

Tall stories

Posted by Peter on 20 October 2009



A tall building - the Petronas towers in Kuala Lumpur. Photo by [Storm Crypt/flickr](#)

Today we discover the word "tall", and we learn about "tall stories".

I guess you know what "tall" means in your own language - if you don't, stop listening now and look the word up in a dictionary.

Here are some examples of the way we use "tall". We can talk about a "tall man". A tall man might be 1.9 or even 2 meters high. The tallest man who ever lived was called [Robert Wadlow](#). He was 2.72 meters tall. He died in 1940, at the age of only 22.

We can talk about a "tall tree". How high is a tall tree? Perhaps 20 meters. Or we can talk about a tall building. There is a photo of a tall building, in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, on the website. It is over 450 meters high. Sometimes, we use the word "high" instead of "tall". We can talk about a "high mountain" for example, or about a "high wall". Ladies sometimes wear shoes with high heels. And small children sit in [high chairs](#) to eat their food. However, you cannot always use "high" instead of "tall". We never use "high" for people or animals, for example. Robert Wadlow was the tallest man in the world, not the highest man.

I started this podcast by saying that we would talk about "tall stories". What is a "tall story", and how many meters high is it? Well, we say that a story is a "tall story" if it is hard to believe it. A tall story is often quite detailed, and it may even be true, but there is something about it which makes you think that it is probably false. Have you ever received an e-mail like this. It is from someone you do not know. The writer says that he has \$50 million in a bank account. He explains how he got the \$50 million, and tells you about his family, and why he now needs to move the \$50 million to another country. Unfortunately, the bank regulations in his country will not allow him to move the money. But he has heard that you are an honest and [trustworthy](#) person, and he asks that you should help him. If you could just send him the details of your bank account, he will use it to move his money, and he will let you have \$5 million for helping him.

Do you believe that story? No. You do not believe it and you do not trust the writer. It is a "tall story". If you send him details of your bank account, of course, you will not get \$5 million. Instead, you will find that your own savings disappear.

Recently, a [documentary](#) film company decided to show that it was easy to get some newspapers to publish tall stories about celebrities. They made up some stories, and then gave them to the newspapers. What sort of stories? Well, do you know the singer [Amy Winehouse](#)? She has lots of hair which she wears piled up on the

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top of her head in a style which in English we call a beehive. The tall story about her was that her beehive had [caught fire](#) during a party at her house. Another singer, [Sarah Harding of the group Girls Aloud](#), is - how shall I say this ? - not well-known as an [intellectual](#). The story about her was that in secret she reads books about quantum physics and that she had bought her own telescope so that she can observe the stars and the planets.



Amy Winehouse and her beehive hair style.

At this point, dear listeners, I must say that I am disappointed that the company did not invent a story about the celebrity podcaster at Listen to English - something about a secret holiday on a Caribbean island with a 19 year old super-model, perhaps. I am sure it would have been much more interesting than the fire in Amy Winehouse's hair.

What adjectives can we use to describe these tall stories. They are untrue, or false, of course; they are also [fabricated](#), or invented, or [made-up](#); and they are [far-fetched](#), or [outlandish](#), or difficult to believe.

Nonetheless, the newspapers published nearly all of the stories. None of them tried to check whether they were true. Sometimes the papers even added little details of their own. And then the stories were repeated in other newspapers and on blogs and internet sites. People will believe almost anything about celebrities. Celebrities are manufactured; they are invented by the media. Sometimes they hardly seem to be real people at all. People do not want the truth about celebrities; they want entertainment. So does it matter if the media publish tall stories about them?

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=490>,