

A black and white photograph of Neil Gaiman. He is wearing dark sunglasses and a dark jacket, leaning forward behind a metal railing. His hands are resting on the railing, and he has a thoughtful expression. The background is dark and indistinct.

Neil Gaiman

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GODS

A Book Signing for 1200 eager fans
in Buenos Aires: *Who is it?*
Storyteller Neil Gaiman.

"I'd like to do it all until I get good at it."
-- Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman: Pretty Decent By Paula Guran

The Spook caught up with Neil Gaiman in late May (via his faithful laptop) in the Sao Paolo, Brazil airport waiting for a delayed flight to Buenos Aires. Exhausted, sleep deprived, speaking not a word of Portuguese and, after a signing for 1200 people the previous night, he'd lost his voice. "Seems like a perfect time to start answering the questions..."

In J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher In The Rye*, Holden Caulfield says, "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though."

It happens with books by Neil Gaiman. First—and probably still best—known as the creator of the Sandman series of graphic novels, Gaiman is finally coming into his own in the auctorial arena of the novel. Despite a novel co-authored by Terry Pratchett; a collection of short stories *Smoke And Mirrors*, *The Day I Swapped My Dad For Two Goldfish* (a children's book illustrated by Dave McKean), the BBC miniseries *Neverwhere* and its subsequent novel-version, and the bestselling modern fairy tale/short novel *Stardust*—Gaiman considers his latest work, *American Gods*, the equivalent of a debut novel:

"I wrote *Good Omens* with someone else. I wrote *Neverwhere* from my TV scripts. I wrote *Stardust* episodically for Charles Vess to illustrate. With *American Gods*, it was just me, sitting down and

writing, on my own, heading off into the dark with no-one else there and nothing to rely on but the story and the people in it to get me safely through to the end."

Perhaps because it has been so highly anticipated and because Gaiman has been doing public readings from the novel as he wrote it, the two years it took him to write *American Gods* seems like a long time. But, as Gaiman puts it, "How long is a novel meant to take? Sandman took me eight years to write. *Neverwhere* took about five months. *Good Omens* was co-written in 9 mad weeks, during which very little sleeping got done. For *American Gods* I tried and failed to do 1000 words a day, every day. Sometimes I did more. Sometimes I did less. Sometimes I got stuck for a bit. When I got stuck for a month I finished *Coraline* in that time, as I felt that if I didn't finish something soon I'd go mad."

Coraline is a short "children's" novel that Gaiman read in its entirety at the World Horror Convention in Denver, Colorado on May 13, 2000. In it, a girl finds a mysterious key to a strange door and is told "Don't go through the door." Of course she does go through the door and finds a spooky other-world. It enthralled the adult audience of horror writers and readers with its hilarity, chills, and surreal terrors. Coraline will be published in May 2002.

"Basically," Gaiman continues, "*American Gods* was a bigger book than I thought when I sat down to write it. If I'd known how big I might not have dared to start. At its longest *American Gods* was about 200,000 words: I trimmed that back to about 185,000 words for the final draft."

Gaiman's been writing an online journal (<http://www.american-gods.com>) since February 1, leading up to the publication date (June 19) of *American Gods*. It's been rather like exposing his cyber-soul to the

world. "I try and keep it focused on the book," he says. "The whole idea was to try and take people backstage and walk them through the process from handing in a novel to publication and promotion. A few weeks ago I did a search for mentions of the journal, and took a look at them. On one young man's site I saw the comment that he'd wanted to be a writer, but didn't any more, because he'd been reading my blogger and it looked like actual work. I smiled grimly and felt it was doing its job."

"It was the most fun for the first couple of months when no one knew I was doing it. Suddenly it feels like the whole world is reading it (and we're getting hits in numbers that would tend to indicate that an awful lot of people are reading it) so I'm marginally more self-conscious than when I was just typing, and it was my little secret."

Gaiman's attempt to keep anything secret is a bit difficult these days. He handles fans with patience and charm in one-on-one encounters or with nice bookish types in a sedate line at more-or-less non-fan events. Sometimes it's, well, more intense. Last month, for instance, there were those 1200 people in line for an autograph in Sao Paolo. "I was told that downstairs on the ground floor the store tried to cap the line, but the fans arriving threatened to riot and destroy the store, so they let them in. The store sold over 700 books. They didn't mind. Meanwhile, upstairs, I was signing and signing for the nicest 1200 people in the world... Several times during that signing, though, I found myself asking myself why on earth I was doing this, and I didn't come up with a satisfactory answer. I suspect there will be times on the upcoming tour when I will ask myself the same question."

"It hasn't gotten out of hand so far," he says. "But it might. If it does, I'll probably stop signing."

"There was one time in 1990," he reminisces, "when the bookshop staff got scared of the crowds and ran into the back and locked themselves into the staff quarters, and Terry Pratchett and I had to stand on tables and order the crowd into lines. But that was fun."

Anyone in the horror and fantasy field learns there was point at which Stephen King went from being "a successful author" who attracted fans to being *Stephen King* -- a being who can no longer cross a lobby or anonymously eat in public. This is the sort of fame Gaiman would prefer to avoid. "There is a reason why I've really upset several publisher publicists over the years by saying no to *People Magazine* and to appearing on David Letterman, when those entities invited me. I'd probably say no to *Politically Incorrect*, too. I'm a writer, and a storyteller, not a personality."

"And I remember Stephen King," he adds, "in a hotel suite in Boston in 1992 saying 'If I had my life to live over again, I wouldn't do the American Express TV ad.'"

Despite denying he's a personality, Gaiman is a rock star sort of writer. Dressed in black and usually wearing one or another of his custom-made leather jackets, Gaiman has an attractively unruly mop of dark hair and often wears shades. (At least in the morning. He's notorious for not being at his best in the AM.) And he performs. If you are wise, you will avoid most authors—untrained and lacking talent in performing arts—reading aloud from work not written to be read aloud in the first place. Not Gaiman. He's worth sitting in uncomfortable chairs and airless convention rooms to enjoy. He is even worth the price of a ticket. Gaiman's raised more than \$100,000 to support the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (<http://www.cbldf.org>). Last fall's *The Last Angel Tour* will, however, be the final one. (CBLDF is offering a VHS tape *Neil Gaiman: Live at the Aladdin* recorded in Portland, Oregon during the tour. See? Rock star.)

Gaiman says he likes to get "audience reaction in real time. When I write something, it's kind of masturbatory: it gives me pleasure (on a good day), but I'm the only one. It's not really communicating any-

thing -- it's more something that has the potential for communication. When people come up to me at a signing and tell me something I wrote made them cry or laugh or changed their life... it's very nice, but it's not real, and it's not then. Doing a reading, if a funny line gets a laugh, it's immediate and magical. If there's a gasp. If you can hear that indescribable change in breathing noise audience members make as a penny drops and suddenly they *get* something, it makes the whole job worthwhile."

Gaiman often acknowledges he was and is inspired by other writers, but doesn't know if he will have a similar impact on future writers. "I didn't used to [think I would]. But now I'm starting to meet people who are telling me that they've been reading me since they were 12 or 13, and it's because of me that they're now 25-year-old writers, so it would be a kind of weird false modesty to say 'I don't think I'll have that effect...'"

"But I don't think it's anything magic about or special to me; I think those people would have found somebody who would have ignited the desire to dream for a liv-



ing. If it wasn't me it might have been Harlan Ellison or Chip Delany or Terry Pratchett or Alan Moore or Thomas Pynchon or a time-traveling Harlequin Romance."

His influence is no longer confined to the written word, or even a single screenplay. When asked to run down his current projects ("Like I know? Oh, okay...") he ticks off: the "*Death* [based on his DC/Vertigo comic which he is writing and directing] movie—waiting for the go-ahead on the second draft of the script...the *Ramayana* movie—trying to solve act 3 in a way that makes dramatic sense while still being consistent with the original story...most other movies—in various stages of being one thing or another...*Coraline*—gets published in May 2002. Have to do an audio book of it... Most of life: focused around doing and surviving the *American Gods* signing tour" (<http://www.holycow.com/dreaming/index.ap>)

As for the future, Gaiman claims to have "no idea" of where he's going. "A lot of it feels now like I'm racing with time. There are so many things I want to write and so many stories I want to tell, and I worry that I won't get to tell them all before I'm done."

"I've been writing for twenty years now. If I'm very lucky I have another forty years left to tell stories in, through any avenues open to me. There are two whole TV series in the back of my head, and one kids' cartoon: I don't know if I'm prepared to give them the five years or so they'd need to be made..."

"So we'll see. I'd like to do it all until I get good at it."

"I normally don't hit a bulls-eye straight out of the gate (there's a mixture of metaphors for you). It takes me time and a bit of trial and error to get it right. I've been writing novels for 5 years now (11 if you count *Good Omens*) and *American Gods* is the first one I've written that I think is as good as anything I've done in any medium. I don't expect my first movie to be the best thing since sliced bread. But if I get that far, my third may be pretty decent."

Pretty decent. Yeah.

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BOOK REVIEW: AMERICAN GODS

By Neil Gaiman
Morrow/ \$26/ 432 pp.
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Neil Gaiman did not set out to become any sort of spiritual guide when he wrote *AMERICAN GODS*, but the book may make him into one. It has the potential to become a "generational novel"—a book that articulates something of the meaning of existence for members of a cultural/countercultural group. (Kerouac and Burroughs in the 50s; Heinlein's *STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND* was one of several in the 60s; I'm not sure what books served the 70s, but I hope *JONATHAN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL* wasn't among them; maybe for the 80s it was Gibson's *NEUROMANCER*; the 90s? Douglas Coupland? You tell me.)

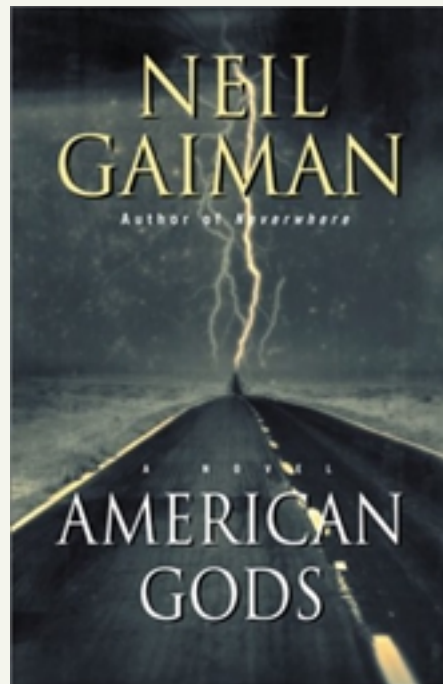
But now it's a new century and Neil Gaiman has come up with a magnificent modern fantasy that entertains while inspiring a faith of sorts, perhaps just a belief in oneself. The premise isn't new -- What happens to the old gods in whom no one believes anymore? What happens when new gods arise?—but the author makes it his own. Gaiman uses America -- a place where many peoples brought their gods and then abandoned them—as his canvas. Mixing cultures, sociology, theology, history, mythology, unique perspective, and slam-bang good storytelling he paints a tale that deserves more than one reading. (One read should be just to test your knowledge of mythology.)

Like the main character, Shadow, we're just along for the ride on this winding revelatory road trip. Shadow has emerged from three years in prison with his anticipated new life swept away by the sudden death of his wife. A roguish old con man, Mr Wednesday, offers Shadow employment as an errand boy and bodyguard. Shadow is soon living in the midst of magic, intrigue, danger, and mystery as he accompanies Wednesday on jaunts to enlist the aid of various dimming deities for an ultimate showdown between the old gods and the new gods of modern technology. We journey through myth (both ancient and new) with the charming (if fantastic) characters and eventually find America (even if we aren't looking for it.) America turns out to be a much darker place than

you might have imagined and very little is as it seems to be. But, amid the illusion and the dark, America offers real redemption—the kind that requires both sacrifice and enlightenment.

Fantasy, horror, mystery, thriller, romance—don't bother with labels, *AMERICAN GODS* offers a bit of everything and a considerable amount of indefinable "more."

—Review by Paula Guran



Spooky Kid, Neil Gaiman