

Q&A with the creators of Kahlil Gibran's perennial classic, *The Prophet: A Graphic Novel Adaptation*
Script by A. David Lewis (ADL)
Art by Justin Rentería (JR)

Could you talk about your process for scripting and drawing the book? How did the two of you arrive at a shared vision for how the art would look?

JR: Dave already had images in his mind, as I'm sure every author does when working with characters and settings. He communicated to me that he wanted Orphalese to seem like the "old country." Whether that was eastern Europe or southern Europe or the Middle East was largely up to me, though I think we both wanted it to be fairly ambiguous. I took inspiration from places like Poland, Ottoman-era Turkey, Lebanon and Palestine, Italy, Malta, Cyprus, and even the Azores, a place where people from various cultures and ethnicities have settled, joined together, and formed new customs and traditions.

We both agreed that the time period could be anywhere from the late nineteenth century up until the time of the first publication of *The Prophet* in 1923. I looked at clothing styles from the aforementioned locations, as well as architecture, ships, and military uniforms at the time.

There was a lot of research before I even *thought* about character design. Orphalese is obviously a seaside town, so I researched ports around the world, with a focus on the Mediterranean region. Dave was clear that the "Temple" was sort of the center of the town and the tallest building. In designing the town, I had to be mindful of the path that the characters walked throughout the story—the proximity of the city gates and the docks to the Temple, for example, and Almustafa's hill to the sea and the fields—everything, really. I even drew a map of the area and plotted out where the characters were at points in the story.

How did you decide which parts of the narrative would be conveyed by illustrations and which parts would be conveyed by text?

ADL: There were a number of passages that were so naturally visual in their imagery that I considered them prime material for the illustrations of our adaptation. The challenge was making sure their verbal omission didn't disrupt the flow of the speech or meaning of the passages, but I like to think that we negotiated them successfully without doing any damage to Gibran's vision.

JR: I think the only thing I had to decide was some of the pacing. I spaced out some moments by adding pages or panels. But all in all, Dave's script was pretty detailed, and there are instances where, if we omitted some of Gibran's original text, Dave scripted it to be conveyed by the illustrations. Readers should be on the lookout for those kinds of illustrations, along with other Easter eggs along the way!

In the text portions of the narrative, how did you decide to represent the different voices, such as direct speech, inner thoughts, and omniscient narration?

JR: Thankfully, in comics, we have well-established tools for showing the reader certain things, whether it's who is speaking, whether it's an external or internal voice, and even whether a character is shouting or whispering. We are both die-hard comics lovers and wanted to use standard comics

methods, like using speech balloons to present direct discourse. Dave, our editor, Kendra, and I had a discussion about how to differentiate between the text passages representing Almustafa's inner thoughts and text passages representing the narrator's voice, which we decided would be in all caps in caption boxes.

What visual clues did you use to convey the flashback portions of the narrative?

JR: I played with different approaches before I started to draw. I really like how some artists use a completely different medium to convey flashbacks or dreams (I'm thinking Eddie Campbell in *From Hell*), and so I considered doing ink washes or graphite. But ultimately I was unsure of whether I could pull that off. Some pages contain multiple flashbacks alongside present-moment panels, and I didn't want things to get messy. I opted for the gray with a wavy cloud shape around flashbacks, with usually only highlights of white, to give a dreamlike feel to it. I felt that paired best with the drawing style, too.

What was your process for extrapolating the backstory you included in the book?

ADL: I tried, wherever possible, to let the original text be my guide. That is, when Almustafa speaks of love, I took it to mean that he had experienced it himself somewhere in his history. The same goes for living under a tyrant, contending with laws versus ethics, enduring heartbreak, and so forth. I also looked to Gibran's own biography (which is fascinating) and how all the places he lived left their mark on him; I felt Almustafa should be influenced in a similar way. After taking extensive notes on the various topics and histories this implied, I looked to shape a biography for Almustafa that not only made logical sense but added some weight to the subjects he addressed. Therefore, his discussion of justice or of loss would come from a place within himself, not just distanced observation.

What was most challenging for each of you in adapting/drawing such a beloved, internationally successful classic from a traditional medium into a more modern artistic medium?

JR: For me there were a couple of things. This being my first foray into comics, I was really nervous about how I would do it at all. Would it flow well? Would the characters look right? Would certain unspoken things be readable? I've been reading and admiring and studying comics for as long as I can remember, but making them yourself is a whole different thing!

Second, Gibran was a visual artist himself and included his own art in the original edition. He left big shoes to fill! It never occurred to either of us to try to emulate his drawing style for this project. For the way Dave scripted it, with the humor and adventure and intrigue in the backstory, the cartooning style we settled on was very appropriate, in my opinion.

There's also the challenge of appealing to people who refuse to give anything but the original a chance. I admit to being that way myself to an extent, especially with movies and music. But I am pleasantly surprised sometimes by how good a fresh take on a classic can be. Hopefully, people will feel the same about this work.

What can *The Prophet* teach us one hundred years after its original release?

ADL: I think it can help us combat the sense of isolation some of us may feel, either living in a largely digital world or recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Prophet* gives us a character both outside of a society yet very much attuned to it; I am hoping that the backstory we provided also demonstrates how he once moved through it, prior to arriving in Orphalese. Almustafa is a source of wisdom as much as he is a cautionary tale, and I have to wonder if Gibran himself didn't feel similarly. Reading and internalizing the book can help us determine where we each exist in terms of our society, whether it be at its margins or immersed in the weight of its obligations. My hope is that it causes readers to reflect on where and how they want to be and, in turn, lead a deliberate, fulfilling life instead of a somewhat empty one.