

Edited by Nate Cosby. *Jim Henson's "The StoryTeller"* (graphic novel). Archaia Entertainment, 2011. 112 pp., \$19.95 (hardcover).

Almost twenty-four years have passed since the original series of Jim Henson's award-winning *StoryTeller* had its run on American and British television. It is doubtful whether anyone who watched even one of the nine priceless episodes could forget the image of a knobby-faced John Hurt seated before his fireplace, nor fail to recall the jeering and fretting of his talking dog (voiced by Brian Henson). In many ways, that series—as well as its four-episode successor, *The Greek Myths*—still epitomizes the best work of Jim Henson and The Jim Henson Company, bringing together storytelling that is traditional and heartwarmingly earnest, settings that are both bewitching and inviting, and, of course, puppetry that remains unrivaled in an age of special-effects wizardry. The death of Jim Henson in 1990 marked the loss of a profoundly independent vision of Fantasy, one that many children of the eighties felt—to their imaginations, at least—as a formative blow.

In the past decade, however, and with the reacquisition of The Jim Henson Company by Henson's children in 2003, many of Henson's old franchises are experiencing a happy resurgence. Among these are a projected series of graphic novels by Archaia Entertainment of Los Angeles, the first of which was published in November 2011. *Jim Henson's "The StoryTeller"* is an anthology containing nine original stories, each one written and illustrated by different individuals or collaborations thereof. Most are established professionals in the comics industry, particularly among superhero titles. Among the contributors and their contributions are Roger Langridge and Jordie Bellaire ("Old Nick and the Peddler"), Colleen Coover ("The Milkmaid and Her Pail"), Chris Eliopoulos and Mike Maihack ("An Agreement Between Friends"), Jeff Parker and Tom Fowler ("Old Fire Dragaman"), Marjorie Liu and Jennifer L. Meyer ("Puss in Boots"), Paul Tobin and Evan Shaner ("The Frog Who Became an Emperor"), Katie Cook ("The Crane Wife"), and Ron Marz and Craig Rousseau ("Momotaro the Peach Boy"). Perhaps the magnum of this opus, however, is "The Witch Baby," which is based on an unproduced *StoryTeller* teleplay by Anthony Minghella, Susan Kodieck, and Anne Mountfield. Minghella, who died in 2008, wrote the teleplays for both *StoryTeller* series. Some may recall that he went on to win an Oscar for directing the film adaptation of Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* in 1996. "The Witch Baby" is adapted for the graphic novel by Nate Cosby (the volume's overall editor), Roman Cliquet, and Adam Street. Additional illustrations for the book are provided by Patrick Scherberger, Dennis Calero, Mitch Gerads, Janet K. Lee, and David Petersen.

Jim Henson's "The StoryTeller" is a wholesome and heartwarming collection, one that stands out in a medium (and genre) somewhat proud of having forfeited these qualities. As with the *StoryTeller* television series, each of the nine stories is based explicitly on a traditional folktale (albeit some, like Liu and Meyer's "Puss in Boots," very loosely), and each has a moral to convey. Only once or twice does the reader feel cloyed by these messages, however; Coover's "Milkmaid and Her Pail" delivers its punch in as innovative a way as can be expected from its basis in one of Aesop's best-known fables. Tobin and Shaner's "The Frog Who Became an Emperor" is reminiscent of the Emmy Award-winning first *StoryTeller* episode *Hans My Hedgehog*, particularly in its charming strangeness and unresolved combination of folktale motifs (which, unlike in *Hans My Hedgehog*, Tobin and Shaner employ self-consciously). All the stories have the zest of antiquity, though the opening tale, Langridge and Bellaire's "Old Nick and the Peddler," suffers from a few too many anachronistic allusions and wordings. The

art in this piece is also, along with that of Eliopoulos and Maihack, 's "An Agreement Between Friends," the least impressive, which suggests it might have been moved deeper into the collection. Perhaps the most enchanting visuals of the collection are the work of Tom Fowler, who renders Parker's "Old Fire Dragaman" (an Appalachian Jack tale) subtly in pencils, with fitting predominance of black, red, and gold. Cook's "The Crane Wife," retelling a Japanese folktale, is illustrated correspondingly in manga-style, though its sophistication and coloring allow what would otherwise seem a gimmick to succeed more as a tribute. Marz and Rousseau's "Momotaro the Peach Boy," another Japanese tale, employs chalky hues on colored paper to achieve a similarly traditional effect. Liu and Meyer's "Puss in Boots" is, despite the almost ridiculous liberties it takes with its source in Charles Perrault, very charming. Meyer's artwork for the piece is fluid and beautiful, and as the collection's sole collaboration between a woman writer and a woman illustrator, "Puss in Boots" is also intriguing for its distinctive style.

The final tale of the collection, "The Witch Baby," is based on reportedly one of three unproduced manuscripts Minghella originally wrote for *The StoryTeller* series. From a Russian folktale, it is twenty-two pages in length, almost double that of the second-longest story. Framed by the storyteller's meditation on tarot cards, it follows a young prince from the empty excess of his parents' court to his sanctuary at the Castle of the Sister of the Sun, and finally back again to confront the horrible prophecy that comes to punish his family and kingdom. It is a movingly surreal—though at times wrenchingly nightmarish—yarn, one that bears the unmistakable touch of *The StoryTeller*'s late, and legendary, writer.

As a faithful continuation of one of the best-loved storytelling franchises, *Jim Henson's "The StoryTeller"* is a worthwhile purchase both for fans of the television series and for new initiates. It is, furthermore, a handsome, respectable-looking volume, and stands apart from the typically flimsy binding and garish coloring of the standard graphic novel. One can only hope that the two other Minghella scripts find realization in additional volumes, not to mention that additional volumes occur.

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