Maciej Skowera, "Entry on: The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman ", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/466. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

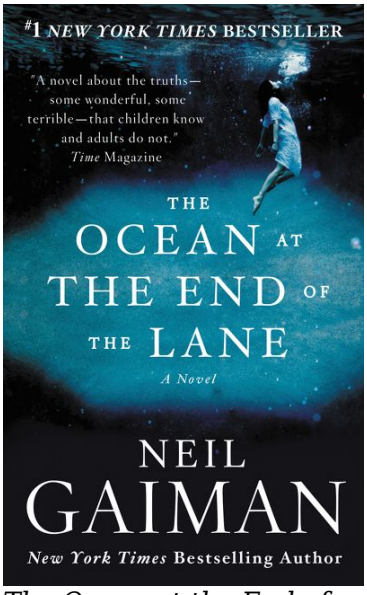
Neil Gaiman

The Ocean at the End of the Lane

United Kingdom (2013)

TAGS: Atropos Clotho Egyptian Mythology Fates Lachesis Moirai Narcissus Norse Mythology Parcae





The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman. Copyright© 2013 by Neil Gaiman. Courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers.

General information	
Title of the work	The Ocean at the End of the Lane
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2013
First Edition Details	Gaiman Neil, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. London: Headline Publishing Group, 2013, 256 pp.
ISBN	9781472200310
Awards	2013 – Locus Award for Best Fantasy Novel; 2013 – Book of the Year and (for the adaptation) Audiobook of the Year prizes in the National Book Awards contest (UK); 2013 – Nomination for Nebula Award for Best Novel; 2014 – Nomination for World Fantasy Award for Best Novel.
Genre	Fantasy fiction, Fiction, Novel of recollections*, Novels

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Target Audience	Young adults (Note that it is difficult to indicate the target group of the novel, see: Addenda)
Author of the Entry	Maciej Skowera, University of Warsaw, mgskowera@gmail.com
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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	In 2013, an audiobook based on *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, narrated by Gaiman himself, was released by Headline Digital.
Translation	*The Ocean at the End of the Lane* was translated into multiple languages.
Summary	*The Ocean at the End of a Lane* is narrated in first person by an unnamed protagonist who, as an adult, comes back to his hometown to attend a funeral. Initially unable to find anything which would bring back his memories about childhood, he involuntarily visits the Hempstock farm, where three women lived in the past: a little girl who used to be his friend, her mother and grandmother. There, he meets one of them – here the readers may be confused, for the woman might be Ginnie (the mother) or Gran, or Ginnie/Gran combined in one person. The more they talk, the more shadows from the past come back to the narrator's mind: the name of his childhood companion, Lettie, the path leading to a forgotten duck pond, and the way in which the girl called this body of water: "the ocean." After that, the book focuses on the protagonist's recollections about quite a short period of his childhood. The narrative, chronologically structured, starts with his 7th birthday – which was not attended by anyone except his family and his younger sister's friends. This episode presents the boy as he then was, as a very sensitive and lonely child who loved books, myths and fairy tales, did not have any friends but, who – in his own opinion – was not in need of them. This coherent vision of childhood – perhaps not happy, but certainly predictable and tranquil – is soon disrupted by a series of events. The opal miner, renting a room in the boy's family's home, kills the narrator's cat and, soon afterwards, commits suicide in a car stolen from the child's father. After that, the main character visits the Hempstock farm for the first time. It turns out to be a fantastic place, inhabited by strange creatures, and its owners, the three women, are presented as beings older than the world itself and as having supernatural powers.

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The death of the miner enables Skarthach of the Keep, a monster called "the flea," to gain access to "our" world. The boy and Lettie Hempstock try to defeat the creature but, because of the protagonist's actions, it finds its path to his house. In human form, transformed into a woman named Ursula Monkton, "the flea" becomes the babysitter of the narrator and his sister. Ursula craftily pushes the mother away, seduces the father, and gains the trust of the sister. Only the boy himself sees her evil, for Skarthach constantly punishes him, plays with his fears, and even makes his father almost drown him in a bath. Therefore, the narrator and the Hempstocks start fighting the creature. They eventually defeat Ursula with the aid of the hunger birds, who are invoked by Gran. However, the birds hurt Lettie, who jumps in between them and her friend in order to protect the protagonist. The girl is on the brink of death but, as a supernatural being, she cannot die entirely. Her mother and grandmother place Lettie's body in the mysterious 'ocean' on the farm, where she is supposed to recover.

In the last passages of the book, it turns out that these events were not remembered by the narrator at all – he thought his companion moved away to Australia. It is also revealed that it is not the first time he visits the Hempstock farm as an adult – in fact, he was there many times in the past, every time retrieving the memories and forgetting them again. This time is no different, as the novel ends with a man asking Gran and Ginny to greet Lettie if she writes them a letter from Australia.

Analysis

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Gaiman's protagonist "reads" his own past as a story. What is more – the readers are not sure whether the described events took place as presented by the main character or if they were imaginatively transformed into fantasy, being traumatic memories about the hated, but actually human, babysitter and about the narrator's best childhood friend. Whichever way we chose to interpret the novel, the narrative flows according to certain aspects of popular culture. Among them, a prominent place is occupied by literature.

The boy from Gaiman's work knows Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956), and references these classics. Both directly and

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indirectly, they appear in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* many times. This also applies to storytelling patterns derived from fairy tales and children's fantasy novels. However, the author also alludes to myths. Having read an Egyptian story about Hathor and Ra, the narrator states: "I liked myths. They weren't adult stories and they weren't children's stories. They were better than that. They just *were*." Therefore, he indicates the intergenerational nature of ancient narratives, which cannot be attributed to a specific age group. This corresponds with the fact that, in the novel, the boundaries between children and adults, and between children's literature and adult literature, are blurred or even non-existent**.

In addition to such general reflections on myths, there are several more direct references in Gaiman's novel to classical antiquity. For example, the Hempstock women may be seen as a postmodern figuration of the Triple Goddess, whose incarnations we may found not only in his favourite Norse stories (three Norns: Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld), but also in Greco-Roman mythology (three Fates, Greek Moirai or Roman Parcae: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos***). There is also a brief summary of the story of Narcissus, narrated when the protagonist's father gives a handful of narcissi to Ursula Monkton. The narrator remembers that, in his book of Greek myths, these flowers were presented as "named after a beautiful young man, so lovely that he had fallen in love with himself. He saw his reflection in a pool of water, would not leave it, and eventually died, so that the gods were forced to transform him into a flower."**** When the boy read this passage from his book for the first time, he thought that a narcissus must have been the most beautiful flower that ever existed – and, when he learned that this plant was "just a less impressive daffodil," he was disappointed.

This may be interpreted as an allusion to the process of disenchanting the world in the course of growing up, which is largely discussed in the novel. Derek Lee states that, in fact, Gaiman's book is an anti-bildungsroman: "One of the core principles in these novels of (de)formation is that adulthood, while inevitable, is a disenchanted space overrun by logic, science, and capitalism. Not only is maturity dispiriting, but, if accepted passively, it imprisons and even annihilates the soul. Gaiman turns to the enchantment of childhood as an elixir to the ills of adulthood, for in that imaginative wonderland of unicorns and hidden pirate booty we can reinvigorate ourselves to face reality. […] The message in the Gaiman anti-bildungsroman is that we must grow up, but we must never grow disenchanted. We

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must draw on the magical possibilities of childhood and remember the visceral power of joy, fear, and love, for the ethics of enchantment reside in a full engagement with life's totality."*****

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* This section is partially based on my chapter in a forthcoming book on Gaiman's works, see in Further Reading.

** See, for example, the following fragment of the novel: "'I'm going to tell you something important. Grown-ups don't look like grown-ups on the inside either. Outside, they're big and thoughtless and they always know what they're doing. Inside, they look just like they always have. Like they did when they were your age. The truth is, there aren't any grown-ups. Not one, in the whole wide world.' She [Lettie] thought for a moment. Then she smiled. 'Except for Granny, of course.' We sat there, side by side, on the old wooden bench, not saying anything. I thought about adults. I wondered if that was true: if they were all really children wrapped in adult bodies, like children's books hidden in the middle of dull, long books. The kind with no pictures or conversations."

*** See: Tony Keen, "The Best Things Come in Threes: The Triple Goddess in the Works of Neil Gaiman" in *The Mythological Dimensions of Neil Gaiman*, Anthony Burdge, Jessica Burke, and Kristine Larsen, eds., San Bernardino: CreateSpace, 2013, 125–140; Joanna Mikołajczuk, "Wielka Bogini i 'skondensowana esencja babciowatości', czyli Gaimanowska wizja współczesnej kobiecości w powieści Ocean na końcu drogi" [The Great Goddess and the „Condensed Essence of Grandmotherliness", or Neil Gaiman's Contemporary Femininity in the Novel The Ocean at the End of the Lane] in *Łapacz snów. Studia o twórczości Neila Gaimana* [The Dream Catcher: Studies on the Works of Neil Gaiman], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SBP, 2018, in press.

****All quotations from the novel after: Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, London: Headline Publishing Group, 2013, e-book.

***** After: Derek Lee, "The Politics of Fairyland: Neil Gaiman and the Enchantments of Anti-Bildungsroman", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57.5 (2016): 552–564, p. 553, 561.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Atropos Clotho Egyptian Mythology Fates Lachesis Moirai Narcissus Norse Mythology Parcae
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Childhood Coming of age Family Friendship Memory Supernatural creatures (non-classical)

Further Reading

Barnett, David, *Neil Gaiman Interview: The Year of Living Crazily*, available at independent.co.uk (accessed: April 7, 2018).

Keen, Tony, "The Best Things Come in Threes: The Triple Goddess in the Works of Neil Gaiman" in *The Mythological Dimensions of Neil Gaiman*, Anthony Burdge, Jessica Burke, and Kristine Larsen, eds., San Bernardino: CreateSpace, 2013, 125–140.

Lee, Derek, "The Politics of Fairyland: Neil Gaiman and the Enchantments of Anti-Bildungsroman", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57.5 (2016): 552–564.

Martin, Tim, *Neil Gaiman: "I wanted to write my wife a story"*, available at telegraph.co.uk (accessed: April 9, 2018).

Mikołajczuk, Joanna, "Wielka Bogini i 'skondensowana esencja babciowatości', czyli Gaimanowska wizja współczesnej kobiecości w powieści Ocean na końcu drogi" [The Great Goddess and the „Condensed Essence of Grandmotherliness", or Neil Gaiman's Contemporary Femininity in the Novel The Ocean at the End of the Lane] in *Łapacz snów. Studia o twórczości Neila Gaimana* [The Dream Catcher: Studies on the Works of Neil Gaiman], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SBP, 2018, forthcoming.

Skowera, Maciej, "Pamięć – dzieciństwo – literatura dziecięca. Wokół Oceanu na końcu drogi Neila Gaimana" [Memory – Childhood – Children's Literature: On The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil

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Gaiman] in *Łapacz snów. Studia o twórczości Neila Gaimana* [The Dream Catcher: Studies on the Works of Neil Gaiman], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SBP, 2018, forthcoming.

Addenda

Target Group:

Gaiman himself, contrary to many reviewers and literary critics, considers the book to be rather an adult narrative about childhood than a children's one. However, the writer told David Barnett: "It isn't a children's book but some younger readers might think they're ready for it. That's why I started the book off with a couple of really dry chapters. It's like, if you've made it this far, then you might be ready for the rest of it.*"

Gaiman dedicated *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* to his wife, singer-songwriter Amanda Palmer, and the book was written, inter alia, to tell her about the author's own childhood: "I thought I'd write her a story, [...] because I missed her. She doesn't like fantasy very much, but she really likes honesty, and she really likes me. Writing it was like going, look, this was me. You're always interested in me. The family isn't really mine, the things that happened aren't really mine, but the landscape, the place it happens, is me, and the eyes out of which this kid looks are those of seven-year-old me."**

* After: David Barnett, *Neil Gaiman Interview: The year of Living Crazily*, available at independent.co.uk (accessed: April 7, 2018).

** After: Tim Martin, *Neil Gaiman: "I wanted to write my wife a story"*, available at telegraph.co.uk (accessed: April 9, 2018).

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