

# Macabre Upbringings: A Look into Identity in Mort and The Graveyard Book

Cody Thomas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon>

 Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

## Macabre Upbringings: A Look into Identity in *Mort* and *The Graveyard Book*

The concept of an individual's identity and the stages of growth through which one passes are core foundations that scholars have used to approach children's and adolescent's literature for decades. One's name is often their connection with the world in which they reside, and if their name comes into question, their link to reality can become blurred or faded. The questions addressed in works that deal with identity and names resonate with readers of all ages—in part due to the fact that many adults themselves are trying to solidify their own fundamental selves and carve out an identity from the masses. It stands to reason, then, that what are often cast off as children's books and therefore not worth a read might indeed be worth reading as an adult. These questions of identity and what is “normal” are directly taken on in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008) and Terry Pratchett's *Mort* (1987). Their macabre upbringings, as shown in fantasy and quasi-fantasy settings, allow them to come out with a more grounded identity and a greater willingness to face the future. It is easier for children and adults alike to relate and grow from a story featuring characters who have overcome fantastical obstacles as opposed to ones rooted in reality because the reader stays engaged and learns to understand their own fears and worries through the metaphors and analogies.

Throughout their distinct journeys, the boys grow and learn in their new environments, having been taken from their normal world and thrust into strange surroundings. Because of these changes in their situations, both Bod and Mort grow into fuller and better developed characters with which children can better relate. Bod has his own life put into perspective by the lives of a thousand-years-worth of souls, ranging from a Roman on the frontier to a few late 19<sup>th</sup> century city-dwellers; he ultimately must go forth and live his own life in the modern day, but he will carry with him the lessons and experiences they shared with him. Mort is forced to confront

his own mortality, and, after literally fusing with the anthropomorphic personification of Death, finds his morality. They leave their strange circumstances surprisingly more “normal” than one might expect: Bod pursuing a normal life with a wallet full of cash and a passport at his disposal, and Mort marrying and being left with the task of making sure history unfolds the way in which it was originally bound.

Having been raised in the graveyard, Bod exists in unique type of otherworld. While he is alive, he is not among the living; while he is not dead, he lives among them. His transience between the two worlds is a key defining point in the formation of his identity. His first memorable interaction with the living is when he meets his friend Scarlett, a small girl about his age whose parents will occasionally bring her to the graveyard to play (as it has been named a nature reserve in the modern day). Upon her return to her parents, “Scarlett told her mother about the boy called Nobody who lived in the graveyard and had played with her, and that night Scarlett’s mother mentioned it to Scarlett’s father, who said that he believed that imaginary friends were a common phenomenon at that age” (Gaiman 39). Bod is stripped of his existence in the world outside the graveyard, as, understandably, his friend’s parents would not accept that there was a boy growing up in the graveyard and if there was, his name certainly would not be Nobody. Scarlett even accepts her parents’ explanation of her imaginary friend when she is older after they move away (213). Despite his supposed nonexistence, Bod’s experiences with Scarlett in their early lives are where he first showcases one of his virtues: courage. Scarlett wants to explore inside the tombs where Bod can go due to his “Freedom of the Graveyard,” as Gaiman names it (30), but she cannot, due to her corporeality. The boy learns of the oldest grave in the area from Caius Pompeius, the Roman who has been in the graveyard for centuries, which is inside the hill. Scarlett is at first trepidatious, but despite Bod’s supposed inexistence, she is able

to find strength in him. They proceed to go down deeper into the grave where they are stopped by the ghastly humanoid protector, “well-preserved, but still like something that had been dead for a long while. His skin was painted (Bod thought) or tattooed (Scarlett thought) with purple and patterns” which give him the name (or descriptor) the Indigo Man. Bod and Scarlett almost succumb to the fear that permeates the grave, but his inquisitiveness reveals the Indigo Man for what he truly is: a scarecrow (Gaiman 51). Bod faces his fears and really wants to know what the Indigo Man is guarding, and through his understanding of how the graveyard works, even five-year-old Bod can discern that Scarlett would not be able to see a ghost, so it must be a ruse of some sorts. As it turns out, the Indigo Man is a tool of the entity known as the Sleer, a three-headed, ghostly snake-like servant which guards the resting place of what it refers to as “**THE MASTER**” (53). Bod and Scarlett leave the tomb unhindered after the encounter with the Sleer, with Bod’s understanding of the graveyard giving the two children the upper hand. Because Bod was forced to grow up in the safe haven of the graveyard due to the fact that he was orphaned as a baby, Bod learns and grows in a way that he would not have if his parents were alive. His identity is shaped through his surroundings and circumstances, and as his journey progresses, it is clear that he begins to question if his identity is truly his own. It is important to examine just how the graveyard effects his growth and how it skews his understanding of the world.

Mort faces a different problem, though rather similar at the core. His father, a relatively well-off farmer, has no use for the boy on the farm. Mort is faced with the dilemma many children in our world meet when they leave high school: “What do I do now?” At the town fair, Mort is left alone at the end of the night, with the other boys in similar situations having already been apprenticed by the various guilds and craftsmen. He sits, almost angry with circumstance, “wonder[ing] miserably why he hadn’t been picked. He’d tried to look respectable” (Pratchett

10). Mort cannot seem to comprehend what his father and uncle had been saying about his strangeness: he is an avid reader, among a slew of other traits, which specifically sets him aside from basically every other one of the peasant-folk, many of whom find reading to be a terrible waste of time. His inquisitive nature might have gotten him noticed in a modern, non-fantastical setting, but his obsession with knowing things set him apart from his own people, and “In short, Mort was one of those people who are more dangerous than a bag full of rattlesnakes. He was determined to discover the underlying logic behind the universe” (6). As the final strokes of midnight fall, Mort’s unexpected saving grace “clip-clop[s]” toward him, though “clip-clop was an astonishingly inaccurate word for the kind of noise which rattled around Mort’s head; [it] suggested a rather jolly pony, quite possibly wearing a straw hat with holes cut out for its ears” (11-12). Mort’s views, like the character himself, are naïve and unhardened to the realities of his world. Indeed, after Mort, his father, and his to-be employer conclude that Mort is to become apprenticed, Lezek pulls his son aside and gives him the fatherly advice meant to shape a young lad going into an apprenticeship: “it’s not unknown for an apprentice to inherit his master’s business...many a young man has started out that way. [] He makes himself useful, earns his master’s confidence, and, well, if there’s any daughters in the house...” (17-18). All but forcing his son into his new role and identity as an apprentice, Lezek, who has had to watch out for his son in more than one way throughout the boy’s life, truly hopes that this is the best decision for the family and, in his final words to Mort, gives the best fatherly advice he can muster. Like Bod, Mort’s identity has been fluid and waiting to be molded and both boys are placed in situations that cause them to grow in a different way. Mort has no other choice than to obey his father and his new master, Death itself, and because of that, he embarks on a journey that will force him to question the very fabric of reality.

Death's Domain, much like Bod's graveyard, exists between planes, and is a place carved from the firmament of the Disc which is untouched by time. It is here where Mort gets his first understanding in how non-human Death is:

In a landscape that owed nothing to time and space, which appeared on no map...Mort spent the afternoon helping Albert plan out broccoli. It was black, tinted with purple.

"He tries, see...it's just that when it comes to color, he hasn't got much imagination."

"I'm not sure I understand..." said Mort. "Did you say he *made* all this?"

Beyond the garden wall the ground dropped towards a deep valley and then rose into dark moorland that marched all the way to distant mountains, jagged as cats' teeth... "Firmament, I suppose. That's the fancy name for raw nothing. It's not a very good job of work...I mean, the garden's okay, but the mountains are downright shoddy. They're all fuzzy when you get up close." (Pratchett 39-40)

In his conversation with Albert, Death's manservant, Mort is given a small insight towards his new master. Death, though lacking in imagination, is able, to an extent, to empathize with his mortal guests and so tries to make their surroundings more comfortable. The house is decorated with motifs commonly associated with the concept of death, but everything is black: "After a while Mort thought he could see—no, he couldn't possibly imagine he could see...different colors of black. That's to say, not simply very dark tones of red and green and whatever, but real shades of black. A whole spectrum of colors, all different and all—well, black" (36). Mort's perception of his surroundings and master is something which helps him to not only form a connection with Death, but also to provide a handy comparison for the reader: the biggest

difference between the two is their divide in power. They are two souls who have thus far done only what they needed to and have not really taken the time to develop a personality. This allows Mort to relate to Death throughout the rest of the novel, where Mort experiences certain aspects of his job that blur his identity into that of his master. The most obvious example comes when he is accompanying Death on the job. The two ride into the castle of Sto Lat with the task of removing the king's soul from his body, after which Mort follows Death through a wall, with "the suicidal logic of this nearly kill[ing] him" (Pratchett 53). When Mort questions the reality of his walking through the wall, reality sets in and nearly encases half of him in stone. Mort asks about this seeming magic, to which Death responds: "MAGIC IS THE ONE THING IT ISN'T, BOY. WHEN YOU CAN DO IT BY YOURSELF, THERE WILL BE NOTHING MORE I CAN TEACH YOU" (53). Mort, being a non-wizard mortal, is almost unable to process all of what happens to him. At this point, he understands that there are a lot of actions Death can take, and he stands to potentially inherit that. As one of his later targets poses: "You may want to hold on to your job, but will you ever be able to let go?" (87) Having stepped into this unknown realm, Mort does not necessarily know what is in store for him. To his knowledge, up to this point, being Death's apprentice has never been offered or attempted, and Mort starts to sense that there is a great possibility of losing himself in the job.

Bod does not truly know who he is as a living person, having been raised by the dead who, inadvertently, stripped him of his true name when he arrived as a baby in the graveyard, and he has some mannerisms that are specifically unique in the modern day: in the few days he attends school outside of the graveyard, he is (barely) noticed by his teachers as having "Lovely handwriting. What they used to call copperplate," and "throw[ing] out made-up details, stuff not in the books" in his history class (Gaiman 169). He goes unnoticed by many of his peers,

and Gaiman at one point describes “his presence [as] almost ghostly.” (170) Bod, because he was taught to do so, is unique in his identity as someone who is unmemorable. His “Freedom of the Graveyard” extends beyond the boundaries of his home and thus he is able to bring his “powers” into the mortal world. In his assistance with getting the seventh years to deal with the bullying problems of Maureen “Mo” Quilling and Nick Farthing, Bod is able to inspire them into defending themselves and disabling the bullies’ power. Though his abilities allow him to hide in plain sight, he starts to get noticed by those he directly affects and he finds it disturbing when people at school start to notice him walking in the hallways: “He wondered if he had made a mistake, getting involved. He had made a mis-step in his judgment, that was for certain. Mo and Nick had begun to talk about him, probably the year sevens had as well. Other kids were looking at him, pointing him out to each other. He was becoming a presence, rather than an absence, and that made him uncomfortable” (Gaiman 179). Bod’s literal identity in the mortal realm up until this point had been faint, loosely connected thoughts and memories of the boy who had weird things to say about history and his fancy lettering. With having drawn attention to himself, regardless as to his noble intentions, Bod weakens the protection that the graveyard has given him, even to the small extent of being remembered. His experiences in the graveyard allow him to make the best of these events, but Silas still reprimands Bod when he gets back to the graveyard while in the same breath lauding him for his selflessness: the boy acknowledges after they return that “[he] *was* wrong...the whole idea” behind going to school “was to do it without anybody noticing. And then [he] had to get involved with the kids in the school, and the next thing you know, there’s police and all sorts of stuff. Because [he] was selfish,” to which Silas presents “You weren’t selfish. You need to be among your own kind. Quite understandable” (195). Bod goes through his integral formative years away from living kids of his own age—



even his vampiric guardian understands that this has been the incorrect way to go about raising Bod. His experience in the outside world has awakened a conflict within Bod, and it is easy to see that this conflict will eventually force him to choose where he truly belongs.

The focal point of both boys' journeys revolves around their conceptions of death. This is no easy task for Bod: his family is taken from him as he is toddling towards the graveyard, and the only parents he truly knows are ghosts. Because of this, he never has been able to affirm a unique identity in the world of the living, which presents its own problems. As Tsung Chi Chang explains, "a person's identity is not merely determined by his or her inner qualities" which Bod develops throughout his journeys in the graveyard and few forays into the mortal realm, but they are also tied to "some outside factors...one's identity is, to a certain extent, socially constructed" (Chang 11). Bod doesn't have the ability to truly ascertain his identity until he is able to become a social creature within the realm of the living—the dead, for everything they help him to become, cannot supply him with the sense of being an individual, and this is because, as Mother Slaughter, one of the older ghosts in the graveyard, puts it, "There's not much happens here to make one day unlike the next. The seasons change. The ivy grows. Stones fall over. But you coming here..." (Gaiman 278). Bod's presence was a welcome change for the denizens of the graveyard, but even they acknowledge that they could not be for him what a living family would have. Bod never truly had to deal with loss until the defeat of Miss Lupescu, his substitute guardian while Silas was away, in Krakow while on a mission with Silas. Despite his immersion in death from early boyhood, Bod feels deeply for the loss of one of his mentors: "you could have brought her back. Buried her here. Then I could have talked to her...she used to call me *Nimeni*. No one will ever call me that again" (Gaiman 270). Bod, like all people, faces the inevitability of death, and though his unique circumstances place him closer to the dead than

would necessarily be normal, the sting of demise strikes him more deeply for his own loss.

For Mort, the representation of Death is a relatively easy acknowledgment. Death in Discworld is and/or has an anthropomorphic personification, and Mort performs several of Death's duties over the duration of his apprenticeship. The development of his identity is a bit more intensive. Though not dealing with loss on a personal level through the novel, Mort's own experience helps to further define it much in the same way. Exhibiting a false-control over who lives and dies, he makes a nearly fatal mistake when out on his first night of duty after Death gives him the lifetimers (hourglasses which indicate the lives of *everyone* on the Disc) of those who are destined to die that night. As his master puts it, he does not kill: "PEOPLE GET KILLED, BUT THAT'S THEIR BUSINESS. I JUST TAKE OVER FROM THEN ON. AFTER ALL, IT'D BE A BLOODY STUPID WORLD IF PEOPLE GOT KILLED WITHOUT DYING, WOULDN'T IT?" (Pratchett 15); but Mort interferes with fate. The same strike that was supposed to separate Keli's soul from her body, under Mort's guidance, removes that of her would-be assassin. In common literary, fantasy, or science fiction trope circumstances, this would be relatively simple to rectify: possibly, fate would alter itself and a new tier of multiverse would form and Mort would just have been reprimanded and potentially cast out of his apprenticeship. Not so in the Discworld: "everything's fixed. History is all worked out, from start to finish. What the facts actually are is beside the point; history just rolls straight over the top of them. You can't change anything because the changes are already part of it. [Keli's] dead. It's fated" (119). In an attempt to do what Mort saw as right, he forgot Death's initial warning on interference: "FAIR DOESN'T COME INTO IT. YOU CAN'T TAKE SIDES" (49). Death does not necessarily lack Mort's empathy but more his humanity; where Mort finds a sense of self while going about fixing or remedying his mistake in one fashion or another, Death is mirrored trying to develop a sense of humanness to understand humankind. Even though Mort is

developing quickly as an apprentice, the fact that he questions the morality of his job shows that he is progressing as a person and the parallel between his and Death's journey helps to solidify his progression.

Bod's story comes to a crowning point when he meets Scarlett a decade after their initial acquaintance. Bod finds Scarlett after she has returned from Glasgow with her mother to the small town with his graveyard. After accidentally stumbling her way back up to the graveyard via a missed bus connection and taking the wrong replacement (Gaiman 204-5), she meets one Mr. Jay Frost doing a project for the local historical society in the graveyard, who gives her a ride home, ingratiating himself to both her and her mother. After a reunion, the children become more inquisitive as to where Bod originally came from, and the book flies into its climax as Jay Frost reveals himself to be the man Jack, who has been lying in wait for Bod to turn up so he can finish the job he started all those years ago. Bod is able to use the abilities he learned during his time with his mentors to work against the Jacks. When Jack corners Bod alone at the top of the stairs, "the man Jack only glanced away for a moment, but Bod knew that the moment was all he had, and he Faded, as completely, as utterly as he could" (239). His abilities to react quickly and Fade have been honed over years in the graveyard. From the first time Bod successfully Faded with the help of Liza Hempstock to Bod's experiences with the Ghoul Gates, the graveyard has been preparing him for this confrontation with the Jacks of All Trades. Bod demonstrates both a profound understanding of the workings of the otherworld he lives in and in his own identity when he asks the question he has carried through the entire text: "What was my real name? What did my family call me?" Jack only goes on to bait him, saying "Let me see. Was it Peter? Or Paul? Or Roderick—you look like a Roderick. Maybe you were a Stephen..." (Gaiman 261), all of which Bod could have been. Bod, truly able to answer the question of who he is at this

point, has only one response: “‘I know my name,’ he said. ‘I’m Nobody Owens. That’s who I am.’” (263-4) His confrontation with Jack, the man without whom Bod would not be a graveyard denizen, is necessary so Bod can recognize that his lost future is inconsequential. Facing the demons of his past, the Jacks of All Trades, Bod is able to claim ownership of his identity by shedding the need to connect with his past. He learns that the determining factors of his life are not completely restricted to the actions of others, but that his destiny is truly his own to shape.

Much as the graveyard and its denizens have small changes in their day-to-day lives, so too does Death in the Discworld. In a parallel to Mort’s journey of self-discovery, Death spends the time he gains by having Mort do the reaping trying to understand the people he eventually escorts to the beyond. This is often portrayed opposite of Mort, Ysabell, Keli, the wizard Cutwell, and Albert, often as the cadre is fighting off Mort’s mistake. While Death is becoming more human, Mort becomes less so. Throughout the entire book, Mort fights for his superiors and others to call him by his name; often they refer to him as boy, where his response, and the narrator’s, becomes “‘Mort’ said Mort automatically” (Pratchett 42, minor derivations thereof: 35, 47, 52, 53, 58, 66, 91, 123, 188, 194, 195, 223, and 278). He eventually almost loses himself to the entity of Death, where he begins to speak in Death’s tones and his eyes become more akin to the cold blue of Death’s; Ysabell even “recognized [his] walk. He was *stalking*” (Pratchett 220-3). Many indicators can be derived from a name but one’s name is not all they are as a person, since “names are convenient for specifying certain people, [but] they are never all-inclusive in identifying the true quality of the name-possessors” (Chang 14). In fighting for his name, Mort is attempting a defense of just one aspect of himself. His actions literally create ripples in space-time reality, which speak many times louder than him correcting others on his name. Mort luckily stumbles upon a solution to both his problems and forcing Death to

acknowledge him by name:

THUS IT ENDS, BOY.

“Mort,” said Mort. He looked up.

“Mort,” he repeated...Anger bubbled up inside of him. If he was going to die, then at least he would die with the right name.

“Mort, you bastard!” he screamed. (Pratchett 284-5)

Mort journeys from being a young boy who did not know what life had in store for him into an entity who can defy Death itself. By forcing Death to recognize him, Mort affirms his own identity and something clicks for Death. Mort's humanity has at this point infected Death, causing the creature to reckon with this newfound understanding. With Mort's momentary transcendence into becoming Death giving the unique perspective of mortality to his master, his own voyage into self serves a multipurpose goal.

Both *Mort* and *The Graveyard Book* tell simple coming-of-age stories, but the fantasy aspects offer a distinctive twist on the genre. The journeys the boys take through their different worlds reflect and draw resemblances that children and adults alike are able to connect with on a level it can be hard to reach with realistic fictions. Though he spent the entirety of his life not knowing his name, having been set down a path not of his own choosing, Bod learns that he needs to question his place in life and to let go of the past so that he can truly grow into the name Nobody Owens. Despite being forced into a career path which he knew nothing about, Mort defies the meaning of his name and the entity Death in the same breath, solidifying his identity and ensuring others respect it. The ability to suspend one's disbelief and still be able to confront their own issues, through the eyes of another and in forms not achievable in our own world, gives the characters' situations deeper meaning to the reader. The issues with identity that every

character eventually faces are not easy to answer; the lens of fantasy allows for the reader to learn about their own fears and overcome them, while maintaining the sense that they are not being preached at. Gaiman and Pratchett's characters present a strong case for bringing answers to demands from fantasy life into reality, where the capacity to take away a fuller sense of understanding how and why an issue affects a non-existent person translates directly into an acceptance one's own feelings and frustrations.

## Works Cited

Chang, Tsung Chi. "I am Nobody: Fantasy and Identity in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*."

*Journal of English Studies*, vol 13, 2015, pp 7-18.

Gaiman, Neil. *The Graveyard Book*. New York: Harper Collins, 2008. Print.

Pratchett, Terry. *Mort*. New York: Harper Collins, 1987. Print.