

Tales of Minz

A Cobbler's Tale

BY ALEX BROWN

TALES OF MINZ

A Cobbler's Tale
A Lamplighter's Tale

THE TALE OF ROSE & ED

A House Named Haven
The Storytellers

SHORT STORIES

Collected Short Stories: Volume One

Tales of Minz

A Cobbler's
Tale

Alex Brown

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A COBBLER'S TALE

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*For Bill—without whom, there would be no story. Well,
there'd still be a story—just not this one.*

~ AUTHOR'S NOTE ~

Stories are often well-polished, carefully worded works of art.

They almost have to be. In a competitive market, oversaturated with content, it's difficult for less-than excellent stories to garner much notice or respect. The problem is, spectacular stories set lofty expectations in readers' minds for all stories—and those expectations can be challenging for aspiring creatives to meet, much less exceed.

The story you're about to read is not well-polished, nor is it a carefully worded work of art. *Not entirely*. But that isn't its intent. Please—don't have high expectations for this book. You'll only end up disappointed, and I don't want that for you. If you keep your expectations low (or get rid of them entirely), I promise—you'll be much better off.

This story is part of the *Tales of Minz* series, told in the voice of a young (and rather overconfident) storyteller named Vern, who hails from the strange and magical world in which these stories take place. His editor, an old (and more experienced) storyteller named Barnabas E. Wooldridge, seeks to guide his young protégé and help him grow at the craft of storytelling.

As the *Tales of Minz* series grows throughout the years, you'll see growth in the storyteller as well. These will not be perfect stories. They will have flaws and problems with them. But beauty can still be found in the imperfection of things—if you take the time to look for it.

So take off your shoes, get comfy, and remember to leave your expectations by the door. Welcome, Dear Reader, to the whimsical world of Minz, where just about anything can happen—and often does. Oh, look—a Kreveling* just stole your shoes. You'll have to stay a while. Or you can walk home barefoot. You can do that too, I guess. *The choice is yours.*

* * *

* Krevelings, Dear Reader, are strange, bipedal, rat-like creatures found throughout Minz. Traditionally scavengers, they're known to steal just about anything that isn't nailed down. And if something *is* nailed down, they'll pry it loose and steal the nails too.

Praise for the Storyteller Vern and the *Tales of Minz*

“Terrible. Simply terrible. We want no affiliation with this work or author. And yes, you can absolutely quote us on that.”

—*Minz Times*

“As librarians, we’re dedicated to the preservation of all works of literature. However, we’d have no problem if this book—and all copies of it—were to spontaneously combust.”

—The Librarians of Reldare

“A heartwarming story of a hometown hero . . . we could not ask for better representation of our town and citizens.”

—*Harbor’s Port Post*

“An instant classic—the prose and poetry are breathtaking. You would never know this is the author’s first published work—he makes it look like he’s been at this for years.”

—The Storyteller Vern

“An odd tale, for sure, but it captures what the people of Minz are known for—heart. In this book, we’re reminded that it is no small thing to lend a helping hand. Well done.”

—OZ Book Reviews

~ EDITOR'S PREFACE ~

I realize it's a break in tradition for an editor to have more than a mention in the acknowledgements of a novel, much less an entire preface. But this *entire novel* is a break in tradition. I could not, in good conscience, have my name be associated with this particular book without first having the chance to explain myself to you, Dear Reader.

You must understand—I did not go looking for the story you are about to read. Once I was made aware of it, part of me wished with all my heart that I never was. A strange claim to make, certainly. Especially since it sounds as though I am trying to keep you from reading it. *I am not.*

I am trying to keep you from reading it without proper preparation. You can read most books without ever needing to know anything about the person who wrote it. This is not one of those stories.

To understand the story, you must understand the man who wrote it, and that's easier said than done. What can be said of Vern? He makes many audacious claims throughout the course of this tale. If I were you, I would take those claims with a grain of salt, Dear Reader.

I myself will speak of which I am knowledgeable, and that of which I am not, I will take great care to speak in such a way that does not give offense to those who are knowledgeable of such things. Vern has no such

reservations. He writes about things he does not know with such confidence that it'd be inspiring . . . if he weren't blatantly wrong. He is young, Dear Reader. You must forgive him for that. The young tend to speak with certainty even about matters which are quite uncertain to them and everyone else. It is the arrogance of youth that hopefully lessens with age.

You might be wondering how I became associated with Vern if I did not go looking for this story. Well, to answer that, he approached *me* with a proposition and a story. The very same story you hold in your hands, in fact. Vern told me that he had in mind to write an incredible series which would span across decades. I'll admit, I was intrigued. How could I not be?

So, I read the manuscript. And it was, quite frankly, *terrible*. But I caught glimpses, Dear Reader, of what it *could be*, given proper care and attention. I told Vern as much. I offered him my own wisdom and experience. I told him that together, we could make it better. We could make it *lasting*, similar to the works of renown which remain on the hearts and minds of those hearing them for a long time.

That sort of writing is not all that is written here. *But it is a start*. It may not be to your liking. That is fine, not all stories speak to everyone. In fact, very few do. All I ask, Dear Reader, is that you give this story a chance. That will be enough.

Respectfully,

Barnabas E. Wooldridge

Barnabas E. Wooldridge
Editor in Chief of the *Tales of Minz*

~ FOREWORD ~

It has been said by very knowledgeable folk that the world of Minz started as a miniscule seed, drifting through the vast, barren void. It was from this seed that the world sprung forth and bloomed into existence, that same existence in which it still stands to this day. Of course, it should be noted that such very knowledgeable folk, while gifted in their respective fields, had no knowledge pertaining to the formation of the Cosmos (or to gardening and the study of plants, for that matter).

Regardless of how Minz was first formed (which is really just a clever way of avoiding the question altogether), it was. Geologists and cartographers have noted that, though the topographical features have shifted over the centuries and millennia following Minz's forming, the inner core of the planet still remains the exact same. You can liken this to aging. No matter what the years do to you, no matter how many wrinkles you accumulate, *you are still you*.

What can be said of Minz? I am no geologist or cartographer, nor am I a skilled artist. I am, however, slightly talented with words of descriptive nature. I create pictures of a different kind, with a different means than paints or brushes.

Together, you and I are about to embark on a journey, the course of which we shall both be at work to shape. Your imagination, paired with my painted words, will be far better than any actual picture. There are plenty of storytellers who go to a great deal of trouble to put a perfect picture in their reader's mind of the setting, scene, and story being told. I am no such author.

Allow me to introduce myself. I am the great chronicler, the incredibly talented purveyor of the people and world of Minz, a storyteller whose imaginative ability to tell a tale knows no bounds, a former writer for the *Minz Times* (having cut ties with them to seek a greater goal: bringing the *Tales of Minz* to you). My name is The Storyteller Vern.

The one to whom this book also belongs is my editor, Barnabas E. Wooldridge. He gathered my extensive notes and research into a more manageable amount for you to handle, but he also insisted on commenting from time to time on parts of my most magnificent masterpiece. That will be evident in the footnotes.

You should know that his comments are in no way expressive of my opinions or views. They're not even remotely insightful or helpful in any way at all. As the foremost expert regarding the world of Minz, you should listen when I tell you to disregard these anecdotal asides and atrocities altogether.*

* * *

* Vern is fond of alliteration, Dear Reader, for which I apologize. He's also a rather unreliable narrator with oft-confusing comments, which require explanations for the sake of clarity. I've attempted to do so with these footnotes. I tried to explain to Vern that an editor is supposed to help an author improve their writing, but he took very few of my suggestions. Well, it's a start. Some is better than none, after all.

You're probably wondering how such a profitable partnership came about. Well, such a tale only goes to show my generous nature (which is only surpassed by my eloquent elocution).

I have penned stories, the likes of which this world has never before seen or heard. My stories have moved kings and queens to tears, and caused the bards and song-writers to weep. I have told tales which have caused the common man to roar with laughter and merriment, spilling their drinks and rolling on the tavern floor. I have seen the mysteries of Minz and danced among the dying stars. In my many travels, trials, and tribulations, I have gathered great and terrible stories to bring to you. This vast wealth of knowledge I offer freely (for a price, of course).

However, just as a king is not directly involved in the menial tasks and labors of the kingdom, but instead delegates and directs other, lesser individuals to do them for him, I have decided to do the same in the compilation of this great work. Hence, my editor. But rest assured, these words are all my own, and all written here is true. If there is any part of it with which you find conflict, error, or disagreement, I assure you—it is my editor's fault entirely.*

I have taken time to tend to these stories, caring for them like a gardener caring for his tomato plant as if it's the apple of his eye. The only words that remain are the ones absolutely necessary to tell the tales as best I'm able. I have pruned this tale carefully with the skills I acquired from my extensive venture in the public

* * *

* Vern might be oblivious to the fact that in order to edit his writing, I have to actually read it.

sector as a journalist for the *Minz Times* before taking my talents to the private sector (even though they begged me to stay, having no better journalists or sales revenue than when I worked for them).*

I discovered something as I scoured the world for tales to tell. Something I am sure you are quite familiar with in your own experience with stories, especially in the myths and legends of old. What I found was this: all those stories are overtold and reused like leftovers thrown into a large cauldron perpetually stirred by an old hag named Marge, to be dished out and served as something claiming to be completely different, even though they're the same ingredients first dumped into the cauldron. It's absurd to think that anyone would benefit from such a meal!†

Regardless, that's what these stories we're being force-fed are: served up, rehashed stories well past their expiration date, already smelling rotten. The thing is, most writers think if they add a potato to the other ingredients in their stories, it's suddenly another story altogether. *It's not*. All they did was add another vegetable to the mix, and not even one of the good ones!

But I digress. Allow me to explain what I mean by all of this. The legends and epics all follow a recognizable plot and storyline. The end result can be seen on the first page, without ever needing to reach the last. For example: a battle builds between good and evil. Good

* * *

* I fact-checked this because it seemed unlikely. Vern was actually fired after two weeks of work for negligence and presenting biased opinions, not facts. I checked the sales revenue claim, too. They actually plummeted for those two issues of the *Minz Times*.

† He went on for several pages with this analogy. I've convinced him to cut it down. More than anything, I think Vern has a distaste for soup.

eventually wins, of course, triumphing over evil, and everyone is happy, regardless of the fact that (according to the pattern of the stories themselves) their world is due for another potentially world-ending, cataclysmic event in the next five to ten years with the birth and rise of the world's next villain. It's *predictable*, and I cannot stand that, nor do I wish to subject you to such atrocious garbage writing.

Therefore, the tales which *I* bring before you are not the stories of evil wizards bent on destruction, or of knights battling dragons to win the maiden's hand (which, as an aside, is often inaccurately portrayed in literature as a great and glorious conquest).

I've interviewed knights who slaughtered the great serpents, and they've all told me—to a man—that the last thing maidens wanted to do after witnessing such a gruesome sight as a dragon being slayed was to fall into the knight's blood-splattered arms, suitably wooed by a stranger who displayed various degrees of violence.

No sensible person would run into the arms of someone who just slaughtered a bunch of bunnies, who only did it with the expectation that such a horrendous and vile act would impress them and leave them weak in the knees. It's honestly insulting.

Such writers demean their characters and degrade the intelligence of their audience, and I promise you, I have no intention of doing so. Stories full of fanciful fiction are far from fact. Thus, my stories are not just of brave knights who battle their ancient foes. *My* stories don't go the way you expect. There's always more to them. *That's* my goal.

These are the tales of the people of Minz, who often find themselves in uncommon situations and

circumstances. But their stories are no less heroic or praiseworthy. Just as we come into other people's lives for a brief moment, not knowing everything there is to know about them and their story, we leave just as quickly. So, too, with these, the *Tales of Minz*, an anthology of tales told by a master storyteller.*

* * *

* This is the real reason I agreed to this bizarre partnership. The way Vern intended to tell these stories intrigued me. Perhaps this will be a terrible waste of my time and yours. Or perhaps, against all odds, Vern's ill-advised boasts will come true, and his work will be what he claims: a masterpiece told by a master storyteller.

~ 1 ~

THE BEGINNING OF OUR TALE

Where to begin? I know of one such tale. It is quite all right if you shed a tear or two during the course of reading it. I am not ashamed to admit that I certainly shed cascades upon cascades of tears while writing it, but I persevered, even with the weight of sorrow seeking to tear me down.* This tale is one of love and loss, of tragedy and triumph. It is a tale which I have chosen to title *A Cobbler's Tale*. It follows a cobbler named Bill. This is his story.

Our story starts as all stories do. It starts at the beginning. Not Bill's beginning, of course, because reading about his birth and journey all the way to where we find him now would take a great many pages and far greater effort on my part than I am willing to make in the writing of this tale.

Suffice it to say, in short summary, Bill was born in the usual way all babies are born on Minz. He had a

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* Never mind the terrible pun I'm sure he quite intentionally made here. I can attest to the fact that the pages he gave me *appeared* to be tearstained. However, I find it just as likely that he spilled his drink on the pages while writing.

father, Papa Tim, and a mother, Mama Jill. They aren't a part of the story to be told, other than to say that they did their part by bringing Bill into the world.*

Bill was born and raised in a small town called Harbor's Port, off the coast of the Serpent Sea in the western hemisphere of Minz. Harbor's Port had a population comparative to the serving capacity of Tom's Tavern—which is three hundred, but is occupied by about fifteen or so patrons on a good day. It's a great place to buy a beer on the Northern Border of Bunlan (their food is terrible though—especially if Tom is cooking).

Anyway, Bill lived in Harbor's Port for forty-three years before we find ourselves intruding upon his story. He was a portly fellow, and not just because he lived in Harbor's Port. He was fond of his salty food, that Bill. Foods with a high salt count tend to add to portendedness.

As his good friend and physician, Doc Stevens, told him, "Bill, you've gotta lay off the salt. Otherwise, I'll have to throw some leeches on you to keep yer heart from exploding."†

Bill was balding, but he didn't hold it against his hair follicles. The ones that stayed were his true friends. Bill had a large beard as well, full of bristly whiskers, and

* * *

* Vern actually had two whole sections of this book that extensively detailed the lives of Tim and Jill. He then proceeded to cut them out of the story without any warning. I convinced him to remove those sections, seeing as they served no purpose to the plot.

† What the good doctor actually told him was that high levels of sodium aren't good for you. Vern told me no one would understand that and translated it into what he called "laymanese," which is the language of the layman. Though, I wouldn't doubt it if Doc Stevens did say something similar. As you'll soon see, Doc Stevens was a practitioner who always seemed one moment away from being sued for malpractice.

eyes which twinkled with a jovial light that reflected their owner's good cheer, despite his hair leaving him. Other than his tabby cat, Millicent, Bill lived in Harbor's Port all by himself.

There's something else you should know about him before we get any further along in his tale. Bill was technically a *tax evader*. That's important to the plot.

While tax evasion is generally frowned upon by society in most cases, in Bill's case, he really couldn't help it. *You* try keeping track of forty-seven different warlords throughout the provinces of Minz, all claiming to be the rightful High King, each demanding tribute and taxes from the destitute citizens unfortunate enough to call such warlords "neighbors."

It was a confusing jumble of names, places, and territory lines—all woven together in a pattern which looked like a tangled, balled up knot of string. As a result, many of the inhabitants of Minz were technically criminals in some fashion or another. Most had no knowledge of their crimes. It was the ones who knew about their criminal actions and actively sought to add to them that you had to watch out for.

Poor, unfortunate Bill had no such knowledge. In truth, the amount of taxes he owed for being a cobbler in Harbor's Port was practically insubstantial (only a gold Copper, in fact) but to the greedy warlords, desperate in a down economy, every gold Copper counted.*

As it so happened, due to the conflicting territories of the warlords, Bill owed taxes to not *one* of the forty-

* * *

* Allow me to explain. The currency in Minz is the "Copper," with three different amounts of worth: copper, silver, and gold. The gold coin is called a gold Copper, a silver coin is a silver Copper, and a copper coin—you guessed it—is a copper Copper.

seven, but *twenty-one* of the warlords. I'm no mathematician, so I won't even attempt to tell you how much Bill owed in taxes, but it was a ridiculous sum of money, beyond measure and count, I assure you. It was a vast sum which no man could pay—much less with the yearly wages of a poor cobbler like Bill.

But again, Bill had no knowledge of the fact that he was now labeled a tax evader in the eyes of twenty-one of the forty-seven warlords. As those with no knowledge of being indebted do, Bill went about his life as usual, cobbling and repairing shoes—which was a good job to have, all things considered.

People need shoes, after all. Unless, of course, they are a people not prone to wearing shoes. I've come across such people in my travels. They live in the foothills of the Broken Mountains. I can assure you that they don't wear shoes (quite proudly, in fact), but this has led them to be known for their horrible foot odor and what's commonly referred to as "Foothill Feet" (which is a fungus genetically passed down from foot to foot). But, people in Harbor's Port *did* wear shoes. And thus, Bill was able to remain happily employed.

The problem was, the twenty-one warlords, to whom Bill technically owed money, knew he owed them. And it seemed that he had deliberately decided to withhold his payment from them. While none were aware of the fact that other warlords also wanted Bill's tax money, they all agreed (each in their own minds) that an example needed to be made of people who didn't pay their taxes.

And whether you believe it or not, all twenty-one warlords decided Bill would be the perfect example to

keep all the other citizens of Minz in line. Each had thoughts along these lines:

I'm a warlord, and right now, people all throughout Minz are mocking me by not paying me tribute with their taxes. Don't they know I'm the one keeping their towns and villages from being burned down by my men? Besides, I'm short on funding.

It's not cheap being a warlord, after all. A cheap warlord doesn't live long, I'll tell you that much. Anyway, each continued thinking:

Being a warlord is all I know how to do, so what happens if I can't do that? What happens if I run out of funding because people won't pay their taxes?

While the twenty-one warlords suffered deep existential crises and coped with them in various healthy (and unhealthy) manners, Bill pressed on, blissfully unaware of the developing dilemma, of which he would soon be the focus, as all twenty-one warlords decided, as chance would have it, that Bill the cobbler of Harbor's Port would be their scapegoat.

How did they arrive at this seemingly impossible conclusion? Well, several of the warlords closed their eyes and pointed blindly at a list of names. One of them had an unreasonable, unjustified hatred for all cobblers, so his reason for picking Bill was somehow both rational and irrational at the same time.

Another went through the list of citizens who owed him money while singing the well-known nursery

rhyme *The Mauling of the Mamry Brothers*.^{*} While the warlord sang this to himself, one of his guards—thinking he had cracked under the pressure of being a tyrant—killed him and became warlord in his place. *He* chose Bill on a whim.

One of the warlords chose Bill because he was going through the list alphabetically, skipping every third name until he grew bored of that method and stopped on Bill's name. Still others chose Bill because he owed them so little money, they reasoned he'd certainly be able to pay, thus showing the other tax evaders that the warlords were not to be trifled with.

The final warlord, a man by the name of Warlord Jerome, selected Bill because they had gone to school together. Warlord Jerome wrongfully believed that Bill stole his lunch money on grilled pheasant day, years and years ago. He hadn't. The perpetrator was a kleptomaniacal kindergartener named Lucy, but hers is another story and not at all related to Bill's.

Regardless, Warlord Jerome now intended Bill to finally pay him back for a thirty-five-year grievance built up like a wall or a tower—slowly over time. Unless, of course, the contractor would cut corners and build the tower quickly against code regulations.

The bottom line was that all twenty-one of the forty-seven warlords involved in this story chose Bill as their scapegoat, each thinking they alone were going to claim his taxes.

* * *

^{*} This is a song sung to children about three brothers who can't decide which of them will sacrifice himself to a Hydranticore, thus allowing the other two brothers to escape. The brothers take so long in deciding that the Hydranticore eats all three of them. Why on Minz it's a children's song I can't fathom.

Now, how does one go about collecting such taxes from the common people? Well, a king would send out messengers to herald in towns and villages the expected arrival of the King's Taxman. But since these were all warlords on a tight budget, they had no money to spare on messengers. Never mind the fact that there hadn't been a king in Minz for nearly twenty-three decades, which is a great many years, too high for any one man to count, much less live.* Unless, of course, that person is a wizard, warlock, or a witch of some nature or other. Then it'd be perfectly possible to live twenty-three decades and a couple hundred more.

All this to say, there wasn't a king sitting on the throne in Marglegruff, the capital of Minz. You might imagine this meant the throne's seat was rather dusty, having sat unoccupied for several centuries. It wasn't. Mark, the castle's custodian, kept the place spotlessly clean—free of both spots and dust.

In some ways, not having messengers to announce their taxmen was advantageous for the warlords in collecting their dues. After all, if someone is warned in advance that taxes are due soon, it gives them time to flee the area. Or, at the very least, hide their money and claim to have less than they really did.

It was better for the taxmen to arrive with no warning and without fanfare. The taxmen wanted to catch people unaware, just like Death sneaking up on someone. It was better if they never saw it coming. As the old saying goes, "Death and taxes go together like pickles and ham."

* * *

* It's 230 years.

So, not having messengers to herald their taxmen's arrival, the warlords were presented with two options. One, they could send Bill a polite and formal letter through Minz's mail system, notifying him of his upcoming bills. But who had time to sit and write letters out by hand—especially warlords bent on defeating their opposition to claim the throne of Minz?

It didn't help that many of them were illiterate. Some warlords paid attention in school and took advantage of their education, but most didn't. The ones that did were the ones to watch out for. Such warlords were like literate lions.

Besides, most schools in Minz suffered from low class numbers, what with the constant wars raging throughout the land. It was harder to justify sitting and reading about wars in history when you could get practical, hands-on experience in such matters instead.

That really left only one option to the warlords—the second. They all simply sent their taxmen to collect Bill's money.

Without forewarning, twenty-one taxmen were sent by twenty-one different warlords from all over Minz, all to Harbor's Port with instructions to collect Bill's debts. Which really shouldn't need to be explicitly stated—seeing as the job description is in the title to begin with—but sometimes specific instructions are necessary. You would not believe how many taxmen, without specific instructions, would be just as apt to *give* Bill money instead of *taking* it from him.

A moment, if you will permit me to divert from this to make a comment that I believe needs saying. I think it a great tragedy that so much of our work in society

has suffered under the long-held traditions of the past regarding their names.

Why is it that *taxman* sounds better than *taxwoman*? Is it because we've had it engrained in us over centuries upon centuries of backwards thinking that common jobs found in society can only be done by a certain gender? What does that say about us, that we find it wrong to say a woman can collect taxes or carry mail, any more than that a man can be a cleaning lady? Do we have to differentiate? Why can't jobs be jobs—regardless of who's holding them? Honestly, sometimes I wonder.

All this to say, the warlords sent out their taxmen—some of them being women, in fact. Each person being a unique individual, I could spend countless hours writing their tales, and of their travels filled with exciting adventures and perils. But, being a focused writer, I will instead draw your attention to a single taxman: *Taxman Tanner*.

[BUY THE BOOK](#)

~ ABOUT THE AUTHOR ~

Alex Brown is the son of two teachers who impressed upon him from a young age a love for reading books of many different sizes, shapes, and genres. Along with that love came the love of telling stories and writing about fantastical lands and people.

He lives in Wisconsin with his lovely family and is most likely writing various works of fiction and drinking lots of coffee right now. *Lots.*

You can keep up-to-date on his writing projects by visiting his website: **alexbrown.blog**. There, you'll also find free short stories, whimsical blog posts, and more.

~ TALES OF MINZ ~

Often irreverent, nonsensical, and uproariously funny, the *Tales of Minz* series is set in a magical and mysterious world where anything can happen (and usually does).

The stories, which can be read in any order, are told by a young, rather overconfident storyteller named Vern. He is joined in this strange narration by an old, experienced storyteller named Barnabas E. Wooldridge, who sees what the series could become and agrees to serve as an editor for the *Tales of Minz*. However, Vern doesn't take all of Barnabas' suggestions to improve his writing . . . as such, helpful and humorous footnotes are provided by the editor where needed.

Scan the QR Code to view all of the books!

