

A Teachers' Guide to PlainTales

Introduction to PlainTales

There are plenty of reasons to enjoy classic stories. Maybe there's nothing good on TV (there probably isn't). Maybe it will make you smarter (it probably will). Or perhaps you have happy memories of reading great stories or having them read to you. You remember times when a story was so captivating that everything else seemed to melt away, when just the sound of the words transported you to another world. Suddenly homework and feeding the dog went out the window, and nothing mattered more than finding out what happened next.

A magical alchemy occurs when words and imagination mix, and it's the goal of PlainTales to make that happen more often. The other benefits of hearing stories, such as a bigger vocabulary, the ability to think creatively, and a jumpstart on school success, matter. But in the end it's the wonderful, transporting pleasure of a good story that makes them worth visiting again and again. And that can change your life for the better, forever.

We hope you'll enjoy listening to a PlainTales story. Prepare to be transported.

Introduction to PlainTales Classics

There are two kinds of stories: the ones you *should* read and the ones you *want* to read. We think the twenty-two stories included in PlainTales Classics are both. You and your kids love tales like "Hansel and Gretel," "The Velveteen Rabbit" and "Rip Van Winkle" because they have great characters you can cheer for (or despise unabashedly) and because they leave you hungry to know what comes next.

They're also good for you. A first introduction to some of the world's great writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Oscar Wilde, PlainTales Classics are cultural touchstones that have informed subsequent works of literature, right down to *Harry Potter*, for the past 100 years. Of course, learning comes easily when you're having fun.

The Reluctant Dragon—Kenneth Grahame

Kenneth Grahame's greatest triumph was *The Wind in the Willows*, a book that has never been out of print since its publication in 1908. But before that came the short story "The Reluctant Dragon," in which a boy befriends a lazy but quite pleasant dragon. When the townspeople call in St. George, the eminent dragon-slayer, the boy has to set things to rights—and try to save the life of his gentle friend. Many of Grahame's writings are nostalgic for the more pastoral, humane world that passed away with British industrialization, and "The Reluctant Dragon" emphasizes similar

themes. Here, where the commonplace and fantastical live side by side, might doesn't always make right, and conflicts are resolved with wit and quick-thinking rather than violence.

How to Listen: “The Reluctant Dragon” is set in the Berkshire Downs of Oxfordshire, England, the same place where Rat, Mole, Toad and Mr. Badger make their homes in Grahame’s *Wind in the Willows*, and where Grahame himself grew up. Grahame takes a traditionally romantic view of nature and country living and imbues his writing with a rich sense of place. Listen to how his evocative descriptions bring the Downs to life.

The Tailor of Gloucester and Other Tales—Beatrix Potter

Beatrix Potter’s charming stories of human-like animals—mice who sew, hedgehogs who do laundry, naughty bunnies who get into mischief—have delighted children since they were first published in 1901, in part because they’re so fantastical, but also because they depict the quirks of human nature in a very real way. Potter came by her keen insights into both animal and human behavior through years of observation, and a love of her subjects. Potter spent hours as a child watching and playing with her pets, including frogs, newts, ferrets, a bat, and yes, rabbits. She was also an early environmentalist who battled to preserve the countryside around her home in the Lake District of England. The charming mixture of fantasy and realism that mark Potter’s work has influenced untold numbers of animal stories since.

How to Listen: For younger children, start with simpler stories like “Peter Rabbit” and “Two Bad Mice,” then work your way to the more complex story about the Tailor of Gloucester. Its vocabulary and subject matter are more demanding, but also more rewarding for the patient listener.

Tales from A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys—Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne is best known for his distinctly adult morality tales in novels like *The Scarlet Letter*. So it’s a surprise that he began his career writing educational books about history and geography for children. In *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, published in 1852, he retold Greek myths for children and took every liberty to turn them into stories for the ages. The myths had, Hawthorne wrote, been around so long that they were “legitimate subjects for every age to clothe with its own garniture of manners and sentiment, and to imbue with its own morality.” The two stories included in PlainTales Classics, “The Golden Touch” and “Pandora’s Box,” teach children the importance of love, forgiveness, and caring about what matters most. But ultimately Hawthorne’s retellings of the myths are less didactic than simply entertaining, told in a conversational style that makes them perfect for children.

How to Listen: The original story of Midas comes from Ovid’s “Metamorphoses,” but Hawthorne’s version is the first one to give Midas a daughter, Marygold. The

character was such a success that she continues to show up in modern retellings. Listen to how the character of Marygold makes a perfect foil for her gold-mad father.

Tales from the Book of Dragons—Edith Nesbit

Before her death in 1924, British author Edith Nesbit published more than 40 books and stories, including perennial favorites like *The Railway Children*, *Five Children and It*, and *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*. Called “the first modern writer for children,” she was a pioneer of combining everyday realism with wild fantasy, as she does in “The Book of Beasts “ when she sets a slightly petulant young boy head-to-head with a brutal dragon. It’s a formula that influenced other well-known authors, including C. S. Lewis and J. K. Rowling. Even more appealing to children, Nesbit’s writing is quite funny.

How to Listen: Children may miss some of the advanced vocabulary and sophisticated humor of Nesbit’s stories at first, but they’re what makes the stories rich enough to stand up to repeated listenings. Expect “Tales from the Book of Dragons” to become more enjoyable over time.

The Happy Prince and Other Tales—Oscar Wilde

Like many writers better known for their works for adults, Irish writer Oscar Wilde (author of “The Importance of Being Earnest” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) tried his hand at writing for children after his own two children were born. But Wilde’s fanciful stories have remained favorites across generations. Haunting and a bit melancholy, “The Happy Prince and Other Tales” center on the power of redemption and the triumph of love over selfishness, as in the story of a selfish giant who builds a wall around his garden to keep children out, only to realize that the wall keeps love out as well.

How to Listen: Some listeners who know Wilde’s reputation as a flamboyant, caustically witty, complex literary figure may be surprised by the powerful traditional Christian symbolism in these tales. It helps lend these beautifully written, sensitive stories their universal appeal.

Tales from the Arabian Nights—Andrew Lang

No one knows who originally dreamed up the stories from “The Arabian Nights.” Like other fairy tales, they were shaped over hundreds of years and thousands of retellings in Asia and the Middle East. The framework, however, remained largely the same: To save herself from certain death, the beautiful Scheherazade must beguile a Persian sultan with her enchanting stories. This excerpt from “The Arabian Nights” was retold by Andrew Lang, a Scottish scholar and historian who compiled and edited twelve books of fairy tales from around the globe, thereby rejecting the Victorian belief that fairy tales are harmful to children. He believed that his readers “know very well how much is true and how much is only make-believe.” See what

rings true to you in the tales of Aladdin and Ali Baba, whose cleverness and quick thinking save the day—and a great treasure.

How to Listen: The stories collected in “Arabian Nights” have been traced to ancient and medieval storytelling traditions from Persia, India, Egypt, and the Middle East. The version familiar to modern readers was translated into French in 1704, and from French into many languages. Imagine with your child the small ways in which the story might have changed over time.

Selected Just-So Stories—Rudyard Kipling

In 1907, Rudyard Kipling became the first English writer to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature and remains the youngest author ever to do so; he was just 42 at the time. He brought the force of his full genius to bear on his stories for children, most of which were influenced by the years he spent living in India. Kipling wrote “Just-So Stories” to offer whimsical explanations for the strange animals he encountered in India—in these excerpts, the long-trunked elephant, the saggy-skinned rhinoceros, and the half-wild housecat. Many of them are directly addressed to “My Best Beloved,” his oldest daughter, Josephine, who died of influenza in 1899, three years before the stories were published.

How to Listen: In his writing, Kipling displays a mischievous sense of humor. He uses language playfully, including nonsense words and phrases like “Satiabile Curtiosity.” Even his discussion of spanking in “The Elephant’s Child is meant to be a funny form of verbal slapstick.

Rip Van Winkle and the Devil and Tom Walker—Washington Irving

Born in New York City in 1783, just as Americans learned that a British ceasefire would end the Revolutionary War, Washington Irving was named for General George Washington. Irving later honored his namesake by writing a five-volume biography of the first U.S. president. But before that, Irving was America’s first truly best-selling author, and possibly the first American man to make a living entirely with his writing. Some also consider him the first American master of the short story. Irving didn’t write specifically for children, but he told adventuresome, mystical yarns that were accessible to everyone, the young included. Rip Van Winkle was Irving’s original creation, but the story has forebears in international folk tales about men and women who sleep for years or centuries and wake to a brave new world. Such tales can be found in German, Hebrew, Irish, Chinese, and even ancient Greek culture.

How to Listen: Nowadays the language of “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Devil and Tom Walker” places it firmly in the nineteenth century. But these challenging stories are important connections to America’s literary past, and their motifs, which evoke a young, vibrant America, are echoed still in literature today. If you’re having trouble handling the vocabulary of the stories, jot down unfamiliar words for later

explanation, and encourage your children to focus on the story rather than the descriptions.

Velveteen Rabbit—Margery Williams Bianco, and Rosy’s Journey—Louisa May Alcott

As a child, Margery Williams Bianco was encouraged to love reading by her father, who told young Margery about the wonderful adventures awaiting her on the printed page. His death when she was seven tinged Margery’s life with the same sweet sadness that can be found in her classic “The Velveteen Rabbit.” Then there’s “Rosy’s Journey,” by Louisa May Alcott, the beloved American author of *Little Women*. Alcott spins a tale of a gentle little girl whose kindness to animals is repaid again and again as she searches for her long-lost father. Louisa May Alcott grew up in mid-19th century Massachusetts among famous folk who shared her parents’ Transcendentalist beliefs. Nathaniel Hawthorne was a family friend, and Alcott wrote her first book of children’s stories for the daughter of poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.

How to Listen: Both of these stories are sentimental visions of a challenging childhood made more comfortable by the presence of good friends, animal and otherwise. Talk with your child how a favorite toy or pet has helped him through tough times.

Jack and the Beanstalk and Other Classic Fairy Tales—Andrew Lang

Imagine a time of fairies and giants, when good always triumphed over evil, and bravery and cunning saved the day. That’s the world inhabited by this collection of favorite fairy tales, retold in charming prose by Andrew Lang. Children will love hearing how Jack made his fortune; how a quick-thinking queen saved her baby from Rumpelstiltskin; how a clever cat turned his master into a marquis; and how even a spiteful fairy couldn’t stop true love from waking a sleeping princess. While Lang only compiled and edited the fairy stories he includes in his twelve books of collected tales, his scholarly approach marked the triumph of the imaginative tale over more realistic, instructive children’s stories. He was also a patron of the arts, discovering and encouraging other authors, including E. Nesbit, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Rudyard Kipling.

How to Listen: Your child may already be familiar with classic tales like Jack and the Beanstalk and Sleeping Beauty. When you’re done listening, have her try to retell you one of these tales from her own memory, or create her own version (like “The Princess Who Didn’t Wake Up in Time for School”). Talk about what’s the same and what’s different about other versions of these stories they’ve seen or heard.

Hansel and Gretel and Other Tales—The Brothers Grimm

During the nineteenth century, brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm traveled across Germany to write down the folk tales that had been told at kitchen tables, hearths, and bedsides for centuries. In doing so, they preserved a rich heritage of storytelling that connects us to the past. Favorite Grimm fairy tales, such as “Hansel and Gretel” and “The Fisherman and His Wife,” showcase the evils of greed and jealousy and the redeeming power of love.

How to Listen: Grimm fairy tales can be, in a word, grim. In “Hansel and Gretel,” parents abandon their children; in “Snow White” and “Rapunzel,” evil women torment the girls they’re supposed to take care of. If your children aren’t already familiar with the stories, you can provide a reassuring word in advance.

The Ugly Duckling and Other Tales—Hans Christian Andersen

Hans Christian Andersen was the proverbial ugly duckling, a homely outcast as a child. Convinced that he was destined for greatness, he moved to Copenhagen as a teenager and joined an acting company there. When that fell apart he returned to one of his first loves, writing and making up stories. Andersen brings a silly sensibility to stories that showcase the triumph of the downtrodden and the downfall of the triumphant, including “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” “The Princess and the Pea,” and “The Steadfast Tin Soldier.” His stories appeal not only because of their universal themes, but because of Andersen’s simple, realistic language, and his ability to capture a big concept with a down-to-earth image. That’s why Hans Christian Andersen is among the world’s most translated and anthologized authors, and why his stories are perfect for the youngest children.

How to Listen: Andersen altered the traditional genre of the fairy tale by giving many of his stories contemporary settings and modern elements—perhaps because, unlike the brothers Grimm, Andersen drew many of his stories from his own imagination and experiences. (“The Nightingale,” for instance, was inspired by Andersen’s infatuation with the opera singer Jenny Lind.) Ask your child, What kind of fairy tale would you write about the people you know?

Introduction to PlainTales First Tales

Kids crave great storytelling. They need good, strong characters to nurture their budding imaginations and spark a fire for literature. In these original retellings of fairy tales and folk tales, a strong narrative and plenty of fun dialogue keep things interesting, but so do the tell-it-like-it-is plots. After all, the Princess mistreats the Frog Prince, the Gingerbread Boy gets eaten in the end, and those tall-tale folk heroes like Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan are entirely too big for their britches. People are naughty—a pleasurable shock for children!—and that’s okay. There are still plenty of happy endings to go around.

The Gingerbread Boy and Other First Tales

These PlainTales versions make classic fairy tales fun for small listeners. Enjoy together the tales of the naughty Gingerbread Boy, the clever Billy Goats Gruff, the enchanted Frog Prince, the stalwart Little Red Hen, and the courageous Bremen Town Musicians. All are told with simple, engaging language, heavy on dialogue and sound effects to capture attention and never let go.

Story Note: The Gingerbread Boy as we know it was the star of a story originally published in 1875, but even before that, food on the run was a popular theme for children’s literature and folk tales. In a Russian version, Kolobok is a ball of bread dough that escapes various hungry animals, while a Norwegian story features a runaway pancake.

Paul Bunyan and Other American Tall Tales

When Americans set out to conquer a wild frontier, they needed larger-than-life role models to match their big surroundings. Enter Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, and Davy Crockett, tall-tale heroes whose stories were told around campfires and at town socials, and whose deeds became ever more amazing (and outlandish) in the retelling.

Story Note: While Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill are wholly imaginary, Davy Crockett was a real frontiersman who served in the Tennessee militia and was later elected to Congress. Crockett told his own story in an autobiography published in 1833, but it was after his death that a series of newspapers called “Davy Crockett Almanacks” turned his life to the stuff of legend.

Introduction to PlainTales Explorers

Children are the ultimate adventurers. They're naturally curious about animals, nature, and the workings of the wide world, and they're eager to find their place in all the goings-on around them. The stories in the PlainTales Explorers series feed that sense of curiosity and daring. In "Animal Tales: Raccoon, Bear and Coyote," the lives and behaviors of real animals are turned into engaging fictional tales. Meanwhile, American Legends shows three adventurers who loved the earth and learned to use and preserve it for the benefit of all.

Animal Stories: Coyote, Raccoon and Bear

To survive a bleak winter, Hazard the coyote must find food for his pack, even if it puts him in grave danger. Finally on his own, a young raccoon named Lotor needs to find a new home before a predator finds him. Osa the brown bear builds the perfect winter den—with less-than-perfect results. These stories about fictional animal friends are rich with detail about real animal behaviors, so children learn as they enjoy the fun.

Story Note: Use the PlainTales Animal Stories as a jumping-off point to discuss the animals in your neighborhood, or to find more about coyotes, raccoons, and bears at your local library.

Johnny Appleseed and Other American Legends

What makes an American legend? Find out in these fascinating stories of three of our national treasures, including Johnny Appleseed, whose apple trees bore the fruit that fed a nation of pioneers; Sacagawea, the Native American woman who bravely guided Lewis and Clark on their westward journey; and John Muir, a valiant protector of the West's natural wonders and founder of the Sierra Club.

Story Note: Though these narratives stay as true to the historical record as possible, most conversations, details, and some events have been imagined to keep things interesting. You can explain to your child the difference between fiction and nonfiction—and talk about where the two sometimes collide.