

Podcast: [What If World](#)

Episode: 52 What if the sorting hat from Hogwarts started saying random words instead of houses at the start of the year?

File Length: 19:20

Transcription by Keffy

Lyrics: What if kittens played the glockenspiel? And what if unicorns were real? What if you could fly or travel back in time, we welcome you to What If World. What If World. This is What If World.

Mr. Eric: Hey there folks, and welcome back to What If World, the show where your questions and ideas inspire off the cuff stories. I'm Mr. Eric, your host, and today we've got a question from Stella.

Stella: Hi What If World. I'm Stella from Sydney, Australia, and my What If World question is what if the sorting hat from Hogwarts started saying random words instead of the houses at the start of the year.

Mr. Eric: Stella, thank you for recording a question and emailing it to us all the way from Sydney, Australia. Both of Miss Karen's parents are from Australia, and it's so cool to know we have listeners out there. And Stella was really smart. She just recorded her question and then emailed it to us at whatifworldpodcast@gmail.com. That's a super easy way for all of our international listeners to send in their questions. And just a quick head's up—I love Harry Potter, and Hogwarts, and the sorting hat, but our question's going to inspire a different story, because basically all of that is trademarked. I hope you enjoy it.

[Rising harp scale.]

Our story takes place way back in the year 2001. Dinosaurs roamed the earth, which wasn't very unusual for What If World, and a much younger Abacus P. Grumbler was just about to open his school, the Observatorium.

Abacus: All right, students. I'm Abbie P, your new cool teacher.

Mr. Eric: Said Abacus. And all the students gathered in the tiny hall of the Observatorium, give a collective giggle.

Students: [Giggle]

Abacus: I'm a cool and funny teacher. We're going to get a lot of learning in and maybe even some magic lessons.

Mr. Eric: The young Abacus was dressed in cool, hip, slim-fitting robes. His beard was neatly trimmed with just a few gray hairs showing through. And he had swapped out his spectacles for contact lenses, which weren't very comfortable in his eyes.

Abacus: Now I know some of you cool kids are boarding here in the dormitories by the squid lake. I'll warn you not to go swimming in there because it's slimy and full of squids. Though they won't pull you down or anything. They're friendly, but...

Mr. Eric: It didn't seem like any of the kids were paying attention to him.

Kid 1: When's he gonna sort us.

Kid 2: What's taking so long.

Kid 3: His robes are totally lame.

Kid 4: When's he gonna teach us a fireball spell?

Abacus: Hey. Listen up to Abbie P, children. I'm trying to keep you safe.

Mr. Eric: And a little girl raised her hand.

Abacus: Yes, you there.

Mr. Eric: And he checked his clipboard. Sydney from... Stella Whatwherelia.

Stella: I was just wondering when you were going to sort us?

Abacus: Sort you?

Mr. Eric: Asked Abacus.

Abacus: Well, I've got your grades and there's going to be some girls rooms and some boys rooms, and some fire monster rooms, and some ice monster rooms so they don't melt each other.

Mr. Eric: And a little boy spoke up.

Boy: I think she means sort us into our houses, like in that movie.

Abacus: Movie?

Mr. Eric: Cried Abacus.

Abacus: I don't let a movie tell me what to do. Besides, it was a book first.

Mr. Eric: And Sydney spoke up again.

Sydney: But I came all the way from Whatwherelia, and I want to be sorted.

Mr. Eric: And Abacus got a little grumbly.

Abacus: Got to invent some sort of sorting thing.

Mr. Eric: Abacus was wearing a cool little fedora. Or at least, he thought it was cool. He took it off and pointed his wand at it.

Abacus: Oh, these children say they've been shorted so let's go and get them sorted.

Mr. Eric: And his cool, fresh, pinstripe fedora floated parallel to the ground, then turned so it was standing straight up and down, with the top of the hat looking out over the entire hall. Then the dimple at the top of the hat wrinkled and worked coming in and out and pressing together and pulling apart, until it could move just like a mouth.

Sortahat: Hey there, everybody. I'm the Sortahat, all right?

Mr. Eric: And all the children in the hall gave it a very curious look. The little boy spoke up.

Boy: Teacher...

Abacus: Please, call me Abbie P.

Boy: Teacher, that's not what the hat's supposed to look like.

Mr. Eric: And Abacus grumbled again.

Abacus: I just used all my magic for the month making this hat so I would prefer a thank you to another criticism.

Mr. Eric: And Sydney was the first to stand.

Sydney: Thank you, Abacus. I'm ready to put on the hat.

Abacus: Finally, one of you students realizes how cool I am.

Sydney: I didn't say you were cool, Abacus.

Mr. Eric: Said Sydney, walking up to the front of the class and standing in front of the sortahat, which made itself horizontal again and landed on her head, gently, though it was a little too big. The other children in the hall couldn't see Sortahat's face anymore, since it talked through the dimple at the top of the hat. And after a minute...

Children: What's taking so long? I don't think it knows what's it's doing. I don't think Abacus knows what he's doing. When am I going to learn a lightning bolt spell.

Mr. Eric: Abacus could see his class getting restless again.

Abacus: Hat, say something.

Sortahat: What am I supposed to say? I'm just a sorta hat.

Abacus: I don't know, but it's important to the children that you say something.

Sortahat: Oh, uh, okay...

Mr. Eric: And the sorta hat scrunched up its little fold of a face.

Sortahat: Yeah... pencil.

Mr. Eric: And all of the kids in the hall went quiet.

Sydney: Pencil?

Mr. Eric: Asked Sydney.

Sydney: What's that supposed to mean?

Sortahat: You heard me, pencil. You've just been sorta-ed.

Sydney: Did you say sorta or sorted.

Sortahat: Yeah, exactly. Next!

Mr. Eric: And the fedora floated off her head and she stomped grumpily back to her seat. Then that talkative little boy got up.

Boy: Please be something cool... please be something cool... please be something cool...

Mr. Eric: He muttered to himself as the fedora came to a rest atop his head.

Sortahat: Something cool, eh? Uh... air conditioner. Boom.

Mr. Eric: And a bunch of the kids in the hall laughed.

Children: [Laughing] That's funny. I'm confused!

Mr. Eric: Then a girl got up.

Sortahat: Barnacle.

Mr. Eric: Then a boy.

Sortahat: Gift, I guess.

Mr. Eric: Then a girl.

Sortahat: Uh... algebra, why not?

Mr. Eric: Then a boy.

Sortahat: Hmm... I'm running out of words I know. I'm only like a minute and a half old. Ghostburger!

Mr. Eric: The boy's face went red and he held his head low as he went back to his seat. And back and forth it went, girl, boy, girl, boy.

Sortahat: Bouncy. Pizza day. Patience. Garage. Uh... roly polly bug. Until every child was "sorta-ed" though they didn't look particularly happy to be.

Abacus: All right, all you cool cats, and people and dogs and monsters. Time to go back to your homes and dormitories and rest up for another wacky day of learning with Professor Abbie P.

Mr. Eric: And all the kids stood up, looking miserable.

Abacus: Just follow the staff.

Mr. Eric: And several wooden staves floated off the wall, and each staff collected a different group of kids and took them to their dormitories, or guided them out to the street to be picked up by their parents.

The next day, Sydney was so excited to start her first day of school. She put on her best robes and grabbed all her brand-new books and walked into the big stone tiled hallways of the Observatorium.

Sydney: Hey, air conditioner, right?

Mr. Eric: Sydney said to the little boy who'd been sorted right after her.

Boy: Yeah, that's me. One of the cool kids, obviously.

Mr. Eric: And there was a chilly air about him.

Sydney: Well, I don't really believe in cool and uncool. I was just hoping we could be friends.

Mr. Eric: And the boy looked at her.

Boy: Sounds just like something a pencil would say.

Mr. Eric: And the girl called Bouncy gave him a high five as they both laughed and Pizza Day caught up with them as they headed to class.

Pizza Day: I can't believe you were talking to Pencil, said Pizza Day.

Mr. Eric: She walked into her first class where Abacus stood, his wand raised high, with a piece of chalk tied to the end.

Abacus: All right, class. This morning we're going to practice some very cool arithmetic.

Mr. Eric: Bouncy, Air Conditioning, and Pizza Day all groaned.

Bouncy, AC, PD: Aww, ugh.

Mr. Eric: And Bouncy said,

Bouncy: I bet Algebra will be really good at this.

Mr. Eric: And the young unicorn called Algebra turned a shade of reddish pink and lowered her horn. And Abacus said,

Abacus: Well, first you have to learn arithmetic. Then we'll do some geometry and finally we'll get to...

Mr. Eric: But a boy interrupted.

Ghostburger: Geometry? Like casting a cone of cold?

Mr. Eric: And half the class laughed.

Class: [Laughing] Ghostburger... That's such a Ghostburger thing to say.

Abacus: Now, class.

Mr. Eric: Abacus was doing his best not to grumble.

Abacus: I don't teach dangerous magic like that and I certainly don't teach it in arithmetic.

Mr. Eric: Sydney did her best to focus throughout the lesson but Abacus was having a tough time getting control of his class and when the lunch bell finally rang, Sydney couldn't get out of there fast enough.

But the cafeteria wasn't much better. The girls who had been called Algebra and Patience sat alone at opposite ends of a long table, their heads each buried in a book. Air Conditioning, Bouncy, and Pizza Day? They played with their food and sat on their table and made lots of loud jokes that didn't seem to be funny to anyone but the three of them. Gift and Garage sat together building a tall tower with their lunches and lunch trays, taking turns eating little bits of it and seeing whether or not it fell down. And finally, Barnacle, Ghostburger, and Rolly Polly Bug sat under their table. They ate their lunches anxiously and looked like they were trying to be invisible.

Sydney walked up to the lunch line and saw the Sortahat with a ladle in the fold of its mouth.

Sortahat: [Muffled talking]

Sydney: What was that?

Sortahat: Hey there, Sydney from Stella.

Sydney: You might as well call me pencil now.

Sortahat: Why would I do that?

Mr. Eric: Asked the Sortahat.

Sydney: Because that's how you sorted me.

Sortahat: What? I just sorta-ed you.

Sydney: I know, and now everyone thinks all I care about is schoolwork and following the rules.

Sortahat: Hey, first off, that's a great thing to care about. And secondly, why would me saying the word, "Pencil" mean anything to anybody?

Mr. Eric: They heard a muffled shout from under one of the cafeteria tables.

Ghostburger: Because [muffled shouting]

Sortahat: Huh? Who said that?

Mr. Eric: And the boy called Ghostburger pulled himself out from under his table and slunk over his bench.

Ghostburger: You gave me a weird name so now everyone thinks I'm a weird kid when I was just excited to learn magic.

Mr. Eric: And Air Conditioning said,

Air Conditioning: I think our labels are cool.

Mr. Eric: And the unicorn called Algebra turned bright blue like the hottest flame.

Algebra: Being mean isn't cool!

Mr. Eric: And a wave of heat flew out from the young unicorn like a wall. Silverware clattered to the floor as it turned hot to the touch. And Abacus was there in an instant.

Abacus: CLASS.

Mr. Eric: He grumbled, pulling out a can of snowflakes and shaking it up into the air.

Abacus: I was saving those magic snowflakes for our cool holiday ball. So which one of you was misusing magic?

Mr. Eric: The cafeteria was cooling down quickly in the light snow and all the children looked towards Algebra the unicorn.

Pizza Day: Maybe you mis-sorted her.

Mr. Eric: Said Pizza Day.

Pizza Day: You should have called her, uh, Fire Horse Horn.

Abacus: All right.

Mr. Eric: Said Abacus.

Abacus: Let's all just cool down and be nice.

Mr. Eric: But Sydney had had enough. She stomped through the snow, walked right up to Abacus and gave a tug on his tiny beard. Which popped right off!

[Record scratch]

- Abacus: Very funny... my wizard beard just hasn't grown in yet.
- Mr. Eric: And there was a sprinkle of laughter through the cafeteria.
- Sydney: Abacus, is this really how you want to run your school?
- Abacus: I just want you kids to like me.
- Sydney: We'll like you if you're a good teacher and if you're fair to the students.
- Abacus: Well...
- Mr. Eric: And Abacus rubbed at his eyes and one of his contacts fell out.
- Abacus: Ow!
- Mr. Eric: Some of the kids laughed again, but Ghostburger came over and picked up his contact out of the snow.
- Abacus: How did you even see that lens?
- Ghostburger: I can see almost everything. That's why my parents sent me to learn magic.
- Mr. Eric: The unicorn called Algebra was shivering in the snow. Her bright blue flaming fur had turned back to a stark white. Then Pizza Day walked over to her and pulled a long scarf out of his bag and wrapped it around her neck. Abacus took out his other contact lens and put his spectacles back on.
- Abacus: Boy, what a beautiful scarf.
- Pizza Day: Yeah, I made it. I like knitting.
- Mr. Eric: And the little unicorn seemed to warm up in an instant.
- Air Conditioning: Hehehe... he's knitting...
- Mr. Eric: Said Air Conditioning.
- Abacus: Are you making fun?
- Mr. Eric: Grumbled Abacus.

Air Conditioning: No... I'm just c-c-c-cold.

Sortahat: I think I see what's happening here, Abacus. You all think I sorted you yesterday.

Mr. Eric: Said the fedora.

Sydney: But you were just saying random words.

Mr. Eric: Said Sydney.

Sydney: You just met us. How could you have known enough to judge us?

Mr. Eric: The snow was up to their ankles now. The cafeteria food had frozen solid and all the kids from all the different tables found themselves huddling together. But they didn't even remember moving.

Abacus: That's why I never wanted a sorter hat in the first place.

Sydney: We thought we had to be makers or scholars or outcasts or cool kids based off of a bunch of silly words.

Sortahat: Yeah, that's the jist of it.

Mr. Eric: And the sorta hat floated over to rest on Sydney's snow-covered head.

Sortahat: How about this for a label. Student. Get it?

Mr. Eric: And Sydney nodded.

Sydney: Yes.

Mr. Eric: Then it floated onto Abacus.

Sortahat: Teacher. You hear me?

Mr. Eric: Abacus nodded as well.

Abacus: I heard you.

Sortahat: You know, I don't think I want to be a part time sorta hat, full time cafeteria worker.

Abacus: But I just ordered 200 fedora-sized food service gloves.

Sortahat: I'm sure you'll find another hat for the job, but I'm out of here.

Mr. Eric: And off floated the fedora. The magical snowflakes gusting out behind him, leaving the cafeteria a little wet but otherwise warm.

Air Conditioning: Wait, he didn't resort the rest of us.

Mr. Eric: Said the boy called Air Conditioning.

Abacus: That's because, my students, none of us need sorting whatsoever.

Mr. Eric: And with that, one long, gray wizard hair poked out of his clean-shaven chin.

Abacus: Well, look at that! My beard is finally coming in.

Sydney: Aren't you 40 or so?

Mr. Eric: Asked Sydney.

Abacus: None of your business! Lunch time is over, class. We all have lots of learning to do and your first lesson—

Mr. Eric: Abacus pulled out his wand and Grayson, the boy once called Ghostburger, squealed with excitement.

Grayson: Magic!

Abacus: A kind of magic, yes.

Mr. Eric: And as he spun his wand, the little white piece of chalk at the end seemed to get shorter and shorter as it drew dusty little chalk arrows in the air, pointing from some kids to other.

Abacus: These arrows point to each student you have offended today with your labeling and presumptions.

Kids: Huh? What?

Abacus: And you will erase these lines only when you have made amends to your fellow students.

Kids: Aw. Man. Sounds like homework.

Mr. Eric: Sydney saw several chalk lines making arrows towards her and red-faced children at the other end who knew they'd offended her. But there was one chalk arrow pointing both ways toward she and Abacus. She walked up to the professor.

Sydney: I'm sorry, Abacus, for insisting you sort us. And for pulling off your fake beard.

Abacus: And I'm sorry, Sydney, for not seeing this mess sooner. And for not being a better teacher to all of my students.

Mr. Eric: And the chalk arrow floating between them flew up to Abacus's chin and became another long, white, hair.

Abacus: Wow!

Mr. Eric: Said Abacus, grasping the two long hairs that poked out of either side of his chin.

Abacus: Do you think if I sort of spun these in a circle they'd make a convincing wizard beard?

Sydney: [Laughs] Not yet, Professor Grumbler, but you're getting there.

Mr. Eric: The end.

[Falling harp scale.]

All right, Stella. I hope you liked your story. I'd like to thank Karen Marshall, my editor and producer. Craig Martinson for our theme song, Jason O'Keeffe for our artwork, and all you kids at home who know that labels really don't mean all that much. Getting to know a person's real work, but it's often worth it.

Until we meet again, keep wondering.

[What If World theme song plays.]