for you to go on, we don’t need a story.’

‘No,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘Poor Madge’s story needs to be told. It may be brutal, heartbreaking and distressing for young ears such as yours to hear, but you cannot be sheltered from the grim reality of life forever. Madge and her husband were so poor . . . they could not afford cake.’

Boris broke down and wailed, ‘That’s terrible!’

‘It gets worse,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘Because they could not afford cake, they were reduced to eating this dreadful sugar-free substance that people say is food but I’m not entirely convinced it is. It was called brrreeead.’

‘Briieeed?’ asked Derrick. He had never heard this word before.

‘Do you mean “bread”?’ asked Michael.

‘Yes, that’s it!’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘Disgusting stuff. Just plain, solidified flour with air in it. It’s the food equivalent of eating dishwater.’

‘Couldn’t they put a nice bit of honey on it?’ asked Boris. He was partial to a honey sandwich himself. And when I say

‘partial’, I mean he passionately loved honey sandwiches with every ounce of his considerable frame.

‘They couldn’t afford honey,’ said Nanny Piggins.

‘Oh dear chocolate!’ wailed Boris. ‘This story is horrendous. I can’t bear to listen. And I’m a bear, so I’m usually good at bearing.’

This was not true. Boris was not good at bearing in the sense of tolerating something unpleasant at all. But he was a bear and therefore good at that, so close enough.

‘It was terrible,’ agreed Nanny Piggins. ‘It’s so exhausting being poor and hungry. Especially for pigs.’

‘It is?’ asked Derrick.

‘Oh yes,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘You see, we love food so much that when we don’t get any it’s so much more dreadful.’

The children thought about this. They guessed it kind of made sense.

‘Madge and her husband only had enough leather left to make one pair of shoes,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘If no-one came in and ordered a pair of shoes, they would starve. Or have to grow vegetables and eat them. Which just sounds so dreadful I’m sure they’d rather starve.’

‘This story is awful!’ sobbed Boris.

‘Don’t worry, I’m coming to a good bit,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘Madge and her husband were just despairing and bemoaning their wretched lives when the shop bell tinkled. They looked up to see that a man had entered.’

A customer had not been in their shop for such a long time that they assumed it was someone who was lost, or perhaps a bank robber who was looking for a

place to hide from the police. But no – this was an actual customer wanting to buy shoes.

Madge rushed forward and measured the customer's feet. Her husband showed him pictures of the styles he could choose from. The man picked what he wanted and said he would be back in the morning to collect his shoes.

Madge and her husband were overjoyed. They would have jumped up and down with glee except they were so exhausted from starvation they didn't have any energy. So instead, Madge got out her tools and started preparing the leather and cutting it into the necessary shapes. But it had been such a long day that she soon became too tired. Plus it was getting dark and there were no candles. Madge decided to go to bed and wake up early the next morning to sew the shoes together.

But the next morning they overslept. I'm not sure why. The village cockerel must have got a frog in his throat. Perhaps literally. I suppose cockerels do eat frogs. I'll have to ask the next one I meet.

Anyway, Madge and her husband were awoken by the tinkle of the shop bell.

'Oh no,' said Madge. 'It's the man returning, and I haven't made his shoes.'

'We shall have to plead with him to have mercy on us,' said her husband.

'Or bop him on the head with a frying pan if the opportunity presents itself,' suggested Madge.

She hurried out to the shop, grabbed up a frying pan just in case and threw open the door, bracing herself for the inevitable onslaught of abuse.

But as soon as the man stepped into the shop his eyes lit up and he gasped with pleasure.

‘Why, these are the most magnificent shoes I have ever seen!’ exclaimed the man.

Madge turned around and saw that the shoes, as if by magic, had been completed. And they did look beautiful. She was a very fine shoe-maker and these were every bit as good as a pair she had made herself.

‘Of course, yes, these shoes that I made earlier,’ said Madge, handing them to him. The man paid for them and left.

Madge and her husband were overjoyed. They hadn’t had any actual money in such a long time. They rushed straight to the nearest bakery and bought a celebratory cake.

‘Was that a responsible way to manage their finances?’ asked Samantha.

‘Of course not,’ declared Nanny Piggins. ‘Madge was a Piggins! She wouldn’t dream of behaving responsibly when there’s cake to be eaten.’

‘So they lived happily ever after?’ asked Derrick.

‘No. Sadly they got carried away and ate lots of cake, spending all the money,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘So they were right back where they started. By 2 o’clock in the afternoon, they were starving.’

‘Hadn’t they just eaten cake?’ asked Derrick.

‘They were pigs!’ exclaimed Nanny Piggins. ‘They had the metabolisms of elite athletes. They were ravishingly hungry again.’

‘Don’t you mean ravenously hungry?’ asked Samantha.

‘No, I mean ravishingly,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘Madge was a Piggins after all, so she wasn’t just good at making shoes. She was staggeringly beautiful as well.’

They were just starting to moan with hunger and despair when the doorbell tinkled. This time, two women customers walked in. Madge and her husband were shocked. They’d never had two customers in their shop simultaneously before. Apparently, the women had seen the man dancing down the street in his fabulous new shoes and asked where he’d bought them. Now they wanted some as well.

Madge set to work cutting out the leather, but with all the cake eating and the excitement, it was getting late in the day. It was too dark to keep working, so Madge and her husband went to bed, planning to get up early and finish them in the morning.

‘But they overslept again?’ guessed Michael.

‘Yes,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘It was the frog the cockerel had eaten the day before – it was poisonous. So the cockerel was sick and slept in himself. They were instead awoken by the tinkle of the shop bell.’

Madge rushed out, frying pan in hand, ready to defend herself from the angry customers. But as soon as she stepped into the shop, she found the two women were delighted. There were beautiful shoes finished and

waiting on the counter. The customers gave Madge the money and left. Madge and her husband couldn't believe it. Two days in a row, the shoes had been finished as if by magic. There was only one thing they could do.

'Eat cake?' guessed Samantha.

'Exactly,' said Nanny Piggins. 'They rushed to the bakery and spent all their money on cake. And by 2.15 in the afternoon they were starving, again. It took a little longer that day because they had eaten twice as much cake.'

Madge and her husband had just staggered back to the shop, distraught because there was no way their amazing luck could continue, when four customers walked into the shop – and they all wanted shoes!

And so it continued. Day after day. More and more customers. More and more shoes miraculously made. And best of all – more and more cake. After about two weeks of this, Madge became slightly less hungry and she began to think about what was going on.

'Whoever is making up these shoes for us is doing us a very good deed,' she said.

'Yes,' agreed her husband.

'Tonight,' said Madge. 'Let's hide in a closet and see who it is.'

So that is what they did. Madge cut out the leather, and they pretended to go to bed, then secretly crept back into the workshop and hid in a closet, where they waited and waited. Fortunately, they'd had the foresight to pack supplies. They'd filled the cupboard with coffee cake so they were neither hungry nor tired.

Eventually, just as the village clock struck midnight, there was movement in the workshop. Madge and her husband were astonished to see three tiny elves climb up on the workbench. These little elves looked just like regular pigs except they had worn and ragged clothes.

‘Wait a minute!’ said Michael. ‘The elves were pigs?’

‘Of course,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘All elves are pigs.’

‘But they are always drawn as tiny humans in children’s books,’ explained Samantha.

‘Typical,’ said Nanny Piggins. ‘And I bet these children’s books were illustrated by humans?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Samantha.

‘Humans are so pigist they can’t even see their pigism,’ muttered Nanny Piggins, shaking her head. ‘No, in real life, elves are tiny pigs.’

The children worked hard to try to imagine what this looked like. They couldn’t really.

The tiny elves were so hard-working, and they made such fine shoes, and yet they looked so ragged themselves. It broke Madge’s heart to see them that way.

‘They have been so good – helping us in our time of need,’ Madge whispered to her husband as they watched from the closet. ‘We must do something to help them.’

‘But what?’ asked her husband.

‘I know,’ said Madge. ‘Tomorrow, let’s make them each a fine suit of clothes.’

And that’s what she did. Madge made each elf a smart outfit with trousers and shirts, waistcoats and jackets.

That night, Madge and her husband lay the elves' clothes out on the workbench and then hid in the cupboard full of coffee cake, ready to watch. Again, at midnight, the elves appeared. They climbed up on the bench and when they saw their new outfits they were overjoyed.

'Look at these fine clothes!' exclaimed the first elf.

'So beautifully made,' said the second elf.

'We'll get a fortune when we sell them,' said the third elf.

On hearing this, Madge burst out of her closet in a rage. 'How dare you! You can't sell those clothes. I made them with love and gratitude in my heart. They are a gift.'

'And they're a lovely gift,' said the first elf.

'But not as lovely as a big slice of chocolate cake,' said the second elf.

'That's what you want to spend the money on?' asked Madge.

'We love cake,' confessed the third elf.

'So do we!' exclaimed Madge. 'Let's make more fancy elf clothes and more shoes, so we can get even more cake!'

The elves cheered with delight.

Then they all sat around stitching fine, miniature clothing and beautiful shoes all night. And the next day, the shoe shop didn't open at all because they were all too busy eating lots and lots of cake! So they all lived happily ever after. The end,' said Nanny Piggins. 'Time for bed.'

‘It’s 11 o’clock in the morning,’ said Samantha.

‘Oh yes, so it is,’ said Nanny Piggins, checking her watch.

‘Time for a nice slice of cake then.’

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Storytelling Tip #1

Sometimes you will read a story so well your child will beg you to tell another.

At this point, feel free to say the magic word – ‘No.’

It is a good word for your child to hear occasionally. They may then accuse you of being every bit as mean as the wicked witch or nasty goblin in the story you just read, in which case, lean into it. Agree with them. Tell them that you are impressed with their intelligence and that they have managed to figure out your dark secret while they are still so young. Explain that you really are a wicked witch/nasty goblin (or both if you like) and that if they don't behave themselves and go to sleep, you will go down to the kitchen, enchant an apple, feed it to them and watch as they sleep for a hundred years.

