Hard to Believe

Before Reading

- Are you interested in things that are bizarre or truly unbelievable? Why?

- Have you ever wondered if what you have read or watched is real, or simply made up so someone could enjoy 15 minutes of fame?

- When you were a child, did you ever ask your parents to look under the bed or in the closet, because you thought monsters were hiding there?

  Did you have an imaginary friend?

While Reading

The text you are about to read contains various dates and details. You should annotate the text as you read, as this will help you put details in the right chronological order and make better sense of it.

- Highlight any words you find difficult that are not in the vocabulary section.

- Look up these words in a dictionary.

Vocabulary

Marco Polo - a Venetian merchant and explorer who travelled to the Far East

headstones - monuments placed in cemeteries with the names and dates of birth and death

make ends meet - expression meaning to have just enough money to pay one's bills

You have probably watched videos on YouTube about people or events that are strange, bizarre or simply unbelievable. Before there was YouTube to show us all these wonders, people relied on the written word. Robert Lee Ripley was the master of this genre. There is nothing strange or bizarre about the man himself. He is included in these texts because of what he achieved. Ripley was called the modern Marco Polo. He visited 198 countries in his lifetime and collected strange stories and artifacts from them. His cartoons and essays were translated into 17 languages in over 38 countries and were (and still are) read by over 800 million people. So, who was he? Here is a short biography of the man behind "Ripley's Believe It or Not!®"

The Man

Robert Lee Ripley was born in 1890 in Santa Rosa, California. In 1905, young Robert was forced to leave school after his father died. His first jobs were delivering newspapers and polishing headstones. The little money he made, he gave to his mother so she could make ends meet at the end of each month. He did not keep the jobs very long because, in 1908, he moved to San Francisco. Since he was a

talented artist, he got a job as a sports cartoonist. In 1913, he moved from San Francisco to New York, where he found a job at *The Globe*, once again as a sports cartoonist.

His "Believe It or Not!®" adventures started in 1918. That December, he published a series of cartoons entitled "Champs or Chumps," which featured achievements in sport, some brilliant, others odd. A year later, another series of cartoons appeared, this time entitled "Believe It or Not!®," relating facts

and stories on subjects other than just sport. The series became so popular that *The Globe* sent Ripley on a trip around the world to gather more unusual, bizarre and exotic stories. He travelled the world producing cartoon series and essays, which were published in *The Globe*. After his return, Ripley found that his articles and cartoons about incredible facts had become extremely popular. So much so that he had to hire an assistant to help with research. In 1926, he was hired by the prestigious newspaper the *Evening Post*, where his "Believe It or Not" feature had become a hit.

His popularity with the public grew with the passage of time. People could simply not get enough of his stories. Remember, this was the era when all the news was in print. There was no television or Internet, and certainly no YouTube. People relied on the written word to learn about anything and everything.

In 1929, Ripley was hired by King Features Syndicate, which meant that his "Believe It or Not" column would appear in hundreds of newspapers. This led to the publishing of a "Believe It or Not" book, which became an instant hit. It sold more than 500,000 copies in the first six months after publication. Ripley then moved from the written to the spoken media, and in 1930 he signed a contract with NBC to host a weekly radio show based on his "Believe It or Not" series. The only visual medium available at the time (other than the theatre) was the movies, so not long after signing his contract with NBC, he signed another with Twentieth Century Fox. This time he made short films that were either presented by themselves or before the main features at movie theatres. Naturally, this made Ripley a very rich man. What did he do with all his money? He invested it in a variety of projects. One of them was the "Odditorium," which was presented for the first time at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933. The "Odditorium" was a museum of the oddities he had uncovered during his travels, and which he had published in his newspaper columns and books. Another project of his was BION,

an island north of New York City that he bought and on which he built a 28-room mansion. He transformed the building into another sort of museum where he kept many of the artifacts he had collected throughout the years.

In 1949, television was just beginning and Ripley began hosting a weekly program entitled, yes, you guessed it, *Believe It or Not!*®. During the taping of the 13th episode, which centred around the funeral song "Taps," he fell unconscious at his desk. He was rushed to a nearby hospital, where he died three days later. The story doesn't say whether the song "Taps" was played at his funeral, which took place in Santa Rosa, California, the town where he was born.

After his death, his home and collection was sold at auction and bought by a man named John Arthur. He used the collection to create the first permanent Ripley's Believe It or Not!® museum. Today, Ripley's museums are found around the world. There is even one in Niagara Falls, Ontario. Stories are still being added to the Ripley collection.

Now that you know a little bit about the man, here are some of the stories he published in magazines and books. Remember, these appeared before the creation of the Internet and YouTube.

Vocabulary

cutter- a light, fast, coastal patrol boat

turned about - urned around

shroud - a garment put over dead bodies

slain - killed

The Strangest Shipwreck in All History

The Gem, a cutter carrying six crewmen, four passengers and 500 bags of wheat sailed serenely into sheltered South Bay, at Rottnest Island, Australia, on May 17, 1876, and suddenly vanished. Divers located the wreckage with all sails still set, but could not discover a reason for the ship's sinking. No trace of the crew or passengers has ever been found.

The Boat That Performed a Rescue Without Human Assistance

On December 24, 1923, Adolphe Pons, a French trader, fell overboard from his motorboat off New Caledonia and a native assistant without thinking dived in to save him. Their craft continued under full power leaving the two men behind eight miles away from any coast, in shark-infested waters. The two men would have died in minutes but the motorboat suddenly turned about and came back for them, and they climbed aboard unharmed.

The Banquets of the Dead

The Prince of Condé (1643–1709), one of the richest men in all of France, suddenly refused to eat at the age of 56, insisting that he had died. For the next 10 years, his doctors staged elaborate banquets at which all the guests arrived in coffins, wearing shrouds to convince the mentally ill prince that even corpses must eat.

The Man Who Bore a Charmed Life

Frank Tower, an oiler, swam away from three major disasters: *Titanic* in 1912; the *Empress of Ireland* in 1914; and the *Lusitania* in 1915. (Submitted by Richard E. Brown, Bakersfield California)

The Coat That Had a Tragic Pattern of Death

Jabez Spicer of Layden, Massachusetts, was killed by two bullets on January 25, 1787, during Shay's Rebellion at the Springfield arsenal. He was wearing the coat in which his brother Daniel had been slain by two bullets on March 5, 1784. The bullets that killed Jabez passed through the same two holes in the cloak that had been made when Daniel was killed three years earlier.

Mourning Pigeon

Something strange marked the burial service for Captain Joseph G. Belain, in the church at Gayhead, Massachusetts. A carrier pigeon flew in from the sea and rested upon the coffin until the service was concluded, as if in tribute to the man who had dedicated his life to saving the carrier pigeon from extinction.

The Bandage That Proved to Be a Strange Prophecy

Lysimachus, a general serving Alexander the Great, was wounded in the head by an arrow. King Alexander stopped the flow of blood by placing his crown on Lysimachus' head. After Alexander died, Lysimachus became king and ruled Thrace for 28 years.

The Most Ill-Fated Garment in All of History

A cremation ceremony was staged by a Japanese priest in Tokyo in February 1657, to destroy the bad luck in a kimono successively owned by three teenage girls, each of whom had died before she could wear it. A violent wind spread the flames and the fire destroyed three-quarters of Tokyo – 300 temples, 500 palaces, 9,000 stores and 61 bridges. It also killed 100,000 people.

Synonyms and Antonyms

Here are the definitions given in the Oxford Dictionary.

Synonym: A word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another word or phrase in the same language.

Antonym: A word that is opposite in meaning to another.

ACTIVITY 1
In the word bank, find the **antonyms** of the following words.

WORD BANK

clean	disobedient	expensive	flavourless	ignorance
maintain	old	pleasure	sick	thin

a) bargain
b) change
c) tasty
d) dirty
e) healthy

f) knowledge
g) obedient
h) pain
i) young
j) thick

ACTIVITY 2
In the word bank, find the **synonyms** of the following words.

WORD BANK

approach – assist – choose – cover – create – demolish – employ – leave – seize – slice

a) cut
b) go
c) hide
d) come
e) make

f) use
g) take
h) destroy
i) help
j) decide

ANSWERS :)

Activity 1

a. Expensive
b. Maintain
c. Flavourless
d. Clean
e. Sick
f. Ignorance
g. Disobedient
h. Pleasure
i. Old
j. Thin

Activity 2
a. Slice
b. Leave
c. Cover
d. Approach
e. Create
f. Employ
g. Seize
h. Demolish
i. Assist
j. Choose