

About this Volume

Joseph Michael Sommers

The essays contained within this volume constitute an interesting mélange of thoughts, ruminations, perspectives, and approaches that are as diverse a look at the life and work of Neil Gaiman as any in print today, to my mind at least. The contributors and I are quite proud of that. The chapters do not radiate from any central thesis, chronology (though one is presented in the Resources section of this book), or even thematic progression nearly as much as they make a vain attempt to explore as many facets of the author and the first thirty years of his career from as many different avenues as one could fit between two covers. We start as near as possible to the beginning of his career in short stories, comics, and journalism and examine works as recent as 2016's *The View from the Cheap Seats* while we await his next volume *Norse Mythology* and the televised adaptation of *American Gods*, both slated to appear in 2017. Some subjects, like Gaiman's seminal work on *The Sandman* receive greater coverage; winning over twenty-six Eisner awards garners that sort of attention. Other topics received less.

I could cajole no one to cover Gaiman's foray into the autobiographical history of *Duran Duran* no matter how hard I tried. Perhaps, next time.

So, at best and certainly at first, consider the volume before you as the lot of us making a start, to paraphrase the great American poet William Carlos William's *Patterson*, out of particulars and making them general . . . rolling up the sum by the defective means of what one book can encapsulate of one of the most prolific writers of the late-twentieth and twenty-first century. Certainly, within these fourteen essays, introduction, biographical sketch, chronology, author's bibliography, and academic bibliography, the reader will find a great many discussions and questions—so, so many questions. One of the first questions actually ponders what a Neil Gaiman is: Is he a writer of comics that elevated the discourse of the field by

reinventing it through his love of the literary masters? Is he an author of fantasy and speculative fiction, or do his narratives simply chronicle reality in all its infinities so well that they heighten the reader's imaginative acuity to the extent that she (Because in this example, the reader is a young lady. Later, she'll be something else.) can see past the realities normally taken for granted into the surreal and fantastic things underpinning it, holding its shuddering entropy together like a bobby pinned shirt or a fraying hem? Does he seek to be inspirational or is that simply a matter of consequence when one gladly throws open the library's doors welcoming all the world to have access to all the possibilities contained within—to reinvent tomorrow by knowing just a bit more about yesterday or today? Does he really think that making good art can change the world or is that just the sort of subtle irony that makes Neil Gaiman such a delightful character in his own story? Who knows.

Any answers that we proffer here are meant to provoke further questions. Gaiman is an author unbridled by the shackles of boundaries. The four-year-old who once sat in a West Sussex library surrounded by the works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien let those writers suffuse his burgeoning art in a manner of world-building that could only happen at this point in history right now. This volume will discuss those libraries. It will discuss manifold mythologies. It will interrogate that great American mythology of the comic book (written by a man who was born British and moved to America). It will somehow find its way into social media as, even in an unfinalizable universe, the Internet still remains that great swirling vortex into which everyone eventually is sucked. It will compel the reader to learn how to do close literary analysis from a variety of perspectives. It will even ask you to watch some television. And, with any luck, it will inspire the reader to pick up a book—possibly a comic, maybe an audio book, or just make a visit to Gaiman's blog, Twitter page, or whatever new Internet portal he will have opened up to communicate with his reading base between the time I write this and the day this book finds its way into your local library.

Certain things will have to be touched on and discovered by the next Gaiman scholar; it might be you. I hope it is. Music is as omnipresent a force in the Gaiman's life as anything, and a chapter detailing his work with song and songwriters, such as Tori Amos and his wife Amanda Palmer, would have been a very fine thing indeed. Likewise, for as many interviews as the man has given, he took even more of them in the earliest parts of his career—Neil Gaiman: the journalist who honed the tip of his quill for myriad British newspapers and publications. (I'd prefer that to be a metaphor involving a typewriter, but, to be honest, I don't know much about typewriter maintenance.) And while we discuss Gaiman's advocacy, we don't cover his omnipresence in the new media of the twenty-first century. If there's any discussion I wish we had made more time and space for, that would be the one, as I'm not sure I can recall a single other author who takes more time out of their day (For the record, that's a singular they; to write Gaiman is to acknowledge his work and concerns with gender and gender construction. We did get that chapter.) to interact with his fans online and commune with them. Gaiman shows the power that words have by using them so often and so eloquently. In many ways, his is the story of a human being trying his best to help write a future for the human race one letter, one word, one tweet, one poem, one interview, one comic, one episode of *Doctor Who*, one library pulled from the brink of closure, and one hand turning the page of something that child might like to read if only an adult would help him at a time. So, if the guiding question to this book is "Why Neil Gaiman?" Our answer is simply because it's time, and we *did* have some space.

Hopefully, I have started this conversation off on the right note, albeit a minor one. This preface, however, is merely the prelude to the introduction, in which I consider Gaiman from many of the myriad possibilities he could be considered. He has been called by critics as "one of the most important fantasists of contemporary literature" (qtd. in Krstovic, 2), and I see little reason, nor could find manor, to argue. In fact, the introduction will go to great lengths not to place Gaiman so much as to try and catalogue him, not unlike a zoologist, in his many forms and evolutions. Gaiman is not simply

an author of comics and novels, or an author for adults or children, or a video game writer, or a playwright, lecturer, social advocate, husband, father, fan, etc.—he’s all of these things and more. He seems to possess no end brackets and, somehow, he teaches his readers how to embrace love, fear, pain, pride, and most of the rest of the emotional spectrum with an earnest vigor, gentle humor, and honest warmth, the likes of which humble the greats in all media to which he has contributed. Unexpectedly enough, the introduction begins in Orlando, Florida, a sentence that I am pretty sure has never before been written in the annals of writing.

From this point, we shall present the Critical Contexts, from which the book shall try and view Gaiman and his work. Justin Wigard starts us off with a short biographical sketch of Gaiman that reads quite well with the Chronology of the Author’s Life and the (selected, yet rather compendious) Bibliography of the Author that the reader can also find in the Resources section of this book. Likewise, pairing well with the biography is the “Critical Reception: The Major Works of Neil Gaiman” co-authored by Wigard and Kyle Eveleth. Here, the two attempt as best as possible to contextualize the academic and popular perceptions of his work in its many and multitudinous forms. In many capacities, if the first essay is a biographical sketch of the author, this chapter serves as biography or annotated bibliography of his work. I am pleased to be the author of the Critical Lens chapter in this tool kit of perception; my chapter, “Embodied in Name Alone: Nobody Owens and the Metonymic Estrangement from the Living and the Dead in Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book*,” approaches *The Graveyard Book*, itself an analogue of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* from the psychoanalytic perspective of Jacques Lacan, a name one will find repeated with some frequency in this volume. That psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic readings factor into the reception of work by a man who spent a great deal of his career writing about dreams and dreaming should likely come as little surprise to anyone. Kristin Bovaird-Abbo continues that investigation in a chapter devoted to Cultural Context: that of the Norse (and United States for that matter) in her chapter, “In the Shadow of Balder: Breaking the Cycle

of Ragnarok in *American Gods*.” In it, she investigates Gaiman’s curious appropriation of the Norse god Balder, as opposed to, say, Thor, in *American Gods* and pins that particular appropriation on a very opportunistic moment of good old-fashioned American luck (by way of a leprechaun). Finally, Julie Perino supplies “Opening the Door, Crossing the Wall: (Re) Mediation and Women’s Roles in Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* and *Stardust*” as our Comparative Analysis chapter; here, looking at the unusual circumstances of novelization and remediation in the adaptive process of turning Gaiman’s books into films and, in the case of *Neverwhere*, vice versa. In it, she focuses on women’s roles in these works as they figure so prominently in Gaiman’s corpus of work across all media, yet changing that media can bring about different manners of portrayal regardless.

Moving away from our Critical Context essays into the Critical Readings section of this book, we begin by muddying the waters and asking hard questions. “Guilty Pleasures: Neil Gaiman’s Books for Children for Adults” by Annette Wannamaker, brings about an interrogation of Gaiman by way of his audience—this writer of works that would be shelved, typically, along the lines of children’s works, young adult works, and adult works, would likely prefer them all to simply sit together, with no discrepancy made regarding age range. With no borders between content or filters to guide the reader, what sort of problems arise, if any, and what boons are to be had by considering fiction merely as fiction with no prerequisites for age or audience? Following up on that topic, Krystal Howard, attacks those questions head-on by examining a very traditionally held children’s book in “Reimagining the Cautionary Tale: Collage in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean’s *The Wolves in the Walls*.” In it, she explains how visual and verbal collage make difficult and complex subject matter accessible to children through Gaiman and McKean’s collaboration; in effect, the duo approaches the problem of complicated subject matter through a construction of accessibility for the intended audience and elevating the discourse for children. Marlyn Thomas takes the discussion a step further by juxtaposing a traditionally seen young adult narrative with an ‘adult’ narrative and show how they speak to very similar ends and in very similar

ways in “‘What is She?’: Neil Gaiman’s Intertextual Conversation on Female Artistry in *Coraline* and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*.” Here, she uses Virginia Woolf’s *A Room Of One’s Own* as a through-line for reading between the age range of the two texts in an analysis of the women contained within both.

The next several chapters take great aim at examining Gaiman’s more traditionally seen graphic novels. Eveleth’s “‘Of viewpoints, of images, of memories and puns and lost hopes’: Polyphony and Narrative Braiding in *The Sandman: Worlds’ End*,” as the name suggests, investigates the “fable,” as he calls it, of Gaiman’s *Sandman*, as an interweaving series of stories attempting to both construct and unravel meaning as means to a greater end than any kind of stable answer. Jill Coste radiates from that idea to look at Gaiman’s fables, *in general, in* “Going Postmodern Gothic: Neil Gaiman’s Feminist Fairy Tales.” As the title of that chapter suggests, Coste approaches Gaiman’s work in his fairy tale revisions and finds the gothic influences he inserts to elevate the tales by feminist markers. Orion Ussner Kidder returns us, once again, to *The Sandman* to read it, in many ways, as counterpoint to Eveleth’s chapter with “‘Everybody’s Here’: Radical Reflexivity in the Metafiction of *The Sandman*.” In it, Kidder views the ongoing serialized nature of *The Sandman* as part and parcel to its ability to operate as self-reflexive metafiction: fiction that can comment upon itself as it is read. Whereby, Eveleth finds the comic as a series of widening and collapsing gyres, Kidder views it more as active thought problem in conversation with itself.

The final chapters of this volume all have exactly one thing in common: collaboration. Laura Nicosia explores the brilliant friendship of Gaiman and Terry Pratchett and the book that became of it in “The Apocalypse and Other Silly Bits: *Good Omens*, Collaboration, and Authorial One-Upmanship.” In it, Nicosia discovers that the genius behind one of the great comedies written in contemporary times has less to do with the idea that two authors can craft a superior piece of humor by trying to make each other laugh but that the author was actually “one two-headed person” to begin with. Speaking of such alien creatures, Kelly Murphy

Going Postmodern Gothic: Neil Gaiman's Feminist Fairy Tales

Jill Coste

As a prolific writer of fantasy, Neil Gaiman has mined the dark worlds of urban gothic, plumbed the depths of childhood psyches, and offered dozens of short stories influenced by myths, legends, and fairy tales. While fairy-tale tropes are prominent in much of his work, Gaiman's actual fairy-tale retellings—particularly in short-story form—are few but significant. They do much to reveal his feminist spirit and gothic inclinations; in Gaiman's fairy tales, familiar heroines haunt borders and destabilize narratives. Of special note are Gaiman's revisions of the Snow White story, which offer ruminations on the nature of monstrosity and the endurance of trauma. He uses the gothic in these tales to illuminate the shades of gray that exist between good and evil and to emphasize unexpected paths to individual agency. In his 1994 short story "Snow, Glass, Apples," for instance, the so-called wicked stepmother narrates the action in a confessional format, relaying a chilling tale of a vampiric princess whom the queen desperately tried to kill to protect her people. Nearly twenty years later, Gaiman penned another Snow White retelling, *The Sleeper and the Spindle*. This tale, which brings Sleeping Beauty into the narrative, features a grown Snow White, now queen, setting out to break the spell cast on Sleeping Beauty and save her own kingdom from a creeping plague of sleep. An emphasis on the relationship between mother- and daughter-figures in these tales forces readers to consider fairy-tale villainy in a new light. In both of Gaiman's Snow White revisions, a connection to the stepmother is what ultimately gives the heroines power—the stepmother is not just an evil queen to be defeated; she is an important character, and she lives within and through the presumptive heroine.

Taking a familiar fairy tale and giving it teeth and complexity is a particularly postmodern ambition. The postmodern fairy tale borrows from generic conventions in folklore and the literary fairy

tale alike, subverting and twisting and transforming traditional tales. Cristina Bacchilega notes that “postmodern fairy tales reactivate the wonder tale’s ‘magic’ or mythopoeic qualities by providing new readings of it, thereby generating unexploited or forgotten possibilities from its repetition” (*Postmodern* 22). In other words, the postmodern fairy tale relies on foreknowledge of these tales; it relies on cultural recognition and repetition in order to provide new tellings. Gaiman writes a postmodern Snow White tale in “Snow, Glass, Apples” by offering the stepmother’s perspective, trusting that readers’ familiarity with the original tale will enrich this new point of view. Similarly, by entwining two familiar fairy tales in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* and referring to notable narrative moments within those tales, Gaiman indulges in an intertextual exercise that again relies on readers’ knowledge of the source texts in order to then surprise them with a different path.

Furthermore, his focus on the female characters and his attempt to complicate their narratives ranks Gaiman among feminist fairy-tale writers, a complicated, postmodern cohort itself. Fairy-tale revisions that feature clever heroines fighting against patriarchal strictures spring from a contemporary feminist response to the canonized literary fairy tale. While the literary fairy tale has a rich history of female storytellers and gothic proclivities, the standard conception of the fairy tale is one steeped in Disney tradition. In the typical “Disneyfied” tale featuring a female main character, an innocent heroine faces off against a wicked force (often an evil stepmother), transforms through her tribulations, and ends up married off to a prince as part of her happily ever after. Fed up with the simplification of fairy tales and subjugation of female characters, feminist writers in the 1970s began staking claims in fairy-tale territory, offering subversive retellings that allowed the heroines control over their own sexuality and marital choices.

While most of the major authors associated with these fairy-tale revisions are women—Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, Emma Donoghue, Margaret Atwood, among many others—male writers have also contributed to the postmodern, feminist fairy-tale landscape. Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme have, like

Gaiman, provided Snow White revisions that subvert the standard narrative. While we might not classify these male writers as feminist visionaries, their work tackles questions of patriarchy and female agency. Regarding Gaiman's work, Aaron Drucker and Tara Prescott note, in their edited collection *Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, that "we can only speculate on the nature of Gaiman's own feminist convictions" (8), but that "through most of Gaiman's work there remains a surprisingly strong strain of will and agency in the women he creates" (2).

I would argue that the agency Gaiman instills in his female characters is rooted in the way he uses gothic conventions. Instead of an outside force prompting the protagonists to face their inner fears, Gaiman's heroines *already* know what their inner fears are, and the gothic puts those fears into stark relief. With its competitive relationship between stepmother and stepdaughter at the forefront, the Snow White tale is especially primed for revision that explores the complex relationships between women. The gothic in Gaiman's retellings casts light on how the heroines and their enemies are part of a history, a network, and a future of femininity, and the steps to agency for heroines and villains alike are influenced by the women who have come before them. In the introduction to her edited collection *Fairy Tales Reimagined*, Susan Redington Bobby notes that "[f]airy tale revisionists have come into their own by embracing a wide variety of theoretical approaches in their works" (7). She points out that while feminist and social criticism are most common, fairy-tale revisions will benefit from new approaches. The first step to doing that, Bobby posits, will come from examining less canonical revisions. Another way to do that, I propose, is to examine how the gothic functions in fairy-tale retellings, starting here with Gaiman's work. While the gothic leads us back to feminism, it enriches current approaches to feminist fairy tales.

The Gothic Past and Present

The gothic pairs well with fairy tales—both genres rose to publishing prominence in the Victorian era, both are adapted to respond to cultural concerns, and both feature consistent tropes across adaptations.

Chronology of Neil Gaiman's Life

- 1960** Neil Richard Gaiman is born on November 10, 1960 to Sheila and David Bernard Gaiman in Portchester, Hampshire, United Kingdom.
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- 1965** The Gaiman family moves to East Grinstead, West Sussex, and Gaiman begins to supplement his reading at the local library with the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, and a bevy of American comic books that he received c. 1967–68.
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- 1970** Begins Ardingly College.
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- 1974** Begins Whitgift School.
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- 1977** After graduating Whitgift, Gaiman becomes a freelance journalist, writing for newspapers and outlets such as *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer*, *Knave*, and *Time Out*.
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- 1983** With Mary McGrath, Gaiman has first child, a son, named Michael Richard.
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- 1984** Gaiman's first professional short story, "Featherquest" is published. Proteus Publishing Company hires him to write a biography of Duran Duran entitled *Duran Duran: The First Four Years of the Fab Five*. He also produces a book of quotations with Kim Newman entitled *Ghastly Beyond Belief*. Rustling through a comics kiosk in Victoria station, Gaiman happens upon an issue of *The Saga of The Swamp Thing* by Alan Moore; this would begin his fascination with the author and his work, and a friendship would ensue. Moore would introduce him to the process of scripting comics in 1985.
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Works by Neil Gaiman

(Edited volumes not listed)

Comics and Graphic Novels

2000 AD:

“You’re Never Alone with a Phone,” 1986 (with John Hicklenton
in No. 488)

“Conversation Piece,” 1986 (with Dave Wyatt, in No. 489)

“I’m a Believer,” 1987 (with Massimo Belardinelli, in No. 536)

“What’s in a Name?,” 1987 (with Steve Yeowell)

Judge Dredd Annual ’88: “Judge Hershey: Sweet Justice,” 1987 (with
Lee Baulch)

Revolver Horror Special: “Feeders and Eaters,” 1990 (with Mark
Buckingham)

Violent Cases, 1987 (with Dave McKean)

Outrageous Tales from the Old Testament, 1987

“The Book of Judges” (with Mike Matthews)

“Jael and Sisera” (with Julie Hollings)

“Jephithah and His Daughter” (with Peter Rigg)

“Journey to Bethlehem” (with Steve Gibson)

“The Prophet Who Came to Dinner” (with Dave McKean)

“The Tribe of Benjamin” (with Mike Matthews)

Blaam! #1: “The Great Cool Challenge,” 1988 (with Shane Oakley)

Seven Deadly Sins: “Sloth,” 1989 (with Bryan Talbot)

AARGH! #1: “From Homogenous to Honey,” 1998 (with Bryan Talbot)

Black Orchid, 1988–89 (with Dave McKean)

Redfox #20: “Fragments,” 1989 (with SMS)

Signal to Noise, 1989 (with Dave McKean)

Trident #1: “The Light Brigade,” 1989 (with Nigel Kitching)

The Sandman, 1989–1996 (with Sam Keith, Mike Dringenberg, Chris
Bachalo, Dave McKean et al.)