

The Graveyard Book, was Re: Odd and the Frost Giants

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- *From:* Kurt Busiek <kurt@xxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Wed, 5 Mar 2008 18:43:59 -0800
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Well, since I finished ODD AND THE FROST GIANTS, I've also read CHINA LAKE by Meg Gardiner and KIRBY: KING OF COMICS by Mark Evanier, but neither of them are SF. Both talk about SF — the lead in the Gardiner novel is an SF novelist, and Kirby, of course, wrote and drew comics SF for decades — but that's not the same thing.

I also discovered a surprise benefit of doing these posts. Neil Gaiman linked to my comments on ODD, in his blog, calling it a review. I dropped him an e-mail to say I wouldn't exactly call it a review, it wasn't really that formal. We ended up talking briefly about a very strange story we co-plotted over a decade ago, and he sent me a copy of the manuscript to THE GRAVEYARD BOOK, his new novel, which comes out in September. It'll be illustrated by Dave McKean, Neil's frequent partner in crime.

So last night, while shutting out the sound of Wolf Blitzer repetitively droning on about primary results, I got to read a novel I wasn't expecting to see anytime soon, and knew nothing whatsoever about.

I'll tell you this much, at least: It's terrific.

THE GRAVEYARD BOOK's title is an homage to THE JUNGLE BOOK, since TGB is about a boy whose family dies, and who winds up being raised in a graveyard, by ghosts, and the other things that lurk there.

The boy, named Nobody ("Bod" for short), learns many things, discovers odd places and curious people, deals hesitantly with the world outside the graveyard and eventually has to deal with the forces that killed the rest of his family, and who are still looking for him. I won't say much more about the plot, because hey, it's not going to be out for months.

But I think it's likely Neil's best novel yet. It has a great deal of warmth, whimsy, dark fantasy (verging on horror), adventure, charm, suspense, monsters, ghouls, a witch, school bullies, policemen, ancient burial mounds, knife-wielding killers, dancing, mystery, trouble, a dash of romance, life lessons, and a creature named Silas, who is both what he seems to be and not. And the most endearingly dangerous and threatening ancient terror you've ever met. The story's engaging, there's a real sense of menace, and it builds to a strong and satisfying climax.

The ghosts are a delight, and the sense of magic and possibility and things happening in the shadows is compelling and attractive. The writing is quite good, but not showy — the story and characters take first place, always.

It's a short novel, under 70,000 words, and it works as YA, provided you don't mind YA books starting with dead bodies (including a child), bloody knives and a toddler in jeopardy, but it's not limited to that — it's a book that'll be as satisfying for an adult to read as for a young teen, but they'll get different things out of it.

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It's more in company with STARDUST and NEVERWHERE, in that it's an occasionally–dark fantasy involving a world one step outside our own, than with AMERICAN GODS and ANANSI BOYS (which are more about stuff intruding from the beyonds into our own), but written by someone who's had that much more practice than any of those. I could say it's "like GOOD OMENS meets A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE" but, well, that's a facile and shallow comparison, so I won't.

In any case, this is a wholehearted recommendation. I like most of what Neil writes, but THE GRAVEYARD BOOK is very high up on the list, even so.

kdb

On 2008–03–02 23:51:03 –0800, Kurt Busiek <kurt@xxxxxxxxxxxx> said:

On 2008–02–28 14:20:54 –0800, Kurt Busiek <kurt@xxxxxxxxxxxx> said:

Currently up: BERTRAM OF BUTTER CROSS by Jeffrey E. Barlough, and probably CHINA LAKE by Meg Gardiner after that.

Unless I can't hold off on reading ODD AND THE FROST GIANTS, by Neil Gaiman, which just arrived yesterday...

Well, that went fast.

ODD AND THE FROST GIANTS is Neil Gaiman's offering for World Book Day, which he describes thusly: "A bunch of authors write books for nothing, and publishers publish them for nothing, and they get sold for £1 each to kids who have been given £1 Book Tokens, and the whole thing exists purely in order to get kids reading."

It's a slim book, 97 largish–print pages including illustrations — which are by Mark Buckingham, artist of DC/Vertigo's comics series FABLES, and are quite nice — and is the story of a boy who saves the world from frost giants, when his Norse village is caught up in unending winter.

It's a good year for young Norse folks saving the world from the unending winters of frost giants — Jessica Day George's SUN AND MOON, ICE AND SNOW deals with a similar threat, though George and Gaiman handle it in very different ways.

ODD AND THE FROST GIANTS is an adventure story, though as with much of Gaiman's writing, it's a gentle adventure story in which words, wisdom, warmth, understanding and a sense of the appearances of things are more important than power, violence or destruction. The language is straightforward but carefully–crafted, and still manages an underlying flavor of Dunsanyque fantasy, where things happen because they should happen, and nobody involved in it seems to find it odd. It's a very pleasant read, with some nice character humor,

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some mythic moments, and a satisfying conclusion.

It hasn't been published in the US yet, though it will be next year -- I got my copy from AMazon.uk, which is still selling the World Book Day edition for a pound, plus shipping.

Good stuff.

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