Elizabeth Hale, "Entry on: American Gods by Neil Gaiman ", peer-reviewed by Miriam Riverlea and Daniel A. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/101. Entry version as of November 11, 2026.

Neil Gaiman

# American Gods

*United States (2001)*

TAGS: Architecture Eurydice Hero(es) Katabasis Orpheus






*We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.*

| General information | |
|---|---|
| *Title of the work* | American Gods |
| *Country of the First Edition* | United States of America |
| *Country/countries of popularity* | Worldwide |
| *Original Language* | English |
| *First Edition Date* | 2001 |
| *First Edition Details* | Neil Gaiman, *American Gods.* New York: William Morrow, 2001, 560 pp. |
| *ISBN* | 9780547225494 |
| *Awards* | 2001 – British Science Fiction Award nominee;<br>2002 – British and World Fantasy Award nominee;<br>2002 – Hugo, Nebula, Bram Stoker, and Locus awards. |
| *Genre* | Fantasy fiction, Fiction, Novels |
| *Author of the Entry* | Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au |
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## Creators



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**Neil Gaiman , b. 1960**
**(Author)**

Neil Gaiman was born in Hampshire, England, the son of leading members of the Church of Scientology and now lives near Minneapolis in the United States. His parents were of Polish-Jewish and East-European Jewish origin. He was raised in Sussex, and educated in Church of England schools. He loved books from an early age, enjoying in particular the works of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Edgar Allan Poe, Ursula K. Le Guin and G. K. Chesterton. He has described himself as a "feral child who was raised in libraries," (see here, accessed: July 3, 2018) and credits this experience for his life-long love of reading. Raised in both the Jewish tradition and the Church of Scientology, Gaiman's religious upbringing attuned him to intersections in culture and belief and while he was heavily influenced by these belief systems, he ascribes to none as an adult. He began a career as a journalist and interviewer, and wrote for the British Fantasy Society.

His writing career began in journalism and his first published book was a biography of the musical group *Duran Duran* (1984). He wrote *Don't Panic: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion* (1988), and collaborated with Terry Pratchett on *Good Omens* (1990). Notable in his career is his friendship with other major writers of fantasy such as Pratchett, and Alan Moore. He began writing comic books, and developed *The Sandman*, a series of highly popular graphic novels (1989–1996) about Morpheus, the personification of sleep/dream, in collaboration with artist Mike Dringenberg. Gaiman's literary output is voluminous, including works for adult readers, young adults, and children, including *Neverwhere* (1996), *American Gods* (2001), *Coraline* (2002), *The Wolves in the Walls* (2003), *Anansi Boys* (2005), *The Graveyard Book* (2008), *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013). A hallmark of his approach is a cross-cultural interest in mythology, fairytale and folk tale, which he interweaves in his storytelling. In 2017, he published *Norse Mythology*, a retelling of the Norse myths.

Gaiman is credited with reviving and re-creating comics as well as



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succeeding in the cross-genre writing for multiple audiences and ages with his works of prose, comics, song lyrics, drama, screenwriting and journalism. Gaiman was one of the first writers to establish a blog and a Twitter account and has over one million followers on each. Gaiman's work has received numerous awards internationally, including the Carnegie Medal and the Newbery Medal and his work has been on the bestseller lists across the world numerous times. *The Graveyard Book* is his most awarded book with sixteen awards. To date he has published forty books, thirty-nine graphic works, and had six television episodes, five screenplays and two theatre works produced.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: July 3, 2018).

Profile at the literature.britishcouncil.org (accessed: July 3, 2018).

Profile at the www.fantasybookreview.co.uk (accessed: July 3, 2018).

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## Additional information

**Adaptations**

TV series: *American Gods*, developed by Bryan Fuller, Michael Green, distributed by Lionsgate Television, aired on Starz, April 30, 2017 – present (edited: 15.09.2020).

Graphic novel (series): *American Gods,* P. Craig Russell (co-writer), Scott Hampton (artist); Glenn Fabry (cover artist), Dark Horse Comics, Volumes 1–3 (2017–2020, edited: 15.09.2020).

**Translation**

Bulgarian: *Американски богове* [Amerikanski bogove].

Chinese: □□□□ (Traditional Chinese), □□□□ (Simplified Chinese).

Croatian: *Američki Bogovi*.

Czech: *Američtí bohové*.

Danish: *Amerikanske guder*.

Dutch: *Amerikaanse Goden*.

Estonian: *Ameerika jumalad*.

Finnish: *Unohdetut jumalat* (Forgotten Gods).

French: *American Gods*.

German: *American Gods*.

Greek: *Ο Πόλεμος των Θεών* [O Pólemos ton Theón] (The War of the Gods).

Hebrew: □□□□□□□□ □□□□ [Elim Amerikaim].

Hungarian: *Amerikai istenek*.

Italian: *American Gods*.

Japanese: □□□□□□□□□ .

Korean: □□□ □□ *(□)*, □□□ □□*(□)*.



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Lithuanian: *Amerikos dievai*.

Norwegian: *Amerikanske guder*.

Polish: *Amerykańscy bogowie*.

Portuguese: *Deuses Americanos*.

Romanian: *Zei Americani*.

Russian: *Американские Боги* [Amerikanskie bogi].

Serbian: *Амерички Богови*.

Slovak: *Americkí bohovia*.

Slovenian: *Ameriški bogovi*.

Spanish: *American Gods*.

Swedish: *Amerikanska gudar*.

Turkish: *Amerikan Tanrıları*.

Summary

In *American Gods*, a man named Shadow is released from prison when his wife dies in a car accident. On his journey to the funeral, he meets a mysterious stranger, Mr Wednesday. Wednesday turns out to be the Norse god, Odin, and hires Shadow as a bodyguard. Wednesday tells Shadow that war is coming, a war between the "old" gods, and the "new." These old gods are the gods of myth and legend, who have come to the United States, brought in the imaginations, memories, and stories of immigrants from all nations. The new gods are the gods of new technology and urban society: Town, Road, Media, and Technology. This symbolises a division between the beliefs of old, religious, and agrarian societies, and new, modern, urban, and technological societies. Wednesday tells Shadow that as people believe in the new, they move away from the old. A god who is no longer believed in dies a particularly final death.

Wednesday travels around the country gathering the old gods, to prepare for battle. Shadow accompanies him for most of this, meeting gods such as the German Eostre, goddess of the dawn, in San



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Francisco; Bulgarian Chernebog and the Zorya sisters (Morning Star, Evening Star, and Midnight Star) living in Chicago. Anansi, the African spider-trickster god appears as "Mr Nancy." "Mad Sweeney" is an Irish Leprechaun. Mr Ibis and Jaquel are Thoth and Anubis, running a funeral parlor in Cairo, Illinois.

It emerges that Wednesday has planned an elaborate con. His power is fading as Americans gradually lose their memories of, and their faith in, the old gods. As a god who gains power from battle, he is orchestrating a battle between the new and the old, with the help of Low-Key Lyesmith (Loki, the Norse god of mischief and trickery). Shadow realises this at the end of the book after he has performed an act of major sacrifice, re-enacting Odin's time hanging from the "World Tree," pierced by a spear.

Accompanying Shadow from time to time, is his dead wife, Laura. She has died in a car crash while performing a sex act with his friend, and Shadow struggles with his anger and betrayal. But Laura saves Shadow, killing the various new gods and their henchmen, and enabling Shadow to see through the trickery of Wednesday and Low-Key. It is an Orpheus and Eurydice in reverse, in which the dead wife saves the living husband. Laura is a form of the undead, brought out of the grave by a magic coin, which Shadow has thrown into her grave.

Gods from the classical pantheon are generally absent from *American Gods*, though echoes of classicism appear throughout, in the classical columns that dot the architecture of the mid-west, in some of the place-names, and in the occasional reference. For the most part, however, Gaiman draws on less familiar Pagan gods, such as Czernebog and Eostre. A long subplot has Shadow spending time in a quiet Great Lakes town of "Lakeside," an idyllic place which, it emerges, is idyllic only because of the manipulations of a Hungarian "Kobbold," a pagan deity who protects the town in exchange for the annual sacrifice of a child.

Inset stories, partly "written" by Mr Ibis, detail the lives of other 'American' gods, which have come to the country in the stories of immigrants: in California Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, masquerading as a prostitute, devours men through her vagina; in New York an immigrant from Oman meets a taxi-driving Ifrit, a form of Arabian Djinn; in Virginia, a convict woman brings pixies and fairies with her from Cornwall; and the slaves from Africa and the Caribbean bring



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tribal gods with them to the South.

*American Gods* is an example of a post-modern pastiche, in which multiple storylines and mythical intertexts operate. Its central figure, Shadow, turns out to be Wednesday's son, and therefore himself possibly a figure of Odin. In an epilogue, Shadow visits Iceland and meets the real Odin, giving him the American Odin's glass eye as a keepsake. Its central question is about the nature of belief: on the one hand, Gaiman taps into a mythology of power that is a recurring feature in his work. On the other, the panoply of gods from beliefs around the world seems more like a collector's guide to mythology, and less representative of real power.

Analysis

*American Gods* is an example of turn-of-the-century postmodern fantasy literature, which draws together intertexts from many cultures. The effect is both enlivening, offering a fantasy in which the reception of myth is alive, vibrant, and multicultural, and flattening: if all myths co-exist, what does this mean for faith, belief, and deep emotions? Gaiman's reception is wide-ranging and draws from myth, literature, history, and fairy tale. He plays with narrative patterns: e.g. the death, and un-death, of Shadow's wife, Laura, is an Orphean journey in reverse: he calls her back from death; she finally saves him from being killed. Classical antiquity is not the only important mythical source in Gaiman's work; it is interwoven with multiple other cultures, showing heterogeneous intertextuality that is both typical of a type of postmodernism, and part of deliberate multiculturalism.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Architecture Eurydice Hero(es) Katabasis Orpheus

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

Journeys Multiculturalism Religious beliefs Tricksters



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Further Reading

Blomqvist, Rut, "The Road of Our Senses: Search for Personal Meaning and the Limitations of Myth in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*", *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literatur*e 30.3 –4 [117 –118] (2012): 5 –26.

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