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Review: The Graveyard Book

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Review for *The Graveyard Book*

Gaiman, Neil, *The Graveyard Book*. Illustrated by Dave McKean. HarperCollins, 2008.

ISBN: 9780060530938

Awards: Newbery Medal, ALA Notable Book, Horn Book Fanfare, Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award (Vermont)

Description

Climbing out of his crib and making his way to a nearby graveyard, a toddler avoids the grisly death inflicted on the rest of his family by a man named Jack. In that unlikely place he is discovered by the ghostly inhabitants who make up the cemetery's population. Adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Owens, who have been dead for several hundred years, the child is named Nobody, or Bod for short and is given the "Freedom of the Graveyard" enabling him to see and hear the ghosts as well as to learn the arts of Fading and Haunting. Unable to leave the graveyard for fear of death at the hands of Jack, Bod's human needs are provided for by the mysterious guardian Silas who comes and goes at will. With danger lurking outside the walls of his new found home, Bod grows up as a human boy in the relative security of this macabre company, but even here he encounters the menacing Sleer, guardian of the underworld, and narrowly escapes capture by ghouls. As Bod grows, he slowly ventures outside the walls of his graveyard home. Eventually confronts the murderous Jack and draws on ancient forces to defeat his enemy.

Critique

In its listing of criteria for giving the Newbery Award, the ALA states that the titles under consideration must have respect for "children's understanding, abilities and appreciations." Children are defined as persons of ages up to and including fourteen. The beginning reading level for these titles is generally considered to be grade four. One wonders whether this qualification of respect truly influenced this year's choice of winner when the opening sentence reads, "There was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife." It is obvious in the first few pages that not one, but three murders have taken place and a toddler is the fourth target. Reviewers, even when they may be praising the writing, are using words such as chilling, brutal, eerie, and creepy. The cover of the original edition of the book has a picture of a knife dripping blood juxtaposed against a black, gray, and white background and a young child toddling along the back edge of the blade. After the book won the Newbery Award, the design was changed to a less disturbing although still somber image. Parents should also be aware that there is a blurring of the line between good and evil as ghosts, werewolves, witches, and a possible vampire are given as positive role models. Paranormal activity is portrayed as normal and to be desired by Bod as he learns to use Fading and Haunting to protect himself. Bod also takes part in the Danse Macabre where the dead come out of their graves and dance with the living citizens of the local

town. The illustrations in shades of black and grey are distracting and do little to add to the effectiveness of the story.

Other Newbery standards include plot development, delineation of characters and delineation of setting. Gaimen's plot moves quickly with witty dialogue, much adventure, and occasional tender moments. The setting is also effectively drawn. However, the human development of the child has great gaps, and the true character of Silas, Bod's guardian, remains sketchy. Readers may also be confused about the rather vague nature of the villainous society attempting to kill the child.

The last Newbery standard is appropriateness of style. Here the question arises whether a horror story is an appropriate or desirable genre to receive the Newbery Medal. The increased interest in Gothic and otherworldly themes in children's literature in the past several years may be due more to publishers' interest in profitability rather than a desire to promote books that will enhance the character development of children who read the titles.

Character Themes: Any positive character themes portrayed in this book are offset by negative overshadowing images of violence and witchcraft.