



JOHN
HOWE

forging dragons

*Wing and talon, scale and fire
Might and poison, guile and ire
Traveller, tarry not, hasten far*

For this is where the dragons are.

J. Frank-Lynne, WHERE THE DRAGONS ARE



A DAVID & CHARLES BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT DRAGONS

ACTUALLY, IT'S SEVERAL BOOKS ...

FIRST, it is an encyclopaedia, since dragons sprawl atop a wealth of lore that equals only their golden treasure troves. Our collective culture is an edifice built brick by brick over millennia by millions of bricklayers, and dragons poke their scaly noses out of every crack and cranny of it; they are ever in the dark space under the stairs, or flying over at great height, wings glinting in the sun, or guarding some door or gate with sharp talon or sly advice. Dragons are so much a part of our subconscious that we rarely consider them carefully (as they are such an intimate part of us, perhaps they don't always invite scrutiny). The book is not, however, an attempt to link dragons to dinosaurs, to root the origins of the great wyrms in some imperceptible and hypothetical recollection from our proto-human past. Nor is it pseudo-science: I am not a fan of cross-sections of dragon plumbing and fire-breathing apparatuses, which erase the magic while providing a wholly unsatisfactory fiction in exchange.

It is, though, a gallery of images, a glossary of scales, a lexicon of tails and talons, a thesaurus of Sauria, a visual exploration of genus *Drakōni*. Visually, dragons are a universe to themselves. They present illustrative challenges that involve a curious and simultaneous suspension and reinforcing of belief – they can't exist, but they need to look real, dragging their bellies on the ground, spitting forth great gouts of flame, spreading their wings and taking flight. Quite honestly, I didn't realize I had drawn so many of them, that they had found their way into so many images. But then, they can be devious creatures, despite their size.

SECOND, it is a practical art book: as much as I dislike the term, it does contain a lot of information about how I work, what can go wrong or right in a picture (wrong always makes for better storytelling) and other hints and tips that are the product of much paper covered in colour, as well as signposting the pitfalls of discouragement that punctuate any picture. It is also a guide to treading the path between client and creative conscience. There will be a lot to read between the lines and, added to that, each picture is always worth its weight in words.

THIRD, and perhaps most important, it is, in the form of a book, a representation of the way I work: a combination of encyclopaedic but fully empirical knowledge, both extensive and flawed, rigorous and biased; a desire to see clearly even things that do not exist; an interest in humankind and our visual terms of engagement with the world around us and the worlds in our heads. On the road between all these things, these contradictions and convictions, is where the illustrator of fantasy wanders, sometimes aimlessly, sometimes with a strange sense of urgency and purpose. The book explores the notion of vulnerability to imagery – just how much of what you consider your own personal vision is really yours, and how much is inherited or absorbed. How to deal with the uses of the enchantments involved – what is the part of the subconscious that must enter into your palette, and how to make sure you don't simply ruin it by too much thought – an exercise in studious intuition. How to let your pencil wander and how to follow where it leads. All very romantic, but simultaneously, it is also a hard-nosed exposé of how to draw the things and how to make them crawl and fly. (It's also a nice opportunity to see if all these thoughts that tumble in the happy chaos of my mind can actually be given voices that make sense.) It is an attempt to pin down, even briefly, the infinitely tricky business of why one sees things the way one does, not to make the actual vision valid for others, but in the hope that the method in the madness thus outlined may serve as an example for the reader's personal foray into those lands beyond.

And dragons are the perfect companions for such a voyage, because we all know what they are. Or do we?

WATER, AIR, EARTH AND FIRE
A dragon done for a fantasy novel, in which creatures metamorphose through the elements, becoming stone, tree, dolphin and eagle until they assume their final form as dragons. (The most fun I had was developing the esoteric lettering, so esoteric in fact that I've forgotten exactly what it says.)



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SCALES, TALONS, WINGS AND FIRE

Inhabiting the elements of earth, fire, air and water in regions beyond human reach, dragons are crystallizations of natural forces – storms, earthquakes and volcanoes. Tales of godlike heroes vanquishing dragons that threaten the world represent a universal wish to preserve order and safeguard humanity. The dragons and serpents of the ancient creation myths were emblems of chaos; later they came to symbolize not just disorder but evil.

The basic concept of the dragon is familiar all over the world, but there are infinite variations. Dragons may or may not have legs or wings, guard treasure or breathe fire; they may be large enough to encircle the earth or as small as a cat (or both at once). Invariably they are reptilian, hatched from eggs, with scaly bodies, sometimes with dorsal spines and a barbed tail. If they have wings these are usually bat-like and leathery. Some have no legs, some two, four or more.

The word 'dragon' comes from the Greek for a serpent, *drakon*, which is related to *derkesthai*, 'to see', and the dragon's eyes are those of a snake: without eyelids, it has a steady, unblinking gaze. Dragon traditions are rooted in the cosmic serpents of creation mythology and the serpent deities worshipped by ancient cultures. Snake deities usually controlled the rain, and the association with water persists in numerous legends about dragons haunting lakes, wells and springs.

In the western world the suppression of the ancient serpent cults encouraged the view of dragons as hostile or downright evil, but eastern cultures, while still fearing them as unpredictable and potentially destructive, have always honoured them as forces of nature. The nagas of India are semi-divine serpents that guard the earth's treasures and whose yawns cause earthquakes. They are descended from Ananta, the nine-headed cobra, a manifestation of Vishnu the creator. In the Hindu creation myth the gods used the primeval naga Vasuki as a rope to churn the cosmic ocean. Now he lies coiled under the mythical Mount Meru and at the end of the present age will consume the world with his fiery breath.

The myth of the nagas travelled to China and Southeast Asia as Buddhism spread from India. In the Chinese tradition, the dragon comes first in the hierarchy of 360 scaly creatures. It is associated with the east, with sunrise, spring and fertility, and its powers include invisibility and the ability to make itself as small as a silkworm or large enough to fill the space between earth and heaven. It represents the male, yang, principle, while another fabulous creature, the phoenix, represents the female, yin. Together they symbolize marital harmony. Four dragon kings rule the heavens, the oceans and the cardinal points. They bring rain in return for offerings (they are particularly fond of swallows' flesh), but if angered they cause storms, fog, floods and earthquakes. Spending the winter underground, they are traditionally welcomed back with processions as the spring rains arrive and crops can be planted. The dragon kings protect ferrymen and water carriers, and punish those who waste water.

THE IMPERIAL DRAGON

In traditional Chinese iconography, only the imperial dragon is allowed five claws on each foot. Four claws signify the rank of prince, and a court official would have only three. Dragons are often shown playing with a flaming ball or pearl, said to be a symbol of thunder – it is this game that produces rain.



RUSTEM AND THE DRAGON

A malign dragon is one of the perils encountered by the legendary Persian warrior Rustem on his journey through the desert. He kills it with the help of his horse, Raksh.

