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this isn’t armageddon...
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I’m an optimist”

Neil Gaiman

Author of American Gods and Coraline

THE
MAGAZINE
INTERVIEW
HELENA DE
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It is late at night in New Orleans and Amanda F***** Palmer — as she is known to her fans — is belting out songs as she strums the ukulele at Tipitina’s, one of the city’s coolest music venues. The captivated audience is singing along to the emotional lyrics. Standing above the crowd in the VIP section is a man with wild curly hair, who looks even more transfixed than the rest.

As Palmer defiantly delivers the final line of the song — “I am exactly the person that I want to be” — and the audience roars its approval, he turns to me and says with unrestrained pride: “That’s my wife.”

Meet Neil Gaiman, the award-winning author of the innovative Sandman comics and fantastical books that burrow into the imaginations of both children and adults — including *Coraline*, *Stardust* and *Neverwhere*. He used to be a cult author with a niche readership. Now, with major adaptations of his work on our screens (*American Gods*) and in production (*Good Omens*), he has 2.7m Twitter followers and is recognised almost everywhere he goes. Dressed — as always — in black, with his unkempt hair and stubble, he’s a bit of a rock star himself. “I fantasise my own anonymity, and then people’s Twitter feeds are full of ‘passed Neil Gaiman on the street just now’. My wife says ‘You love being famous’, and I say ‘I love the useful bits of it’ — but mostly I like knowing I’m part of a crowd.”

To understand Gaiman, it helps to look at him through the prism of his wife. He refers to her constantly — she is clearly the fulcrum on which his life turns. A talented musician and singer, who once worked as a stripper and performing street statue, her feistiness has won her a devoted following. She has written one book, *The Art of Asking*, which throws more light on Gaiman than the dozens of books he has written himself. Gaiman, 57, sighs affectionately: “That book contains so much of our relationship.”

I comb through it, determined to crack the enigma

that is Gaiman. “When Neil and I first met,” Palmer, now 41, writes, “we didn’t find each other all that attractive. I thought he looked like a baggy-eyed, grumpy old man, and he thought I looked like a chubby little boy. I now think he’s smashingly handsome, and he calls me ‘the most beautiful woman in the world’. Ain’t love grand?”

She says Gaiman is shy and easily embarrassed; that he cannot dance nor drink more than a glass or two of wine “without getting obnoxious or falling asleep”. That he has “abandonment issues” and spent months convincing her to marry him. Gaiman laughs: “When I met her, I was almost 50. I thought, ‘I’ve met a lot of people in my life, but I’ve never met anybody else like this one.’” But how does he handle being with someone so open if he is really as shy as she says? “It’s only weird for me because Amanda and I share different amounts. [She once said they had an open marriage, something Gaiman would not have revealed given the choice.] We are definitely an astonishingly unlikely couple, but it works. Standing next to Amanda Palmer is really good if you’re shy, because nobody is looking at you.”

Now I understand why he’s brought me to her concert. When I listen back to the hours of conversation, I find he has talked lots about Palmer and given me many interesting stories and digressions — but very little that reveals how he ticks.

“Nobody gets to know Neil,” Palmer tells me later. “I don’t either. I’ve been with him nearly a decade and I still find gigantic surprises lurking around every corner.” She believes that his prolific output of weird fiction is part of the smokescreen. “He stands behind a lot of personae.”

They married in 2011, and now live in Woodstock, New York, with their two-year-old son, Ash. Gaiman has three adult children from his first marriage, to Mary McGrath, and is also a grandfather. He would make a point of reading to each of his children ➤➤➤



NEW YORK: TIMES/REYNE

PHOTOGRAPH
SASHA MASLOV

every night, even when he was travelling. “We would have two copies of the same book and he would read it over the phone,” says his youngest daughter, Maddy, 23, who agrees that her father has different guises. “People think he’s some dark, goth weirdo, which he is, but he’s so warm and kind-hearted too.” His breakup with McGrath in 2002 was very civilised: “They were so cordial,” Maddy tells me. “He would stop by my mum’s house to walk the dog and we would still go on family holidays together.”

It is his children whom Gaiman credits with inspiring much of his material. He wrote *Coraline* for his older daughter, Holly. “When she was four or five, she would climb up on my lap and dictate nightmarish stories to me — about a little girl called Holly who would find that her mother had been exchanged for an evil witch who would lock her in the basement with the ghost children.”

Gaiman’s editor read *Coraline*, a warped fantasy based on his daughter’s imaginings and told him it was brilliant but “unpublishable” as it was “horror for children”. Eventually Bloomsbury published it, and it became a bestseller, then a 3D fantasy horror film. And next month sees the premiere of the Royal Opera production of Mark-Anthony Turnage’s new work based on the book.

Most of his creations, he says, are just elaborate daydreams. “I feel that ideas are balloons. If I don’t catch them someone else will.”

Yet there is something unique about his voice. Even if someone came up with a similar concept, surely no one could write a book as strange as *Neverwhere*, which depicts a fantastical underworld beneath the real city of London, where the homeless and dispossessed join the Black Friars and the Angel Islington.

“I’m always surprised,” he says, “that everyone doesn’t think the same way I do. Amanda is convinced I have a very strange relationship with dreams. Maybe I just bring things back with me.” He is currently writing a sequel, *The Seven Sisters*. “It’s about the nature of refugees and how we make homes.”

Apart from their weirdness, his books have no unifying thread: “I do nobody any favours because each book is so different. You could read *American Gods* and hate it and not know that you’d love *Stardust*.”

In person, Gaiman is courteous and genial. We chat over tea at the Contemporary Arts Center, then he suggests dinner before Palmer’s concert. He picks a restaurant in the French Quarter of New Orleans, housed in a crumbling mansion. It feels like a suitably gothic location, and on the way Gaiman excitedly points out the strange kilnlike structures in a cemetery. “They are like ovens, you put the bodies in at the top and four years later you take out whatever is left — ashes and a few bones. It frees up an awful lot of space.”

It brings to mind *The Graveyard Book*, another of his terrifying children’s stories, about a small boy who survives a brutal massacre and is raised by ghosts.

Over dinner, as Gaiman works his way through a plate of Murder Point oysters, I ask him if death — which is sprinkled liberally throughout his novels —



bothers him. “It ought to,” he says thoughtfully, “but it doesn’t. Although I’m wussier than I was. I’m definitely not as enthusiastic to murder characters. I often twist things around to keep them alive.”

He used to worry that he would die before he could make his mark. “Now I feel I’ve written my name on the wall. Still, you never know what you’ll be remembered for, if anything. There is nothing like looking at the bestseller lists of yesteryear for teaching humility.”

If he could be remembered for one book, he would choose *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. “It is so personal,” he says. Written for his wife, it encapsulates the imaginary terror and magic of his own childhood. The Sussex countryside where he grew up plays a central role. “I once tried to show Amanda the places of my youth, but they had gone.”

There is a revealing passage, when Gaiman’s young narrator is sitting in a tree reading a book about Egyptian myths. “I liked myths. They weren’t adult stories and they weren’t children’s stories. They were better than that. They just were.”

“Here am I, aged 57, feeling exactly the same way,” says Gaiman, whose latest book, *Norse Mythology*, indulges his obsession with the deities of Scandinavia. He first read a version of the Norse myths as a child, then rediscovered them a few years ago. “I thought, ‘Wow, these are even crazier and more f***** up than I had thought.’”

Norse Mythology, which topped the bestseller lists when published in hardback last year, is written with that familiar Gaimanesque combination of humorous dialogue and startling lyricism. The Norse myths, he says, are his favourite, perhaps because Ragnarok — the twilight of the gods — feels analogous to the state of the world today. “We’re in a strange place right now; they’ve advanced the doomsday clock. The number of minutes to midnight has been moving up and I worry about the world I’m leaving my children. Most people I know just have their fingers crossed that we can make it through the next four years without starting a nuclear war over penis size.” And yet, and yet. “I was asked recently if we had reached peak Ragnarok. We haven’t. This isn’t doomsday, this isn’t armageddon. Good Omens is a giant fiction about not going to war. I guess fundamentally I’m an optimist.”

His aunt Janet once described Gaiman as a really weird kid. Gaiman laughs when I repeat this. “Thank you, Aunt Janet. I was very bookish and incredibly precocious; I didn’t have much self-awareness.”

Gaiman’s parents were Scientologists: his father, of Polish-Jewish descent, was the church’s UK >>>

GRIM FAIRYTALE
Right: *Coraline* was adapted as a film in 2009, and will be performed as a Royal Opera production in March



CASTING A SPELL
Top: Gaiman’s wife, the singer Amanda Palmer’s “nipple slip” at Glastonbury, 2013. Above: Michelle Pfeiffer in *Stardust* (2007)

“Our marriage follows nobody else’s rules. Right now, there isn’t room for anybody else”

spokesman. But Gaiman espouses no religion. “I had a gloriously religiously mixed-up childhood. I was a scholarship kid at a high Church of England school, studying for my bar mitzvah, with Scientologists as parents. I wound up feeling like an outsider all the time.”

As a teenager he loved US superhero comics and aspired to write in a similar style. First, he turned to journalism, cobbling together a career as a freelancer by phoning editors and lying about his experience. “They would say, ‘Who have you written for?’ and I listed things that sounded likely — The Sunday Times Magazine, Time Out. It was before Google, so nobody checked.” He got his foot in the door, writing book reviews and interviews. “It became a point of honour to write for every publication I had ever bullshitted about. And by the end of that decade, I had.”

After interviewing Terry Pratchett, the two struck up a close friendship and collaborated on *Good Omens*, a comedy about the birth of the son of Satan. For years, he and Pratchett struggled to find a screenwriter for the book. Eventually Pratchett wrote to Gaiman from his deathbed in 2015, saying: “Please write this so I can see it before the darkness.”

“The bastard,” jokes Gaiman, “there must be easier last requests.” As a result, he finds himself working as a showrunner on set and is flying to South Africa, the next shoot location, the day after we meet. “It’s the nearest thing I’ve had to a real job,” he grumbles, “and I can’t wait to retire.”

Although he has lived in America for nearly three decades, Gaiman has long wished to return to Britain. He has a house on Skye and had planned to move there when Maddy went to college. “I was counting down the minutes, then somewhere in 2008 I fell in love with Amanda and the whole plan fell apart. England still makes me happy in a way that nowhere else does. I love the enormous pudding of England and I love the mythology of London.”

But Palmer, he says, would never want to move there. He tells me with adoring pride of the time she got into a spat with the *Daily Mail*, which ran a picture of a nipple slip she experienced at Glastonbury: “She didn’t mind that they published the nipple, she minded that they never mentioned the music.”

Her riposte was glorious. A few days later, at a London concert, she debuted a waltz called *Dear Daily Mail*, appearing in a kimono, which she dropped, singing the rest of the song stark naked. The last line of the song? “Dear Daily Mail: UP YOURS.”

“I was so sad I wasn’t there for it,” laughs Gaiman. “Amanda has absolutely no nudity taboo.”

As for Palmer’s statement that they have an open marriage, Gaiman says simply: “Our marriage follows nobody else’s rules and right now it’s a marriage with a cute small boy, so there isn’t room in it for anybody or anything else.” Which seems to imply that

it might become open again when their son is older? “Absolutely,” agrees Gaiman. “Or I may be too old and boring at that point.”

Despite the purported cloak of shyness, Gaiman seems very sociable; he chats at length to everyone who crosses our path — the taxi driver, the waiter, the legions of fans who line up to see him at his wife’s concert, signing the paraphernalia that is thrust towards him with the fountain pen he carries everywhere. He makes a connection with everyone: “Your name is Eris? Goddess of discord!” “Yes,” says the young woman, clearly delighted, “my mum’s a bit weird.”

“I crave my little human interactions,” Gaiman admits. Failing tangible human company, Twitter becomes his companion. “Once when I was off on my own writing, I tweeted, ‘I’m really lonely’ and somebody wrote back, ‘How can you be lonely with 2m Twitter followers?’ I typed back, ‘Make me a cup of tea...’”

Yet it seems the sociability is just on the surface. “He is incredibly withdrawn, whereas I am the queen of feelings,” Palmer tells me. “But he’s insanely perceptive. We’re so different, but we recognise the desperate artist in the other.”

She suggests that even Gaiman doesn’t really know himself. “I think Neil sometimes considers himself a stranger — it’s like there are entire rooms of his mind that he’s never wanted to enter. Perhaps they’re too dark, or maybe they’re populated with ghosts he’d rather not have to chat to.”

Backstage after the show, Gaiman hugs and congratulates Palmer. She is eating a salad and pops a shrimp in his mouth. Just for a moment, he stops talking.

Outside the club, under the oak trees that reach out towards the Mississippi River, an enthusiastic crowd has been waiting nearly an hour for Gaiman and Palmer to emerge. They surge forward, surrounding the couple, waving phones and pens. A tall woman in an emerald green corset begs Gaiman to sign her bare chest: “Please, please, please!” Gaiman obliges and Palmer, giggling, follows suit. As their car pulls away, two young women run after it, shrieking: “You guys f***** rock!”

I speak to Gaiman over the phone a few days later; now in Cape Town, he is “a bit fried from a long day of crucifixions” on the *Good Omens* set, which has put him in a philosophical frame of mind. “I’m fascinated by the fact that it feels like reality is being spread very thinly over toast,” he muses. “It feels malleable. It no longer matters if something is true or not. National borders of non-island nations are just an idea. Money is just a thing we made up. I love the bitcoin-ness of things.”

Later, he sends me an enigmatic email entitled “Behind the trees”, with a link to an animated video of a voice memo made by Palmer while she engages him in conversation as he drifts off to sleep. It is almost too strange to describe. “Who *are* you?” Palmer asks. “Just some bloke,” he replies hazily. “You’re not just some bloke,” says Palmer, “you’re special.” “No,” says Gaiman, “there are millions like me, they’re all behind the trees ... They’re a bit scared.”

As I watch the whispery video, two things become clear: one, that although Gaiman and Palmer are an unlikely couple, in terms of artistic subversion, it is hard to imagine a more perfect match. And two, the real Neil Gaiman remains as elusive as ever ■

“Reality is being spread very thinly over toast. It no longer matters if something is true or not”

Norse Mythology by Neil Gaiman is out in paperback on March 6 (Bloomsbury £9)