

Waking up the gods

THE UNUSUAL WORLD OF NEIL GAIMAN

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'Saying Neil Gaiman is a writer, is like saying Da Vinci dabbled in the arts.'

(Minneapolis Star Tribune)

A doll with hollowed out eyes is pinned to the wall. An 'expression' of horror fills its lifeless face. A tie is wrapped around its neck. Beside the doll stands a man with dark, tousled hair and a heavy five o' clock shadow covering his face. We are informed that the man lives in a big house of uncertain location where he grows exotic pumpkins and accumulates computers and cats. The man is Neil Gaiman.

As strange as the preceding image and text (from a Gaiman book jacket) may be, it pales in comparison to what the reader may find within.

Perhaps the most daunting aspect of writing about Neil Gaiman is the difficult task of explaining his literary style to those unfamiliar with his work? I think the best way would be to say that, if he were still with us, Roald Dahl would probably have found Neil Gaiman to be excellent bedtime reading.

Though Gaiman's work shares with Dahl's that sense of the macabre, it also differs in some ways.

Neil Gaiman often uses fantasy when creating his milieu. Even when the setting is quite urban, or realistic, elements of fantasy often distort that milieu. His short story, **The facts in the case of the departure of Miss Finch** illustrates this perfectly. In the story, groups of people are invited to a night at the circus - a travelling circus. One performance only. The circus venue is in underground chambers beneath the City of London. Intriguing, yet still innocuous. Then, while the spectators are led from one horrific 'floor-show' to the next, Gaiman's brand of fantasy (urban fantasy) creeps in and turns an innocent night at the circus into a bizarre dreamscape.

Neil Gaiman has been writing fiction since the late 1980s, and first gained cult status as the creator and writer of the *Sandman* graphic novel series. When *Sandman*

#19 became the first (and only) comic (graphic novel) to be awarded a literary prize (The World Fantasy Award) in 1991, the 'underground' author took his first steps toward world acclaim.

Today he is hailed by many as an exciting new voice in English fiction, and even best-selling author Stephen King, has high praise for his work. *The dictionary of literary biography* lists Gaiman as one of the top ten living post-modern writers.

Neil Gaiman was born on November 10, 1960, in Hampshire, England, and notwithstanding his Jewish faith, was educated at various Anglican schools where he developed a penchant for Judo-Christian mythology, much of which is evident in his early *Sandman* graphic novels.

Before writing his first 'notable' novel, **Good omens** with Terry Pratchett in 1990, Gaiman wrote several shorter works, which often contained a high humour-quotient. Among these is his 1985 biography of the popular boyband Duran Duran (**Duran Duran: the book; the first four years of the Fab Five**) and the incredibly witty **Don't panic: Douglas Adams & The hitch hiker's guide to the galaxy** (1988).

For those not interested in the graphic novel format, a good place to start experiencing the world of Gaiman would be his collaborative effort with renowned fantasy author Terry Pratchett. **Good omens: the nice and accurate prophecies of Agnes Nutter, witch**. This novel was published in 1990, and represents Gaiman's first significant entry into the annals of modern literature. And what an entry it is! In **Good omens** the typically Pratchett-type characters are faced with an Armageddon scenario, which hinges on the predictions of an executed seventeenth century witch. Along with the Four Bikers of the Apocalypse (who ride hogs, not bikes) the characters are in a frenetic race against time, before the world ends, on the following Saturday. Though the novel is typically Pratchett, readers will notice the influence of Neil Gaiman in the execution of the various plots and subplots. The combina-

tion of the minds of these two authors here truly produces a hugely entertaining read.

Besides his acclaim as the author of *The Sandman* series (and legions of other similar publications) Neil Gaiman has also written numerous short stories and essays. An excellent selection of these may be found in the 1999 publication **Smoke and mirrors: short fiction and illusions**. As its title suggests, the pieces collected within it are all about illusion. Often Gaiman uses traditional imagery and ideas, or even fables and then adds his unique otherworldly touch to them. The text itself is very varied, ranging from a mere paragraph to a dozen or more pages. Yet, whether long or short, the stories, poems and essays included are always stimulating and tend to linger in the mind.

And not only in the mind of the reader! Neil Gaiman himself often revisits his own stories and elaborates on them or transforms them into another style. Recently he has revisited one of the short stories from **Smoke and mirrors**. Gaiman has reworked **The facts in the case of the departure of Miss Finch** into a hardcover full-length graphic novel. The novel is written together with his long-time collaborator, Michael Zulli.

Neil Gaiman is quite au fait with reworking his own material. One of his most recent novels, **Anansi boys** (2005) develops one of the minor characters from his 2001 groundbreaking novel **American gods**.

Stardust, originally a short graphic novel published in 1997, has been reworked into a novel and found publication in 1999. Now **Stardust** is a major motion picture (with Gaiman writing the screenplay) starring Robert DeNiro, Michelle Pfeiffer and Claire 'Romeo + Juliet' Danes.

A de luxe, highly-illustrated version of the book is also due for release soon.

Neverwhere (1997) which started life as a BBC television series (with Neil as scriptwriter) has also been reworked into novel form.

All these revisions of his own material only serve to strengthen the web that Gaiman spins around his readers (or perhaps, more accurately, his 'fans').

Indeed Gaiman has become quite the cult figure. He is the author who receives the most online 'hits' on any author-related web site. According to Wikipedia, (the online encyclopaedia), before **American gods** (2001) was even published thousands of people visited his web blog to hear Neil comment about the book and the publicity surrounding it. After publication of the book, the 'blog' remained popular; and eventually metamorphasised into the official Neil Gaiman web site. (Incidentally,

the contents of said web blog, were later published as **Adventures in the Dream Trade: a miscellany** in 2002!

With his unique vision to represent the ordinary in such an extraordinary way, Neil Gaiman has managed to write a succession of successful children's stories.

The day I swapped my dad for two goldfish (1998), **Melinda** (2003), **Coraline** (2002), and the award-winning **The wolves in the walls** (2003) have been hugely popular with juvenile readers, although as one source has stated (referring to **Coraline**) the story 'seems to delight children and terrify parents'.

In 2001 Neil Gaiman had **American gods** published. It is unanimously regarded as his best and most significant contribution to post-modern Western literature. Thus far being perhaps the single most important work in the career of Neil Gaiman. It certainly ensured his entry into the literary world. Its concept and execution was phenomenal!

The 500-odd-page tome tells the epic modern urban fantasy of the Gods of the Old World (Europe, et cetera) and their journey to the New (America). In this New World, they need to re-assert themselves and find their lost power. At the centre of the story is the Norse God, Odin, now called Mr Wednesday. His relationship with ex-convict, Shadow, and their momentous mission, compels the reader into a world so bizarre that it becomes almost ordinary.

In **American gods** Gaiman truly displays a particular talent for narrative. (A passage describing Shadow's creation of a snow-storm is particularly memorable.)

Since his triumph with **American gods** Gaiman has achieved similar success with novels like **Anansi boys** (2005) where the theme of Old World gods in a modern setting is revisited.

In fact, the character of Anansi appeared briefly in **American gods**.

He still regularly contributes to graphic novels, is very active in the process of adapting much of his work into screenplays, and he continues to write songs, poetry and short stories. **Fragile things** (2006) is his latest short story collection. It contains some admirable examples of his unique story-telling talents. Again some familiar themes are reworked, and Shadow, from **American gods** makes an appearance.

So, for fans of Neil Gaiman, the future looks rosy. The man with the notoriously

unruly hair, is still producing his special art, and we eagerly anticipate the next literary instalment from the master of urban fantasy..

Awards

(from www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil)

- ◆ World Fantasy Award for Short Fiction (1991): for **Sandman #19: A midsummer night's dream**
- ◆ Comic Buyer's Guide Award for Favourite Writer (1991-1993) for ongoing *Sandman* series. Including nominations in the years from 1997 to 2000.
- ◆ The Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature (1999) for **Stardust** (illustrated version)
- ◆ The Hugo Award for Best Novel (2002) for **American gods**
- ◆ The Nebula Award for Best Novel (2002) for **American gods**
- ◆ The Bram Stoker Award for Best Novel (2001) for **American gods**
- ◆ The Hugo Award for Best Novella (2003) for **Coraline**
- ◆ The Bram Stoker Award for Best Work for Young Readers (2002) for **Coraline**

- ◆ The Hugo Award for Best Short Story (2004) for **A study in emerald**
- ◆ The Quill Awards for Best Graphic Novel (2005) for **Marvel Comic 1602 Volume 1** (go to www.thequills.org/2005.html)
- ◆ The Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature (2006) for **Anansi boys**
- ◆ 14 Eisner Awards for his comic works and various other minor awards.

Booklist

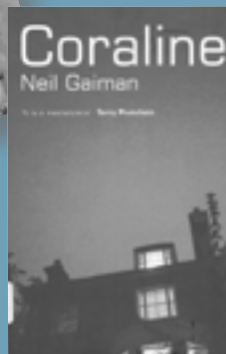
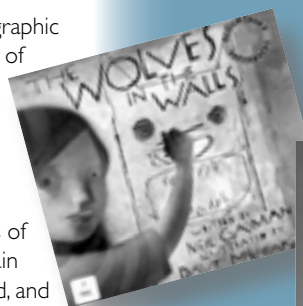
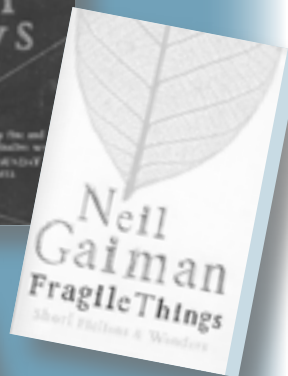
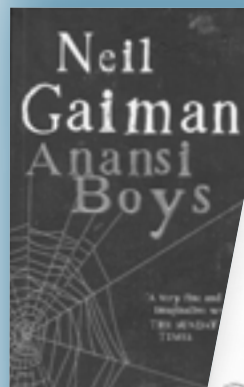
Comics and graphic novels

(a selection only)

- ◆ **Violent cases** (1987)
 - ◆ **Black orchid #1 to #3** (1988)
 - ◆ **The Sandman #1 to #75** (1991-1997)
 - ◆ **Books of magic #1 to #4** (1991)
 - ◆ **Signal to noise** (1992)
 - ◆ **Angela #1 to #3** (1994-1995)
 - ◆ ***Stardust** (being a romance within the **Realm of Faerie #1 to #4**) (1997-1998)
- Many other titles...

Prose (Complete)

- ◆ **Duran Duran: The book** (1984)
- ◆ **Ghastly beyond belief: the science fiction and fantasy book of quotations** (1985)
- ◆ ***Don't panic: Douglas Adams & the hitch hiker's guide to the galaxy**- Titan Bks., 1993.
- ◆ ***Good omens: the nice and true prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch** with Terry Pratchett.- Transworld Pub., 1991.
- ◆ **Angels and visitations** a collection of short stories featuring other authors in addition to Neil Gaiman (1993)
- ◆ **Now we are sick: an anthology of nasty verse** with Neil Gaiman as co-editor and contributor (1994)
- ◆ ***Neverwhere**.- BBC Books, 1996.
- ◆ ***Smoke and mirrors: short fiction and illusions**.- Headline, 2000.
- ◆ ***The day I swapped my dad for two goldfish**.- Bloomsbury, 2004.
- ◆ ***Stardust**.- Headline, 1999.
- ◆ ***American gods**.- Headline, 2001.
- ◆ **Murder mysteries: a play for voices**. (2001)
- ◆ **Adventures in the dream trade: a miscellany**. (2002)
- ◆ **Snow, glass, apples: a play for voices**. (2002)
- ◆ ***Coraline**.- Bloomsbury, 2002.
- ◆ **Melinda** limited publication of 1500 prints (2003)



- ◆ ***The wolves in the walls.**- Bloomsbury, 2003.
- ◆ ***Anansi boys.**- Review, 2005.
- ◆ ***Fragile things, a collection of Neil Gaiman's short stories.**- Headline, 2006.

Film and television

- ◆ **Neverwhere** BBC television series; available on DVD (1996)
- ◆ ***Princess Mononoke** (1997)
- ◆ **Babylon 5: series #5 day of the dead** Television Episode (1998)
- ◆ A short film about John Bolton (2003)
- ◆ **Mirrormask.** (2005)
- ◆ **Beowulf.** (2007)

References

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*Note: *Titles available in Provincial Library Service stock.*