

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #324

The Bizarre Life of Lewis Carroll

16th Dec, 2022

[00:00:05] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today it is the start of another three-part mini-series, this time on three iconic British children's authors.

[00:00:31] In part one, today's episode, we'll be exploring the curious and [controversial](#)¹ life of Lewis Carroll, the author of Alice in Wonderland.

[00:00:41] Next up, in part two, we'll look at the life of Enid Blyton, the hugely successful author behind the book series such as The Famous Five and Noddy.

¹ causing disagreement or discussions

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[00:00:51] And in the final part of our series, part three, we'll explore the life of Roald Dahl, a man you may know as the author of books like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Matilda.

[00:01:04] OK then, let's get right into it and go back to Victorian England and kick this mini-series off with the story of Lewis Carroll.

[00:01:16] To be precise, we need to go back to the 4th of July of 1862.

[00:01:22] It was a hot summer afternoon in Oxford, a city [nestled²](#) in the countryside along the river Thames.

[00:01:31] The sun was shining, and a rowing boat made its way down the river.

[00:01:37] In it was 30-year-old Lewis Carroll, his friend Robinson Duckworth, and three young girls, Lorina, Edith and Alice.

[00:01:50] The group were going for one of their regular picnics on the riverbank.

[00:01:54] And to pass the time, Carroll was telling the sisters a story about a girl named Alice who had followed a white rabbit down a hole.

² situated or located (in a protected or comfortable position)

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[00:02:06] This hole led to a magical land where Alice had many **bizarre**³ adventures and met many strange creatures like a smoking **caterpillar**⁴ and a marching **hare**⁵.

[00:02:19] The girls loved the story, and Alice was thoroughly delighted to hear the tales about her **namesake**⁶, the character named after her.

[00:02:30] And while it was not the first time Carroll had entertained the girls with stories, Alice's adventures were clearly their new favourites.

[00:02:40] Alice **begged**⁷ him to write down the stories so they would not be forgotten.

[00:02:45] This, as you may have guessed, would become one of the most famous children's stories in history, Alice in Wonderland.

[00:02:55] The book has now been translated into more than 170 different languages in over 300 editions.

[00:03:03] I'm sure many of you would have read the story yourselves, or you may have seen the film adaptation.

[00:03:10] And it can all be traced back to this one boat ride.

³ unusual, strange

⁴ a small, long animal with many legs that develops into a butterfly

⁵ an animal like a large rabbit

⁶ the character named after her

⁷ asked in strong, urgent manner

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[00:03:15] However, the trip also captures why Carroll has become such a [controversial](#) figure, with many now questioning why he, a 30-year-old man, spent so much time with these young girls.

[00:03:30] He wasn't their father, their uncle, or their cousin.

[00:03:34] In fact, they weren't in any way related.

[00:03:37] They weren't his family and he wasn't their [guardian](#)⁸, in fact he described them as his friends.

[00:03:44] The youngest of these girls was a [mere](#)⁹ 8 years old.

[00:03:49] Naturally, this has led to some serious [speculation](#)¹⁰ over his [motives](#)¹¹, what he was actually doing.

[00:03:56] So what was he doing, and how did he meet the girl who became the subject of one of the most famous children's books in history?

[00:04:06] [For starters](#)¹², his real name wasn't even Lewis Carroll.

⁸ a person who was legally responsible for the care of them

⁹ just, only

¹⁰ talk, guessing

¹¹ reasons for doing it

¹² to start with

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[00:04:10] It was Charles Dodgson. He was born in 1832, into a wealthy family in Cheshire, in the north of England.

[00:04:20] Growing up he was one 10 children which, as I'm sure you can imagine, made for a very busy homelife.

[00:04:28] From a young age Carroll entertained his family, telling stories, drawing silly [cartoons¹³](#) and making up games.

[00:04:37] As we will see, these were hobbies that would last his whole life.

[00:04:42] At home, Carroll was confident and happy but outside he became shy and [introverted¹⁴](#), [struggling¹⁵](#) due to his [stammer¹⁶](#), or speech impediment.

[00:04:53] Some historians believe that this [stammer](#), this speech impediment, could actually be [traced back¹⁷](#) to the fact that he was left-handed.

[00:05:03] In the Victorian period, left-handedness was believed to be uncivilised or even the work of the devil, so children would often be beaten and forced to use their right hand instead.

¹³ funny drawings showing people, animals etc.

¹⁴ a quiet and shy person who found it difficult to talk to people

¹⁵ having difficulties

¹⁶ speech impediment or problems

¹⁷ considered as being caused by

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[00:05:18] Most probably, Carroll would have suffered such punishments, leaving him with trauma that could have contributed to developing a [stammer](#).

[00:05:27] This young boy who loved to tell stories found himself struggling to even speak.

[00:05:33] And sadly, Carroll's social struggles got even worse when he fell ill and became [deaf](#)¹⁸ in one ear, he stopped being able to hear from one ear.

[00:05:44] And as you might expect, when he was shipped off to a [boarding school](#)¹⁹ in Warwickshire, life was not easy for this shy young boy with difficulty speaking and hearing.

[00:05:57] He spent his school years trying to avoid school [bullies](#)²⁰, but it was at school that he would discover a new talent, one for mathematics.

[00:06:08] He [excelled](#)²¹ in his studies of [algebra](#)²², geometry and logic, which led to him winning a place at Oxford University.

¹⁸ not able to hear

¹⁹ a school where students lived and studied

²⁰ students who hurt or frightened other students

²¹ was very good at

²² a part of mathematics in which letters and other symbols are used to represent numbers

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[00:06:16] He graduated from Oxford with a first class degree, top of his class, and he was offered a teaching position at the university, he was asked to stay on.

[00:06:28] He did stay on at Oxford, continuing as a teacher.

[00:06:32] His students, however, we're not particularly **fond**²³ of their new, young teacher.

[00:06:38] He had a reputation for being a boring, strict, **no nonsense**²⁴ teacher, which is perhaps surprising given that his Alice stories are anything but boring.

[00:06:50] His students might not have liked him very much, but he developed a reputation for himself as a well respected **scholar**²⁵ and academic, publishing papers and books under his real name of Charles Dodgson.

[00:07:05] And mathematics was clearly a passion that **pursued**²⁶ him at every hour of the day.

[00:07:11] At night, his mind would race with ideas about numbers and equations, sometimes to the point that he couldn't get to sleep.

²³ having a liking for him

²⁴ serious and practical

²⁵ a specialist in his study

²⁶ followed

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[00:07:20] But, Carroll would later explain, that it was during these sleepless nights that he came up with many of his ideas and concepts, which he would later publish in a book appropriately named Pillow Problems.

[00:07:34] And some of the [conundrums](#)²⁷ he [pondered over](#)²⁸ at night even led to him designing puzzle games, which he eventually collected into a puzzle book.

[00:07:44] But Carroll's puzzles and mathematical problems weren't his only creative [output](#)²⁹.

[00:07:51] For in 1856, aged just 24, a national magazine published his first literary work, a romantic poem entitled Solitude.

[00:08:02] And this was the first time he used his [pen name](#)³⁰, or fake name, his [pseudonym](#)³¹ of Lewis Carroll, which was chosen to keep his creative writing separate from his mathematical works.

[00:08:16] But as if all of this was not already impressive enough, Carroll was a celebrated artist in another way.

²⁷ difficult problems

²⁸ thought about carefully

²⁹ amount of things he produced

³⁰ fake name used on his written works

³¹ fake name used on his written works

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[00:08:23] And no, I'm not talking about his career as a children's author. We'll get to that shortly.

[00:08:29] Carroll was also a well-known photographer.

[00:08:32] He had been fascinated by cameras for his entire life, **utterly**³² amazed by this new technology.

[00:08:39] After all, the first camera had only been invented in 1816, just 16 years before he was born.

[00:08:47] And, like most things that he tried, Carroll **excelled at**³³ taking photographs.

[00:08:53] Over the course of his life, he took over 3000 photos, including pictures of celebrities like the poet Alfred Tennyson, or even the Crown Prince of Denmark.

[00:09:05] And it was his use of this new **flashy**³⁴ technology that led him to the life changing friendship of Alice Liddel.

[00:09:13] One day in 1856, Carroll was taking pictures of the Christ Church Cathedral, the large church in the university college that he was attached to.

[00:09:24] He noticed a group of young girls playing nearby.

³² completely

³³ was very good at

³⁴ attractive, impressive

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[00:09:28] It was Alice and her two sisters, and Carroll believed they would make the perfect photograph.

[00:09:35] The girls were daughters of the dean, or head, of Christ Church, the same college.

[00:09:41] Determined to get his [shot³⁵](#), Carroll approached the family and offered to take the girls' photograph, much to the children's delight.

[00:09:50] And although she was just 4 years old at the time, Carroll found Alice to be a brilliant subject for his pictures.

[00:10:00] From that day on, he formed a close friendship with the family, especially the young girls, coming to see them frequently.

[00:10:09] It's even said that when he was in the company of the children his [stammer](#) would stop and he could speak freely at length.

[00:10:17] Instead of spending time with adults, people his own age, he would take the sisters for picnics, on boat trips, and have photography sessions with them in his studio.

³⁵ photograph

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[00:10:29] And no matter the occasion, Carroll would entertain them with magical stories for [hours on end](#)³⁶ as they [eagerly](#)³⁷ listened to every word.

[00:10:39] But it is the story of that sunny afternoon we mentioned in the beginning of this episode that was the most praised by the girls, it was the story of Alice that they liked the best.

[00:10:51] And following Alice's request to write the story down so it wasn't forgotten, Carroll decided to put pen to paper.

[00:10:59] However, shortly after he began to write in 1863, a sudden [rift](#)³⁸, or falling out, between Carroll and Alice's family [emerged](#)³⁹.

[00:11:10] After many years of friendship with the girls, and seeing them frequently, Carroll suddenly stopped seeing them altogether.

[00:11:19] Nobody knows what happened or why, as many pages of Carroll's diary from that time have been mysteriously [ripped out](#)⁴⁰.

[00:11:30] And of course, this has led to much [speculation](#).

³⁶ many hours

³⁷ in a way that showed great interest and excitement

³⁸ falling out

³⁹ appeared

⁴⁰ pulled, cut out

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[00:11:34] The most common theory is that Alice's family grew concerned over the close relationship between their 11-year-old daughter and the 31-year-old man.

[00:11:45] Some even **theorise**⁴¹ that Carroll had actually proposed to Alice, he had asked the young girl to marry him.

[00:11:53] Whatever the reason for this **rupture**⁴², this break, it didn't stop Carroll from carrying out Alice's wish, and putting her story to paper.

[00:12:03] He continued to write out the stories and **intended to**⁴³ give the completed book to her as a Christmas gift later that year.

[00:12:12] He carefully hand wrote 15,000 words and decorated many pages with illustrations, or drawings, of the characters in the story.

[00:12:22] The final product was a masterpiece and Alice was **thrilled**⁴⁴ with the book, despite its rather **mundane**⁴⁵ title of Alice's Adventures Underground.

[00:12:34] In the story, Carroll transformed the people in the sisters' lives into the creatures of his fantasy land.

⁴¹ guess, suppose

⁴² break

⁴³ planned to

⁴⁴ extremely happy or excited

⁴⁵ ordinary, boring

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[00:12:42] Alice was, of course, the main character, the hero of the book.

[00:12:46] Her [nanny⁴⁶](#), Mary Prickett, was imagined as The Red Queen, an authoritative and angry character.

[00:12:54] Robinson Duckworth, Carroll's friend who had joined the group on the boat, was presented as a duck, due to his surname, "Duckworth".

[00:13:04] And Carroll didn't forget to include himself in the story.

[00:13:08] He and the girls had often laughed about his [stammer](#), and his inability to pronounce his surname, Dodgson, and how he called himself Do-do-dodgson.

[00:13:19] So, he became a [dodo⁴⁷](#), the [extinct⁴⁸](#) bird.

[00:13:24] In the story, Carroll also included much inspiration from his academic career, and interest in maths. You may remember that the story is full of [absurd⁴⁹](#) logic and [riddles⁵⁰](#), puzzles to solve.

⁴⁶ the woman whose job was to take care of her

⁴⁷ a large bird that existed in the past

⁴⁸ not existing now

⁴⁹ crazy, not making sense

⁵⁰ puzzles to solve

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[00:13:39] When Alice needs to eat the correct amount of a mushroom to grow her neck and [shrink](#)⁵¹ her [torso](#)⁵² to the perfect size, some believe Carroll is [alluding to](#)⁵³ his textbooks on proportions and [algebra](#).

[00:13:52] And there are also times in the story, when numbers don't even function in normal ways.

[00:13:59] For example, [multiplications](#)⁵⁴ stop making sense when Alice tries to remember them, and Alice is confused when measurements of things become varied and are no longer [constant](#)⁵⁵.

[00:14:12] Some have even [theorised](#)⁵⁶ that this strangeness was Carroll [mocking](#)⁵⁷, making fun of new concepts in symbolic [algebra](#) that he opposed.

[00:14:22] Clearly, it was a wonderful story for Carroll and the girls, as they could recognise people from their own life in it.

⁵¹ make it smaller

⁵² the human body apart from the head, neck, arms, and legs

⁵³ referring to, hinting at

⁵⁴ the process of multiplying numbers

⁵⁵ regular, not changing

⁵⁶ formed a theory or explanation

⁵⁷ making fun of

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[00:14:30] But this **bizarre** and **nonsensical**⁵⁸ world would turn out to be one that was loved and enjoyed by children from all over the world, who had no idea about the original people the characters were based on.

[00:14:44] Carroll, of course, had no idea about how much of a **resounding**⁵⁹ success it would be when he first started writing it.

[00:14:52] After writing the story, and unsure about what to do with it, Carroll spoke to his friend George Macdonald who was a successful author at the time.

[00:15:02] Macdonald took home the copy of Alice's Adventures Underground to read it to his 6-year-old son.

[00:15:10] Unsurprisingly, and this seems to be a theme with children's books, the boy absolutely loved it.

[00:15:18] He said he 'wished there were 60,000 volumes of it', in other words, he wished it would never end.

[00:15:25] So, Carroll decided to prepare the work for publication.

[00:15:29] He added some new stories and characters such as the Mad Hatter's tea party and Alice's meeting with the Cheshire Cat.

⁵⁸ not making sense, silly

⁵⁹ huge, massive

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[00:15:38] He also began to think of a new title, with possibilities being Alice Among the Fairies or Alice's Golden Hour but he finally [settled on](#)⁶⁰ Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

[00:15:52] For the book, he also [enlisted](#)⁶¹ a man called John Tenniel, a [cartoonist](#)⁶², or illustrator, from the comedy magazine Punch and one who was famous for his animal illustrations in the book Aesop's Fables.

[00:16:07] By November 1865 the book was published and it did not take long for the [initial](#)⁶³ print of 5000 copies to [sell out](#)⁶⁴.

[00:16:17] Among the earliest [fans](#)⁶⁵ of the book were Oscar Wilde and even Queen Victoria.

[00:16:23] And the book's popularity only grew after its [sequel](#)⁶⁶, Through the Looking Glass, was published In 1871

⁶⁰ decided on

⁶¹ engaged or secured his cooperation

⁶² illustrator

⁶³ of the beginning, first

⁶⁴ be completely sold

⁶⁵ admirers, supporters

⁶⁶ the book that continued the story of the previous one

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[00:16:31] And although Carroll was [hesitant](#)⁶⁷ about growing famous, and despite the fact that he used a [pen name](#), a [pseudonym](#), by the time of his [sudden](#)⁶⁸ death in 1898 he had become something of a celebrity.

[00:16:46] So what made the books so popular?

[00:16:50] Well, this [format](#)⁶⁹ of a magical children's world might seem obvious to us now, but back in the late 19th century it was like nothing people had seen before.

[00:17:02] Firstly, Alice was the first children's novel with a strong and confident female [protagonist](#)⁷⁰.

[00:17:10] Clearly, for girls who simply hadn't ever read stories about strong and independent girls before, it must have been wonderful.

[00:17:19] Secondly, the book was hugely [innovative](#)⁷¹ through its [nonsense](#)⁷², through the fact that it didn't make a huge amount of sense, and that was the beauty of it.

⁶⁷ not sure

⁶⁸ not expected, happening without warning

⁶⁹ style, presentation

⁷⁰ the main character of the story

⁷¹ using new ideas of methods

⁷² things that don't make sense

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[00:17:29] Traditionally, Victorian children's books had always been **dogged**⁷³ with some sort of moral lesson for children to learn. Books were viewed as a way for children to be taught how to behave.

[00:17:43] Carroll's book, however, was written purely to entertain and delight his young audience.

[00:17:50] For the first time, children were being encouraged to simply let their imagination **run wild**⁷⁴.

[00:17:57] And this has been a recipe for success for centuries afterwards, with Alice in Wonderland remaining in print since 1865 and selling at least 100 million copies worldwide.

[00:18:10] If you read it as a child, or if you've seen the movie adaptation, you can probably understand why.

[00:18:18] But while the success of Alice has **stood the test of time**⁷⁵, Carroll's own reputation has not, as debates around his relationship with children have **cast a shadow over**⁷⁶ his career.

⁷³ followed by

⁷⁴ grow, develop without being controlled

⁷⁵ continued to be important for a long period of time

⁷⁶ had a bad effect on

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[00:18:31] Not only did he spend large amounts of time with young children, he took a lot of pictures of the young girls.

[00:18:39] And by modern standards at least, they are quite shocking.

[00:18:44] One shows a 6-year-old Alice posing like an adult with her dress positioned in a way which [reveals⁷⁷](#) her upper body.

[00:18:52] Another picture of a fully [nude⁷⁸](#) girl of around 12 years old has also been discovered and is believed to belong to Carroll.

[00:19:01] While images like these would certainly not be acceptable [in this day and age⁷⁹](#), some historians have pointed out that in the Victorian period this was not as shocking as it might now seem.

[00:19:14] Many people believed children were symbols of innocence, and naked children could be found on birthday cards, Christmas cards, and in [all manner of⁸⁰](#) art.

[00:19:25] It wasn't, so the argument goes, in any way sexual.

⁷⁷ shows (for something hidden)

⁷⁸ not wearing any clothes

⁷⁹ at the present time

⁸⁰ many different kinds of

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[00:19:30] Now, I should add that there's no evidence that Carroll ever did anything other than spend time with and photograph any of these children, and Alice for instance, never had anything negative to say about him.

[00:19:44] But his behaviour still [raises alarm bells](#)⁸¹ to modern eyes, and the debate around Carroll's relationship with Alice still [rages on](#)⁸².

[00:19:53] Ultimately, the question of who Lewis Carroll actually was still remains unsolved.

[00:20:00] He was a gifted mathematician, a talented photographer, a half-decent poet, and a magical author.

[00:20:09] He was also an unmarried adult who was friends with children.

[00:20:13] Was that [all there was to it](#)⁸³, or did he want something more?

[00:20:18] In all probability, we will never know, and the [riddle](#)⁸⁴, the puzzle will [endure](#)⁸⁵ for as long as his books.

⁸¹ makes people feel worried or concerned about it

⁸² continues very actively

⁸³ all that he was interested in

⁸⁴ puzzle

⁸⁵ last, live on

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[00:20:26] As his creation, Alice, would famously say “Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle.”

[00:20:38] Ok then, that is it for part one of this mini-series, on the [bizarre](#) life of Lewis Carroll.

[00:20:44] Next up it’s going to be the two-faced life of the best selling children’s author of the 20th century, Enid Blyton, and after that it’ll be Roald Dahl.

[00:20:54] As always I would love to know what you thought about this episode.

[00:20:57] Have you read Alice in Wonderland?

[00:21:00] Did you know Alice in Wonderland was based on a real Alice?

[00:21:03] Do you think the [controversy](#)⁸⁶ surrounding Carroll’s reputation should impact the popularity of his books?

[00:21:09] I would love to know, so let’s get this discussion started.

[00:21:13] You can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:21:21] You've Been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

⁸⁶ disagreement or discussions

[00:21:26] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Controversial	causing disagreement or discussions
Nestled	situated or located (in a protected or comfortable position)
Bizarre	unusual, strange
Caterpillar	a small, long animal with many legs that develops into a butterfly
Hare	an animal like a large rabbit
Namesake	the character named after her
Begged	asked in strong, urgent manner
Guardian	a person who was legally responsible for the care of them
Mere	just, only
Speculation	talk, guessing
Motives	reasons for doing it
For starters	to start with

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Cartoons	funny drawings showing people, animals etc.
Introverted	a quiet and shy person who found it difficult to talk to people
Struggling	having difficulties
Stammer	speech impediment or problems
Traced back	considered as being caused by
Deaf	not able to hear
Boarding school	a school where students lived and studied
Bullies	students who hurt or frightened other students
Excelled	was very good at
Algebra	a part of mathematics in which letters and other symbols are used to represent numbers
Fond	having a liking for him
No nonsense	serious and practical
Scholar	a specialist in his study
Pursued	followed
Conundrums	difficult problems

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Pondered over	thought about carefully
Output	amount of things he produced
Pen name	fake name used on his written works
Pseudonym	fake name used on his written works
Utterly	completely
Excelled at	was very good at
Flashy	attractive, impressive
Shot	photograph
Hours on end	many hours
Eagerly	in a way that showed great interest and excitement
Rift	falling out
Emerged	appeared
Ripped out	pulled, cut out
Theorise	guess, suppose
Rupture	break

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Intended to	planned to
Thrilled	extremely happy or excited
Mundane	ordinary, boring
Nanny	the woman whose job was to take care of her
Dodo	a large bird that existed in the past
Extinct	not existing now
Absurd	crazy, not making sense
Riddles	puzzles to solve
Shrink	make it smaller
Torso	the human body apart from the head, neck, arms, and legs
Alluding to	referring to, hinting at
Multiplications	the process of multiplying numbers
Constant	regular, not changing
Theorised	formed a theory or explanation
Mocking	making fun of

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Nonsensical	not making sense, silly
Resounding	huge, massive
Settled on	decided on
Enlisted	engaged or secured his cooperation
Cartoonist	illustrator
Initial	of the beginning, first
Sell out	be completely sold
Fans	admirers, supporters
Sequel	the book that continued the story of the previous one
Hesitant	not sure
Sudden	not expected, happening without warning
Format	style, presentation
Protagonist	the main character of the story
Innovative	using new ideas or methods
Nonsense	things that don't make sense

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Dogged	followed by
Run wild	grow, develop without being controlled
Stood the test of time	continued to be important for a long period of time
Cast a shadow over	had a bad effect on
Reveals	shows (for something hidden)
Nude	not wearing any clothes
In this day and age	at the present time
All manner of	many different kinds of
Raises alarm bells	makes people feel worried or concerned about it
Rages on	continues very actively
All there was to it	all that he was interested in
Riddle	puzzle
Endure	last, live on
Controversy	disagreement or discussions

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com