



The Graveyard Book

by
NEIL GAIMAN

Teacher's Notes

Synopsis

This inventive, thought-provoking reimagining of Rudyard Kipling's classic adventure *The Jungle Book* tells the unforgettable story of Bod (Nobody Owens), a baby who finds a new home in a graveyard following the murder of his family.

Raised by a guardian who belongs neither to the world of the living nor the realm of the dead, Bod experiences things among the mausoleums and headstones of his home that most mortals can barely imagine. But real danger lurks outside the cemetery walls in the form of the man who murdered Bod's family. He will not rest until he finds the boy and finishes the job he began.

About the Author

British-born, US resident Neil Gaiman is an internationally renowned writer of genre-defying novels, screenplays, graphic novels and picture books. Many of his works have been transformed into acclaimed big screen adaptations, including *Coraline* and *Stardust*. A film version of *The Graveyard Book* is also under way.

The Graveyard Book was the recipient of major international acclaim and awards, including the Carnegie Medal, the Booktrust Teenage Award, the Newbery Medal, and, for Chris Riddell's illustrations, the Kate Greenaway Medal.

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www.gaimanbooks.com

Study Notes for Discussion

1. *'There was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife [...] The knife had done almost everything it was brought to that house to do, and both the blade and the handle were wet.'*

How do the first few paragraphs set the tone for the rest of the novel? What kind of atmosphere do they create? How do they make you feel? How has the author created this atmosphere? Think about the structure of the opening sentences, and choice of words.

2. *'One of the joys of reading Gaiman is how he subverts our expectations of magic, horror, fantasy and the mundane'* The Times

Do you agree with this review of *The Graveyard Book*? If so, how does Gaiman subvert genre boundaries in *The Graveyard Book*?

3. *'Well, you can't stay here all your life, can you? One day you'll grow up and then you will have to go and live in the world outside.'* (Scarlett to Bod)

Can *The Graveyard Book* be considered a coming-of-age story? What does Bod learn about himself, human nature and the world during the course of the novel?

4. Consider the following excerpts. What does *The Graveyard Book* say about life and human experience?

'[...] death is the great democracy'

'You're alive, Bod. That means you have infinite potential. You can do anything, make anything, dream anything. If you change the world, the world will change. Potential. Once you're dead, it's gone. Over. You've made what you've made, dreamed your dream, written your name [...] that potential is finished.'

'Face your life/ Its pain, its pleasure, / Leave no path untaken'

'I want to see life. I want to hold it in my hands.'

'[...] there was Life; and Bod walked into it with his eyes and his heart wide open.'



Study Notes for Discussion (continued)

5. *The Graveyard Book*, like a number of Neil Gaiman's books, has been praised for its appeal to a broad readership. What do you think gives Gaiman's writing wide appeal? Do you agree that *The Graveyard Book* is a 'crossover' novel? Consider subject matter, language and characterisation.
6. Bod's friendship with Scarlett is one of his few points of contact with the world of the living. Why do you think the author created Scarlett's character? What does she add to the story? What role does she play in Bod's assimilation into life in the graveyard? And what role does she play in Bod's ultimate battle?
7. *'It is going to take more than just a couple of good-hearted souls to raise this child. It will', said Silas, 'take a graveyard.'*

Consider the characters of Silas, Miss Lupescu and Liza Hempstock. What does Bod learn from his relationship with each? Do they learn anything from him? Which relationship has most impact on Bod? Might Scarlett also be called a mentor? Does Bod learn anything from her? What does she learn from him?

8. Free will and fate: do you think Bod was predestined to defeat the Jacks? Does Bod ever act against his will? Do you think Silas knew about, or believed in, the prophecy about Bod, the child 'who would walk the borderland between the living and the dead'? Did he know what battles Bod would have to fight? Was he knowingly preparing Bod for this battle and an inevitable return to the world of the living?
9. The graveyard is populated by supernatural beings, but how typically are they represented? How do they compare with representations of ghouls, werewolves and vampires in other books you've read, or films you've watched? Did the author's representation of any of these beings surprise you? Why do you think he chose to represent them as he did?
10. The novel blends a sense of timelessness with references that set it in the modern world. How aware of time and place were you while reading the novel? Or do you think the time and place are ambiguous? What might ambiguity about time and place add to the story?



Study Notes for Discussion (continued)

11. How does the author maintain a sense of threat from the man Jack throughout the novel? Consider what kind of language is used to describe Jack's thoughts, appearance, movement and actions. Consider when he appears in the narrative, both in person and when referred to 'offstage' by others.

12. In his acceptance speech for the 2009 Newbery Medal Neil Gaiman said, *'I wanted the book to be composed of short stories because The Jungle Book was composed of short stories. I wanted it to be a novel because it was a novel in my head. The tension between those two things was both a delight and a heartache as a writer.'*

Consider how the novel is structured. Do the individual chapters work as isolated, individual short stories? Why might the tension between wanting *The Graveyard Book* to be composed of short stories and a novel have been *'both a delight and a heartache as a writer'*? What differing needs and challenges are posed by these different forms of writing?

13. Boundaries and gateways are important throughout the novel – between the living and the dead, the world and the graveyard. How does Bod deal with existing between these boundaries? How does he test them?

14. *'You're brave. You are the bravest person I know'* (Scarlett to Bod).

Do you agree that Bod is brave? Are there any moments when his bravery is shaken?

15. What does *The Graveyard Book* say about compassion (or, in Liza's words, doing a 'good turn') and forgiveness? Who are the most and least compassionate characters in the novel? And what is the most compassionate act?

Do you think Bod is motivated by revenge, anger or self-preservation? How did you feel when Scarlett tells Bod *'You aren't a person. People don't behave like you. You're as bad as he was. You're a monster.'* Did you agree? Did you question Bod's motives or actions?



Study Notes for Discussion (continued)

16. Does humour play a role in *The Graveyard Book*? If so, consider whether the humour derives from particular characters or from situations, or both. Consider dialogue, descriptions of characters' movement, physical appearance and their reactions to situations and other people.
17. Which moments in the novel did you find most tense or frightening? Why? And how did the author create this atmosphere?
18. What role does the Sleer play? Does your opinion of the Sleer change through the course of the novel? What is the significance of the Sleer instructing Bod to 'Find your name'? And when do you think Bod realises it was seeking a 'master to protect'?
19. What is the significance of the Lady on the Grey? What might she symbolise? What do you think she means when she says everybody rides her horse one day?
20. In what sense can Chapter Five and the Danse Macabre be considered the pivot of the novel? Or do you think a different episode could be considered a critical turning point?
21. What does Bod's time at school in the world of the living reveal about his character? What does this chapter show about the relationship between Silas and Bod?
22. At what point did you realise who Mr Frost was? How did that realisation affect your reading of the remainder of the novel?

Creative Activities >



Creative Activities

For visual inspiration, you might like to visit the Graveyard Galleries at www.thegraveyardbook.co.uk to view a selection of illustrations by Dave McKean and Chris Riddell, illustrators of the two editions of *The Graveyard Book* published by Bloomsbury.

a) Make a supernatural scrapbook

Referring to descriptions in the book ...

- Draw character sketches of each of the main characters and supernatural beings that populate the graveyard.
- Write character descriptions to accompany your illustrations. Limit yourself to just 30 words for each character to test your descriptive powers.
- Draw a map of the graveyard.

b) Develop your publishing prowess

Form a design and marketing team by working in pairs/small groups for the following activity, and distribute illustration/design/copywriting roles to different individuals.

Design your own cover for *The Graveyard Book*. Think about who you want the book to appeal to, the age of potential readers, what genre the book falls into, if any. Consider whether to create a cover that conforms to that that genre, or whether to play with convention. Look at other book jackets for inspiration. Think about whether the cover should be illustrated, photographic or typographic. Try different fonts.

Write back cover copy for *The Graveyard Book*. Think about how you would summarise the plot and style of writing. Try to come up with an impactful strapline to convey the essence of the book. Sometimes selecting/editing a line from the book can make a strong strapline. Sometimes posing an arresting question works well. Come up with a number of options and test them on friends and family who haven't read the book to see their response before choosing one and using it on the book cover.



Creative Activities (continued)

c) Give grave-rubbing a go

Head to an old cemetery (ones with lots of Victorian headstones are best as they tend to be ornately decorated) with a sheet of lightweight paper and wax crayons. Press the paper against your chosen headstone and rub the crayon across it, taking care not to mark the stone. Perhaps you could include your best rubbing in your scrapbook, or incorporate the pattern into the design of your book cover.

d) Write a sequel to *Scarlett's story*

Imagine what impact Scarlett's encounters with Bod have on her later life and write a short story about it. Does she unexpectedly recall her friend from the graveyard when she's grown up and has her own children, despite Silas having taken her memories? Do they meet again when she's grown-up? Did she love him? Has she changed her view that Bod behaved like a 'monster'? Does she want to tell him she understands his actions?

e) Write a prequel to *Liza Hempstock's life*

Reread Chapter Four and write a short story about the events that led to Liza's death. Try writing a first person narrative from Liza's perspective, and/or from the point of view of one of her persecutors. Think about the way she speaks, when she lived and what people believed in.

f) *The Book Beyond*

Each chapter of *The Graveyard Book* represents two years of s Bod's life. Write Chapter Nine of the book, imagining what happens after the book has ended. How does Bod fit back into the world of the living? Does he miss the graveyard and the friends he made there? Does he yearn to return? Does he return? What impact does his early upbringing among ghouls and graves have on his later life?



Further Reading

Background

Read Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, which Neil Gaiman has cited as an inspiration for *The Graveyard Book*. What similarities do you notice?

By the same author

Coraline

Odd and the Frost Giants

M is for Magic

Graphic novels (selected)

Sandman series

Mirrormask

Signal to Noise

Picture books

The Wolves in the Walls

Blueberry Girl

Crazy Hair

The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish

The Dangerous Alphabet

Fiction for adults (selected)

Stardust

Neverwhere

Smoke and Mirrors

American Gods

Other books to explore

Mister Creecher – Chris Priestley

Uncle Montague's Tales of Terror – Chris Priestley

The Dead of Winter – Chris Priestley

Midwinterblood – Marcus Sedgwick

Mortlock – Jon Mayhew

Long Lankin – Lindsey Barraclough

