

Talking about *Just So Stories*

by Rudyard Kipling · the free ebook lives at youngreaderguide.org/books/just-so-stories/

Warming up

Easy openers. Anyone at the table can answer these, including the youngest.

1. Whale's throat, camel's hump, leopard's spots, elephant's trunk, cat's independence. Which explanation did you like best, and which one did you not believe for a second?
2. Kipling made up the sound of things: ooshy-skooshy, 'satiabable, cameelious, scalesome flailsome. Say your favourite one out loud. What do you think it means?

The real conversation

Pick two or three, not all of them. Parents answer too, honestly.

1. The Elephant's Child gets spanked by every relative he has for asking questions, and he keeps asking. He comes home with a trunk and spansks them all back, and the book says that after that, nobody spanked anybody any more. Did he win, or did he just become them?
2. Taffy draws a picture to ask for a spear, and her whole village reads it as an attack and jumps on an innocent man. She invented writing and the first thing it did was cause a disaster. Has a message you sent ever landed completely wrong?
3. The Cat won't say he's tame, ever — he makes a bargain instead, and keeps walking by his wild lone. Is the Cat brave, or is he just refusing to be part of anything? Is there someone at this table who is a bit Cat?
4. Every one of these stories is an answer to a question, and Kipling clearly made them all up. Does an explanation have to be true to be worth having? Which of these do you almost wish were true?
5. In 'How the Leopard Got His Spots' there is one ugly word that was ordinary when Kipling wrote it and is not ordinary now. What do you do with a book you enjoy that has something wrong in it — and is that different from what you'd do with a person?

The big *one*

Save it for last.

Kipling told the first three of these to his daughter Josephine at bedtime, and she made him say them exactly the same way every time, word for word — that is where the name comes from. What is the story in this family that has to be told just so, and who is the one who corrects it?

Do it *together*

Write one for something in this house. Pick something with a shape nobody can explain — why the dog's ear flops, why the back door sticks, why one person always sits in that chair. Everybody makes up the origin story out loud, in Kipling's voice: start with 'In the High and Far-Off Times, O Best Beloved,' and use at least two words you invent on the spot. Then do what Kipling did and draw a picture, and write a paragraph underneath explaining every single thing in it, including the parts you couldn't draw.