

Translated excerpt

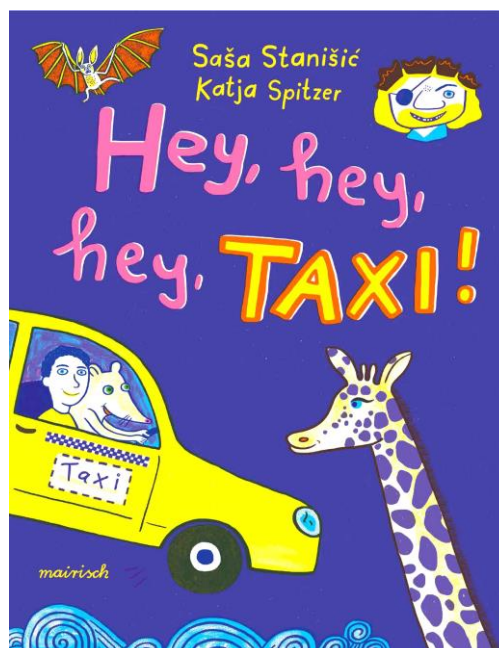
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Hey, hey, hey, Taxi!

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Translated by Katy Derbyshire



DEAR READ-ALOUDER,

Why would a children's book need a foreword? It doesn't, and I'm writing this not as a writer, but as a fellow read-aloud – an ally. In this book, I share the taxi stories I tell my son almost every day. Almost all the stories were spontaneous inventions, while brushing his teeth, out walking, at bedtime. I never thought about what he ought to *learn* from them or *feel* about them. The point was to make him happy, confuse him in a good way, animate him to join in the storytelling, and create images for important or troubling experiences in his life: fear, courage, defiance, loss, camaraderie, justice.

When children listen, they become architects for worlds made up of language. That includes worlds barely like our own, places of magical creatures and strange physics. As a read-aloud, I want to fill those worlds with life as best I can. That works best when I break with habits and prejudices – when I surprise my listeners. The terrifying dragon has a lisp and the fearful dwarf has a deep voice. After all, I sound different according to the kind of mess I get myself into.

That's right, "I" – it's an "I" telling these taxi stories. For my son, that "I" is me. Me, who used to spend a lot of time travelling, and started each journey in a taxi, ending it by getting out of a taxi and arriving home.

That "I" might not be you, dear read-aloud, I realize that. Maybe you don't travel much and you don't take many taxis. So that "I" might be a Paul for you, or a Fatima. Or if you choose to say I as well, you too will get to travel with giants and pirates. And that might be pretty good fun.

As a listener, my son usually travelled in the city. But he was a big fan of countryside stories too, because we rarely go there. Maybe you live in a suburb, and that will be the capital of your world.

What I want to say is: Please read my stories as loose guides for the stories you tell. Adopt them and make them your own, as you see fit. Change them! Build the variables of your world into mine.

Ask children questions as you read aloud (if they like answering questions). My son can't imagine a taxi story he's not in himself, maybe rescuing a fish that's forgotten how to swim. Or rescuing me, who's forgotten which road leads home. And there should always be a road leading home.

Wishing you lots of fun reading aloud and listening along!

Saša Stanišić





OUR STREETS

Hey, hey, hey, I get in a taxi and say: "Take me to the airport!" And off we go, all the way through our town. There are our streets, there's our river, there's the park, there's our cheerful people, there's our games, our worries, our wishes, our noisy streets, our traffic lights, and there's our ants and pigeons, and there! Our magician, our giants and pirates, our dwarves, our happiness, all the same as ever or a bit different than usual. Has the lion got a new hat? A little bit interesting or maybe not, and when I get to the airport I already miss you a lot. The best thing to do is get back in the taxi and come straight back home, and that's what I do. I get in a taxi and come back to you, and I bring a couple of stories with me, like this one:

LOO

Hey, hey, hey, I get in a taxi and I'm sitting on a toilet.
I say: "There's a loo in here."
The taxi driver says: "How do you like the loo?"
I say: "It's pretty comfy, for a loo."
The taxi driver says: "It's useful too!"
But I don't need the loo right now, so I say thanks and
take a different taxi home, back home to you.





YOUR FAVOURITE SONG

Hey, hey, hey, I get in a taxi and it's driven by music.
Music is driving the taxi! The music is your favourite song.

What's your favourite song?

It's exactly that song that's driving the taxi. The engine
sings along, in a deep, booming voice. I come back, back
home to you – let's sing it together!

TEENYGIANT, THE VERY SMALL GIANT

Hey, hey, hey, I get in a taxi, and suddenly the taxi's gone. Huh? I'm sitting on the shoulders of a very small giant. The shoulders wobble and I grab hold, knocking the hat off the very small giant's head, and the hat says: "Ouch! Watch it!"

The very small giant picks up his hat. I start wobbling again and the hat sticks its tongue out at me, and the tongue is a little drum kit, and none of them – the very small giant, the hat or the drum kit – seem very happy right now, thanks to me.

"Sorry!" I say, and climb off. No one wants to be a burden on a very small giant and his hat and his hat's drums, do they?

"What are you doing?" asks the hat.

"It's OK, I can call a different taxi," I say.

"Huh, think you're too good for us, do you?" the hat snorts.

"More like too heavy," I say.

"You know what?" says the very small giant. "Let's start again from the beginning. My name is Teenygiant. I carry people around town to pay my rent as a musician. Where to?"

"To the station, please!" I say, and I introduce myself too.

"The station? Aw, come on, let's do something more fun!" drum the drums. And doing something more fun is always the best idea, of course. But I can't right now, so I say: "Why don't you wait for me in a different story. I really have to go now, sorry."

"Alright," says the very small giant.

And the hat says: "Here, jump inside me and we'll take you to the station."

Why not? I think, and a couple of drum solos later, my train pulls in. I don't stay away for long – I come back in the evening, back home to you.



CHEESE TAXI

Hey, hey, hey, I get in a taxi and the taxi is a wheel of cheese and the driver is a mouse and the light inside is yellow and the windows are holes in the cheese and it smells – what else? – of cheese, and I get a huge craving for a cheese sandwich.

“Excuse me,” says the mouse, “please stop eating my taxi.”

“Sorry,” I say. “But your taxi looks so delicious.”

“I know,” says the mouse, and nibbles at the steering wheel.

“But it’s my taxi, and I’m the only one allowed to eat it.”

“Fair enough,” I say. “Please drive me to the moon.”

That’s not actually where I need to go today – I wasn’t going to go until next Tuesday. But I think to myself, if a cheese can drive and a mouse can be a driver, then the cheese-driving mouse can take me to the moon today.

“Right-o,” says the mouse. “Hold on tight!” And we have lift-off!

How brightly coloured is our world from up in the sky? Very.

Rivers blue and cliffs silver! Forests green and fields brown! Cities grey and mountaintops white! The mouse squeaks astronomical instructions into the cheese radio and we go weightless in the cheese wheel. The space suits are under the back seat.

And now, the moon! We land on the edge of a crater. The mouse and I take a walk, kicking up moon dust. You might think the moon is made of cheese as well – it looks a bit like it – but no, the moon is made of yearnings.

Do you know what yearnings are?

Yearnings are feelings people get now and then, when they connect something lovely with a thing or a place or a person but they can’t have that thing, or be in that place or with that person right then and there.

Like I get yearnings for you when I’m away for a while. Like now, on the moon! So I ask the mouse to take us back to earth, nice and quick! Back home to you. And to a yummy cheese sandwich!



PIRATES AHOY

The pirates are noisy in the bath. They kick up a stink arguing, partying and farting. “Ho ho ho!” rings out the whole time. They snore so loud that tiles fall off the roof and birds fly south earlier than they ought to. Of course, they’re kind of nice as well, those fun-size noisy roisterers, but this is what’s happened: They left the bathtub at night, managed to open the fridge somehow and held a massive feast. They ate up all our cheese! And the jam, and even the eggs were all gone – and you can bet they didn’t boil them! They drank up the milk, and my eye drops bottle is empty as well. Maybe they thought it was rum.

You should have seen the sight of the fridge! It looked like – well, like a band of pirates had been let loose on it, that’s what. There was a slice of salami stuck to a water bottle and mayonnaise everywhere. I think they wanted to paint with it, but I don’t know what. They’re not very good at painting. Anyway, the pirates can’t stay a day longer. No matter how cool it sounds to say we’ve got pirates living with us.

Hey, hey, hey, I fish the pirates out of the bathtub with a net, and their ship too. At first they moan and groan and complain, and then they love being carried through mid-air into a taxi.

I tell the taxi driver: “To the river, please!”

I’m just about to explain exactly which spot, when the driver exclaims: “Odjo odjo?” I’m very pleased to see Odjo Odjo – he knows the pirates too and he ought to know how to get to the river, in theory at least. He puts the pedal to the metal and drives me somewhere completely different, of course. He takes me to the sea. The airy salt. The wavy blue. Oh, to be the sea! At a place with not too much plastic floating around, left behind by people. And people swim in you, and fish and seaweed too, and everyone’s happy.

The pirates are very happy. They haven’t seen the sea for such a long time, or felt the spray on their faces, that they’d forgotten what it’s like when the wind pinches your hat off your head and throws it onto the waves.

They’ve missed the sea without noticing. The sea makes the pirates happy – the wind, the salt, the deep and the blue – and that happiness makes the pirates grow again. Soon they’re as big as children, then as big as me. Only one of them, called Theo, wanted to stay tiny, and that’s fine too.

And since their ship has grown with them, they can soon be off. They set the sails, wave us a wave and before long they’re nothing but a speck on the horizon. Farewell, pirates!

And me? I tell Odjo Odjo our address because I want to come back to you, and Odjo Odjo takes me somewhere completely different first, of course. But after a while I do come back, back home to you.



FUTURE

Hey, hey, hey, I get in a taxi and I say: "Please take me to Tom Morrow," but the taxi driver mishears me and takes me to tomorrow. We drive to the future! And that's great, because the weekend starts tomorrow. You and me play like crazy all morning. The only break we take is for lunch (gummy bears with broccoli). Then we cycle to the forest, meet a deer, build a tent out of branches, bury some treasure and find some other treasure, dance and sing – what a great day.

And now it's over, that day, and I put you to bed and read you a story. In the story, I get in a taxi and drive back to today. Today, I'm glad tomorrow's coming and the weekend's ahead and we'll play like crazy all morning.

First I have to go and see Tom Morrow, though. But the taxi driver mishears me again and takes me to tomorrow again. And you know what? It doesn't matter, because he takes me to you, yesterday, today and tomorrow, always home to you.

