The stories

The Nine Billion Names of God. A lama from a Tibetan monastery arranges to buy a large computer from an American company. He wants its help in making a list of all the possible names of God. The job would take them fifteen thousand years on their own but they can do it in a hundred days with the computer.

The company supplies the computer, and two engineers to take care of it. As the end of the hundred days approaches, the two engineers discover why the lamas want to make the list. They believe that when the list is finished, God’s purpose in making the world will be finished – and the world will end. The engineers are worried that when this does not happen, the lamas will be angry. They arrange to leave shortly before the list is finished. As they ride down the valley to the airfield they notice that it is now time for the list to be finished and overhead, the stars are going out.

The Secret. A journalist, visiting the Moon, which is now a colony of the Earth with a hundred thousand inhabitants, finds that, although people are very friendly, they also seem to be hiding something from him. He finally discovers the reason. Experiments with animals are showing that they live much longer on the Moon than on the Earth. And this means that people will probably live for around two hundred years. But already, the people of the overcrowded Earth are jealous of the privileged life of the scientists on the Moon. How is the journalist to give them the news?

The Wall of Darkness. Shervane lives on a planet where there is no night – its sun, Trilorne, rises and falls in the sky, but never sets. If you ride north, you reach a land where it is too hot to live. If you ride south, Trilorne becomes faint, and it is too cold. Also in the south, there is a high dark Wall, which stretches around the planet. In summer it is possible to reach the Wall, but no-one has been beyond it.

Shervane arranges an expedition to climb the Wall. He alone goes to the top, and then walks across the wide top of the Wall towards the south, away from Trilorne. He walks for a long time, but eventually finds that he is back where he started at the top of the Wall. It is impossible to reach the far side of the Wall. Or perhaps the Wall has only one side.

No Morning After. Bill Cross is unhappy. His girlfriend has left him, and his employer, the army, wants him to make bombs, not spaceships. One evening he drinks a lot of whisky to forget his problems.

The Thaarns, people of a planet hundreds of light-years away, have discovered that the Earth is going to be destroyed. The sun will explode and burn up the Earth in three day’s time. They can help the humans to escape, but they need telepathic contact. The only person they can make contact with is Bill. Bill doesn’t believe his hallucination, and, even if it is true, he doesn’t care.

For the next two days he is too ill to remember the telepathic contact. The day after that, Brenda comes back to him. And there isn’t a fourth day.

The Songs of Distant Earth. Lora and her boyfriend Clyde live on Thalassa, a distant planet which has almost lost contact with the Earth. One day a damaged spaceship stops for repairs. It is travelling from Earth to colonize a distant planet. Most of the travellers are frozen in sleep, and only a few engineers are working to repair the ship.

Lora falls in love with Leon, one of the visitors. For a time he seems to fall in love with her, and she thinks that perhaps when the ship leaves, he will stay. But just before the departure, he takes Lora to visit the spaceship – and shows her his pregnant wife, in her frozen sleep. Lora understands that she will stay on peaceful Thalassa, while Leon will travel on.
The Songs of Distant Earth and Other Stories

Pre-reading activity

Match the pictures with the story

Match the story titles with their corresponding picture(s).

1. The Nine Billion Names of God
2. The Secret
3. The Wall of Darkness
4. No Morning After
5. The Songs of Distant Earth

To the teacher

Aim: To familiarize students with the story
Time: 10–15 minutes
Organization: Give one copy of the worksheet to each student or group of students. Ask them to look at the pictures and at the titles of the stories and see which pictures they think go with which story. It is not important for them to get this activity correct. The important thing is to begin thinking about each of the stories.
Key: 1c, g; 2f; 3a, e; 4d; 5b, h.
The Songs of Distant Earth
and Other Stories
While reading activity

What will happen next?

The Nine Billion Names of God.
Which of these things do you think will happen in the story?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WILL HAPPEN</th>
<th>MAY HAPPEN</th>
<th>WON’T HAPPEN</th>
<th>YOUR OWN COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Something stops the computer writing the list.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The computer writes the list.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The two engineers are killed by the lamas.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something very strange happens when the list is finished.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Your suggestion)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Your suggestion)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The Secret.
Which of these things do you think will happen in the story?

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<th>MAY HAPPEN</th>
<th>WON’T HAPPEN</th>
<th>YOUR OWN COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a new killer disease on the Moon.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Strange aliens have been discovered on the Moon.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Moon is about to be destroyed by an explosion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scientists have discovered something to make people on the Moon live longer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Your suggestion)</td>
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To the teacher

Where: At the end of pages 4 and 14
Aim: To encourage students to predict the development of the stories
Time: 5–10 minutes for each story
Organization: For each story, stop the students reading at the three asterisks on the page which indicate a break in the story. Ask them to fill in the table with their predictions of what will happen next. They can add their own ideas. They may want to keep their filled-in worksheets to compare with the actual story.
Some Tibetan lamas come to San Francisco to buy a computer. They want to use it to finish a job they have been doing for thousands of years: writing down the nine billion possible names of God. They take the computer back to Tibet with them, together with two engineers to help them with the work.

The two engineers enjoy their work with the lamas and they are sorry that it is going to end. But two weeks before it ends, they discover why the lamas want to print the list of names. When the job is finished they will have done what God wants, so . . .

Now write a summary of one of the other stories here. Include some mistakes. Then ask another student to correct it.

To the teacher

Aim: To practise summary writing
Time: 20–30 minutes
Organization: Give each student a copy of the erroneous summary for The Nine Billion Names of God. Ask them to correct/rewrite the first part of this, and then finish it. Then ask them to write a similar erroneous summary for one of the other stories.