

STORY STARTER I

SOPHIE IN GARGANTUA

BY MAUREEN LYNAS

Age range: 7–9 years old

Genre: Comedy adventure

“Please, please don’t leave me with Aunt Annabelle,” begged Sophie. “She wears frills! And bows! And curling papers in bed!”

“We must,” said Papa. “It’s far too risky. What if you were chomped on by a chewderoo?”

“Or snapped up by a snapadoodle!” agreed Mama, lacing up her boots. “An expedition to Gargantua is not a suitable outing for a little girl. It’s far too dangerous.”

“But I like danger! I love danger! I live for danger. Look!” Sophie hitched her petticoats up and jumped onto Papa’s desk before he could stop her. She leapt across to Mama’s, wobbled on the edge then regained her balance and headed for the bookshelves. “I can climb to the tops of the trees and collect the specimens of...oops.”

She slipped but Papa was fast and caught her. She looked up at him, pleading.

“You need me! I can carry your butterfly nets.”

“No,” said Papa.

“No,” said Mama. “You must stay here where it’s safe.”

“But *you’re* going,” said Sophie. “What if *you* get chomped on or snapped up?” A thought suddenly popped into her head. It scared her more than the mythical creatures of Gargantua. She gasped. “What if you DIE...because I’m not there to save you?”

STORY STARTER 2

THE REUNION

PAULA RAWSTHORNE

Age range: Young Adult

Genre: Contemporary

Ruby pushed on the doors and they swung open with a whoosh. A wave of warm air hit her; it smelt of polish and perfume. She stepped inside. Everything was shrouded in a soporific light coming from the stage.

“Wow!” She hadn’t expected this from the shabby exterior and dodgy location. Rows of plump, velvety seats sloped down to the curtain-framed stage. Gleaming pipes rose up behind an ornate organ. Gilt-edged boxes clung to the walls and, high above, a huge chandelier sparkled from the sculptured ceiling.

She walked down the aisle, trying to suppress her nerves and guilt: what would her mum say if she knew she was here, meeting the man who didn’t have a right to call himself her dad? Why now after fifteen silent years? The letter, this address, a plea to come and see him.

“Is anyone there?” she called towards the stage. “It’s Ruby. I’m here to see Pete Lawton.”

“Ruby!” The baritone voice from the wings sounded full of pained longing. A figure clattered across the boards and took centre stage.

Ruby stared, open mouthed, at the towering wig, the make-up caked face, the sequined dress and the killer heels.

“Dad!?”

STORY STARTER 3

AMY WARBURTON'S MOST UNUSUAL PET

BY STEVE HARTLEY

Age range: 7+

Genre: Humour

Amy Warburton **soooooo** wanted to win the school's Most Unusual Pet competition. The trouble was, she didn't have a pet – usual **or** unusual.

There were also some good contenders.

Vicky Jones had a dog with no hair called Shiver.

Millie Walker had a cat with no tail called Oops.

Anthony Dingle had a butterfly cocoon hanging from a twig in a jam jar. It wasn't called anything.

Daniel Black said he had a bat called Drac, although no one had ever seen it. He said that was because it only ever came out at night, but Amy knew a fib when she heard one.

Bethany Baldwin had a stick insect called Harry. Amy **had** seen that.

"I bet my stick insect wins the prize," boasted Bethany.

"No it won't," replied Amy, before she could stop herself. "Because my bnumgrubber will."

"What's a bnumgrubber?"

'It's a bit like a rabbit, and a bit like a frog. They live in trees, bite bottoms and grub for bnumbs.'

Amy could see that Bethany Baldwin also knew a fib when she heard one.

"I can't wait to see **that**," she said.

Me too, thought Amy. **Now what am I going to do?**

STORY STARTER 4

MONSTERS ANONYMOUS

BY SARWAT CHADDA

Age range: Young Adult

Genre: Comedy Horror

“Hi, I’m Alan and I’m a monster.”

“Hi, Alan,” reply the crowd somewhere out there, in the darkness beyond the light.

I lick my lips, trying to get some moisture to them but it’s an old habit and, well, having been dead for the last two years I’m pretty dried up all over.

“And it’s been three weeks since I ate my last brain.”

There’s a smattering of applause. A couple of the other guys give me the thumbs up.

I blink, trying to see if I recognise anyone. No good. Really wish I’d found my right eyeball before I’d come out. Must have rolled off back under the drawers again. Or Eddie’s swallowed it again. Damn bird.

“I’m getting out more. Last Friday they had a Zombie-thon at the Ritzy. Whole audience came dressed up. There was a competition. I came third.”

A few more claps of applause.

“I’m doing Pilates twice a week. Flexibility’s becoming a real issue; if I’m not careful I’ll be shambling by the end of the year.”

Paul, who’s up front, nods. Or creaks his head forward. He knows what I’m talking about. Poor guy’s a stiff. Lorraine has to bring him by wheelbarrow. I smile at him, or at least stretch my lips. Black bile seeps out over my chin and down my shirt. I sigh. I’ll never get the stain out.

“But the big news this week is I’ve met someone. She’s here tonight. It’s her first time.” I spot her nearby, just by the door. I wave. “Her name’s Mary.”

Mary shakes her head. She’s shy.

“Come on up, Mary,” says George, the facilitator.

Reluctantly, Mary joins me on the podium. We hold hands and I’m grinning and spilling bile like an oil slick. “Mary’s a banshee.”

George gestures to the mike. “Say a few words for us, Mary.”

Mary blushes, then takes the mike in her slim, delicate fingers. She looks at me, unsure. I nod. She takes a deep breath.

“EE..”

STORY STARTER 5

BRAINLESS

BY SARA GRANT

Age range: Young adult

Genre: Sci-fi thriller

Congeaed globs of macaroni in tomato sauce. That's what I think they look like. As far as the eye can see, rows and rows of glowing pink jars twitch and pulse. It looks like an old-fashioned candy store with only one sweet on offer: brains!

Transplanting brains is messy work. My once white coveralls are stained pink with dots, drips and ragged splatters of blood. I'm a walking abstract painting – but they think I'm a blank canvas. They think I'm one of the brainless. That's why they gave me this job. Anyone with half a brain couldn't stand it here. The cold. The sour smell. The isolation. At thirteen, you are given a new brain or a menial job. I pretended to be an idiot to keep my own macaroni in my head.

I slide number 4519802 from its hiding place. Dack Jenkins Foulmore. He was the most notorious serial killer of all time. I was supposed to shred his brain, but I couldn't. I didn't want his remains fed to the cows on Piphor 5 or the emperor's cats. He was an artist in death. He never killed the same way twice and took great care to preserve the brains so they could be salvaged. A genius like that deserves to live again – like all the other top-notch brains we save. Now I will give him a second chance, not only because I promised, but also because he was my dad.