BFI

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Coraline 15th anniversary screening (3D)

+ Q&A with director Henry Selick and actor Teri Hatcher

The story of Coraline Jones and her adventure in the Other World is one that has crossed many avenues of storytelling – father to daughter, pen to paper, book to movie, studio set to 3D screen.

Once upon a time – in the early 1990s – author Neil Gaiman's daughter Holly was, as he remembers, 'four or five years old. She used to come home from school and she would see me sitting and writing. She would then clamber up on my knee and dictate little stories to me; these were often about small girls named Holly whose mothers would be kidnapped by evil witches who looked like their mothers.

'I thought, "Right, I'll go and find a book like this for her." I looked, but there wasn't anything even remotely like that. So I figured I would write that book, and I started to do so.'

Holly Gaiman reflects, '*Coraline* was a story that my Dad read me bits and pieces of when I was a little girl, a story that he had started writing for me and one which nobody else had ever heard or read. It's a lovely story, one that has both haunted and inspired me since I was a little girl.'

But after completing a few chapters, Neil Gaiman found his career taking off, and it would be another five or six years before he found the time to return to *Coraline*. At which point he 'suddenly thought, "Holly is getting too old for it."'

However, she now had a younger sister, Maddy, and Neil Gaiman realised that that if he did not finish the book soon his other daughter would be too old for it as well. With a formal book contract being drawn up, he came up with a plan for productivity: 'For the next two years, instead of reading in bed before I turned off the light, I would write *Coraline*.'

He began to keep a notebook beside his bed and before he went to sleep he would write 50-100 words, maybe five to six lines each evening. 'It was a very slow way of writing,' he admits. 'That's about one page every six days. But, doing it every night, eventually, I found myself approaching the end.' Finally, in 2000, he was able to spend a week finishing the book.

Central to the story is a childhood memory of the author's; just as children are for a time certain that their toys come to life when they are asleep or not looking, the young Neil Gaiman had his own household suspicions. They were stoked by an old manor house that he was living in with his parents. He recounts, 'There was a door in a living room that opened onto a brick wall. But I was convinced that it wouldn't always do that. I tried sneaking up on it; I'd lean against it, as if I was doing something else, and then open it quickly and look. I thought if I could only approach it properly, there would be a corridor behind it. I had a dream that I opened the door and there was a tunnel. In the book, Coraline finds a door that has been bricked up, but one day she goes through the door and there is a corridor.'

The after-school story had become a bedtime one; having finished the book, Neil Gaiman read a chapter each night to Maddy Gaiman before she fell asleep. He admits, 'If she had been scared or troubled by it, I probably would have put it away. But she loved it.'

During the years of writing *Coraline* Neil Gaiman followed with interest the feature film work of director and animator Henry Selick; the author had gone to see *The Nightmare before Christmas* (1993) the first week it was released, and then saw *James and the Giant Peach* (1996) as well. He remembers, 'Henry was on my radar as a remarkable creative force. I would talk to my agent and he would say, "There's this guy Henry Selick; you two would like each other." So when I finished

Children's Chorus: Camille Joutard, Coraline Tassy,
Lucie Thevenet, Marianne Di Benedetto, Marie-
Laura Colomba, Mayliss David, Mélissa Zerbib
Keyboards: Bruno Coulais
Oboe: Christophe Grindel
Harp: Hélène Breschand
Bass Guitar: Bernard Paganotti
Orchestra Conducted by: Laurent Petitgirard
Children's Choir Conductor: Alain Joutard
Orchestrations by: Bruno Coulais
Sound Design: Ron Eng
Sound Designer: Randy Thom
Re-recording Mixers: Tom Johnson, Randy Thom
Supervising Sound Editor: Ron Eng
Co-supervising Sound Editor: David A. Cohen
Dialogue [Editor]: David A. Cohen
Dialogue Recording: Carlos Sotelango
Effects Editors: Steve Tushar, Steve Boeddeker
ADR Recording: Carlos Sotelango
Foley Artist: Dan O'Connell
Foley Mixer: John T. Cucci
Supervising Foley Editor: Willard J. Overstreet
Digital Systems Supervisor: Martin Pelham
Publicist: Maggie Begley
Voice Cast:
Dakota Fanning (Coraline Jones)
Teri Hatcher (Mel, Coraline's mother/other mother)
Jennifer Saunders (Miss Spink)
Dawn French (Miss Forcible)
Keith David (cat)
John Hodgman
(Charlie, Coraline's father/other father)
Robert Bailey Jr (Wybie Lovat)
Ian McShane (Mr Bobinsky)
Aankha Neal (sweet ghost girl)
George Selick (ghost boy)
Hannah Kaiser (tall ghost girl)
Harry Selick, Marina Budovsky (photo friends)
Emerson Hatcher (magic dragonfly)
Jerome Ranft (mover)
Christopher Murrie, Jeremy Ryder (toys)
Carolyn Crawford (Wybie's grandmother)
Yona Prost (Shakespeare rascal)
USA 2008©
100 mins
Digital 3D

the *Coraline* manuscript, I gave it to my agent and asked him to send it to Henry. This was about 18 months before the book was published.'

Selick reflects, 'When I first read the manuscript, I was struck by the juxtaposition of worlds; the one we all live in, and the one where the grass is always greener. This is something that everyone can relate to. Like Stephen King, Neil sets fantasy in modern times, in our own lives. He splits open ordinary existence and finds magic. *Coraline* is very appealing to me, and I hope that she will be very appealing to children seeing the movie for a variety of reasons. She's brave and imaginative and has got an overwhelming curiosity; if she sees something interesting, then she has to know about it. I loved that her "grass is always greener" scenario turns out to be scary. When Coraline – an ordinary girl – faces real evil and triumphs, it really means something, as Neil has said.'

Gaiman says, 'Within a week, Henry said he wanted to do it. Producer Bill Mechanic – with whom he had worked before – bought the movie rights, and Henry started work on the script immediately. By sheer force of never giving up, Henry has gotten the movie made.'

Selick feels that 'this was an ideal opportunity to take all I know about storytelling through animation, bringing those tools to bear on a story with a strong lead character. Neil was there with help and advice right from the start, yet was not overly precious with his book and would step away when I needed to focus. You want to honour the important parts of a book in adapting it, but you also have to invent and change as well.'

Production notes

Henry Selick on using 3D in 'Coraline'

Was it your idea to use 3D in Coraline*?*

Yeah. I know the guy, who died [in 2022]: Lenny Lipton, who pretty much developed the modern 3D projection system. He was a very interesting renaissance guy. He wrote the lyrics to 'Puff, the Magic Dragon' [which were adapted for the 1963 hit song by Peter, Paul and Mary] when he was, like, 19 [in 1959]. The money he made from that song over the years… helped to fuel some of his experiments. I did some projects with him and I would check in with him at least once a year to see how [his technology] was coming along. When it looked like *Coraline* had a chance to get made, he showed me the latest version of it. Of course, what he showed me, with electronic shutter glasses, was beyond what anyone in the theatres had ever seen. He said he'd sold this to a company, RealD, who were going to start putting it into theatres. That was my eureka moment.

Coraline has to go into another world. In the original *Wizard of Oz* [1939], Dorothy goes into a world of colour, which at that time was a rare thing in feature films. Coraline could go from her flattened, less colourful life into a very expansive, deep world of 3D. It's not that 3D hadn't been done in the past, but it was always done as a gimmick – the 1950s sorts of films that gave people headaches, when the technology was weak.

[We] really went overboard in designing the film and the story to go hand in hand with the technique. The sets in the real world were compressed and literally flattened. The animators hated me for doing that! Maybe I went overboard. But I wanted the sense that when she goes through the tunnel into the other world, it just goes deep. When things go bad, I started shifting the 3D to not just be deep but to come at you and be uncomfortable, when she discovers this other world is a dangerous place.

There was a 3D society [the Advanced Imaging Society] that voted on the best 3D movie of the year. I didn't even attend, because I assumed *Avatar* [2009] was going to win, but our film won. I still haven't been able to collect my award.

Interview by Alex Dudok de Wit, *Sight and Sound*, September 2024