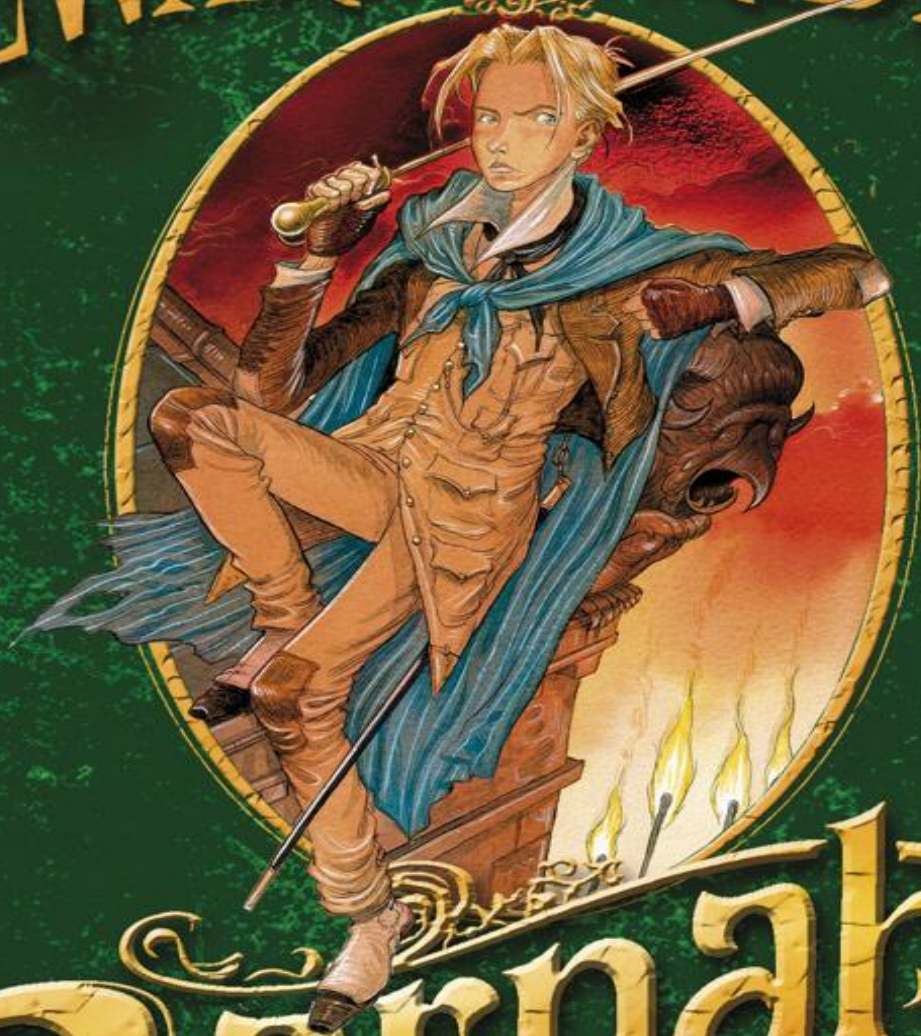


PAUL
STEWART & CHRIS
RIDDELL



Barnaby Rimes

RETURN of the
EMERALD SKULL

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Sneak peek at *Barnaby Grimes: Legion of the Dead*
About the Authors
Also by Paul Stewart & Chris Riddell
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About the Book

My grip tightened on the cruel stone knife, the blade glinting, as the blood-red ruby eyes of the grinning skull bore into mine. Inside my head, the voice rose to a piercing scream. 'Cut out his beating heart - and give it to me!'

Barnaby Grimes is a tick-tock lad on a mission - to collect a parcel from the docks and deliver it to a famous school. But dark forces have been released and, as Barnaby returns to Grassington Hall School, he's about to find out the extent of the horror.

A spine-tingling tale of a school in the grip of a terrible curse. Tick-tock, time is running out. Can Barnaby survive?

From the creators of the best selling ***Edge Chronicles***.

PAUL
STEWART & CHRIS
RIDDELL



Barnaby Grimes

RETURN of the
EMERALD SKULL

Illustrated by Chris Riddell

RHCP DIGITAL

For Anna, Katy and Jack



CHAPTER 1

'CUT OUT HIS beating heart!' the ancient voice commanded, each syllable dripping with a dark evil that I was powerless to resist.

Overhead, the moon slid slowly but inexorably across the face of the sun, casting the courtyard into a dreadful dusk. And as the light faded, so did the last vestiges of my will to resist. There was nothing I could do.

A circle of shadowy figures clustered like a flock of hideous vultures around the great slab that lay before me. Their beaked faces and long rustling feathers quivered with awful anticipation as their dark eye-sockets turned, as one, towards me.

On awkward, stumbling legs I approached the wooden altar like a sleepwalker, climbing one step after the other, powerless to fight it.

The hideous figures parted as I drew closer. At the altar I looked down. There, stripped to the waist, lying face up and spread-eagled, was a man, roped into place. There were cuts and weals on his skin – some scabbed over, some fresh – and his ribs were sticking up, giving his chest the appearance of a damaged glockenspiel.

His head lolled to one side, and from his parted lips there came a low, rasping moan.

'Please,' he pleaded, gazing up at me with the panic-stricken eyes of a ferret-cornered rabbit. 'Don't do it, I'm

begging you ...'

At that moment the final dazzling rays of the sun were extinguished by the dark orb of the moon. In shock, I looked up into the sky. The whole disc had turned pitch-black, and from the circumference of the circle a spiky ring of light streamed out in all directions, like a black merciless eye staring down from the heavens.

The tallest of the feathered figures stepped forward to face me. He wore a great crown of iridescent blue plumage. Behind him, nestling like a grotesque egg on the cushion of a high-backed leather chair, was a hideous grinning skull. As I stared, the huge jewels in the skull's eye-sockets started to glow a bright and bloody crimson, which stained the eerie twilight of the eclipse.

The feathered figure reached into his cape and withdrew a large stone knife, which he held out to me. Again the ancient voice rasped in my head.

'Cut out his beating heart!'

Despite myself, I reached out and gripped the haft of the stone knife in my hands. As I did so, I felt my arm being raised up into the air, as if it was attached to a string tugged upwards by some unseen puppeteer.



The feathered figure reached into his cape and withdrew a large stone knife ...

I stared down at the figure tied to the altar. A vivid cross of red paint marked the spot beneath which his heart lay, beating, I was sure, as violently as my own.

My grip tightened on the cruel stone knife, the blade glinting, as the blood-red ruby eyes of the grinning skull bore into mine. Inside my head, the voice rose to a piercing scream.

'Cut out his beating heart - and give it to me!'





CHAPTER 2

HOW COULD I have possibly known of the waking nightmare that was to unfold when, on a bright summer afternoon, I set off for Grassington Hall School with a spring in my step and a whistle on my lips?

I don't know about you, but schools have always struck me as strange, unnatural institutions. Don't get me wrong: I'm certainly not against hard study and the acquiring of knowledge. Far from it! Why, there's nothing I like better than poring over the dusty volumes on the shelves of Underhill's Library for Scholars of the Arcane after a hard day's work ...

I'm a tick-tock lad by profession - that's a clerk errant for those of you who might not know. I pick up things and deliver them all over this great city as quickly as I can manage, because - tick-tock - time is money!

The faster I am, the more I earn. Simple as that.

That's the reason I always take the most direct route from one place to another, over the rooftops. Highstacking, it's called, and it's not for the faint-hearted, I can tell you. I've taken my fair share of tumbles in my time. It goes with the job, and it's one of the reasons there aren't more highstackers around. It's just too dangerous for most tick-tock lads, who prefer to stick to the pavements. 'Cobblestone-creepers', we highstackers call them. Needs

practice, daring and a sense of adventure to take to the rooftops, not to mention an instinct for danger.

Now, *that's* something they don't teach you at those fancy schools.

Instead, the pampered sons and daughters of the rich are packed off to grand-sounding institutions like Highfield Academy for Young Ladies of Quality and Farrow Court College for the Sons of the Gentry, where they're taught to dance and ride to hounds and hold polite conversations in whatever language is considered fashionable at that moment.

Not that all schools are as grand as Highfield and Farrow. No, I've seen my fair share of institutions that resemble lunatic asylums or prisons rather than places of learning. Set up by plausible professors with impressive-sounding letters after their names, these schools promise to make ladies and gentlemen out of their unfortunate students and charge gullible parents exorbitant fees to match.

'Lock-up academies', they're called, because once they're full, the professors lock the gates and control everything that comes in or out. That way they can pocket the fees and not spend so much as a brass farthing on their pupils.

Old Jenkins the cloth merchant pays little Johnny's school fees, and in return gets a letter each term from the apple of his eye telling him how splendidly he's getting on. The truth, though, is quite different. Little Johnny and his schoolmates are being starved and beaten, and sleeping ten to a vermin-infested bed, while Professor Whackstick and his schoolmaster henchmen get richer and richer.

I know, believe me, because as a tick-tock lad I've delivered a good few sackfuls of 'school letters'. Whenever I discover they're fake or have been written under threat, I do my best to warn the parents – but it's amazing how often they'd rather not know. Besides, what's the word of a tick-

tock lad against that of a plausible professor? No wonder, then, that there are school rebellions.

Yes, that's right. Rebellions. When the poor downtrodden inmates of the lock-up academies just can't stand it any more.

Take Grendel Grange School, for instance. The pupils spent months fashioning all manner of weapons right under the noses of the bullying headmaster, Colonel Griggs, and his staff of ex-military men, who were supposed to be giving their charges the 'discipline and moral fibre of a military education'. The good colonel certainly got more than he bargained for.

Despite being fed on rations of mouldy bread and watery gruel, the Grendel Grange Grenadiers - as they called themselves - managed to rout the teachers in a pitched battle and besiege them in the Senior Common Room for five days, using catapults, blowpipes and a home-made cannon.

Of course, the most famous school rebellion took place a few years earlier, at Enderby Court College for Young Ladies. The Enderby Amazons defeated Dame Cecily Mandrake and her fifty-strong staff of ex-convicts using croquet mallets and feral cats, and released the girls of the lower school, who counted the daughters of several prominent merchants and the Lord Mayor's niece amongst their number. I must confess, I played a small part in the rebellion, due to my close friendship with one Emily Ford-Maddox, a girl with startling green eyes and a pretty smile

...

But that's another story.

As I say, schools vary. There are good ones like Highfield Academy and Farrow, and shockingly bad ones like Grendel Grange and Enderby Court. Grassington Hall was, by the standards of the day, a good school. It was situated to the south of the city, where the mills and factories give way to parkland and meadows; where cobbles end and grassy

lanes begin. It's possible, out there, to imagine yourself in the country as you walk past the spacious villas with their large gardens and ornamental lakes. Once, late one summer a few years back, I even took a haywain ride at midnight through the southern suburbs during the terrifying scarecrow zombie scare ...

Anyway, the gardens were in full bloom and the birds were singing in the hedgerows as I approached the entrance to Grassington Hall on that bright summer afternoon. I arrived at the gatehouse, which was set into a high perimeter wall at the end of the drive, with an urgent delivery for the headmaster, one Archimedes Barnett, BA (Hons), MA, MRSA.

There were boys out on the field playing 'Farrow Fives' – a game invented originally at Farrow Court, and very popular at the time. It was, as far as I could tell, a cross between baseball and croquet, and involved hitting five large targets situated in the outfield. Whatever the rules, it also involved a lot of running and shouting, by the look of it, not to mention a fair few crunching tackles.

I explained my business to the gatekeeper, a cheerful-looking fellow of middling years, with a waxed moustache and a warm handshake. I'd seen his type before. An ex-soldier, by the look of his upright bearing and neatly trimmed side-whiskers. Probably a private in the infantry – though the boys all called him 'the Major'. He summoned one of the lads to take me to the headmaster's study.

'Thompson, here, will show you the way,' he told me, indicating the fair-haired lad in a scruffy white blazer and grey, grass-stained knee breeches. 'Mr Barnett will be mighty pleased to see you. That's if he *can* see you,' he added with a chuckle. 'Right now, he's as blind as a corporal in a coal cellar.'

Thompson, my guide, seemed amiable enough. We took a footpath which ran parallel to the main drive, then crossed a gravelled area for visiting coaches and carriages.