

*The Graveyard Book*

Reviewed by Danny Schiffer (Literary Arts 2025)

I was fourteen when I first read *The Graveyard Book*. I was a freshman in high school, and just discovering my love for Gothic literature and Gothic Fantasy. I had read a good amount of Neil Gaiman by that time, and I could recognize his style in any book. Of all the things I read in that year from Ms. Fedora's recommendation list, *The Graveyard Book* sticks out like a sore thumb in my memory. I remember seeing it was for "Ages 10+" on the back and almost not reading it, because obviously it was more for kids (I had a precocious complex that told me to only read "adult" books so I could subtly brag about it later). I ended up reading it when there were simply no books left in the classroom I was otherwise interested in. As I read this battered, "well-loved," copy I became more and more engrossed and more and more in love. I did not know at the time that by the end of the book, the main character, Bod, is fifteen. I did not know that he would learn for me what I needed to hear the most.

When you pick up *The Graveyard Book*, it seems to be a perfectly normal kid's book for kids who may be a little weird. You know the type, the one who prefers the library over recess and doesn't seem to talk much, or maybe talks too much. Bod becomes this weird kid for you to relate to in this book. But that is not all there is. It's not just a story with ghouls and vampires, it has something to teach anyone who picks it up. The book touches on death which has always fascinated me. This is not simply the whimsical, creepy idea of life beyond the grave to tell your friends around a campfire, but a deep cut through the idea. Early in the book Bod is already asking the question "Why does it matter if I die?" He is always told he can't leave the graveyard or he would fall into danger, that no one can protect him out there, but he can't see why that matters.

His parents are dead people, anyway. The part that held onto me in my second reading of this book rings in my head as I read the rest of it. Liza Hempstock, the ghost of a witch, finally gives him an answer on why dying matters. “Wherever you go, you take yourself with you.” It was when Bod’s guardian, Silas, expanded on this that significantly changed how I saw my life going forward. Silas explains to Bod that the fundamental difference between alive and dead is *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 made, dreamed your dream, written your name. You may be buried here, you may even walk. But that potential is finished.” I no longer felt like I was reading a kid’s book. My melancholia and angst were no longer terminal. In subtle, tiny, ways I no longer feared death to the point of obsession, I now *respected* death to obsession. I didn’t think of it as either the end of everything or just another way of life, I now *knew* it as a dance, as Gaiman describes it. Whoever you are when you pick up *The Graveyard Book*, you’ve heard about death and you’ve had your own experience of growing up. Wherever you are, that still affects you today. Think about how hard you’ve been drawn towards or away from it your whole life, think about how it was explained to you when you were a child that one day you’ll be an adult, and that some days people stop living. I think that if *The Graveyard Book* helped me process being fourteen, it could help you process *anything*.

Besides having this very helpful philosophy behind the book, what really seized my brain and kept me reading was Gaiman’s reinvention of the Gothic genre. Gaiman, when introducing new concepts and characters, sends subtle hints and signs to what a character might be, but never outright says it until long after you, as the reader, have solved it. The effect is that I had mini-mysteries playing out in my head throughout the

book. As much as I followed the plot, I also followed every time I gained knowledge about a character. It takes it to another level of page-turner. He also describes these creatures in original, innovative ways. Everyone knows the popular consciousness idea of a vampire, but Gaiman's vampire does not have to say that he is one. You might be aware of ghouls in the vaguest sense, but Gaiman's ghouls have their own terrifying, chilling, adrenaline inducing city and their own special quirks, like being the 33rd President of the United States or the Emperor of China. There's this little touch of magical realism in the way he adds new lore to known creatures that just makes sense for a modern world. Of course werewolves don't like being called werewolves and prefer "Hounds of God!" The lore is added in tiny doses of little anecdotes that give you pause, but encourage you to just keep reading. He takes an idea of a fantasy universe and makes it his own. Gaiman's original poetry included as part of the lore makes this feel like a real universe out there somewhere. This reinvention of Gothic Fantasy pairs nicely with the reinvention of the coming-of-age story. If you read the acknowledgements in the back of the book, Gaiman (of course) notes *The Jungle Book* as a main point of inspiration and the many similarities. But filtered through Gaiman's own ideas, the book becomes its own unique thing in this world. Out of all the books I read freshman year, this is one I come back to and remember both fondly and vividly for all its originality. It threw me for a loop.

I think that depending on when and where and who you are when you start reading, this book can mean so many different things to you. I don't exactly pretend that everyone will love this book, but I think everyone will relate to it somewhere and everyone can take something away from it. I think how anyone grows up still affects them into old age. No matter what you do, you can't fully forget what it was like to grow

*The Graveyard Book* by Danny Schiffer, Class of 2025

up. I haven't, and that's what made me reread this. Bod needs protection, and as Bod grows up he learns to appreciate all those who protected him when he was young. On top of that, *The Graveyard Book* is also about the parents and guardians of Bod. In fact, Gaiman himself speaks to my theory here. In 2009, he gave a speech when accepting the Newbery medal for this book. "I had set out to write a book about childhood...I was now writing about being a parent." If you're like me, you might first read this and approximate your own grown-up-ness in relation to it. But maybe you'll read this from the perspective of the ever worried-over-Bod community of the graveyard and feel through them. Instead of coping through your own childhood with every heart wrenching line, maybe you'll find yourself coping with your future or present parenthood. You might read it again and think to yourself that *truly*, it is about the love in a community rather than about just the child or just the adults. To be universal, something has to be interpretable in many ways. *The Graveyard Book* accomplishes this and gives something to everyone. It gives words to the interaction between letting someone go and being let go.

I am sixteen while I write this review. 16 sounds both incredibly young and incredibly old to me; both a marvel that I made it this far and a marvel that I've *only* made it this far. I don't know what your life is like right now, but I can tell you that reading this once in English 9 and once in a dorm room made a difference to my life both times. I think reading this book allowed me to leave home in some small way, opening my mind to the possibilities if you just simply go out and live your life. If you leave your old haunts behind. If you leave the graveyard.