

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC**

**319**

Volume 319

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers



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# Preface

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- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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# Neil Gaiman

## 1960-

(Full name Neil Richard Gaiman) English graphic novelist, short story writer, novelist, screenwriter, playwright, and children's author.

The following entry presents an overview of Gaiman's career through 2011. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 195.

### INTRODUCTION

Gaiman is best known for his role in the emergence of the graphic novel as a literary genre. His first graphic novel was *Violent Cases* (1987) and was illustrated by Dave McKean, a frequent collaborator. When the novel was published, comic books were largely viewed as non-literary works for children. Gaiman is often credited as a considerable force in lifting the stigma afflicting the medium by focusing on storytelling and high literary and artistic quality. His well-known series *The Sandman*, with covers illustrated by McKean, was published between 1989 and 1996, won numerous awards and accolades, and is widely considered one of the best graphic novels of the twentieth century. In addition to his work in the graphic novel genre, Gaiman has also produced traditional fiction for adults and young adults, as well as screenplays, works for television and radio, and nonfiction. He has won dozens of awards for his work and continues to be among the most prolific writers in the fantasy and science fiction genres.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Gaiman was born on November 10, 1960, in Portchester, England. His father was the director of a chain of grocery stores and his mother was a pharmacist. In the early 1960s, Gaiman's parents became involved with the Church of Scientology and, in 1965, the family moved to East Grinstead in West Sussex. Gaiman's involvement with Scientology has proven to be an issue of some controversy. He maintains that he is not a member of the Church, but also that he enjoys a close relationship with his family, who are still members.

As a child, Gaiman developed a love of reading and became enthralled with the works of such authors as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, James Branch Cabell,

and Edgar Allan Poe. Growing up, he attended Church of England schools, including Fonthill School and Ardingly College in Sussex and Whitgift School in South Croyden. Having developed a love of comic books, especially American superhero comics, Gaiman resolved to one day write his own. In 1975, however, a guidance counselor discouraged him from such endeavors and suggested he train to become an accountant. Gaiman stopped reading comic books for the next nine years, but maintained his resolve to become a writer. When he graduated high school in 1977, Gaiman embarked upon a career in journalism, conducting interviews and writing book reviews for London's *Sunday Times*, *Observer*, and *Time Out*. Between 1983 and 1985, Gaiman married Mary McGrath and the couple had three children: Michael, Holly, and Maddy. He also began writing short stories, including "How to Be a Barbarian" and "How to Spot a Psycho," which he submitted to various magazines. During that time, he published interviews with science fiction writers, including Douglas Adams and Harry Harrison. His earliest published works, however, were written on commission. The first, a biography of the pop band Duran Duran, was written in three months. His second book, also a biography, covered Douglas Adams and his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* trilogy.

Gaiman rediscovered comic books in 1984, when he happened upon an issue of *The Saga of Swamp Thing*. Two years later, he met McKean, a comic book artist and illustrator, and the two embarked on a now-lengthy partnership that began with a five-page comic strip which eventually became *Violent Cases*. In the novel, a man reminisces about his childhood visits to a doctor whose patients included the American Prohibition-era gangster Al Capone. The work led to further collaboration the following year on the three-part series *Black Orchid* (1988-1991), published by DC Comics. The *Black Orchid* character is a superheroine who had previously appeared only sporadically in DC Comics' *The Phantom Stranger* series (1969). Following *Black Orchid*, DC Comics invited Gaiman to revisit another character from their past, and he chose Sandman, an obscure figure from the 1940s. Although intended simply to establish Gaiman as a writer at DC, the



*Sandman* series was an unexpected success. *The Sandman* debuted in 1989 and became a seventy-five-issue series, winning several awards and running until 1996.

Gaiman has continued to work in the graphic novel genre, but has also written prolifically in a number of other forms, including novels, short fiction, juvenile and young adult fiction, and film and television screenwriting. He has won dozens of awards, including Hugo Awards, Nebula Awards, and the Newbery Medal.

## MAJOR WORKS

Gaiman's most well-known and acclaimed work, the *Sandman* series, was originally published in comic book form over the span of nearly a decade. Ultimately published in a series of hardcover books, the *Sandman* series is populated by a group of seven beings called the Endless whose mythology suggests that they existed "before humanity dreamed of Gods," and, "will exist after the last God is dead." The Endless are Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, Desire, Despair, and Delirium, who was once known as Delight. The central character in the series is the Sandman, who at times is called several other names, including Dream, Morpheus, and Sleep. The narrative comprises numerous storylines told within a larger arc that describes how Dream was captured by a coven of wizards and later escaped. He was then left to contend with the changes in his realm, The Dreaming, which is a world that exists on a parallel plane to reality. After escaping, as recounted in the first installment of the series, *Preludes and Nocturnes* (1991), he embarks on a quest to find his tools: a helmet, a container of magic sand, and a ruby. The series follows Dream as he attempts to return The Dreaming to order, correcting the disarray that set in during his seventy-year imprisonment. There are many subplots and minor stories that take place within the context of the larger story, and the series features a host of peripheral characters.

Intending to go out on a high note, Gaiman ended the series at the height of its popularity. In issue sixty-nine, in *The Kindly Ones*, Sandman is shown on a mountaintop with his sister, Death. She tells him to give her his hand, their fingers touch, and the final two panels show an enormous flash of light. The final six issues of the series, collectively known as *The Wake*, function as an epilogue for the series and feature appearances by many of the other characters from throughout the story. The Sandman character has continued to make appearances in Gaiman's work, including his *Books of Magic* series (1990-1993).

Gaiman has also written several spin-offs from the *Sandman* series, including the prose novel *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* (1999), which incorporated

Chinese and Japanese folklore to create a new mythology. In the story, a fox and a badger bet that whichever can get a monk to leave his temple can take the temple for a home. When neither can fool the monk, they call off the wager. The fox apologizes to the monk and falls in love with him, then learns the monk's life is in danger and travels to the dream world to seek help from Morpheus. The novel was eventually adapted to comic-book form by P. Craig Russell for the Vertigo imprint. Gaiman also published the graphic novel *Endless Nights* (2003), which includes a storyline for each of the Sandman's siblings, the Endless. All of the stories were written by Gaiman, but each was illustrated by a different artist. The *Sandman* series also spawned a spinoff that featured his older sister, called *Death: The High Cost of Living* (1994), which was issued as a three-volume miniseries. A feature film based on the series has been in development for several years.

Originally a serial published in a British music and culture magazine, *Signal to Noise* (1992) features a film director with terminal cancer. He is writing one final film, aware that he has only weeks left to live and can't possibly finish it. The narrative alternates between the parallel tragedies of the director and his script, which concerns the population of an Eastern European village on New Year's Eve in the year 999 who are convinced that they are living on the verge of the apocalypse. The story has been adapted for the stage and was also adapted for radio by Gaiman himself. Gaiman followed *Signal to Noise* with the graphic novel *The Tragical Comedy, or Comical Tragedy, of Mr. Punch* (1994). The story draws on the British seaside cultural tradition of Punch and Judy puppet shows. Gaiman takes a decidedly dark perspective, however, and gives the shows a sinister spin. Mr. Punch's tale is populated by many of the traditional characters, including his wife, Judy, their baby, a crocodile, a ghost, and the "professor"—the puppeteer inside the booth. While the traditional puppet shows were often gruesome, the action was played as slapstick. Gaiman, however, forgoes the slapstick element and emphasizes Mr. Punch's psychopathy. Mr. Punch's grisly story is juxtaposed against that of the narrator, who is spending a summer at his grandfather's seaside resort. The narrator confronts his disturbing past, recalling his loss of innocence, which includes a grandfather who is mentally disturbed, a great-uncle who is a hunchback, and several betrayals and incidents of senseless violence.

Gaiman published his first prose novel, *Stardust*, in 1998. Though not technically a graphic novel, the work is an illustrated story book, with pictures by

fantasy artist Charles Vess. In the story, Tristran Thorn lives in the village of Wall, which borders the magical realm of Faerie. Wall gets its name from the very long and high wall that separates it from Faerie. Faerie's meadows can be seen through a single, narrow gap in the wall that is guarded day and night to keep Wall's residents out. However, once every nine years, Faerie hosts a fair and leaves the opening unguarded. When Tristran falls in love with Victoria Forester, he promises to retrieve for her a shooting star that fell in Faerie. During the time of the fair, Tristran slips through the gap to get the star, and then learns that the star is actually a woman named Yvaine, who broke her leg when she fell. There follows an allegorical journey that proves to be an adventure filled with danger, magic, and excitement. According to critic Paula Brown, "*Stardust* challenges the assumption that the quality of sentiment, still commonly associated with the fantasy genre as well as with a Victorian ethos, is necessarily an outmoded trait. Tristran's quest to find his heart's desire, ostensibly an old-fashioned fairy tale, has many qualities readers associate with post-modern fiction." *Stardust* was adapted for film in 2007 with the protagonist's name changed to Tristan.

Gaiman won both a Hugo Award and a Nebula Award for *American Gods* (2001), a fantasy novel that employs elements of the road narrative. The protagonist is an ex-convict named Shadow who travels across the United States with a con man named Mr. Wednesday. Mr. Wednesday is eventually exposed as the Norse god Odin, and many other characters turn out to be incarnations of other gods and mythological creatures. When Mr. Wednesday is killed by the New Gods, he continues his journey, eventually dying, visiting the land of the dead, and being brought back to life. The novel has been praised for its blending of the ordinary with the fantastic and for its modern interpretation of ancient mythologies. The book also resulted in a spinoff, *Anansi Boys* (2005), which centers around "Fat Charlie" Nancy, an unambitious Londoner who learns that his father was an incarnation of Anansi, the African trickster god, and that he has a brother, Spider, who possesses their father's supernatural abilities.

Frequently compared to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002) is one of his novels for young adults. The title character, Coraline, has moved to an apartment with her parents. In the new apartment, she finds a mysterious locked door. She learns that her mother has the key to the door, and her mother shows Coraline that there is nothing behind the door but a panel of bricks. Later, though, Coraline obtains the door's key and, upon opening the door herself, discovers a dark hallway. She passes through

the corridor and finds another apartment that mirrors her own, complete with parents who resemble hers except for buttons where their eyes should be. Coraline's pseudo-mother explains to her that, before they can be a proper family, she has to sew buttons over Coraline's eyes. Horrified, Coraline returns to her apartment to find that the button-eyed mother has imprisoned her parents in a mirror. Throughout the rest of the story, Coraline has to outwit her Other Mother to get her parents back and return to normal. The book won several awards and was adapted for film in 2009.

Inspired by the sight of his son riding a tricycle in a cemetery, Gaiman wrote another young adult book, *The Graveyard Book* (2008). The book comprises eight chapters, each functioning as a stand-alone short story with two years' time separating them. The book's protagonist is Nobody (Bod) Owens, a boy who escaped to a graveyard after the murder of his parents and siblings. Bod is raised by the graveyard's residents and adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Owens. Growing up in the graveyard, Bod makes friends, both human and supernatural. The coming-of-age story has been compared to both Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and features themes of family and friendship, raising questions about the nature of community.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Gaiman is credited with almost single-handedly elevating the graphic novel to a legitimate literary and artistic genre. His *Sandman* series has garnered high praise for expanding the capabilities of graphic novels and comics. The nineteenth issue of the series, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," was praised for its experimentation within the medium and won the World Fantasy Award. Joe Sanders noted that the comic reveals Gaiman's interpretation of the human condition, which, "as Gaiman sees it, is a nervous estrangement from other humans and from ourselves. With one part of our soul, we want to escape that isolation; yet we are frightened of trying. Rather than reinforcing that fear by attacking it directly, art helps us step outside the supposed limits of ourselves so that we can better see present realities and new possibilities."

Gaiman has also won the favor of critics for his skill at mythmaking in his prose works such as *American Gods*. Mathilda Slabbert and Leonie Viljoen observed, "In *American Gods*, Gaiman presents a melding of mythology, fictional fantasy and reality and explores the mythical underpinnings of story-making. In the

process he devises a refreshing contemporary mythology of his own." The spin-off of *American Gods*, *Anansi Boys*, was noted for its stylistic gymnastics. The sections in the book are set in different worlds, each narrated with a different tone. Sandor Klapcsik addresses this trait, stating: "The stylistic fluctuations reveal the tangible presence of borrowed textual conventions, unveiling the influence of H. P. Lovecraft, Arthur Conan Doyle, Zora Neale Hurston, P. G. Wodehouse, Douglas Adams, and so on. Hypertextuality, the transformation of conventional themes and characters, the imitation of a style, is a crucial element in Gaiman's oeuvre."

*Coraline* is one of Gaiman's most celebrated works for young adults. According to Richard Gooding, "Early reviews of *Coraline* heralded Gaiman's emergence as a major writer for children, noting the novel's similarity to the Alice books while emphasizing its gothic effects." *Coraline* was greeted with a degree of suspicion, though, and seen by some critics as too dark and inappropriate for children. David Rudd, however, cited critics who argued that "children not only *want* to but *need* to explore matters that affect their lives, albeit in their own time and fashion (issues to do with death, sex, ontology, evil, desire, violence and so on)."

*The Graveyard Book* has been called Gaiman's "masterwork" and was awarded the prestigious Newbery Medal by the American Library Association. According to Don L. F. Nilsen, the ALA deemed the book "a delicious mix of murder, fantasy, humor, and human longing" in which a child "marked for death by an ancient league of assassins escapes into an abandoned graveyard," where he is protected and raised by creatures not of his own ilk." Nilsen goes on to call *The Graveyard Book* "delightfully spooky, but also heartrending, funny, and instructive at various times," adding that, "Although on the surface the story might seem too horrific for younger children, the violence is no worse than typical fairy tale violence (where wolves eat grandmothers), and the fright readers will feel is more entertaining than disturbing."

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Duran Duran: The First Four Years of the Fab Five* (biography) 1984  
*Violent Cases* [illustrated by Dave McKean] (graphic novel) 1987  
*Don't Panic: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion* (nonfiction) 1988, revised edition published as *Don't Panic: Douglas Adams and the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, 1993

- Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch* [with Terry Pratchett] (novel) 1990  
*The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 1-8; illustrated by Sam Keith, Mike Dringenberg, and Malcolm Jones III] (graphic novel) 1990  
*The Sandman: The Doll's House* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 9-18; illustrated by Mike Dringenberg, Chris Bachalo, Malcolm Jones III, and others] (graphic novel) 1990  
*Black Orchid* [4 vols.; illustrated by McKean] (graphic novel) 1991  
*The Sandman: Dream Country* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 17-20; illustrated by Kelley Jones, Charles Vess, Colleen Doran, and Jones III] (graphic novel) 1991  
*Miracleman, Book 4: The Golden Age* [illustrated by Mark Buckingham] (graphic novel) 1992  
*The Sandman: Season of Mists* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 21-28; illustrated by Jones, Jones III, Dringenberg, and others] (graphic novel) 1992  
*Signal to Noise* [illustrated by McKean] (graphic novel) 1992  
*The Weerde: Book One* [with Gentle and Roz Kaveney] (short stories) 1992  
*The Weerde: Book Two: The Book of the Ancients* [with Gentle and Kaveney] (short stories) 1992  
*Angels and Visitations: A Miscellany* [illustrated by Steve Bissette and others] (short stories) 1993  
*The Books of Magic* [4 vols.; illustrated by John Bolton and others] (graphic novel) 1993  
*The Sandman: A Game of You* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 32-37; illustrated by Shawn McManus and others] (graphic novel) 1993  
*Death: The High Cost of Living* [3 vols.; illustrated by McKean, Buckingham, and others] (graphic novel) 1994  
*The Sandman: Brief Lives* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 41-49; illustrated by Jill Thompson, Dick Giordano, and Vince Locke] (graphic novel) 1994  
*The Sandman: Fables and Reflections* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 29-31, 38-40, 50; illustrated by Bryan Talbot] (graphic novel) 1994  
*The Sandman: World's End* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 51-56; illustrated by McKean, Buckingham, Giordano, and others] (graphic novel) 1994  
*The Tragical Comedy, or Comical Tragedy, of Mr. Punch* [illustrated by McKean] (graphic novel) 1994; also published as *Mr. Punch*.  
*The Sandman: Midnight Theatre* [with Matt Wagner; illustrated by Teddy Kristiansen] (graphic novel) 1995  
*Neverwhere* (novel) 1996  
*Neverwhere* [with Lenny Henry] (screenplay) 1996  
*The Sandman: Book of Dreams* [editor with Edward E. Kramer] (graphic novel) 1996

*The Sandman: The Kindly Ones* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 57-69; illustrated by Marc Hempel, Richard Case, and others] (graphic novel) 1996

*Signal to Noise* (screenplay) 1996

*The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish* [illustrated by McKean] (picture book) 1997

*Death: The Time of Your Life* [illustrated by Buckingham and others] (graphic novel) 1997

*The Sandman: The Wake* [originally published as *Sandman*, issues 70-75; illustrated by Zulli, Vess, and others] (graphic novel) 1997

*Smoke and Mirrors: Short Fictions and Illusions* (short stories) 1998

*Stardust: Being a Romance within the Realms of Faerie* [illustrated by Vess] (graphic novel) 1998; text published as *Stardust*, 1999

*Princess Mononoke* [English translation of Japanese screenplay by Hayao Miyazaki] (screenplay) 1999

*The Sandman: The Dream Hunters* (novel) 1999

*American Gods* (novel) 2001

*Harlequin Valentine* [illustrated by Bolton] (graphic novel) 2001

*Coraline* [illustrated by McKean] (children's novel) 2002

*The Sandman: Endless Nights* [illustrated by Russell, Milo Manara, and others] (graphic novel) 2003

*The Wolves in the Walls* [illustrated by McKean] (picture book) 2003

*The Alchemy of MirrorMask* [illustrated by McKean] (nonfiction) 2005

*Anansi Boys* (novel) 2005

*MirrorMask* (screenplay) 2005

*Fragile Things* (short stories) 2006

*Beowulf* [with Roger Avey] (screenplay) 2007

*M Is for Magic* [illustrated by Kristiansen] (short stories) 2007

*The Neil Gaiman Reader* (essays) 2007

*Stardust: The Visual Companion: Being an Account of the Making of a Magical Movie* (graphic novel) 2007

*The Graveyard Book* [illustrated by McKean] (juvenilia) 2008

*Odd and the Frost Giants* [illustrated by Brett Helquist] (juvenilia) 2008

*Absolute Death* (graphic novel) 2009

*Crazy Hair* [illustrated by McKean] (juvenilia) 2009

*Instructions* [illustrated by Vess] (juvenilia) 2010

*Stories* [editor with Al Sarrantonio] (short stories) 2010

*The Tales of Odd* (juvenilia) 2010

## CRITICISM

**Publishers Weekly** (review date 18 July 2005)

SOURCE: Review of *Anansi Boys*, by Neil Gaiman. *Publishers Weekly* 252, no. 28 (18 July 2005): 180-81.

[In the following review, the author praises *Anansi Boys* and offers a brief synopsis.]

If readers found the *Sandman* series creator's last novel, *American Gods*, hard to classify, they will be equally nonplussed—and equally entertained—by this brilliant mingling of the mundane and the fantastic [*Anansi Boys*]. "Fat Charlie" Nancy leads a life of comfortable workaholicism in London, with a stressful agenting job he doesn't much like, and a pleasant fiancée, Rosie. When Charlie learns of the death of his estranged father in Florida, he attends the funeral and learns two facts that turn his well-ordered existence upside-down: that his father was a human form of Anansi, the African trickster god, and that he has a brother, Spider, who has inherited some of their father's godlike abilities. Spider comes to visit Charlie and gets him fired from his job, steals his fiancée, and is instrumental in having him arrested for embezzlement and suspected of murder. When Charlie resorts to magic to get rid of Spider, who's selfish and unthinking rather than evil, things begin to go very badly for just about everyone. Other characters—including Charlie's malevolent boss, Grahame Coats ("an albino ferret in an expensive suit"), witches, police and some of the folk from *American Gods*—are expertly woven into Gaiman's rich myth, which plays off the African folk tales in which Anansi stars. But it's Gaiman's focus on Charlie and Charlie's attempts to return to normalcy that make the story so winning—along with gleeful, hurtling prose.

**Neil Gaiman and Calvin Reid** (interview date 25 July 2005)

SOURCE: Gaiman, Neil, and Calvin Reid. "Talking Manga with Neil Gaiman." *Publishers Weekly* 252, no. 29 (25 July 2005): 16.

[In the following interview, Gaiman discusses his interest in Japanese comics, or manga.]

One of the biggest stories to come out of this year's Comic-Con convention is Tokyopop's plan to publish a manga version of Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's forthcoming fantasy film *MirrorMask*. PW talked with Gaiman about the project.

[Reid]: *Why manga?*

[Gaiman]: I got the idea at the PW/AAP Summit meeting in April. Art Spiegelman and I decided to be on the graphic novel panel. At lunch, I sat next to Tokyopop president John Parker and he said he'd talked with the Jim Henson company about manga versions of the Henson films *Labyrinth* and *The Dark Crystal*, and he mentioned *MirrorMask*.