

Using stories with teens



1. Frankie 1, students 0

What is it about teenagers and practical jokes? When I was at school, we used to think that it was funny to leave notes on our teachers' desks. We would wait for the teacher to notice the piece of paper, pick it up, examine it, unfold it and read it. We would then wait in anticipation for a reaction.

The best note we ever left was this: *There is a piece of cheese on the classroom ceiling.*

Of course the reaction that we expected was for the teacher to look up at the ceiling and try to see the fictitious piece of cheese. At that moment, everyone would have to do their best not to laugh. Laughing would demonstrate that you were involved in the joke. And you wouldn't want that, would you?

Hilarious, no?

I don't remember how many teachers we played the joke on. But I'll never forget the day we left the note on the desk of Mr Francis, our cool history teacher. The lesson was almost over and we were starting to think that Frankie was not going to see the note. But then he did. He hesitated for a moment and then, very slowly, opened it.

There was a silence. His eyes stayed fixed on the paper. Then he walked over to the corner of the room and dropped the note in the bin. He returned to us and said, as calmly as possible, "Of course there is – I put it there."

We all looked up.

2. Annie Edson Taylor

Part one. On October 24th, 1901, Annie Edson Taylor got into a boat with two companions. They left the shore and rowed out to the middle of the river. Once there, they put a barrel over the side, and Annie climbed in.

After screwing on the lid, her companions used a bicycle pump to compress the air inside the barrel. Then, they put a cork in the hole and pushed the barrel away from the side of the boat.

It was Annie's 63rd birthday.

Part two. For much of her life, things had been comfortable for Annie Edson Taylor. Her father was the owner of a flour mill in a town in New York state. And although he died when Annie was just 12 years old, he left enough money to provide for the family.

Annie was educated and became a school teacher. While studying, she met a man called David Taylor and they quickly got married.

But things went badly from there. Her only child died in infancy. And tragically, her husband died in the Civil War soon after. Annie changed jobs many times. She moved from place to place. She opened a dance school in Bay City, Michigan. It could have succeeded but it didn't.

Over the years, Annie made many bad professional decisions. And as a result, her comfortable lifestyle gradually started to disappear. With little financial stability and with retirement approaching, the dreaded poorhouse looked like a possibility.

Desperate to avoid the poorhouse, Annie had a crazy idea: she would go over Niagara Falls in a barrel. No one had ever done this before. Success would surely bring fame and fortune. And this would mean financial security for life.

Part three. Annie had a special barrel made. It was constructed of oak and iron. Inside, there was a mattress to provide a protective cushion.

Annie hired a manager called Frank M Russell, a well-known promoter of local events. He communicated the event to the press. Annie claimed that she was in her forties.

On October 19th, 1901, the barrel was tested with a cat inside. The cat went over the falls. It survived.

Five days later, it was Annie's turn. A crowd gathered at the bottom of the falls to witness the event.

Inside the dark barrel, Annie started to pray. Strong currents pulled the barrel towards the roaring falls. And as it went, it banged and scraped against the rocks. Annie was thrown from side to side. The roar got louder and louder. And then, inside the barrel, Annie took the plunge.

Eventually, the barrel came out of the mist and into view. It was still in one piece. And despite the shock, the cuts, and the bruises, so was Annie. After being pulled out, her first words were:

“Nobody ought ever to do that again.”

Part four: Annie became the first person ever to go over the Niagara Falls and survive. Unfortunately, despite initial media attention, she didn’t make much money from the stunt.

While Annie was recovering in a Canadian hotel, her manager – Frank M Russell – ran away with the barrel and tried to gain from Annie’s success.

Annie Edson Taylor spent her final years posing for photographs with tourists at her souvenir stand in Niagara Falls. She died in poverty at the age of 83 years old.

Despite the lack of fortune, Annie inspired fourteen men and one other woman to go over Niagara Falls in similar stunts. Five of these resulted in deaths.

Here are some examples:

1911: Bobby Leach went over the Falls in a barrel. He spent 6 months in hospital, recovering from two broken knees and a broken jaw.

1930: George Stathakis went over the falls in a barrel along with his pet turtle. Although he survived the fall, his barrel got stuck and George died of suffocation. His turtle survived.

1951: William "Red" Hill, Jr. went over the falls in a rubber barrel. He was killed and you can see a report of the event here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAoCc82AG-E>

1985: Steve Trotter and his girlfriend Lori Martin went over the falls in a barrel. They survived and Lori became the second woman to perform a stunt like this since Annie Edson Taylor.

2003: Kirk Jones became the first person to go over the falls without any equipment and survive. He claimed that it was a suicide attempt rather than a stunt.

2017: Kirk Jones (see above) attempted to go over the falls again, this time in an inflatable ball. This time, he did not survive.

3. Teeth

Two old men in a rowing boat in the middle of a lake.

John and Rob. Old friends.

They sit facing each other.

In silence.

Fishing rods in hand.

They haven't caught anything yet.

Suddenly, John sneezes.

He sneezes hard.

He sneezes so hard that his false teeth fly out of his mouth.

They go over the side of the boat and: Plop!

They sink to the bottom of the lake.

Rob thinks that this is the funniest thing he has ever seen.

He laughs uncontrollably.

John is not amused.

An hour passes.

Two old men in a boat in the middle of a lake.

John and Rob. Old friends.

They sit back to back.

In silence.

Fishing rods in hand.

Suddenly, Rob feels a pull.

He's got one; he's caught a fish.

He reels it in; he lands it; it's a big one.

But surely not! Can it be true?

That inside the mouth of the fish are some false teeth – John's false teeth?

Rob taps John on the shoulder to show him what he's got.

John takes the teeth out of the fish's mouth and puts them into his own mouth.

Unfortunately, they don't fit.

Apparently these are not John's teeth after all.

John throws them over the side of the boat.

They sink to the bottom of the lake.

Poor Rob!

Note: The story is based on a short film which you may have seen before. If you watch it, you will find out why things ended badly for Rob.

<https://vimeo.com/5800357>