

Li-Wan's Revenge: World-Building Notes on a Ghost Story



Happy Halloween! As our festivities continue, here's a Halloween ghost story for you, beautifully illustrated by Emily Vitori. ([Click here to go to the original post with download links.](#)) For the connection to world building, read on.

This story is taken from my free samurai adventure novel, [Dragonsword](#). In that book, I needed a cautionary moral tale to be told to children during a "Halloween-equivalent" time of the year. This story is the result. I used various world-building elements I already had in place, or set up some new ones, to do this.

World-building factors that needed to be present (all of these are in the culture arena):

1. Holiday & metaphysics. This takes place during "The Night of Return" - roughly equivalent to our Halloween, but with a different cultural origin. This is the one night of the year when the veil between worlds is thinnest. Ancestors are worshipped and ghosts may manifest from the astral plane more easily than at other times of the year.
2. A cultural tradition of vengeful ghosts. Not all ghosts are vengeful--many are just relatives on the astral plane, hanging out, as it were, and watching over their loved ones and descendants. So, in this setting, ancestor worship becomes a real practical thing with sometimes real-world results. But just as they can help the living, there are also angry ghosts who may harm the living. Especially to be watched out for are the ghosts of people who are murdered, and vengeful, jilted (dead) lovers.
3. "Ghost rules." A specific definition of the abilities of ghosts: what they can do, and what they cannot. Related to the metaphysics in (1) but more concrete about exact actions.
4. Social rules about ghosts. A detailed understanding of the relationship people have to ghosts, and what steps are taken to banish haunts or possession.
5. A heroine and bad guys who made complete cultural sense in this setting, which is distantly related to medieval Japan.

That's a peek under the hood of this story from a world-building perspective. But I trust those nuts and bolts will vanish from sight as you read the story. Let me know what you think about it in the comments!