

WRITE US A STORY FOR CHRISTMAS

Children's author offers her tips to get you started

THE run up to Christmas is a great time for storytelling, as the dark nights draw in and we cuddle up indoors, sharing a story by fireside or bedside is a lovely winter pastime.

So how about going one step further and writing a story?

If you are 16 or under and have a way with words, why not enter our Christmas Story competition?

Children's author Ali Sparkes has teamed up with us to help you out with three Christmas flavoured 'spark-offs' to get you going.

Ali, who was once a reporter on one of the Advertiser's sister papers, has had eight children's novels published since 2006 – and she knows that starting a story is often the hardest part.

"I've written about 15 books now, and it's definitely that first two or three paragraphs that are the most scary," she said.

"When I visit schools I often hear children explaining that they've got some great ideas but just don't know how to kick it all off."

Ali will also join the judges panel to choose the winners in December, and those stories will be published in the Swindon Advertiser.

She says she is looking to be charmed, scared, thrilled and fascinated by budding Swindon authors.

Here are some of Ali's Top Tips for writing a good story...

1. Aim to grab your reader's attention quickly and hold on to it. Get something unusual or interesting happening fast.

2. Get dialogue going quite quickly. It's sometimes easier to get

A Christmas Story



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into a story when somebody starts talking.

3. Do work on a good description BUT don't over-do it. Not many people want to read three pages of prose about falling autumn leaves, however lovely, before they get on with the story.

4. Avoid using clichés to describe things – ie: instead of saying 'Scared to death' think of a way to really describe how you felt. Eg: 'I felt my stomach clench and my hands start to shake, while a feeling of panic seemed to rise up in my throat'. Spend time thinking hard about exactly what it is you want your reader to understand, and play around with the words until you think you're getting it across.

5. Use your own experiences. Use your imagination, of course, but also write about things you know about. This makes your writing ring true, and that's really important.

6. Don't guess at things. If there's something factual about your story, check it – through your library,

teachers or the internet (with a parent or teacher's help) and make sure it's accurate. Why not do it properly? Research can be great fun.

7. Get someone you trust to check it through for any mistakes (but don't let them re-write it for you).

8. Above all ENJOY IT! Good writing should make you feel like you are flying! If you enjoy it, your readers probably will too.



TIPS Children's author Ali Sparkes with one of her books. She offers some ideas to help you write your Christmas story

Choose one of these spark-offs to begin your story

CHRISTMAS SPARK-OFF 1

The valley looked like a scene on a Christmas card, quilted with white snow, a drifting curtain of new flakes obscuring the tiny houses with their golden window lights, and blurring the dark line of trees that followed the frozen river.

It was charming, but for Simon, shivering alone in the dark cave which shrank back into the cold rock of the mountain, the valley, and everyone in it, seemed a world away.

CHRISTMAS SPARK-OFF 2

I knew Christmas was going to be

hell when Mum came downstairs with baubles dangling from her ears and tinsel round her hair like a halo – and a glass of ginger wine in one hand and way too much of her chest on display for a woman of her age.

In the front room, Gran was singing along to The Wizard of Oz and my revolting little brother was surreptitiously licking all the cheese footballs and putting them back in the tin.

How was I ever going to get through this?

CHRISTMAS SPARK-OFF 3

'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't let go, you dipstick?' grunted Gavin, dangling Mitch over the edge of the gulley by the toggles on his duffel coat.

'If I drop you now, I get to keep all of this!' He waved a bag full of Mitch's Christmas shopping. "And you'll be dead, so nobody will ever know!"

Mitch could feel his eyeballs bulging with terror at what lay below; a bone-crunching landing on thick brambles, lumps of concrete and abandoned rusty bikes.

He didn't expect help – least of all from Father Christmas.

How to enter our competition

CHOOSE which of our 'Spark-offs' inspires you the most and continue your story up to a maximum of 650 words.

There are two entry categories: under 12s and 12 to 16s.

Send your entry, with your name, age, address and contact details either via email to: webteam@swindonadvertiser.co.uk, or via post to: Christmas Story competition, Swindon Advertiser, 100 Victoria Road, Swindon SN1 3BE.

Your entry must reach us by Wednesday, December 17. All entries are non-returnable.

Our first place winners in each age category will have their stories published in the Swindon Advertiser on Christmas Eve and will also both receive a paperback of their choice up to

the value of £7.50 from Borders and a signed copy of Ali Sparkes new book *Frozen in Time*.

Our second place winners will have their stories published in paper on December 23 and will receive a paperback of their choice up to the value of £7.50 from Borders and a signed copy of Ali Sparkes' new book.

Our third place winners will have their stories published in paper on December 22 and receive the paperback of their choice up to the value of £7.50 from Borders along with a signed copy of Ali Sparkes new book.

All entries received will be printed on our website for everyone to enjoy. Normal Newsquest rules apply, for full details visit www.swindonadvertiser.co.uk/leisure/competitions/comprules.