



GOTHIC REVIVAL: AN INTERVIEW WITH COSTA CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD WINNER CHRIS RIDDELL

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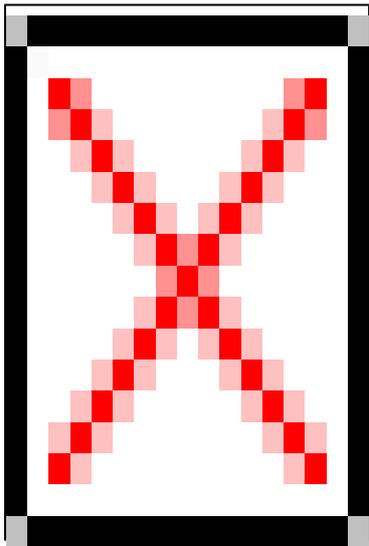
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Chris Riddell interviewed by Damian Kelleher.

Chris Riddell's [Goth Girl and the Ghost of a Mouse](#) [3] was proclaimed 'an instant classic' by the Costa judging panel. But what went into creating a gothic novel for children? Damian Kelleher finds out.

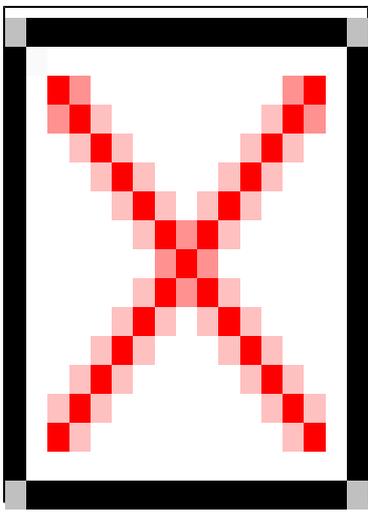


Chris Riddell is no stranger to book prizes. He's won a clutch of Nestlé awards, and two **Kate Greenaway** medals for **Pirate Diary** and **Gulliver** (when no illustrator has ever managed to win three). But today, Chris is celebrating his latest achievement - the **Costa Children's Book Award 2013** for **Goth Girl and the Ghost of a Mouse**. And that's one gong he's never previously won.

'I think what is so nice about the Costa is that it's one of these inclusive prizes that covers a whole range of books,' says Chris. 'I love being one of five winning titles from the four corners of the publishing world.'

Having five separate prizes means that for once, children's books are on a par with four other adult category winners: novel, poetry, biography and first novel.

'One of the things we should never forget is that adults read children's books to children,' says Chris. 'In that sense, the people reading **The Pike** (the biography category winner by Lucy Hughes Hallett) might well be reading my book to their children. It's a nice cross-fertilisation in that way.'



If ever a children's book were cross-fertilised, **Goth Girl** must be a case in point. A gothic tale set at Ghastly-Gorm Hall, it focuses on young Ada, daughter of Lord Goth, the famous cycling poet. Ada may be rich in monetary terms, but she's pretty impoverished when it comes to friends, and that's where a small phantom rodent can make all the difference. But from the outset, a gothic novel for kids sounds a little?well, let's just say, *unusual*.

?When I embarked upon writing Goth Girl, it seemed to me a rather Quixotic and self-indulgent thing to do,? explains Chris. ?I really was writing this just to please myself and to have fun. I could have been completely nuts. There was a huge relief when the book came out and I started to take it into schools to read to kids; the relief was palpable for me to see them engage with it. In a way, winning the Costa has been a wonderful affirmation. It's lovely to think it's reached a wider audience.?

There aren't many publishers who would consider taking a punt on a gothic novel for children, you might think, but then again, Chris is unique in the world of children's books. Straddling the world of political cartooning and children's illustration, he brings a completely new perspective to publishing. **Goth Girl** is littered with witticisms; nods to other literary works, and characters, parodies and puns. Adults won't pick up on all of them, let alone kids.

?What I do a lot of in my other incarnation as a political cartoonist is this; I play with references and I make illusions and use metaphors and all those sort of things. Some of that inevitably came into Goth Girl, ? says Chris. ?What I felt was important was that there should be a sense of place and a sense of fun in the book. I wasn't too worried about whether you were picking up on this reference or that reference. It was more about a sense of style and feeling. For that I just let myself go with the black and white illustrations.?

There's no doubt about it, **Goth Girl** is a stunning and stylish book. From the shiny purple-tinged pages to Chris's signature illustrations loaded with detail and intricate flourishes, he has created a world of charm and gothic glee to entrance his younger readers.

?I think these sort of books are coming into their own these days,? explains Chris. ?Books that are beautifully packaged with lots and lots of visual appeal. It's one of the reasons why I love working with this particular age group, the emergent readers, 6-10 year olds. They are very permissive in terms of what they will pick up and look at; they haven't quite formed the prejudices that older readers quite rightly adopt. They can be wonderfully eclectic in their taste, which means one can be a little bit more imaginative in structural terms.'

I've interrupted Chris today. He explains he's been at his desk and is currently working on the next volume of **Goth Girl**. I wonder how different is the experience of writing and illustrating his own books to that of illustrating for other authors, I wonder.

?I'm an illustrator through and through,? says Chris. ?For me, writing is some sort of exquisite torture. I rely on an excellent editor at all times to turn my doggerel into something that passes for prose. The way I begin is with a cast list; I draw my characters and they suggest to me what the story is going to be. So I start to illustrate the book before I write

it. Then I sit down and find a suitable ring-bound sketch book and I write the book long hand, annotating it with little sketches and doodles. As I'm working, the visual is always there. So by the time I get to a first manuscript, I've been designing the look of the book as I've gone along.?

2013 proved to be something of a bumper year for Chris. As well as illustrating the hugely popular **Summer Reading Challenge's Creepy House** for The Reading Agency (?I had a lovely time going in and out of libraries, particularly in Wessex?), Chris could now top it off in style if he emerges triumphant as overall winner of the **Costa Award**. No children's author has managed this since Philip Pullman pulled it off in 2011 with **The Amber Spyglass**. So can Chris do it?

?I really can't,? he laughs, ?which is nice because I can go along to the party and enjoy it. It's lovely to be on the list and I don't harbor greater hopes than that. No, I won't be having a flutter on **Goth Girl**. My money would be on **The Pike!**?

Damian Kelleher is a journalist and writer.

[Goth Girl and the Ghost of a Mouse](#) [3], Macmillan, 978-0230759800, £9.99 hbk

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