



Goblin Secrets

By William Alexander

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In the National Book Award–winning *Goblin Secrets*, a boy joins a theatrical troupe of goblins to find his missing brother.

In the town of Zombay, there is a witch named Graba who has clockwork chicken legs and moves her house around—much like the fairy tale figure of Baba Yaga. Graba takes in stray children, and Rownie is the youngest boy in her household. Rownie’s only real relative is his older brother Rowan, who is an actor. But acting is outlawed in Zombay, and Rowan has disappeared.

Desperate to find him, Rownie joins up with a troupe of goblins who skirt the law to put on plays. But their plays are not only for entertainment, and the masks they use are for more than make-believe. The goblins also want to find Rowan—because Rowan might be the only person who can save the town from being flooded by a mighty river.

This accessible, atmospheric fantasy takes a gentle look at love, loss, and family while delivering a fast-paced adventure that is sure to satisfy.

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Goblin Secrets By William Alexander Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #91307 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Margaret K. McElderry Books
- Published on: 2013-07-23
- Released on: 2013-07-23
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.63" h x .70" w x 5.13" l, .40 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 256 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

* "Rownie's search for his brother turns into an unlikely heroic quest. . . . Though highly textured, it's tightly woven and reassuringly seamless. The result is wryly humorous and bearably yet excitingly menacing: Even while much is left unexplained, Rownie's triumph is both gripping and tantalizing."--*Kirkus Reviews*,
***STAR**

"Alexander has an intriguing central theme, in which masks and theater create actual magic . . . The result is a (sometimes gruesome) fantasy stuffed with interesting ideas."--*Publishers Weekly*

"The appeal here lies in Alexander's careful construction of a distinctive world: touches of steampunk can be found in Graba's geared-up legs and the Mayor's automaton guards while a more ancient, primal magic seems to guide the goblins and their powerful brand of storytelling. . . . The bittersweet ending remains true to the story's overall dreamy, melancholic tone."--*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

"The story weaves a many-webbed tale, rich in imagination with a fairy-tale feel."--*School Library Journal*

"The mythic resonance in Alexander's storytelling, coupled with his smart, graceful writing, make this novel feel both pleasantly old and thoroughly new." - *Locus Magazine*

"William Alexander organizes his atmospheric first novel into acts and scenes, rather than chapters, and he couches it in the beautifully elliptical language of the old fairy tales." (*Washington Post*)

About the Author

William Alexander won the National Book Award for his debut novel, *Goblin Secrets*, and won the Earphones Award for his narration of the audiobook. His other novels include *Ghouliah Song*, *Ambassador*, and *Nomad*. William studied theater and folklore at Oberlin College, English at the University of Vermont, and creative writing at the Clarion workshop. He teaches in the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA program in Writing for Children and Young Adults. Like the protagonist of *Nomad* and *Ambassador*, William is the son of a Latino immigrant to the US. Visit him online at WillAlex.net and GoblinSecrets.com, and on Twitter via @WillieAlex.

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Goblin Secrets

Act I, Scene I



ROWNIE WOKE WHEN GRABA knocked on the ceiling from the other side. Plaster dust drifted down from the knocking. Graba knocked again. Baskets hung on chains from the rafters, and they shook when she knocked.

Rownie sat up and tried to blink sleep-sand and plaster dust from one eye. The whole floor was covered by a bed made up of straw, stolen clothes sewn into blankets, and sleeping siblings. Two of his brothers crawled

up out of the straw, Blotches and Stubble. Blotches had orange hair, orange freckles, and orange teeth. Stubble was the oldest and the tallest, and he liked to say that he had a beard. He didn't. He had stray hairs on the tip of his chin and on his cheeks near his ears.

Their sister Vass came in from the girls' room, which was really the same room with a blanket hung across the middle. Vass had been her name before she came to live with Graba. Sometimes Graba's grandchildren kept the names they had before. Sometimes they made up names for themselves. Blotches and Stubble had made up their own names.

"Hurry," Vass snapped.

Rownie got to his feet, combed the straw out of his hair with his fingers, and stumbled away from the middle of the room. He stood with Vass and Blotches while Stubble pulled the rope that lowered the stairway down from the ceiling. The musty smell of Graba's loft came down with it.

Vass went upstairs. The others followed her. Rownie came last.

There were birds everywhere in Graba's loft. Most were pigeons, gray and mangy. Some were chickens. A few larger, stranger birds perched in dark corners, watchful.

Graba perched on a stool near the iron stove, her legs hidden underneath the bulk of her gray skirts.

"Four grandchildren," she said. "Today I have four of you. Enough for what I have in mind now."

The word "grandmother" did not mean "mother's mother" or "father's mother" to Rownie, or to the various other children who sometimes lived in Graba's shack. Neither mothers nor fathers were part of this household, and the word "grandmother" simply meant "Graba."

The four children lined up in front of the stool, waiting. Two chickens pecked at the floorboards nearby, looking for seeds.

"I'll need eggs carried to Haggot's market stall," said Graba. She pointed to Stubble and Blotches, but she did not say their names. She probably did not know their names. "He'll be at the Northside market today. Trade the eggs for feed-grain, the best chicken feed you can find. Bring it back to me. Will you do that, now?"

"Yes, Graba." Stubble picked up a wooden crate filled with straw and eggs. All four siblings turned to go.

"Don't be going yet," Graba said. She took a small leather bag from around her neck and held it out to Vass. "Hang this over the chains on the Clock Tower door. Sing the charm I was teaching you last night, and stand back when you do. Take care with this, now. It is a present of welcoming home, and it's almost ripe."

Vass took the bag carefully. "What's in it?" she asked.

"A bird skull, stuffed with other things. Do this well, and I might be teaching you the making of it."

"Yes, Graba," said Vass.

"Go," Graba said. "All of you but the runt, the smallest one. Rownie should wait here with me."

Rownie waited. He wondered why Graba knew his name. She knew the names of those she kept an eye on, and it was not always a good thing to have Graba's eye on you.

He listened to Vass, Stubble, and Blotches clamber down the stairs.

"Yes, Graba?" Rownie asked.

"My leg bones have run down," she told him. "Wind them for me now." She extended a gearwork leg from under her stool. It was bird-shaped, with three long talon-toes in front and one in back, at the heel. The whole limb had been made out of copper and wood.

Rownie pried the crank out from her shin and wound it up, watching gears turn against chains and springs inside.



Graba always said that Mr. Scrud, the local gearworker, hadn't enough skill to make legs into human shapes. Vass whispered that Graba needed the chicken legs to hold up her hugeness, that nothing smaller would suffice, and that Graba wouldn't be able to walk today if she hadn't lost the ordinary legs she'd been born with.

Stubble said that Graba used to be a sailor, or a boat-witch, and that she'd lost her legs in a pirate attack. He said Graba killed some of the pirates with a look and a laugh and a lock of her hair before they cut off her legs with rusty swords. He always drew out the word "rusty" when he told the story. "Rrrrrrrrusty swords. Ha!" Then he'd hit Rownie behind the knee with a stick to buckle him over.

Stubble told this story often. Rownie had cried the first time, and the rest of Graba's grandchildren had laughed. On the second telling Rownie had glared up at Stubble from the ground. The third time Stubble told the tale Rownie had fallen backward on purpose, throwing up his hands and imitating Graba's rusty voice. "Curse you, Pirate King!" (The story had grown by then, and the ordinary river pirates had become a full barge captained by the King of All Pirates.)

Everybody had laughed. Stubble had helped him up, and after that he didn't hit Rownie so hard while telling the pirate story, because Rownie couldn't say his line if he was gasping in pain and holding his leg. It still hurt, but not as much.

Now the story was almost a play. This was dangerous. Performances were outlawed in Zombay.



Rownie finished turning the left crank as far as it would go and folded it into the shin. Graba pulled back her left leg and then extended her right. Rownie pried out the crank and turned it once. The joint gave a loud, shrill creaking. Graba waved her hands and scowled.

"Needs oil," she said. She reached up into the rafters and into one of the nests. She plucked out a small brown egg and popped it into her mouth. It crunched. "I haven't any gear oil left," she said around the cracking eggshell. "Get to Scrud's shop for a small flask, now. I've overpaid him for leg repair, and he owes me for it. Don't let him tell you otherwise."

"Yes, Graba," Rownie said. He folded back the crank, dodged around a chicken, and ran down the stairs.

He grabbed his coat, even though it was a little too warm outside for coats, and tried to leave through the door. The door wouldn't budge. Rownie remembered that it couldn't budge. Graba moved her house around sometimes. She would send everyone out, lift up the shack, and go somewhere else. Then she would let everyone back in after they found her, if they ever did find her. The last time Graba moved her house, she set the front door against a neighboring wall. "Just use a window," she had said when Vass complained. "I like my view better this way."

Rownie climbed through the window and dropped down to the street.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Richard Glass:

In this 21st millennium, people become competitive in every single way. By being competitive today, people have to do something to make these individuals survive, being in the middle of the crowded place and notice simply by surrounding. One thing that oftentimes many people have underestimated it for a while is reading. Yep, by reading a book your ability to survive increases then having a chance to remain than other is high. For yourself who want to start reading some sort of book, we give you this specific Goblin Secrets book as a basic and daily reading guide. Why, because this book is greater than just a book.

Markus Walker:

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