

A Q&A with Graphic Novelist Matt Phelan



What drew you to the story of Snow White?

“Snow White” has always been my favorite fairy tale. Like most kids of the past few generations, the Disney version was my introduction to the story. I loved it then and still do.

“Snow White” has more layers than many fairy tales. It has the stepmother element, the jealousy, and the murder attempt, but it also has the help and friendship of the seven dwarfs, which sets it apart. Unlike other characters in fairy tales, Snow White is not alone. She has the seven dwarfs. The Huntsman spares her. That always interested me.

Why noir? Why set the book during the Great Depression? Did you try to set the story in a different style or time period before landing on this one?

It was always going to be set in the late twenties/early thirties. The idea sparked from sketching apple peddlers for a short story I wrote about Herbert Hoover for the anthology *Our White House*. One day, I drew a hag-like peddler holding an apple up to a smartly dressed young woman as everyone on the crowded street rushed by and I thought: “*Snow White*” in 1930s New York. Once I had the idea, I started playing with how to translate the rest of the tale to that particular setting. Who was the Queen? She was the Queen of the Ziegfeld Follies. Who are the dwarfs? They could be seven street orphans, like in those old Dead End Kids movies, and so on.

The noir tone came naturally, especially after I focused on the inheritance as the main motivation. I’ve always been influenced by old movies. For this book, I thought about the noir films of the 1940s, but also earlier atmospheric films such as Fritz Lang’s *M* and John Ford’s *The Informer*, not to mention the Thin Man movies and the first ten minutes of *King Kong*. The opening sequence of *Citizen Kane* was also an inspiration, but then again *Citizen Kane* is always a creative touchstone for my graphic novels.

Illustration copyright © 2016 by Matt Phelan



Tell us about your research process.

My research tends to be image-based: books, movies, or online photographs. I have a wonderful book on the Ziegfeld Follies that I had originally bought for *Bluffton: My Summers with Buster*. There are a ton of great art deco books out there (they tend to be oversize so they may actually weigh a ton). I wanted some of that art deco in *Snow White*, but I was more interested in the darker visions of the Great Depression, such as the photographs of Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White.

I also took some trips up to New York City to photograph locations in Central Park and Macy's, as well as to find a stand-in for the White mansion. It's always good to physically walk in the setting, even if it has changed considerably.

One thing that I didn't do was seek out other versions of "Snow White," aside from rereading the edition I've had since I was a kid (*Sixty Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* with Arthur Rackham's great illustrations). I wanted to approach this story fresh. Lisbeth Zwerger once said that "to illustrate a fairy tale is not an intellectual, scientific interpretation, but a transposition of internal pictures and feelings." That was my approach.

Can you tell us about your use of red hues throughout *Snow White*?

I wanted the art to feel like a black-and-white movie, which of course really means a wonderful soft atmosphere of grays and shadows. Stripping your palette down, then introducing color in a limited way can be very effective dramatically. Red was useful for the apple, lips, and the Queen's fury. I also tinted many of the scenes blue or green to add variety, which is a technique that was sometimes used in old films, particularly in the silent era.



Which character did you find most satisfying to draw?

I've always been fascinated with the character of the Huntsman. His mercy, which costs him dearly, is a key element to the story and the overall theme. So I really love him as a character, which is important in how I approached drawing him. My Mr. Hunt is a giant goon, a thug with a gnarled, lined face that speaks of a dark and violent past. But under all of that is a heart that can still find redemption. I don't have the chance to draw that sort of character very often in picture books.

Matt Phelan is the author-illustrator of three previous graphic novels: the Scott O'Dell Award-winning *The Storm in the Barn*, *Around the World*, and *Bluffton*, which was nominated for three Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards, including Best Graphic Album. He is the author-illustrator of *Druthers* and the illustrator of many books for young readers, including *Marilyn's Monster* by Michelle Knudsen and *The Higher Power of Lucky* by Susan Patron, winner of the Newbery Medal. Matt Phelan lives in Pennsylvania.

#mattphelan