

Interview with Dave McKean about the illustrated edition of *The Graveyard Book*

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You've done a lot of collaborations with Neil, but each one is different. What was unique about this one, for you?

There are two elements. The style of the images, which in this case are quite old fashioned. The story feels in many respects like a classic adventure. Maybe it's the link to *The Jungle Book*, or the cast of elderly, mannered ghosts that make me think of it that way. So I chose a style that fell somewhere between 19th.C. book illustration, and early 20th.C. expressionism.

The other element is a sense of storytelling in the layout. Sometimes there isn't any, as with *Coraline*, but I liked the idea of this twilight world of ghosts and mist fading in and out between chapters. So the illustrations begin at the end of each chapter with a swirl of mist or a few faint branches, flow through the title page, and then drift away as the next chapter gets under way.

Let's talk about the cover. You submitted sketches for a number of different possible covers for *The Graveyard Book*, initially. Neil quoted you in his online journal, saying this one was, "MY FAVOURITE. The toddler walks along the knife edge, which has the graveyard reflected inside it. I think this one does everything and now I've read the whole book, sums up the plot, and the balance between the real world and the ghost world best".

Is that what you generally try to do with a storybook cover? Sum up the plot and the internal tension of the book? That seems like a lot to try to do with one picture.

No, not usually. I try and find an image that represents the book, without literally describing it. I don't like covers that simply show the characters from the book in a scene from the book. It needs an idea, something to intrigue the viewer, something to make them think, and put 2 and 2 together, and become involved in the book, and then hopefully, to buy the book and become a reader.

So I liked this cover for that reason, and I like the cover for the main Harper's edition for the same reason, but this knife image also happened to summarize the spine of the story well, in a way that you wouldn't really be aware of until you've read the whole story.

You've done some amazing work with computer graphics lately, for instance on *Mirrormask*. What work on *The Graveyard Book* (if any) did you do on a computer?

Everything gets put through the computer at some point. Even a simple ink drawing is scanned and placed on the page and cleaned up in Photoshop. The control that the computer gives you over the final book is crucial.

What medium (or media, and tools) were you working in for the cover?

They are a mix of acrylic painting, photographic elements, combined in Photoshop, with a simple filter applied to the whole image. I'm very anti-filters usually, but I thought it would bring all the elements together.

For the interior illustrations?

Black brushpen, drawn in 2 or 3 layers. The secondary layers are composited at 30%, or whatever looks right, to add a flat grey tone.

The combination of a more classical illustrative use of line and shadow and a more stylized look (more like you used for *Coraline*) fascinate me here. What artistic influences would you say you were drawing on for the appearance of your *Graveyard Book* illustrations?

As above, an old fashioned style of illustration. But I've been using brushpens a lot, and I've rediscovered my love of drawing. The swift, fluid marks, and the huge variety of marks available, is inspiring.

Did you find it difficult, finding a balance point between these styles?

I did the images for chapter one first, and redrew them a few times, as they didn't sit easily on the page. For some reason, when the deadline started to bite, everything moved along much easier. I had to take half the book with me to Los Angeles to finish in my hotel room, and by that point, the drawings flowed easily.

You designed the typeface for *The Graveyard Book* cover based on lettering on real local gravestones. Did you spend a lot of time in graveyards working on this project?

There are many old Norman churches where I live, so there are many graveyards. My local town is 900 years old. I took lots of photos, and pieced the type together from several sources. The Photoshop filter helped to bring all these elements together.

What was that like?

Very peaceful.

Do you listen to music while you work? If so, what were you listening to while you illustrated *The Graveyard Book*?

Always. I've discovered a certain amount of folk music that I like. I have no time for the standard 'foldy-ol-roll' nonsense, but there are some great and original performers out there at the moment, whose roots are in folk, but whose music is really experimental; great singer songwriters like Chris Woods, to original bands like Rachel Unthank and the Winterset, to oddballs like Joanna Newsom.

Also, I really love the oud at the moment, so players like Dhafer Youssef and Anouar Brahem. Also, I love working to Bach, it's very meditative, and really encourages you to concentrate, especially the Goldberg Variations, and especially played by Andreas Schiff.

Your illustrations are wonderful. Thank you for talking to us about *The Graveyard Book*.

Cheers.