

A Tribute to Russ Nicholson

(*Dave Morris*)

Russ Nicholson is probably best known to gamers from his work on The Warlock of Firetop Mountain, the Warlock boardgame, and Fiend Folio. I helped out with playtesting Warlock at Games Workshop and remember gazing in rapture over the gorgeously glossy spell cards with Russ's precise and evocative artwork. Few artists would even begin to know what to do with concepts like invisibility or flight, but Russ was a real magician.

Years before gamebooks existed, at least in Britain, Russ's art had been appreciated by the cognoscenti in Stephen Jones's and David Sutton's semi-prozine Fantasy Tales. That's where I became a fan. When I started my own writing career it was Stephen Jones who kindly gave me Russ's address in Papua New Guinea. We corresponded, and I got Russ's pictures into my books despite the reluctance of publishers, who were alarmed at the thought of a package of illustrations falling out of a boat or getting sent via the Tuvalu post office and leaving them with twenty blank pages.

Even at a distance of 9,000 miles with weeks between letters (he was often upcountry) it was a delight to work with Russ. I looked forward to getting his pictures because he was one of those artists who always improved on what you'd hoped for. Often he improved it a lot. The meteor stalker in Blood Sword book 2, the street scenes for Dragon Warriors, the cast of desperadoes in Heart of Ice, the fillers that brought the Fabled Lands to life.

Before all the wizards and dragons, Russ had been an illustrator of girls' comics in the '70s (Misty, I think) and I always hoped we'd get a comics project off the ground. I introduced him to David Fickling when The DFC was being planned. He did some wonderful sample pages for them – various strips including Philip Pullman's utterly unfilmable John Blake stories and a science fantasy saga called Kingdom of Feathers. He also drew part of a Mirabilis one-shot that The DFC was going to place in The Guardian. Russ had taught art to Sean Phillips, longtime collaborator with Ed Brubaker, but still somehow The DFC failed to hire him. (Considering the fate of most of the strips involved in the comic, maybe he dodged a bullet there.)

I worked with him on a pitch for an interactive graphic novel and on adaptations of Camelot Eclipsed and Frankenstein's Legions. We even toyed with a comics prequel to Heart of Ice starring Chaim Golgoth. For Jamie Thomson he blocked out a comic book version of The Heart of Harkun radio play. But none of those projects quite came off. As far as publishers were concerned, Russ was the gamebook guy and he was never able to escape that gravity well.

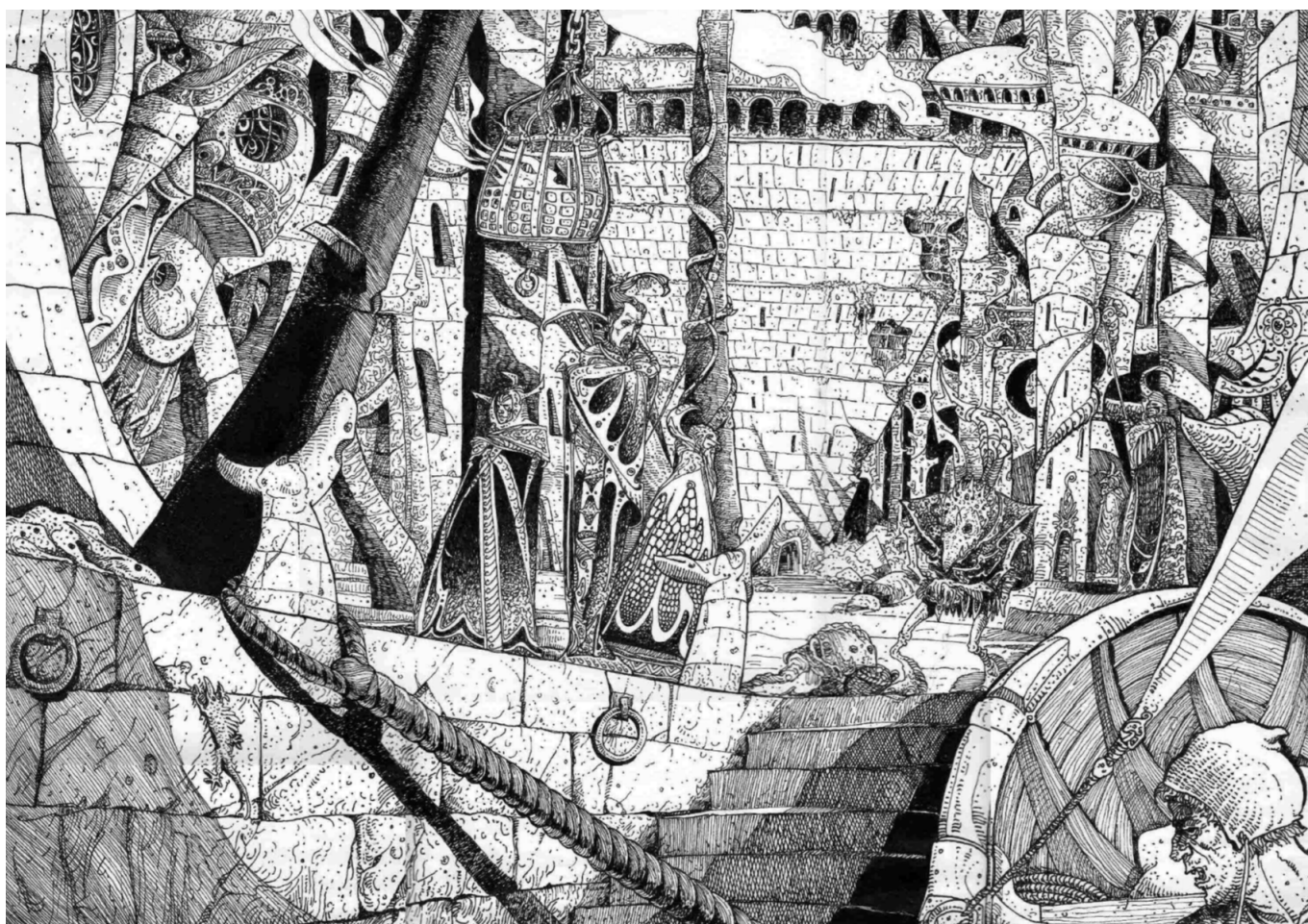
When he got back from Papua New Guinea we finally met up in person, became firm friends, and from then on it was always a pleasure to have projects that gave us an excuse to settle down to regular long phone conversations and occasionally getting together at conventions or publisher meetings. Once he was back in Britain it became easier to set up those projects, and his art can be seen going from strength to strength on the Blood Sword and Fabled Lands series.

Returning to civilization wasn't the end of his struggles with art directors, who were prone to mislaying his original art and who could have him pulling his hair out with their weathervane demands. There was the art director at Mammoth who, spotting a Maya child in one of the street scenes for Necklace of Skulls, decided that it was racist and insisted that he keep Tipp-Exing and redrawing the child's features until they looked Anglo-Saxon. It was dumb, and it ended up spoiling a first-rate illustration; I was just back from travelling the Ruta Maya on honeymoon, and Russ's first

version of the picture had perfectly captured the faces of happy Maya kids at play.

Though most people of Russ's towering talent would be too conceited to rise above such provoking silliness, he was always modest, even-tempered, and gracious. He knew good work from bad far better than most of the people who hired him and held to his own exacting standards, but he took any requests for changes in his stride. Later he might grumble about it to me, but always with wry amusement rather than rancour. He was a truly lovely man who showed how decent people ought to behave.

Unfailingly warm, generous, kind, and funny, Russ was a great raconteur too, full of fascinating tales of his travels, always interested in people, always open to new experiences, always enthusiastic about creative work, continually ablaze with original ideas. He was a cherished friend and a peerless colleague, and everyone who knew him will miss him.



This article first appeared in [Casket of Fays Issue 10](#).

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