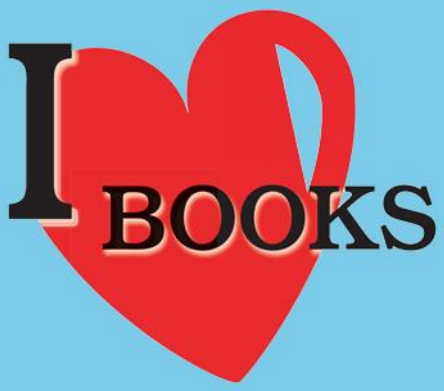


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Opening extract from

# Dragons at Crumbling Castle and Other Stories

Written by

**Terry Pratchett**

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# INTRODUCTION



Focus on a planet revolving in space . . .

Focus in on a small country in the northern hemisphere – Great Britain.

Closer, closer . . . and on the western edge of London you can see the county of Buckinghamshire. Small villages and winding country roads.

And if you could go back in time to the mid nineteen sixties, you might spot a young lad on a motorbike coming down one such lane, notebook and pen in his jacket pocket.

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This is me. A junior reporter for the *Bucks Free Press*, sent out to cover stories on local events. If I was lucky, I would be going to something like a village fair – you know the kind of thing: men putting weasels down their trousers, people bobbing for frogs in a bucket, the odd cheese rolling too fast down a hill . . .

It was a lot of fun back then. And somewhere in the middle of it I taught myself how to write by reading as many books as I could carry home from the library. So then I began writing stories of my own – stories for young readers that were published every week in the newspaper.

The stories in this collection are a selection of those. There are dragons and wizards, councillors and mayors, an adventurous tortoise and a monster in a lake, along with plenty of pointy hats and a few magic spells (a few of which actually do what they

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are supposed to). Some of these early stories even spawned into my first novel, *The Carpet People*.

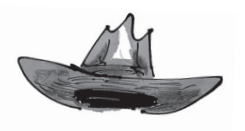
So turn the page and read the stories that I wrote as a teenager, mostly as they were first printed, although the grown-up me has tinkered just a *little* with a few fine details – the odd tweak here, a pinch there, and a little note at the bottom where needed, and all because the younger me wasn't as clever back then as he turned out to be.

But that naive young lad on the motorbike and the grown-up me with my black hat and beard are the same person – and all we both ever wanted to do was write for people who are old enough to understand.

And to imagine . . .



Terry Pratchett
*Wiltshire, 2014*



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# DRAGONS AT CRUMBLING CASTLE



In the days of King Arthur there were no newspapers, only town criers, who went around shouting the news at the tops of their voices.

King Arthur was sitting up in bed one Sunday, eating an egg, when the Sunday town crier trooped in. Actually, there were several of them: a man to draw the pictures, a jester for the

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jokes and a small man in tights and football boots who was called the Sports Page.

# ‘DRAGONS INVADE CRUMBLING CASTLE,’

shouted the News Crier (this was the headline), and then he said in a softer voice, **‘For full details hear page nine.’**

King Arthur dropped his spoon in amazement. **Dragons!** All the knights were out on quests, except for Sir Lancelot – and he had gone to France for his holidays.

The Ninth Page came panting up, coughed, and said: ‘Thousands flee for their lives as family

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of green dragons burn and rampage around Crumbling Castle . . .'

'What is King Arthur doing about this?' demanded the Editorial Crier pompously. 'What do we pay our taxes for? The people of Camelot demand action . . .'

'Throw them out, and give them fourpence* each,' said the king to the butler. 'Then call out the guard.'

Later that day he went out to the courtyard.

'Now then, men,' he said. 'I want a volunteer . . .' Then he adjusted his spectacles. The only other person in the courtyard was a small boy in a suit of mail much too big for him.

'Ralph reporting, sire!' the lad said, and saluted.

'Where's everyone else?'

'Tom, John, Ron, Fred, Bill and Jack are off

* In the days of King Arthur, this was a lot more money than it seems today – it would buy, oh, at least a cup of mead and a hunk of goat's meat.

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sick,' said Ralph, counting on his fingers. 'Then William, Bert, Joe and Albert are on holiday. James is visiting his granny. Rupert has gone hunting. And Eric . . .'

'Well then,' said the king. 'Ralph, how would you like to visit Crumbling Castle? Nice scenery, excellent food, only a few dragons to kill. Take my spare suit of armour – it's a bit roomy, but quite thick . . .'

So Ralph got on his donkey and trotted over the drawbridge, whistling, and disappeared over the hills. When he was out of sight he took off the armour and hid it behind a hedge, because it squeaked and was too hot, and put on his ordinary clothes.

High on a wooded hill sat a mounted figure in coal-black armour. He watched the young boy pass by, then galloped down after him on his big black horse.

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**'HALT IN THE NAME OF THE FRIDAY KNIGHT,'**



he cried in a deep voice, raising his black sword.

Ralph looked round. 'Excuse me, sir,' he said. 'Is this the right road to Crumbling Castle?'

'Well, yes, actually it is,' said the knight, looking rather embarrassed, and then he remembered that he was really a big bad knight, and continued in a hollow voice,

**'BUT YOU'LL HAVE TO FIGHT ME FIRST!'**

Ralph looked up in amazement as the black knight got off his horse and charged at him, waving his sword.